

Early Childhood Transitions: Supporting Children and Families

For Early Childhood Professionals



Transitions to a new care and learning setting impact the entire family. For both children and families, transitions between settings can lead to great excitement and joy. Families can look forward to new possibilities, new friends, and a potential change in a child’s caregiver or teacher.

Transitions can also bring on uncertainty and concerns. Children may experience loss of familiar people and predictable routines. Families may have mixed reactions to their child getting older and wonder if they are ready for the next stage.

Early childhood professionals can offer support and guidance to help families feel secure and ready to make the move to a new setting. Strong relationships between professionals and families will likely help the transition experience.

Examples of Transitions in Early Childhood Settings

Home to Infant/Toddler Care or Preschool

Infant/Toddler Care to Preschool

Classroom Transitions within Early Childhood Programs

Preschool to Kindergarten

Kindergarten to Elementary School

All transitions involve changes for children and families, and every transition presents opportunities and challenges. Each family is unique and will experience transitions in their own way. Early childhood professionals can partner with individual families to determine what supports and strategies will be most effective and reassuring before, during, and after their child’s transition.

Adapted from [Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes: Research to Practice Series—Family Engagement and Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten](#)

This document was developed with funds from Grant #90HC0014 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, and Office of Child Care, by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

For all transitions, at any age, consider:

- Parents and children often have a very different response to the same transition.
- Families' expectations of care and learning settings may vary.
- Families' past experiences with transitions may affect the current transition.
- Transitions impact children, parents, and professionals.
- Families' transition experiences may be influenced by their cultures, languages, and backgrounds.
- Age and level of development influence how a child experiences transitions.
- Settings may differ and create new demands on the child and family.



What Can Early Childhood Professionals and Programs Do?

Early childhood professionals and programs can offer important support to families and children as they are preparing for transitions. Transitions will be most successful when families and professionals discuss ideas, plan activities, and decide about action steps together.

Communication and Collaboration

Communication and collaboration with families and between professionals is important for successful transitions. This is true when children are transitioning within a program as well as moving to a new setting.

Connect on a personal level to understand each family's unique emotions and situations. Ask families what they anticipate, look forward to, and worry about.

Create occasions for families to discuss their children's transitions with each other.

Organize time for families and children to meet new teachers and visit classrooms.

Develop fun and meaningful traditions for transitioning within a program, such as creating a memory book, going on an adventure to the new classroom, choosing a buddy, or asking older children to share their stories.

Continuity

Consistent learning experiences and expectations among care and learning settings are important parts of transitions for children. Continuity is achieved when professionals at both settings work together to create alignment and a shared understanding.

Provide guidance and reassurance to children and families as the environment, activities, learning expectations, and routines change.

Plan for transitions in advance, when possible, so that they are timely and predictable and occur according to each child's needs and pace.

Plan with families how to meet their child's needs as they move to the new setting.

Invite parents to stay in the new setting until they feel comfortable leaving.

How do you work with families to create continuity during transitions?



How do you encourage family leadership and advocacy?

Family Leadership and Advocacy

Transitions are most successful when families are engaged in planning and decision-making. Families can take the lead on identifying what is most important for their children as they move to a new setting.

Encourage families to share information about their child's strengths and challenges as they move to a new setting.

Create opportunities for open discussions about the differences in settings.

Be responsive to families by listening to concerns, providing information, and offering help when requested.

Reflect with families about how they might apply leadership and advocacy skills in a new setting.

Professional Development and Continuous Improvement

Ongoing learning about the best way to support children and families is an important part of an early childhood setting's transition process.

Assess your setting's current transition practices to understand what has been effective and what needs to be changed.

Offer professional development about partnering with families through transitions.

Ask families and older children to share their experiences about transitions.

Provide opportunities for staff to reflect on their feelings and experiences related to transitions.

Early childhood professionals and their situations are unique. How might the ideas in this resource work for you and your program?



What strategies do you already use to support the transition process for children and families?

For more information about this resource, please contact us:
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