



MovIN' ON

Supportive Transitions for Infants and Toddlers

Emily J. Adams and
Rebecca Parlakian

It is the end of the day in the Sunflower room. Miss Lisa sings the good-bye song to each 2-year-old as his or her family member arrives. Miss Paula is at the door helping children gather projects and personal items to take home. After the good-bye song, each child has a slightly different routine for leaving. Some children want a hug, some say good-bye to the fish, and others simply wave and leave.

During their time with this group, Lisa and Paula have created end-of-the-day routines with each child. With August approaching, they want to make the larger end-of-the-program-year transition out of their room feel as individualized and supportive as the children's daily good-byes have become.

PAULA AND LISA'S SITUATION may sound familiar to people who work with infants and toddlers and their families. There comes a time when a child leaves your care to move into someone else's care. Planning ahead for transitions supports everyone involved—children, parents, and caregivers. Whether a transition is anticipated and planned or comes as a surprise, such as when a teacher leaves the program, it's important to understand the effects it has on children and families.

Why do we support transitions?

Infants and toddlers learn best when they feel safe and can trust the adults who care for them (Zero To Three 2008). Building a trusting relationship between a young child and a teacher takes time. If that relationship must end, even very young children may feel sadness, confusion, fear, and even grief. Infants and toddlers may express emotions through withdrawal, irritability, crying, tantrums, aggression, and/or disruptions in their routines. Caregivers and families can help very young children by responding sensitively to them during transitions. Planning can reduce the negative impact of transitions.

What can you do to support transitions?

The Sunflower teachers in the opening vignette are on the right track. They reflect on how they have come to individualize many of the daily routines for each child. For example, they know that Keyaun needs a few minutes and a couple of offers before he is ready for his diaper to be changed. Lisa and Paula have learned a lot about the different temperaments, personalities, and preferences of the toddlers in their care. Using their knowledge will help them best support each child and family at the end of the program year.

Caregivers can help to prepare children and families in a variety of ways

for leaving a classroom. Programs also have a role in creating policies and procedures to support transitions. In the program where Lisa and Paula work, each step in the transition is clearly defined and explained:

- Plan a conference with the family. This is a time to find out how the family feels about the upcoming changes. Often, parents too feel a bond with their child's teacher. Whether the transition is from one room to another or out of the program, families may find the change difficult.
- Create an opportunity for the child's new teacher to meet the child and family. Encourage parents to share information, either verbally or by completing a brief questionnaire, with the teachers in the child's new classroom. Suggest that the parents visit the new classroom, if possible.
- Set up a meeting with the new teacher to share caregiving strategies that seem to work best for the child.
- Plan for the child to make a series of visits to their new classroom. The first visit should be short, and subsequent visits can each be a little bit longer. The child's current teacher should stay with him or her in the new classroom for at least the first few visits.

In addition to the supportive plans above, Lisa and Paula have another idea. They want to create good-bye books for each child who is leaving. The books will include pictures of

Emily J. Adams, MA, is a writer and training specialist for the Early Head Start National Resource Center. She has been an infant teacher, a toddler teacher, and an education supervisor for Early Head Start. eadams@zerotothree.org

Rebecca Parlakian has developed written and Web-based resources and curricula for both parents and professionals at ZERO TO THREE, in Washington, D.C. Most recently she codeveloped online resources for child care providers that explore five challenging infant/toddler behaviors. rparlakian@zerotothree.org

This column appears in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.

the child doing daily activities with friends and teachers. These books will be a great place to point out a child's strengths and mention skills they are still developing. Lisa and Paula believe the books will help children remember and feel connected to the peers and the classroom they are leaving behind.

Here are a few ideas for making good-bye books:

- If only one child is leaving the classroom, make a similar book for the peers who will miss their friend. You might be surprised at how children seek out and “read” this book about a friend who moved on.
- The child's book can include photos of the new classroom or program, teachers, and children. A special photo of the child's new cubby (with his or her name and picture displayed prominently) is also a nice welcome.

THINK ABOUT IT

What kind of transition plan do you follow when children leave your room? Does your program have policies to support families before, during, and after transitions?

Hold in your mind the image of each child who is leaving you. Think about how he or she is likely to experience this change. Consider how each child handles daily transitions; this can give you clues as to how the individual children might react to a bigger life change, like shifting to a new room, new teacher, and new classmates. Now think about what soothes and comforts each child during difficult transitions—how can you apply those strategies to support a classroom transition?

TRY IT

Some ideas for saying good-bye:

- Make a good-bye book for each child who is leaving and a copy to keep in the classroom. Read the books before the child leaves. Explain to the family how the book might help their child remember the fun she had with her caregivers and friends.
- Create a good-bye gift for children. This can be as simple as a handmade card, a chunk of homemade playdough, or a laminated photo of you and the child together.
- Talk about upcoming transitions. Long before children can speak, they are experiencing emotions. Even for very young

infants, respectfully telling them about what is coming next can help them gain the ability to feel safe and trusting through the experience.

- Remember the family! Sometimes parents who have come to know and trust you as a caregiver will have the hardest time with a transition. Talk to family members and be available to listen to their concerns.

Transitions are part of everyone's life. Helping parents and children through them is an important part of being a competent teacher and creating a quality program. Developing nurturing transitions also helps children begin to understand the notion of healthy good-byes—a life skill they will take with them as they grow.

Resources

- Alton, C., M. Mizukami, M. Banks, M. Quick, & L. Dziadul. 2003. Helping children make transitions. *Exchange* 154: 38–43.
- Jervis, K., & B.K. Polland. 2007. *Separation: Supporting children in their preschool transitions*. Rev. ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

McCracken, J.B. 1997. *So many goodbyes: Ways to ease the transition between home and groups for young children*. Brochure. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Wittmer, D.S., & S.H. Petersen. 2009. *Infant and toddler development and responsive program planning: A relationship-based approach*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Zero To Three. 2008. *Caring for infants and toddlers in groups: Developmentally appropriate practice*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Author.

Rocking & Rolling is written by infant/toddler specialists and contributed by ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization working to support the healthy development and well-being of infants, toddlers, and their families by informing, educating, and supporting adults who influence their lives. The column appears in January, May, and September issues of *Young Children* and online at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Copyright © 2010 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.





Go Green in the Classroom

Laminated, vertical, 12" x 36"

Order #: 478 Non-members: \$10
Members: \$8

Great Posters



Tips for Talking with Children

Laminated, vertical, 12" x 36"

Order #: 474 Non-members: \$10
Members: \$8

JOIN TODAY AND SAVE 20% ON THESE AND OTHER RESOURCES.