

Helping children through life transitions

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- 1) Introductions
- 2) Overview:
 - a. Definition of life transitions
 - b. Why talking with children is important and how to do that
 - c. Strategies to help children deal with change
 - d. Resources
- 3) Let's start with an activity: Think about a change you experienced in the past or that you are about to experience.
 - What makes you happy about the change?
 - What worries/scares you?
 - What/who has been helpful?
 - What has been hard?
 - What do you do to make the change less scary/stressful?

Pick one of these questions and share with another parent for a couple of minutes.
How do you feel after sharing?

- 4) What is a life transition? Life transitions are the result of planned or unplanned events that occur in your everyday life. All transitions involve changes in the world around you and require that we adjust internally to handle the change.
- 5) There are small and big transitions. Today we will consider some of the big transitions (such as moving, birth of a sibling, changing school etc.). The strategies we will discuss are helpful to support children also through other major transitions (such as loss of loved one, divorce, etc.), but we will not focus on these transitions, as they also need additional specific strategies.
- 6) Giving advanced warning (if it is possible) will help children get ready for the change and cope better.
- 7) However unpredictable the change that is about to happen, talking with children about it will be beneficial.
- 8) To be able to talk with children, parents first need to ask themselves how they perceive the change. What do you like about it? What you don't like?

What do you think led to this change? Discussing the change with your partner is also important, so that you two can be on the same page.

9) Although the change may be unpredictable and scary for you too, it is important to acknowledge both positive and negative feelings that you and your child can have. Share with your child positive feelings but also negative feelings that you experience in regard to the change. Sharing your negative feelings offers you the opportunity to model for your child how to deal with stress. When you share negative feelings, make sure that you also communicate to your child that you are in control of the situation and that he/she is safe. You want to share your worries, but not look overwhelmed and unable to reassure your child that things will work out.

10) Considering your child's developmental level. It is possible to talk about change even with young children, but talking about change looks different with children of different ages. Strategies that are helpful:

- a. Drawing/using art. Ask your child to make a drawing about his life now and another one about his life once the change happened. Make the drawings yourself if your child is too young to imagine what the change will look like
- b. Make a calendar and use drawings for each day, so that the big change can be broken into smaller steps
- c. Make a "book" about the new changes (by taking pictures, telling a story about how life will look like after the change)
- d. Use doll play to represent scenes/stories related to the change
- e. Read books with your child about the change (see resource section)

Exercise: Pick one of these techniques and explain to another parent the change (I will provide dolls, sheets etc.)

11) Keep things the same as much as possible and maintain habits and traditions even after the change happened

12) Give children some choices. Most likely your child does not feel he/she chose the change and this can make adapting more difficult. Help your child gain some sense of control by giving some choices (for instance have your child choose the colors/toys in his new room; new backpack for a new school/ new toys for a sibling)

13) Refer to changes the child is familiar with. Even young children experienced some changes in their past, and we can draw on these experiences to help them cope with the new ones

- 14) Help children see what is still stable in their life. In the middle of the change, some things are still going to be the same. Take time to point them out for your child.
- 15) Make sure children do not take the change personally. Sometimes children tend to think that somehow they caused the change (ex. I wasn't a good friend and this is why my parents put me in a new school). Explain to them that this is not the case
- 16) Have special time with your child. This will help strengthen the relationship with you and make your child feel more supported. It will also give your child opportunity to express feelings and concerns with you
- 17) Expect some regression. When children feel overwhelmed, they may temporarily "lose" some of the skills they recently acquired. This happens commonly and usually children bounce back once they adapt to change.
- 18) Expect some grieving about letting go of old places/habits and so on (different children may express it in different ways, look for changes in behaviors, things they say etc.).
- 19) Self-care. Change is a time of stress for everybody. You may be extremely busy with managing all the things that need to be done, but remember that a caregiver who is exhausted and drained is not an emotionally present and sensitive caregiver.
- 20) When should you seek therapy? There is no clear-cut rule for deciding when therapy is needed. Although problems with transitions are expected in children and children may eventually adapt, you may feel that your child is particularly overwhelmed and that you don't know how to best help him/her. You may also feel that you are overwhelmed and unable to support your child. In these cases, individual therapy for you and/or your child and/or family therapy may be helpful.

21) Contact: drmessina@serenamessina.com

22) Resources:

Arrival of a New Sibling

Heo, Yumi . **Ten Days and Nine Nights**. Schwartz & Wade, 2009. 32 pages.
Ages 3 - 6

Horse, Harry. **Little Rabbit's New Baby**. Peachtree, 2008. 32 pages. Ages 3-6

Jenkins, Emily. **That New Animal**. Illustrated by Pierre Pratt. Frances Foster

Books / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. 32 pages. Ages 3-7

Krishnaswami, Uma. **Bringing Asha Home**. Illustrated by Jamel Akib. Lee & Low, 2006. 32 pages. Ages 4-7

Lloyd-Jones, Sally . **How To Be a Baby--by Me, the Big Sister**. Illustrated by Sue Heap. Schwartz & Wade, 2007. 32 pages. Ages 3-7

Wigersma, Tanneke. **Baby Brother**. Illustrated by Nynke Mare Talsma. U.S. edition: Front Street, 2005. 28 pages. Ages 3-6

Woodson, Jacqueline. **Pecan Pie Baby**. Illustrated by Sophie Blackall. Putnam, 2010. 32 pages. Ages 3 - 6

A New Place to Live: Moving

Bond, Rebecca. **When Marcus Moore Moved In**. Megan Tingley Books / Little, Brown, 2003. 32 pages. Ages 5 - 8

Croza, Laurel. **I Know Here**. Illustrated by Matt James. Greenwood Books / House of Anansi Press, 2010. 40 pages. Ages 4-8

Elya, Susan Middleton. **Home at Last**. Illustrated by Felipe Davalos. Lee & Low, 2002. 32 pages. Ages 5 - 8

Gleeson, Libby. **Clancy & Millie and the Very Fine House**. Illustrated by Freya Blackwood. Little Hare, 2011, c2009. 32 pages. Ages 4-7

Gleeson, Libby. **Half a World Away**. Illustrated by Freya Blackwood. U.S. edition: Arthur A. Levine Books / Scholastic, 2007. 32 pages. Ages 3-7

Ritz, Karen. **Windows with Birds**. Boyds Mills Press, 2010. 32 pages. Ages 4 - 7

Schimmel, Lawrence. **Let's Go See Papá!**. Translated by Elisa Amado from the Spanish. Illustrated by Alba Marina Rivera. Greenwood, 2011. 40 pages. Ages 5-9

Williams, Karen Lynn and Khadra Mohammed . **My Name is Sangoel**. Illustrated by Catherine Stock. Eerdmans, 2009. 32 pages. Ages 5 - 10
Scholastic Press, 2002. 32 pages. Ages 5 - 9

**Big Beginnings:
Starting Daycare, Preschool, or Elementary School**

Ballard, Robin. **My Day, Your Day**. Greenwillow Books / HarperCollins, 2001. 24 pages. Ages 2 - 5

Barrett, Mary Brigid. **Day Care Days**. Illustrated by Patti Beling Murphy. Little, Brown, 1999. 32 pages. Ages 3 - 5

Child, Lauren. **I Am Too Absolutely Small for School**. U.S. edition: Candlewick Press, 2004. 32 pages. Ages 5-8

Choi, Yansook. **The Name Jar**. Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. 32 pages. Ages 4 - 6

Cocca-Leffler, Maryann. **Jack's Talent**. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 32 pages. Ages 5-7

George, Lucy M. **Back to School Tortoise**. Illustrated by Merel Eyckerman. Albert Whitman, 2011. 24 pages. Ages 3-6

Grindley, Sally. **It's My School**. Illustrated by Margaret Chamberlain. U.S. edition: Walker & Company, 2006. 24 pages. Ages 4-7

Henkes, Kevin. **Wemberly Worried**. Greenwillow, 2000. 32 pages. Ages 3 - 7

Hughes, Shirley. **Don't Want to Go!** U.S. edition: Candlewick Press, 2010. 32 pages. Ages 3 - 5

McGhee, Alison. **Mrs. Watson Wants Your Teeth**. Illustrated by Harry Bliss. Harcourt, 2004. 32 pages. Ages 5-8