

What are transitions?

Transitions are changes that take place in our life; changes that move us from one stage to another, for example from being single to being married, or from being unemployed to being in work.

Transitions are an essential part of growing up and the most important ones happen when we are babies and young children.

Some of the more universal transitions that all children experience are:

- birth itself
- from milk to solids
- from crawling to walking
- from being fed to feeding ourselves
- from nappies to being trained
- becoming self aware
- able to be cared for by others
- going to nursery
- going to school
- developing new skills.

Other transitions that some of the children in your care may experience are:

- a new baby
- violence/abuse
- parents divorcing/step parent/new partner
- a serious illness/accident/death in the family
- unexpected change of school
- moving house.

It is these early transitions, and how we cope with them that will have the greatest effect on the rest of our emotional development, and on our ability to cope with life's challenges.

Experience of transitions

All of these transitions present the child with challenges. Of course, the child doesn't usually have to go through the transitions on his own, he will be supported by those around him at home or in day care, or in education. However, the experience of going through the transition will depend on the kind of response and support he gets from those around him. We must also keep in mind the fact that a child's early experiences of transitions will have a big effect on how he handles transitions at later stages of his life.

Billy is taking his first steps. He stumbles and pulls a cloth off the table smashing some cups and a plate. His dad shouts at him. 'You stupid boy. Look at the mess you've made. Bad boy.' Billy cries and for the next few days seems reluctant to try walking again.

If this irritable response is repeated regularly then Billy's transition from crawling to walking will be severely delayed. He may also suffer damage to his confidence and may be unwilling to attempt later transitions.

Mary is holding a spoon for the first time. Food is going everywhere but in the mouth. Big sister is laughing at her so Mary learns that putting apple purée up her nose brings a big smile to her sister's face. Mum could get angry at big sister and angry with Mary but she smiles and gently encourages Mary in the right direction. When Mary gets it right both mum and big sister give her lots of praise and big smiles.

If we respond warmly, firmly and consistently, even when a child has made a mistake, the child will come through the transition with positive rewards; feeling she belongs, feeling more confident, deepening a trusting relationship with important people around her.

With unexpected transitions, such as divorce or moving house, there is even more pressure on the adults to get the supporting response right. Much damage can be done to a child if their feelings are not responded to when some serious change is taking place.

Each transition provides the child with a new challenge. He already has a body of experience that now informs his view of the world. This is his mind-set. He uses this to assess the new challenge.

Mind-set

Unfortunately Jimmy sometimes gets shouted at and then smacked at home. He may not be sure why because his parents haven't always made a clear link between behaviour and consequences. But shouting means a smack in his mind-set. Unfortunately, this has been a bad week for his teacher and she is feeling very stressed. She shouts at Jimmy for taking Freddie's playdough. Jimmy cowers away and looks frightened.

Both Jimmy and the teacher are operating from their own particular mind-set, from an understanding of how the world works. Jimmy believing that when a grown up shouts he gets smacked, the teacher believing that when she is stressed it's OK to get angry with others. Both have to develop a more mature mind-set and both need help to make this transition.

How mind-set is formed

Our mind-set is almost like a set of rules. We expect things to work in the way we have become used to. We expect people to behave in the way they have been doing. Transitions offer us new experiences and we build up our set of rules, widen them, change them and make new sense of the world. Our brain does all this for us! When we are very young the brain is particularly active in making new pathways and strengthening already existing ones. When an experience is repeated and repeated it becomes hardwired and is consequently more difficult to remove or change.

Children who have been badly treated are often hardwired for fear, anxiety or, more sadly, are more subdued and defensive. Mind-sets become almost instinctive and are often associated with strong emotions. A child's early life experience should be filled with warm, happy and secure emotions because the brain will hardwire these feelings into the mind-set and help

the child approach new transitions with confidence, even though it might mean letting go of some familiar rules and trusting new ones. Creating this trust through a transition is the work of the responsible adults round him. This is a particular challenge when the child is older because there is more hard wiring in the brain and mind-sets are getting more established even in the three and four year old.

Transitional objects

A transitional object is anything which, for the child, symbolises home life, mummy and things familiar. The younger child will use a cuddly toy, or suck a thumb. Some children cling to teacher. The older child may have a firmer grasp of being loved and cared for and feel safe inside without need for something tangible.

The three to five year old

A child at this age has gone through many transitions, so from one point of view is very experienced.

If everything has gone well this child will have a measure of self-confidence, be very trusting and perhaps even a little adventurous. She will have a strong attachment to the parent figure(s), based on the affectionate, approving and supportive relationship she has experienced. She will face the transition to nursery or school with a real, if quivering, trust in her parents which may be bolstered by a favourite toy or other transitional object.

The self-confident child – will have a well established understanding of how things should be, based on home life and his relationship with his parents. School routine is different so, during this early period he may display signs of separation anxiety and will need reassurance and comfort. If he has had a good home experience he will be anxious but able to accept comfort and support.

The anxious child – if the home experience has not been so good, if transitions have been handled badly or if the

attachment is not so sound the anxiety will be dealt with differently. Some children will brave it out and deny they are anxious and will not accept comfort or support. They may behave in disruptive or even bizarre ways, acting out their anxiety by crawling on the floor, hiding under tables or making strange animal sounds.

The only child – may have special difficulty because the transition is from being the centre of mummy's attention at home, to being one of a crowd at school. She may not have learned the social skills necessary to mix well with other children.

The 'spoilt' child – who has been demanding and 'spoilt' at home may expect to get attention, toys, food, on demand and, feeling unfairly treated when made to wait and share, may rebel, become disruptive, or simply opt out and withdraw.

To sum up

Children face transitions with a variety of experience, some positive some negative. They will nearly always be anxious. Faced with some unexpected transitions, like divorce or death, they may feel rejected or guilty, angry or unbearably sad. Awareness of their experience and what might be going through their little heads and giving a sensitive response should help bring them through so that transition leads to a stronger, more confident and rounded individual.

<http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/transitions-and-their-impact-on-a-childs-emotional-development-1131>