

TRANSITIONS NEWSLETTER

WHY LOOK AT TRANSITIONS?

At first glance, transitions seem like a topic for midlife. Why bother to focus on the process of transition for your junior kindergarten child, your middle school child, or yourself? The answer to that question is that life is a series of transitions. The smooth, successful resolution of those transitions makes life easier to live. It is easy to get stuck within a transition, and getting stuck can create many problems for children and parents. I have asked my colleague, Melanie Golden, MEd, to help me summarize the transition materials that evolved from our presentations and parent conversations during the past school year. I hope you find our review helpful and enlightening.

HOW ARE TRANSITIONS DEFINED?

Transitions have been defined as a process, a period, a bridge, or a turning point. But what these all describe is a three-step movement, from a stable state or self-definition into an in-between time and then toward a new direction or self-definition. Transitions come in many forms. *Developmental transitions*, such as entering preschool, occur within normal human development. You can choose to make some transitions, but others come as a surprise. You may choose a particular job but experience a surprise promotion that means leaving supportive colleagues or friends, facing new expectations, and unpredictable work schedules that do not mesh well with being the parent of a 10-year-old. There are even transitions that occur because something you expected didn't occur, such as your child's not

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wanting to join the basketball team at school although at the same age, you did. Some transitions sneak up on you without your realizing it, such as your child's graduation from high school, and others arise just because your life is on hold for one reason or another. There are transitions that bring changes in your roles, your relationships, your routines, or your basic assumptions about life and about people.

THE TRANSITION PROCESS: WHAT IS MEANT BY BEGINNING WITH ENDINGS?

Some parents have been surprised when we have opened presentations on transition with the statement, "All transitions begin with an ending." We add that every ending comes with losses that should be grieved. This might sound too much like therapy to some. I prefer to tell children that they need to think about what is changing in their lives. What losses are they sad over as they face a new beginning? If they are moving from their preschool, they would profit from listing all that will change for them. They will probably lose their routine; their teacher; their schedule; their classmates; their friendly classroom; their cot and cubby hole; a friendly school janitor, cook, or secretary; and their morning or afternoon at-home time with mom or dad or a caregiver. These are real losses for children. They need an opportunity to acknowledge them and even preserve memories with a scrapbook, find ways to stay connected with some classmates and school staff, keep special child-parent home relaxing time, and identify ways the new school will be both different and the same from the old school. Children may be out of sorts, sad, angry, and so on, because they have not had an opportunity to think about this transition consciously and with your support. Of course, this same process is also helpful for high school students leaving for college.

I put a collage of my son's family's and friends' pictures in his suitcase when he left for college. While his sister did this on her own, he did not even think of doing it, nor would he have done it if I had suggested it earlier. He displayed the collage immediately in his new, empty dorm room without commenting at all. He had been very crabby and distracted on the trip to school and once we arrived. I can only hope the pictures helped him remember us and reminded him we were with him in spirit. I feel the care packages, letters from home, and e-mail and phone connections helped make the transition easier. Knowing this information on transitions helped me not to take his crabbiness personally and not to launch into a lecture on all we had done for him to get him to that point. A week later, he e-mailed to thank us for all we had done and apologized for being in such a fog the previous week.

Why are endings so hard? Each ending revives all past endings, especially if we have ungrieved losses related to them. If a child has had problems moving in the

past or if you had problems moving when you were a child, these feelings may reemerge with any move to a new school. But if those endings are faced and those losses acknowledged, they can lead to personal growth. It is also helpful if we become more aware of our own style of dealing with endings. Do we move through them abruptly? Do we prolong them or avoid them altogether? It is helpful as well for parents to know their children's style of dealing with endings.

Naturally, children have several expected developmental transitions with the movement from one grade level to the next. With a change of schools (moving from elementary school to middle school or moving from middle school to high school), the transition includes more potential endings and more potential losses to be grieved. I recall my oldest son moving from kindergarten to a class with desks and a uniform, which included a tie and blazer. He was very excited all summer, and then 5 minutes before class began in the fall, he pulled off the tie in a panic. It seemed to signify the end of fun and the beginning of school as work. (With the assistance of a very understanding first-grade teacher, he soon found school was still fun.) The information on transitions helped me anticipate this behavior.

Parents also face many nonnormative and off-time transitions, such as having their children exposed to peer pressures at an early age and to violence and sexuality information in the media. With young people's reaching puberty at earlier ages and with peer pressure concerning sexuality and drug and alcohol use reaching down into the elementary grades, parents are faced with preparing their children much sooner than they themselves were prepared. Some parents are stuck in grieving the loss of innocence or loss of childhood or safety for their children. They are in a fog and cannot deal with the changes and losses their children face. It is very important to deal with these "off-time transitions" and provide children with the needed information and decision-making strategies for all of these anticipated and unanticipated events.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE LOSSES INVOLVED IN THESE ENDINGS?

The losses associated with the endings can be of several types. Mitchell and Anderson, in *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, have identified the following categories: material losses (loss of a physical object), relationship losses (loss of those opportunities in which we relate ourselves to others), intrapsychic losses (loss of an image of oneself or of what might have been), functional losses (loss of some physical function of the body), role losses (loss of a specific social role or of one's accustomed place in a social network), or systemic losses (loss of part of a system as a whole—such as the "family system"). Mitchell and Anderson also identify variables associated with these losses. Are the losses avoidable or unavoidable?

Are they temporary or permanent? Are they actual or imagined? Are they anticipated or unanticipated? And finally, there are issues regarding who is leaving and who is being left.

Often teens leaving for college begin to disparage everything their family does and almost imply that the family has abandoned them by being so unresponsive or difficult. Thus, the child avoids being the one leaving home and becomes the one left by the family. I recall my always congenial daughter becoming uncharacteristically crabby the month before her freshman year in college. We could do nothing right. She couldn't wait to get away from us. Once she got to college and saw we were very happy for her and actually able to survive without her, she returned to her cheerful self. The information on transitions prepared us for her unexpected behavior. We must also recall that the level of grief is proportional to the level of attachment to what has been lost. The more attached one is to what has been lost, the more intense the grieving process will be.

WHAT IS THIS “LIMINAL STAGE” BETWEEN ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS?

The in-between state, or the “period of liminality,” is the heart of any transition. This is where all the work is done. The liminal period starts with a feeling of being in a fog, which many students and parents experience during the first week at a new school. There may be an inability to concentrate; a feeling of being edgy and confrontational; a testing of relationships—either by distancing oneself or by becoming overly demanding; an underlying sense of anger; a drain of energy; or a feeling of being isolated, not understood, and lonely. Even after all the endings are identified and the associated losses grieved, a feeling may persist of being unable to make meaning in one's life or of nothing making much sense. The challenge of the liminal period is to identify what has changed and what has not changed, let go of the past, grieve the losses, and look toward the new beginning. It is important to know that the feelings of confusion will eventually end.

WHAT WILL THE NEW BEGINNING BE LIKE?

The final part of the transitional process is the new beginning. This is the easy part. But one caution about new beginnings: They can bring on conflict within ourselves and with others. Our sense of who we were may come into conflict with whom we have become. Also, with the change of any one person in a relationship, the relationship itself may need to adjust or change. This can be met with resistance from others if they have a vested interest in your remaining the same. Every transition

includes an identity crisis and a crisis in meaning making. Who am I now? If we don't resist the transitional process, we will naturally move toward the new identity and not foreclose on the old identity, because the latter is safe and familiar. For example, as children move into adolescence, parents have to transition from being the manager of their children's activities to being a consultant. For everyone's sake, their role as a parent must not end but must transition into something new and evolving.

WHY SHARE THIS INFORMATION WITH PARENTS?

If we as parents understand this process, we can help our children move through transitions more smoothly. By helping maintain routines and listening to children's feelings, we can help make transitions less overwhelming. Our helping children develop new patterns and see new possibilities encourages them to achieve a healthy resolution to the transition. Many parents have found this information on transitions to be useful in their own lives as well as their children's. Please think about reading some of the resource materials below.

RESOURCES

- Bridges, W. (1980). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Hipp, E. (1995). *Help for the hard times: Helping children through loss*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.
- Mitchell, K., & Anderson, H. (1983). *All our losses, all our griefs*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Pasick, P. (1998). *Almost grown: Launching your child from high school to college*. New York: W. W. Norton.

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