

## Transitions

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Have you ever heard the expression, “the only constant is change” and thought that sounded just like life in Early Head Start? Although we work toward providing continuity with families and staff, sometimes things just change. *Transition* means that something is changing. Not all transitions are equal, and everyone experiences them differently. There are big transitions like the birth of a baby or joining or leaving a

program option. Smaller daily transitions might include changing activities in a classroom or socialization and beginning or ending a home visit. Every day there are many small transitions for infants and toddlers. Think about how many times a day very young children start an activity, stop an activity, wash hands, eat, go outside, go inside, go to sleep, wake up, and so much more! Because transitions are such a huge part of every infant and toddler’s day, it’s important that we make the best of them.

Think of how hard change can be for you as an adult. That might give you some idea of how it can affect infants and toddlers. Of course, we are all different. One person might love change and find it exciting, whereas another dreads the same upcoming change! Each child in your program is an individual and will experience transitions in their own way. In this News You Can Use, we look at ways to support some of the different kinds of transitions that go on in Early Head Start.

## Individualizing Transitions

*Lupe has always been very careful to maintain her routine in her family child care program. She has just joined an Early Head Start program and will be enrolling her first child. The child development specialist, Rosa, has noticed that Lupe keeps to a schedule for all children and is working with her towards individualizing each child’s experiences starting with transitions.*



When Lupe looked closely at her daily schedule, she realized that there were a lot of changes going on each day. Any time children go from one activity to another, they are experiencing a transition. There is a big difference between transitions that children choose for themselves and those imposed on them by adults. For example, rather than having a designated snack time, offer an “open snack” where older toddlers can wash hands and sit at the table when they are hungry. Rosa assures Lupe that



making changes like this is not only responsive to children but also increases one-on-one time. Now Lupe realizes that, while some children are busy playing, she can sit with a few at a time while they are hungry.

Young infants determine their own schedules. Working together with families, group care should attempt to match the home routine. Pay close attention to each baby's cues, and respond when they are hungry, tired, bored, or wet. You probably already do this—especially when it comes to diapers. Although there are certain requirements that diapers be changed every 2 hours, if a child needs a new diaper after an hour, of course you would change it!

When *each* child's schedule is individualized, it is much easier to meet the needs of children within a group care situation. Imagine how would you feel if your day was that full of other people telling you to stop activities you are enjoying, or eat when you weren't hungry? It's no wonder that transitions can be a difficult time of day for infants, toddlers, families, and caregivers. Just think—every time you ask a 2-year-old to do something, it gives them the opportunity to say their favorite word: “No!”

Whether you work with young children on home visits, in your own home, or in a center, here are some ways to individualize transitions:

- Give infants warning when things are about to change. Even a very young infant may feel more comfortable if someone gets on their level and says, “Are you ready for a clean diaper?” instead of swooping down to lift them to the changing table. If children say “no” or indicate that they are not ready, let them know that they have a few more minutes to play and then it will be time for a new diaper.
- Give toddlers a few minutes' notice before it is time to change activities. Take a moment to let toddlers know, “You have 5 more minutes to play so finish up what you are doing.” Then, “You have 2 minutes left to play; we're just about to clean up.” Even before they have a real sense of time, these warnings will prepare toddlers for transitions and leave them more likely to cooperate.
- For children who need a little extra help around transitions try getting down to their level, make sure you have their attention, and let them know it will be time to move on to something else soon.
- Create a signal that engages children, such as clapping your hands in a rhythm that they can join. Use that signal to let them know it's time to move to a new activity in a fun, positive manner.
- When possible, provide them with an acceptable option. You might say, “Do you want to put the toys on the shelf or in this basket?”



*Estelle and Shari, co-teachers in an Early Head Start classroom, tell the children that it is time for an art activity. All eight eager toddlers run over to the art table. Estelle carefully pours paint and glue into small cups, searches for eight brushes, and sets out paper for the children. Shari is putting newspaper down to protect the table. In the short time that it takes the teachers to get ready, a few children*



*begin hitting each other, another few get up and walk away, and the remaining children are whining. Before the materials are even on the table, the activity has lost its appeal.*

Estelle and Shari are great teachers who are trying to provide a lovely art experience for the children in their classroom. What is the problem here? Although they planned the experience, they forgot to plan the *transition!* Young children's excitement for an activity is unlikely to last if they have to wait. Estelle and Shari brought this experience up with their education manager, Carla. Together, the three of them decided to split responsibilities at times like these. They planned to have one teacher set up the materials while the other teacher reads a book and sings songs with the children. The very first time they tried this plan in their classroom, they had a successful experience! As soon as children knew about the activity, the paint was ready for them to use.

Reducing the amount of time young children are expected to wait for food, activities, or even in a line to wash hands will make these transitions much smoother. Infants and toddlers are still learning about being patient, and you can help. If a child is calmly sitting at the table before lunch, mention that they are being, "so patient." That way, the next time you ask that child to be patient, she'll know just what you mean!

Sometimes waiting just cannot be avoided. Maybe the kids are dressed and ready to go outside but another group is still straggling. When these situations come up, be prepared with a few songs and fingerplays to keep children engaged while they wait. This will be much more fun and effective than asking such young children to stand patiently in a line.

## **When Transitions are Challenging**

*Annabelle has been attending Susan's family child care program for over a year. Although she is nearing her third birthday, she still struggles whenever something out of the ordinary happens. Just the other day when they decided to take a "nature walk" in the park, Annabelle had a tantrum about leaving the house. Susan is very patient, but she still wonders why everything seems so difficult for this child and how she might help Annabelle cope with change.*

Annabelle is a child who has trouble going from one place or activity to another. Her mom, Candace, describes her as battling every transition all day long! How well a child handles moving through the day depends a lot on a child's temperament and personality. For children who are really struggling, there are some things that can help:

- Create and stick to a routine that is similar both at home and in child care. This does not mean that children must eat, sleep, and play at the same time every day, but when things regularly

flow in the same order, young children feel a sense of security in knowing how each day will unfold.

- If the day turns out to have a change of plans, be sure to give as much warning as possible and describe what the new or different experience will be.
- Make a simple picture schedule. A piece of paper with photos or hand drawings of playing, eating, and napping would be good for the morning. Keep it very simple and refer to each activity. You might tell children, “Right now, we are having a snack; here is the picture of some food! Next, we are going to play outside—see the picture of our playground?”
- Focus on the experiences of the next activity. When Susan explained to Annabelle that they would take a walk and look for bugs and leaves, she was excited to go. She was able to focus on what they were going to do instead being upset about leaving the house.

## Coming and Going

*Ten-month-old Jackson is just starting in Arlene's classroom. When his father, Matt, drops him off in the morning, Jackson's wails can be heard down the hall. Matt finds it very upsetting to leave Jackson when he is so upset. One morning, he decides to wait until Jackson isn't looking and then sneaks out. Later, Arlene lets Matt know that, as tough as it is to watch Jackson struggle through a goodbye, sneaking out does not make the transition easier for him. In fact, it can make a child more nervous. Arlene suggests some ideas to help both Matt and Jackson cope with this stage of development.*

Anyone who has ever had to hand over a crying baby of their own will understand how distressing this is for a parent or family member. Both the caregiver and the parent can do a lot to ease this difficult transition. It is important that both adults stay calm and reassuring. When a baby senses that his parent trusts the caregiver, it will be easier for the baby to trust her too.

Why not sneak out? When parents sneak out, they may think their baby will not notice—but they are wrong. The baby might look up expecting to see her daddy, and he's gone! This can be scary and confusing for a baby. A child may become clingier during goodbyes because she anticipates and worries about her parent disappearing. Instead, help parents create a “goodbye ritual” that is the same every time. Maybe a parent sings a song or reads a short book, gives a hug and kiss, and then leaves with a cheerful “Have a great day.” Here are some other ways to help the parent and child cope:

- Make sure you warmly greet the family whenever they come into the room.
- Offer to hold the child while his parent or family member is leaving.
- Offer to call or text the parent once the child calms down.
- Acknowledge how hard it is for a parent or family member to leave a baby who seems so upset.
- Find out what the families' caregiving routines are and try to hold, feed, sing to, and comfort the baby in a similar way.<sup>i</sup>
- Have family photos available that the child can carry, hug, and kiss.

Home visitor Anna is leaving 18-month-old Joseph's house. Every week when it is time for her to leave, Joseph throws himself down on the floor, crying and screaming. His mother, Yvette, apologizes again to Anna, who assures her it is OK. On their next visit, Anna and Yvette think together about what might help Joseph through saying goodbye at the end of her visit. Yvette mentions that Joseph seems to do better when he knows what is coming next. They decide to try giving Joseph a few warnings before Anna says she must leave. Anna even sets an egg timer for the last 5 minutes of her visit. When the timer dings and it is time to go, Joseph is prepared and knows what is going to happen. Anna reminds him that she will come back to play with him again soon, and although he cries a bit, he does much better than he did during the previous weeks as she waves to him on her way out.

A home visitor might be met by a child with great joy on their arrival, but when it is time to go, it can be hard for a child to end their special time! They have just spent the time being the center of their home visitor and family's attention, and now they must let that go. Providing warnings as Yvette and Anna did for Joseph can help a child understand what is happening and what's coming next.



Toddlers can benefit from being reminded of what is coming up next. Often during the toddler years, children can understand much more than they can tell you, especially children who are bilingual. This means that they can't always ask, "What's going on around here?" even if they feel confused. When you let them know what is coming next, you are not only easing their confusion but also helping their language development with words and ideas like "next," "later," and "soon."

## Conclusion

Transitions can be some of the most frustrating times of the day for families, caregivers, and especially very young children. They rely on you to provide a sense of safety and continuity as their environment, caregivers, and activities change. When adults provide as much stability as possible, along with intentional planning, children will be better able to cope with life's little and big transitions.

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Sarah Merrill, "Starting Child Care: It's a Transition for Parents Too!" *Young Children* 65 (2010) 60, accessed December 15, 2010, <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201009/RockingAndRollingOnline0910.pdf>.