

Successful transitions to school and care

The school year has begun and fall routines are becoming...routine. Or are they?

Transitions from home to an outside setting are one of the major challenges that families face; children and parents alike. Transitions involve attachment, separation and reunion. All people are affected by these experiences during their lifetime. Healthy attachments and enduring relationships must be secure to make transitions smooth and care free.

The child is the first partner in the transition dance. What is he or she feeling and thinking at this time?

- A child's first need is for comfort and safety. They expect and must be assured that this need is being satisfied in a new setting.

- Children seek attention when they are in distressed and adults must respond to this distress. Caregivers, teachers and parents build trust with the child when they pay attention in a positive way.

- Comfort and responsiveness allow children the freedom to explore and to take positive risks. Children can be motivated to learn and are more willing to take the risks necessary to learn new skills if they are secure in their new settings.

- Care giving routines are essential for all children. Predictability opens the child up to engagement and participation. Routines can be supported and rehearsed at home to bridge the settings.

- Children also need to learn self-soothing and calming techniques.

- Making new friends in the classroom and with other adults are the mark of a positive adjustment.

You as parents are partners in the transition process as well. You provide the link between home and school or out-of-home program. As your child's parent, you know your child best. You are the anchor for the child as they move on and out.

- Routines are essential for a successful transition. First, as the household gears up for work and school, a calm routine at home can bring sanity and some peace to the pending chaos of coming and going. As a child is brought into a new situation the ritual of leave-taking is critical. Reading a favorite book or seeking a favorite toy each day can provide the pattern required to reassure both parent and child.

- As parents, you need to stay informed. Read the newsletters, notices or daily messages so that you can connect with what is happening in your child's day. Relevant questions (How did you like the new snack? Did you have a chance to play in the new doll area?)

can help to focus the conversation to the real experiences of the day. Young children find it difficult to respond to questions such as; "What did you do today?" Prompting is important.

- Parents and teachers need to be honest and upfront with the children about changes in their daily routine. If someone else is coming to take your child home or if a new face will be in the classroom be sure to prepare, prepare and prepare. This is a joint responsibility for parents and teacher alike. Honest communication creates a smooth path.

- Parents need to feel comfortable with their child's setting. Your anxiety will only multiply your child's. Come into the setting ahead of time and seek what you need in order to feel this comfort. Ask for help and information. Make a relationship with all of the adults and don't hesitate to seek the person who understands you the best. Parents need to be comforted and reassured as well.

- Build the bridges that link home and school. Your involvement as a parent will be a key predictor in your child's success in the new setting. Your involvement can be very extensive or take a minimal amount of time but the true interest in your child's program is critical. Read, bake, bring a small gift or food, and take the opportunity to know what the needs of the program are.

- Some concrete suggestions to building the bridges are allowing your child to bring some pictures of your family members to school or taking pictures of your reunion with your child to post at school. Discuss with your child the process of using the toys at the new setting. Discuss the various routines that can be found there. Share as much information as possible with the adults who will be with your child. Bring home activities to school and share with all of the children such as cooking, stories or family traditions.

Finally, give the transition lots of TIME. It takes longer for some of us than others to find that comfort place. Children as well as adults will often have moments of regression as they ponder again if this transition is really what they want to do and what they should do.

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensure that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; building public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family. www.earlylearningnh.org