

TACKLING TRANSITIONS

WHY TRANSITIONS CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR CHILDREN AND HOW TO HELP THEM COPE.



For preschoolers, transition can mean many things, including moving from one activity to another. A toddler's progression from milk bottle to cup is one form of transition, as are bigger changes like leaving the familiarity of home to attend preschool for the first time, moving into a new neighbourhood, or welcoming a new sibling into the family.

In a child's growing up years, transition has been likened to a journey marked by changes and uncertainty. Children who have difficulty managing transitions may feel anxious, frustrated or become withdrawn, which in turn affects their confidence, and cognitive and social-emotional development. By handling transitions sensitively, parents and early childhood educators can help children adapt to situational changes with ease.

Beanstalk asked early childhood practitioners and parents to share their views and strategies for managing transitions.

“Aggressiveness, sudden outbursts of tears and being extra clingy may be signs that the child is not adapting well to new changes.”

MS AMANDA YAP, 31
Teacher, The Little Skool-House
(At-Tampines-Junction)
2019 ECDA Outstanding Early Childhood Teacher



MAIN PHOTO (From Left) On Kang Yee: Denim shirt Stylist's own, Sweater & shorts Château de Sable, Sneakers New Balance. On Titus: Checked shirt Château de Sable, Shorts Gingersnaps, Socks Stylist's own, Sneakers Puma. On Dya: Cardigan Château de Sable, T-shirt & dress Gingersnaps, Sneakers with ribbons Puma, Backpack Stylist's own. On Justin: Outfit & backpack Seed Heritage, Sneakers Puma, Socks, Stylist's own, Outfit Esprit. On Mazli: Outfit Marks & Spencer. On Ayra: School uniform & backpack Stylist's own. PAGE 3 On Amanda: Outfit Model's own

WHY ARE TRANSITIONS DIFFICULT FOR SOME CHILDREN AND WHAT ARE SOME TYPICAL REACTIONS?

Jenica Ong: The ability to adjust to changes and manage transition depends on a range of factors. These include a child's temperament, resilience, support system and prior experiences. For some children, transition can be exciting, while others may find the experience stressful. The affected child may react by crying, withdrawing, throwing tantrums, biting or displaying regressive behaviour such as thumb-sucking or bed-wetting.

Amanda Yap: Transitions are sometimes difficult for children because they are simply not ready for them. It may have been unexpected or perhaps there wasn't much time to prepare them for the change. As a result, they feel frustrated or sad. Younger children who may not be able to express themselves yet will usually react by screaming and crying. They may also feel a sense of shock, if they are taken away abruptly from an activity.

WHAT ARE SOME WARNING SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR DURING A TRANSITION?

Jenica: Look out for significant behavioural change such as a previously happy child becoming moody or withdrawn, a good-tempered child suddenly displaying disobedience, or even changes in sleep patterns.

Amanda: Aggressiveness, sudden outbursts of tears and being extra clingy may be signs that the child is not coping or adjusting well to changes.

PARENTS, DID YOUR CHILDREN EXHIBIT ANY OF THESE SIGNS WHEN ATTENDING PRESCHOOL FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Foo Jit Choon: When my son Kang Yue recently started toddler class at 20 months, he became more attached to me and would want to hold my hand — even when we were at home! I had to constantly be in his sight. However, as time passed, he became more excited and looked forward to going to preschool so that he could play with friends. We had to be patient and understanding.

Mazli Bin Haji Warin: My daughter Ayra cried in her first week at preschool as she



THE GLOBAL PICTURE

Out of the 30 countries participating in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2017 report, *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*,

93%

were found to offer parent information meetings and open house days at the centre level to prepare children and their parents for their transition to primary school.

missed her family and was surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I got her to bring a family photo to the centre to look at whenever she missed us. Ayra's elder sister, Sofi, who was in the same preschool, kept assuring her that preschool is fun. Knowing her big sister was there also made Ayra feel safe.

WHEN PARENTS LEAVE THEIR CHILDREN IN PRESCHOOL FOR THE FIRST TIME, BOTH PARTIES ARE OFTEN ANXIOUS. EDUCATORS, WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU OFFER PARENTS?

Jenica: Parents need to understand that a transition is a milestone event in a child's development. Separation anxiety is inevitable. Stay calm so that you can support your child.

Share positive stories about starting preschool with your child. Take your child to visit the centre and meet with teachers before the first day of class. Be specific with pick-up times; if you say to your child that you will pick him up after lunch, keep to your promise. This will reassure the child and establish trust.

Amanda: If parents have any concerns, please share it with the teachers. Most preschools have made provisions for parents to sit in for the first three days. Take two days to come in and interact with

“Encouraging parental presence and getting parents to stay connected to the school helps children feel more secure and assured in a new school.”

MS JENICA ONG, 47
Centre Director,
Seeds D' Learning House



THIS SPREAD On Jenica: Outfit Esprit. On Ayra: Outfit Seed Heritage. Hair clip Stylist's own. On Mazli: Sweater Marks & Spencer.

teachers together with your child. In this way, you develop trust in the teachers and allow your child to see it too.

PARENTS, WHAT STRATEGIES DID YOU USE TO HELP YOUR CHILD WITH TRANSITING FROM HOME TO NURSERY AND BEYOND?

Jit Choon: At home, I try to keep myself in their sight and accede to reasonable requests. I also maintained our usual routine, such as going to their grandma's place for dinner, to minimise changes in their lives. The aim was to let them know that life has not changed much even with them going to preschool.

I know that the teachers at preschool will care for the children. I feel it's important for teachers to take time to build familiarity and trust with our children. If parents are constantly intervening when our children cry, it will be harder for them to build a bond with the teachers.

Mazli: I didn't want Ayra to feel overwhelmed by all the new things she had to learn in preschool. To boost her confidence, her sister played games with her to expand her vocabulary. We also brought her to the library and encouraged her to read more books, and we also read together.

ISSUES SUCH AS BECOMING ILL OR FALLING DOWN IN PRESCHOOL ARE INEVITABLE TRANSITIONS THAT DISRUPT A CHILD'S USUAL ROUTINE. WHAT CAN EDUCATORS DO?

Jenica: Educators can use visual aids and prompts to help the child anticipate and prepare for what is coming next. Sharing stories like *That's Me Loving You* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal or *Dealing With Feeling... Worried* by Isabel Thomas serves as a springboard to help children anticipate and cope with possible scenarios and changes.

Amanda: When a child has been away from preschool because of illness, teachers can visit the child at home or speak to the child over the phone. We can get the child's friends to create get-well cards, which we then email to the child's parents. It helps children feel that they matter and builds their trust in teachers and their friends. It is also important to maintain close communication with parents.

COPING WITH CHANGE



ECDA Fellow Ms Seri Rahayu Binte Ariff, Executive Principal, PCF Sparkletots, offers tips on managing change.

A physical transition, such as entering a new preschool, primary school or a new level, can cause children to experience other transitions. For instance, children may struggle with an emotional transition, as they have to get used to a new teacher, make new friends and adapt to class routines. They may undergo an intellectual transition when they feel anxious about learning new things or coping with higher learning expectations.

Parents play an important role in facilitating a safe and secure emotional climate for their children so that they can grow and learn in a safe environment. When children feel secure in an environment and with other adults such as teachers, they are motivated to explore, discover and participate eagerly in activities. However, if children do not manage transitions well, it can have a negative impact on their learning and social-emotional development.

Ms Seri suggests ways parents can prepare their children to cope with transitions.

- **CONNECT**
Work closely with your child's preschool teacher. Exchange and share information about your child's learning and development. Talk about your own anxieties and discuss how you can support your child's transitions. It also enables the preschool to plan and address your child's needs.

- **COMMUNICATE**
Prepare your child for an upcoming transition by talking to them about why they are moving to a primary school or a new neighbourhood. Talk about some of the new subjects your child may be doing, the timetabling and recess times. This helps them prepare for the emotional transition to meet new friends, leave their comfort zone and face new challenges.

- **COMFORT**
A child who is ill goes through a physiological transition and may feel down. Comforting children who are sick will make them feel loved and protected. This helps them build trust. Should this need for comfort not be met, children may be withdrawn.



“Have confidence in your child and don't let your anxiety show.”

MR MAZLI BIN HAJI WARIN, 42
Assistant Engineer, father of
Ayra Edora Mazli, 6



PARENTS, ANY TIPS TO ENSURE YOUR OWN TRANSITION-RELATED ANXIETIES ARE NOT PASSED ON TO YOUR CHILDREN?

Jit Choon: The root cause of our anxiety is our child's anxiety. Our anxieties are reduced when our children are happy. Speak to the teachers if you have concerns about how your child is coping in preschool. Hopefully, this can lead to less worry. Most importantly, learn to let go. Going to preschool is all part and parcel of growing up — celebrate it!

Mazli: Most of our anxieties are based on 'what if' scenarios, which may or may not happen. We have to be confident that our children will share their problems with us. As parents, we should do our best to listen, encourage and support them.

EDUCATORS, WHAT ARE SOME PROGRAMMES ORGANISED BY YOUR CENTRE TO HELP CHILDREN AND PARENTS WITH TRANSITION?

Jenica: At Seeds Kindergarten, we have created a more structured classroom setting that mimics a Primary 1 classroom for our K2 children. Children learn how to draw a margin in their exercise books, copy sentences from the board and other necessary skills. Towards the end of the K2 year, we organise a formal leadership programme which helps children to feel empowered and independent as they transit to primary school. Children are equipped with skills to problem-solve and they learn to be resilient in the face of challenges. This programme helps them become more receptive and ready for life in primary school. We also provide opportunities for social role-play activities and for children to have a mini tuck-shop experience.

“If we as parents constantly intervene when our children cry, it'll be harder for them to build a bond with the teachers.”

MS FOO JIT CHOON, 36
Civil Servant, mother of Chee Kang Yue, 22 months



PICK A TUNE

Music does more than cheer us up — it can also help children transition more quickly from one activity to the next during the school day. In a 2007 article in the peer-reviewed journal *Music Therapy Perspectives*, case-study evidence from three American preschools showed that the transition time between activities decreased when preplanned songs or sound stimuli were used to prepare and support young children for forthcoming change. MOE's Nurturing Early Learners Framework also recommends making music an integral part of classroom transitions, for example by singing a greeting song to start the day and a goodbye song before dismissal.



We also conduct a 'How to Prepare Your Children for Primary 1' workshop for parents, where one of our centre directors — a former primary school teacher — shares tips. We find this reassures parents and it is a platform for them to ask questions and clarify any concerns they may have.

Amanda: Little Skool-House organises tea sessions with parents at the beginning of the year. We share our goals for the year and outline some of the things we will be doing. We plan 'class orientation' sessions for children and parents new to the centre to familiarise them with the preschool, classroom and teachers.

We ensure that children in the Toddler and Nursery 1 classes are engaged in simple fine and gross motor activities throughout the year. This helps them develop the self-help skills needed when they are toilet training, brushing their teeth or learning to eat independently. It also builds their confidence.

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS EDUCATORS AND PARENTS CAN WORK TOGETHER?

Jenica: Before a child's first day of preschool, parents can complete a questionnaire to help the educator know the child's preferences and interests. This makes it easier for us to build a relationship based on mutual understanding. Parents and teachers can share regular updates about the child's developmental progress, behaviours or concerns, so that both can identify potential issues and plan strategies to help ease the child through transitions.

Teachers can also invite parents to volunteer as teacher's helpers or participate in the centre's activities. Encouraging parental presence and getting them to stay connected to the preschool help children feel more secure.

Amanda: Listen to each other's concerns and work out plans that are beneficial for the children. With good communication, teachers and parents can better understand new transitions and how to manage them. They can share information on strategies that worked and did not work. Parents and teachers can also share their observations of how the children are adapting to change. They can share their insights and suggest tips to further support the children.

SUPPORTING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

DR CHUA BEE LENG OUTLINES STRATEGIES TO HELP EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS WITH THEIR OWN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRANSITIONS.



It's not only children who face transitions when they go to childcare or preschool; teachers, too, experience them in the course of their professional development journey. It is an ongoing process that can be divided into four stages.

- Show empathy, patience, understanding and appreciation of the effort put in.
- Mentor beginner educators to help them navigate the intricacies of building relationships and pedagogical practices.

SUPPORTING STRATEGIES

› **Stage 1 — Survival**

In their first year of teaching, teachers may struggle with a range of issues such as classroom management, working with colleagues or communicating with parents. Some may feel unprepared to handle the day-to-day classroom needs and activities, which may result in low confidence and self-esteem.

› **Stage 2 — Consolidation**

Between their first and third year, teachers become more proficient in classroom management. They focus on mastery and learning of skills needed in their teaching practices, and begin to pay more attention to children's needs individually.

Helping Tips:

- Provide more support in classroom management and in the functional aspects of the job, such as lesson planning and organisation of classroom activities.

› **Stage 3 — Renewal**

In the third to fourth years, educators become interested in exploring new pedagogies and incorporating research into practice.

› **Stage 4 — Maturity**

Educators are more reflective about their internal self, teaching philosophy, practices and identity. They begin to see themselves more as facilitators who bring out the best in young children.

Helping Tips:

- Provide exposure to different pedagogical approaches through professional learning communities.
- Encourage educators to be more self-directed by finding creative solutions to improve daily practices.
- Motivate educators to share their innovative classroom pedagogies with fellow educators at workshops and conferences, both locally and internationally. ●



Dr Chua Bee Leng

Associate-Dean, Professional Practice (Office of Teacher Education), National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Dr Chua regularly shares her expertise in subject disciplines such as educational studies and instructional pedagogies with schools and educators from other organisations and countries. She is also a Senior Lecturer with the Psychological Studies Academic Group.

Teacher, Are You OK?

Empowering early childhood educators contributes to the feel-good factor and their wellbeing.

1. COMPETENCY
Make teaching resources available, provide mentorship from experienced colleagues, and offer constant encouragement and affirmation. This has a positive impact on educators' belief in their capacity to shape young children's learning.

2. AUTONOMY
Give educators the autonomy to design teaching and learning environments for children. At the same time, give them room to innovate in their pedagogical approaches to engage the learners.

3. RELATEDNESS
Give educators a sense of belonging to the wider early childhood education fraternity. Engaging them in professional learning communities provides them with opportunities to form social networks and learn from one another. As educators share, reflect and collaborate on educational research and classroom pedagogies, they also enhance their teaching competencies in the process.

4. TIME
Give educators the time and space to read, reflect and apply what they have gleaned from the different professional resources.

To learn more about supporting teacher transitions, check out the following articles:

Katz, L. G. (1972). Developmental Stages of Preschool Teachers. *The Elementary School Journal*, 73, 50-54.
Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68-78.

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