



Childhood and dealing with change

“

The newborn must make a great effort to adapt to the external world. He is not yet conscious. Consider for a moment this sudden change of environment. His eyes have never seen light; his ears have never heard any noise; nobody, nothing has ever touched his skin. He has lived in an even temperature. There has been no winter or summer, no change of place, no contact with air, with oxygen, and his birth was an almost suffocating experience. Birth is a passage to a completely new and different environment

Maria Montessori, The 1946 Lectures, pg. 110

”



As noted from the quote above right from the moment of birth, change is an inevitable part of life, it can occur for a variety of reasons YET this does not make it any easier for children or adults to manage.

Why?

Experience and many studies show that people resist change for many reasons:

- The tendency to see change as a problem rather than an opportunity
- They may be uncomfortable with the unknown or perceived risk
- The feeling of a lack of control
- Their own past experiences of change etc.



Childhood however is a time of change. Children go through more changes in a day, week, month and year than we ever do as adults. These changes could be developmental or transitional. Whilst we may now have a better understanding of supporting developmental changes as parents and educators, we sometimes fail to give the same consideration to transitional changes.

In early childhood the term, transitional changes are those changes in which children move from one environment, experience or activity to another and are an essential part of growing up or maturation. For example,

- As highlighted in the quote above – the birth itself
- Weaning – from being fed to being able to feed oneself
- From being non mobile to mobile – crawling to walking.
- Toileting – from being in nappies to being able to use the toilet independently
- Learning new skills
- Starting nursery or school
- Moving from one activity to another – at an educational setting or at home.



Transitions can be viewed as a process where children try to make sense of the world and the communities to which they belong

Palaiologou, 2013, The Early Years Foundation Stage pg. 132.

However, these will not be the only transitions that children experience, some may for example experience:

- Birth of a sibling
- Parental divorce/separation or the introduction of a new partner
- Illness – own or close member of the family
- Accident or death in the family
- Moving house
- Violence/abuse

The list of transitions is not exhaustive but just examples of some of the experiences that children may be impacted by.

Whilst we recognise that children go through many changes during childhood; do we always recognise that each and every change they go through impacts and affects them?

Perhaps we do sometimes **BUT** not necessarily always. As the adults in the children's life, we need to be mindful about how each and every child is supported effectively through each and every transition as this will equip them with the tools for independently dealing with future changes.

In order to do this, we need to firstly recognise that a change that could impact the child is actually occurring and then ensuring that we support with the right tools.

*Palaiologou (2013, p141) advocates actively involving children in the process of transitions – a rights-based approach informed by the right to participation – **WHY?***



Preparation – Whilst not possible for all changes, for example the unexpected death of a loved one, where possible giving a child plenty of warning that a change is coming allows them time to process, begin to prepare and accept the change. It is also important to discuss this change with any other stakeholders such as the child's educational setting. Whilst it may be felt that the change is a personal one for example – separation or divorce/ death in the family; awareness of this change will only add support networks for the child – which they will need.

Involvement:

Whether you are going to view a new educational setting, moving to a new house, welcoming a new addition to your family or even dealing with divorce or separation, involve your child in this change as appropriate.

If viewing a new educational setting – take your child to the setting you are visiting. Observe their reactions and consider how the educators are engaging with your child. Should you determine that this is the setting for your child then it is important that you are able to observe how the educators will support your child's transition.

Moving from nursery to school – arrange for your child to meet the new teacher in advance; many schools will arrange transition days – talk to your child about this and allow them to ask questions – if you don't know the answer seek them out. The more information your child has the more prepared they will feel. Before that change takes place – visit the school periodically (even when it is closed). Walk or drive there (use the mode of travel you will be using) so that your child becomes familiar with the journey and landmarks. Talk about the new teacher, routines and activities. If you have the opportunity to engage with other families and children who will be attending, then if possible, socialise with them outside of the school setting. Having known and familiar faces will support your child (and you).



If moving to a new home – take your child to view the new house. This will also be their new home after all. View their room together; discuss how you may decorate the room and make it "theirs". Tour the rest of the shared spaces and even tour the neighbourhood so that you can talk about these spaces as you prepare for the move. The more informed and involved your child is – the easier the change will be.

Toileting – this is an exciting but sometimes challenging change. Children are individuals and develop at their own pace. Some children will control their bladder and bowels sooner than others, but this can only happen when they are physically ready, which includes the development of their nervous system in order to send messages to and from their brain. Because of this it is best not to compare your child with other children of the same age. So when should Toilet training start?

- If your child is showing signs of being ready (there are many signs of readiness – discuss these with your child’s educational setting or with a Health visitor)
- If your child attends nurseery then discuss this with the team at nurseery, they will start talking to them about the process.
- Choose a long weekend or similar when you have no other plans to start the process. Please do not start the process if there are other important things happening, such as:
 - o Moving house
 - o Birth of a sibling
 - o Moving rooms at nurseery
 - o Starting nurseery etc.

Before starting:

- Go shopping with your child and choose some “grown up” pants. Do not buy very expensive ones as they will go through many before they are fully toilet trained; and sometimes it will be easier to dispose of pants when they have a “poo” accident.
- At home, allow your child to “run around” in pants initially. This will make it easier for them to undress and if they do have an accident, you won’t have so much washing to deal with.
- When dressing, please dress them in clothes that are easy to pull up and down by themselves. This process helps build up their self-esteem and confidence. The children get very upset when they have made it to the toilet but then they simply cannot undress themselves fast enough – this often “knocks” their confidence.
- Encourage your child to use the potty or toilet, but if they are upset or seem to be having regular accidents do not be afraid to stop and try again a bit later. Try not to make a fuss if they do have an accident, as this may make them feel worried and make the process more stressful.

When at Nurseery:

- Sometimes children get very engrossed in what they are doing so they may “forget” to go to the toilet. This can happen even with frequent reminders. Please do not get upset with your child if they have accidents over a period, as this can lead to children “holding in”; which leads to a whole set of other problems. If you have any concerns, then please discuss these with your child’s educators.

Some things to note:

- Every child takes their own time to perfect this function; please remember this is not a race. The more ready your child is the easier, quicker and stress free the process will be. **It will be worth waiting for the right time.**
- Sometimes they even regress after they have been fully toilet trained so, please do not be concerned, just support them.
- If accidents continue for a period there may be another underlying medical reason, speak to your Health Visitor or GP

A new sibling – If you're having a baby, show your child/ren pictures of themselves as babies. Talk about what to expect when the new baby comes and all the ways your child/ren can be great big brothers or sisters e.g. take them shopping to buy their new sibling a present; you may even want to take them to a scan – the decision is yours.



Listening to their concerns:



Whilst it is always important to focus on the positives associated with the any change – big or small; it is also important that you are addressing any concerns the child may have. Even the most positive and supported changes can still be disconcerting as the child may have questions that you had not considered. Rather than distracting from their emotions or even shielding them, it is important that the feelings and emotions are addressed. Working your way through the emotions and feelings that the child is experiencing is a vital learning experience – it teaches them that having emotions is okay and supports them in learning to understand their feelings and the associated actions

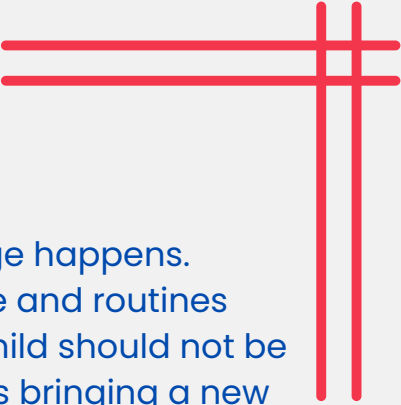
Remember Misbehaviour is often communication – are you listening?

Sometimes when a child is unable to deal with the emotions of change you will see a demonstration of behaviours that adults usually classify as misbehaviours. Rather than honing in on the behaviour itself it is important that the adult stops and question why this behaviour is manifesting itself. If a child is unable to deal with/process their emotions and feeling they may behave in ways that may not be considered appropriate – hitting; crying; biting; tantrums may be some of the manifestations.

So, **STOP** and **LISTEN**; then **SUPPORT**

- Observe; consider what triggered the behaviour.
- Acknowledge the feelings and emotions
- Help them name the feeling/emotions if they are unable to
- Read books that may help deal with some big changes. **Bibliotherapy** is the use of literature to help with changes by providing information, support and guidance through books and stories. These books help children understand that they are not alone in experiencing this type of change. They also provide encouraging words, helpful advice, and the knowledge that everything will be okay in the end.
- Support them with appropriate strategies if possible – if you cannot think of a comforting strategy, simply ensure that you acknowledge what the child is feeling. Do tell them that their behaviour is not appropriate if relevant BUT be clear that it is the behaviour that you do not like. Never make them feel that you do not like/love them.
- Remind them that you are there – always available for an extra hug or kiss when they need it.





Routines and connections:

Consistency and stability are important when major change happens. Where possible it is important to stick to the usual schedule and routines and any additional changes that may further upset your child should not be instigated. For instance, don't start toilet training as soon as bringing a new sibling home – you may not want to deal with two sets of nappies to change but for your child this is a big change that needs time and support

Attending nursery/school, bedtimes, and mealtimes should remain consistent. The structure and regularity feel safe for children, so provide as much of it as possible to restore a sense of safety and security.

Another factor that should remain consistent is the time and connection that your child has with you. Making sure that your child knows that no matter what changes, you are not going anywhere and your bond with them will not change is vital. This can be difficult when you yourself may be dealing with upset, change or stress but putting your own emotions and needs to one side for even 10 minutes will have the greatest positive impact on your child. Reassuring your child that your love and care will remain consistent, will make changes in other aspects of life easier.

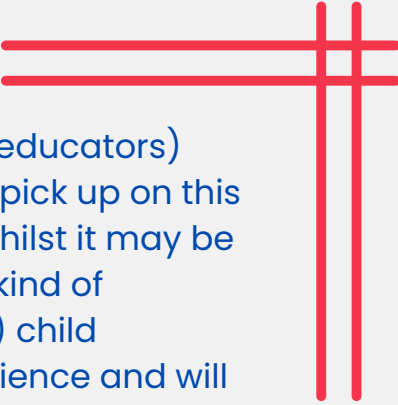
Control:

Like adults, children feel a loss of control when big changes occur in their lives too. During such times it is important to give children some agency by allowing them to make some choices within that change e.g.

- What would you like to wear to your first day at nursery?
- What colour should we paint your bedroom?
- What would you like to take for your sibling when we visit them in hospital, or do you have any ideas of what we should name them?



Such opportunities will help address feelings of helplessness by giving children opportunities to be helpful of in making decisions.



Children pick up on the energy closest to them. If parents (or educators) are tense and stressed about a change then the children will pick up on this energy and their behaviours and actions will reflect this. So, whilst it may be difficult or challenging for the adults around – REMEMBER the kind of response or reaction that you have will impact how your (the) child experiences the transition. This will impact their body of experience and will inform their views on the world around them and they will use this to assess and deal with all future challenges – **forming a mindset**.

Our **mindset** determines how we approach things in life. Individual mindsets can be likened to a set of rules – rules that determine how we react to changes in our lives. From birth our brain starts to form neuro connections based upon our experiences; constantly making new pathways and strengthening already existing ones. When experiences are repeated and repeated, they become hardwired in our neuropathways and become more difficult to remove or change. Transitions offer new experiences and an opportunity to build on; widen or change these rules and make sense of our world.

Mindsets become intuitive; almost instinctive and are often associated with strong emotions:

- A child who has been badly treated will become instinctively hardwired for fear, anxiety and will be more subdued and defensive.
- A child whose early experiences have been loving, warm and secure will become instinctively hardwired with confidence, even when known mindset rules change.

Helping children create positive **mindsets** is the responsibility of the adult. Remember that **no transition is an event** – rather it is a process or journey. Achieving successful transitions is about supporting the development of **autonomy, self-regulation and independence** within the child.

Change is difficult for everyone; it requires preparation and focus but most importantly it requires communication – this will help with many of challenges that could arise.

It is important that all stakeholders are involved in the process and most importantly where possible children are brought into the planning and problem-solving process.



After all this change is about them!