A parent's guide to...

transitions

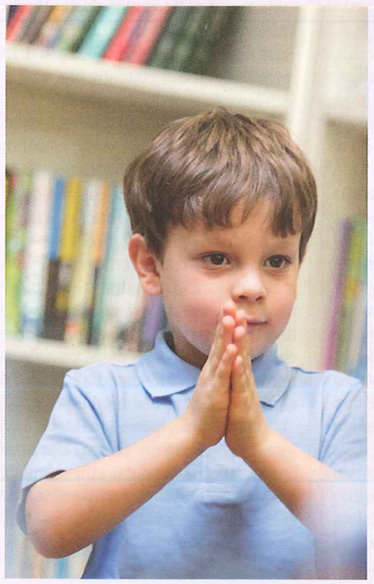
At this time of year, moving room or setting is particularly common. *Penny Tassoni* presents some top tips for parents

The term 'transitions' is used to describe the changes that children experience during their childhood. These include starting at a new childminder, pre-school, nursery or primary school, as well as changes within settings such as going up a class or moving room. At this time of year, these transitions are often uppermost in parents' and children's minds although, of course, there are plenty of others, including moving house and even going on holiday.

FIVE THINGS PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

1. Successful transitions

Changes are by their nature potentially stressful. It is important that children experience successful transitions in early childhood as these act as templates for their future ways of dealing with change.



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A difficult and stressful transition can embed strong negative memories in both the conscious but also unconscious mind that can be hard to unpick, and can act as a barrier to children coping with even small changes later in life.

2. Relationships matter

While it is impossible to remove all stress from a transition, a few factors can reduce it. The most important is how well the child already knows and feels comfortable with the new adult they will be with.

The strength of this relationship is vital when it comes to babies and toddlers who developmentally rely on the emotional support of adults as they are not yet able to draw on the back-up of their friends. Equally, older children who do not have friendships in place will also do better if they are already comfortable with the adult.

3. Temperament matters

The way children adapt to transitions can be affected by their temperament. While young children's personality is still under development, many parents will have already picked up some of their children's traits. Children who are more extrovert and curious often find it easier to cope with meeting new people and being in new situations, while children who take time to get used to new people and are less adventurous may need longer to settle and adapt. This means that two children starting on the same day may have very different reactions to starting in a new situation.

If your child takes time to 'warm up', try not to become irritated by their reticence as this will stress them further and will potentially slow them down.

4. Picking up on signals

Very young children including babies are very quick to pick up on anxieties or stress shown by their parents. While you might try to put on a cheery voice or smile, children are able to read body language and pick up on voice tones very effectively.

If children sense that you are anxious, their stress levels will increase. A successful transition for your child relies therefore on you feeling comfortable too. If you are feeling anxious, think about why this might be and then talk to your setting about your concerns.

A child's relationships with the adults they already know are key to ensuring that a move to a new environment is as stress-free as possible

5. Finding out about systems

All early years settings and schools should have a system in place to support children. If transition is some time away for your child, then it is a good idea before you choose a new early years setting or school to find out how the adults work to support children's transitions.

Consider how much time is available for settling in and find out about the steps that are taken to help your child develop a bond with the new adult they will be with. It is particularly important to look at this if your child has had a previous experience that was difficult.

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD'S TRANSITIONS

Familiarity

Transitions can be made less stressful if children become familiar with what is due to happen. This is why settling-in sessions are so important and why it is always worth taking up any opportunity to become familiar with the setting.

There are other ways you can help your child become partly familiar with a transition. If your child is due to wear a uniform, let them wear it for a week or so beforehand.

You can also walk by the school, nursery or childminder so that your child becomes used to the journey and the idea of going there.

Safe base

Most early years settings and schools will have times for settling in. It is worth finding out what will happen in these sessions so that you are familiar. If the process involves staying and playing with your child, it is worth gradually doing a little less with your child so that other adults and children can take over. Don't be tempted to push your child away or over to another adult as this often backfires and instead makes children anxious.

Developing 'goodbye' routines

If you do not have a goodbye routine, it is worth developing one in the run-up to your child starting in a new setting. If you leave your child with a partner, family member or friend even for a few minutes, create a little goodbye routine. Something as simple as 'three kisses and bye bye' can be immensely helpful. Goodbye routines are useful as they are positive ways of leaving.

Smooth start

Many children will cope better with transition if they have had a smooth start to their day at home. This is because their background stress levels on entry to the setting are lower than children who have had a bumpy start to their day. While many families struggle to get out of the door on time packed, fed and dressed, it is worth aiming to be super-organised for the days around transition in order to give your child a better start. Make sure also to get your child to bed so that they have sufficient sleep. Tired children do not make for great transitions.

Finally, while it can take time to settle in, if your child is clearly very distressed and you are worried, do something promptly. Talk to your setting about your concerns. It may be that your child might need additional settling in time, a change in routine or additional time with their key person. ■