



# Transitions

**Transition to a new learning environment is a major event in a child or young person's life as it changes social connections that they have built.**

## What are transitions?

**Transitions are defined quite simply as change**

They are a period where we must adapt to new circumstances, expectations, people, environments or routines. Whether big or small, transitions are a significant part in children and young people's lives, as well as the learning community.

Children and young people may also experience transitions in their home life – for example, moving house, going on holiday, the birth of a sibling, family separations and bereavements.

## Impact of transitions

**Transition is not just about the first day – it's a process that happens over time.**

It begins as families and educational settings start to prepare during the previous year, or even earlier. It continues as children and young people experience their first days, weeks and months in their new environment.

Transition from home and between education settings involves various key changes for children, young people and families, including:

- the physical environment (for example, the size of the outdoor areas, buildings, the location and types of toilets, the number of other children, young people and educators)
- rules and procedures (for example, more structured times for attending class, eating and going to the toilet, rules for different places and times such as the classroom and recess)
- relationships (for example, meeting new children, young people and adults, responding to students of different ages, leaving established relationships with educators, getting to know a range of educators for different subjects)
- learning (for example, more formal learning experiences, structured times and set tasks, increasing independence and responsibility).

## Importance of transitions

### Potential challenges and stresses

Research shows that transitions to a new learning environment is a time of potential challenge and stress for children, young people and their families. For some, it brings excitement about making friends and learning new things, while for others the change can leave them feeling nervous and overwhelmed. Some adjust quickly to their new school

environment; others can take many months to adapt. Studies show that around 15% of students have some difficulties adjusting as they transition in and out of primary school. These issues can have social and academic implications if they're not addressed. It's also important to know that the patterns of behaviour and achievement that are established during transition often remain stable over time.

### **Children and young people need positive social and academic experiences from the outset.**

Transition is an important time for you to work with families to support a positive start to the new learning environment. This is the best way to promote children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and their social and academic success. Children and young people will make many transitions during their lives – supporting them with this important milestone will have long-term benefits.

#### **Making a positive start**

Children and young people who experience a positive transition into their new school environment are more likely to:

- feel comfortable, relaxed and valued
- feel excited and motivated to learn
- have good relationships with others
- develop a sense of belonging within the school community.

A supportive, well-planned transition process can make a big difference to children and young people's engagement, learning and wellbeing outcomes. For example, research highlights that Year 10 students who had a positive experience of transition had higher rates of attendance, better academic achievement, fewer behavioural issues and lower levels of substance abuse.

#### **Relationships are important**

A child or young person's transition is influenced by their relationships with:

- other children and young people
- family members
- educators in the setting they're leaving
- educators in the setting they're going to

- the wider community.

As an educator you can act as the pivotal point, bringing these participants together to establish transition policies and practices that best meet the needs of all children and young people. Transition is more likely to be successful when these relationships have two-way communication, and are responsive and flexible to the needs of everyone in the learning community.

Studies show that family involvement is typically high during transition in and out of primary school. As it's more likely that families will participate in transition activities, this period is the perfect time to promote positive relationships and a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community.

#### **Be You Professional Learning**

Check out content on transitions relevant to early learning, primary school and secondary school settings in the [Connect](#) module.

### **Understanding behaviour**

It's normal for children and young people to have strong feelings about an upcoming transition, such as excitement about the prospect of going to a new school, as well as nervousness about what lies ahead. Many children and young people may also feel sad or angry about leaving their current learning environment and the positive relationships they've established with educators and each other.

#### **Common feelings children and young people have during transition can include:**

- excitement
- sadness
- anger
- anticipation
- fear or anxiety.

Understanding and helping children and young people to handle the feelings will help to reduce their stress and can provide them with positive coping strategies. Children and young people often have difficulty explaining in words how they are feeling – instead they might show their feelings through their behaviour.

### **Behaviours you might observe include:**

In children transitioning to primary school – clinging behaviour, restlessness, withdrawal, anxiousness, refusal to comply, avoidance, planning and organisation difficulties, crying and tantrums, regression to younger behaviours, volatility.

In transitioning to secondary school – withdrawal or difficulty participating in class discussions, low confidence or self-esteem, regression to younger behaviours, avoidance of tasks, short temper or behavioural concerns, friendship issues or isolation.

Families might also notice issues such as changes in eating habits (low appetite or overeating), difficulties falling asleep, feeling unwell (for example, sore stomach or headaches) or difficulty separating from family members.

### **These could be typical behaviours**

Many of these behaviours are typical for children and young people as they adjust to their new environment, but educators and families need to show understanding and support to help them settle in. By discussing such behaviours with families, you'll gain a sense of whether they are unusual for the child or young person and make an accurate assessment of their support needs.

If concerning behaviours persist, it's important to get help to identify possible underlying problems such as mental health issues or academic difficulties. You may need to seek advice from the school wellbeing team or external health and community professionals.

### **Be You Professional Learning**

Learn more about noticing behavioural and emotional changes in the Notice module, and about providing support for children, young people and their families, by helping them access information and internal and external supports, in the [Provide](#) module.

## **Opportunity for early intervention**

Transition is an opportunity for 'receiving' schools and services to gather information from existing learning environments about children and young people's strengths, skills, interests and preferences.

### **For some students, change is stressful**

Research highlights that transition in and out of primary school can be the time when issues such as school refusal, disengagement and academic decline first emerge or are exacerbated. So working together with the child or young person's existing learning environment in the lead-up to transition can identify those who may need additional support or special arrangements. Families also have rich information about their child or young person's needs and are an important resource in planning individualised programs and strategies.

Identifying additional support needs during transition can help ensure that children and young people receive assistance before difficulties escalate.

### **Early intervention:**

- can help promote engagement in school and enable students to achieve their potential
- may include school and family-based interventions and strategies, or support from external professionals such as health and community agencies.

## **How can schools support a smooth transition?**

### **Whole-school level**

- Invest in partnerships with 'feeder' early learning settings, primary and secondary schools to build an understanding of each environment, and to aid the transfer of information about students and families.
- Review current policies and practices for transition so they're reflective and inclusive of your diverse community – do they make specific consideration for children and young people with additional needs (physical and developmental)?
- Identify a key team of people in your learning environment who can coordinate transition practices; establish and maintain key relationships with wider school community networks and families.
- Ensure there are established processes for gathering information from everyone involved in transition, including the voice of children and young people.

- Get to know the local community where families live, including cultural norms, demographics and available resources, so that you understand the experiences and backgrounds of students.
- Review communication processes and tools to make sure information flows both to and from families in a way that's accessible and inclusive for diverse community members.
- Provide professional development to help staff members identify key signs that show children and young people may need additional support.
- Create space and time for educators from different settings to meet and share valuable transition information.
- Provide multiple opportunities for students and families to visit their new environment – both formal (for example, information evenings or orientation days) and informal (for example, after-school access to the playground or school clubs/sporting events) – to help build familiarity and belonging.
- In addition to orientation information, give families tips and ideas for how they can support and develop their child or young person's social and emotional skills, coping and help-seeking strategies.
- Provide creative opportunities for children and young people to start building a sense of connection to school – for example, provide names/photographs of key educators and classrooms, involve current students in creating short films introducing the school to new students, ask transitioning students to create a booklet 'all about me' to share with educators.
- Teach children, young people and families specific skills which will support them during the transition period and beyond, such as:
  1. How to recognise, express and talk about their feelings
  2. Problem-solving skills
  3. Helpful thinking strategies – for example, "I can do this" or "I can be brave"
  4. Seeking help when needed.
- You may wish to engage the help of external health and community agencies to provide information sessions to families on these topics.
- Identify students who are likely to or are finding transition difficult – work closely with the family to provide support early.

For more information about transitions, check out our In Focus webinar: [Transitions – preparing children and young people for change](#).

#### **Individual level**

- Get to know individual families and help them understand you value the information they can share about their child or young person.
- Ensure children, young people and families know who they can talk to if they feel worried or encounter a problem.
- Scaffold opportunities for children, young people and family members to connect with each other before and after transition to help build a sense of belonging to the school community (for example, activity evenings, social events, team-building activities or children attending school productions). Ask families how they'd like to connect with each other.
- Online communication systems, social media and applications can be intimidating for some families – provide lots of opportunities so they can learn how to access these and provide alternative options where necessary.

## Reference

- Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) (2015). The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Statistical Report 2014. Melbourne: AIFS. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/longitudinal-study-australian-children-annual-statistical-report-2014>.
- Izzo, C. V., Weissberg, R. P., Kaspro, W. J., & Fendrich, M. (1999). A longitudinal assessment of teacher perceptions of parent involvement in children's education and school performance. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(6), 817-839.
- NSW Health (2014). School Refusal – every school day counts. Sydney: NSW Health. Retrieved from <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Documents/forum-speaker-presentations/2017/webster-greenberg-sr-booklet.pdf>.
- Waters, S. K., Lester, L., & Cross, D. (2014). Transition to secondary school: Expectation versus experience. *Australian Journal of Education*, 58(2), 153–166.