

## Identifying and supporting children through life changes

Sue Nicolson | New Zealand Tertiary College

---

Transitions can be seen as any changes that a child may experience and are a part of life for us all (Head Start, 2018). These changes may impact on children's lives over a period of time or may be considered a change in the moment, such as when a child is briefly upset about something without a lasting effect. This article will look at the life changes of children and how these changes influence their behaviours. It will offer ideas of how teachers can support children's emotional needs during these changes. I hope that in reading this, teachers gain a better understanding of how they can identify the feelings and emotions that prompt the behaviours that they observe in children.

When teaching, there were many times when I struggled to understand the changes in children's behavioural patterns. Examples of these changes could be: a child who was happy to interact with others and engage in activities previously, becoming a child who wants to be alone but cries for attention; or a child who wants to be by a teacher's side during the day but then suddenly lashes out at the teacher; or a child who will now not let go of a toy or their bag when previously they happily moved through the transition of putting away these items. There are many examples of these types of changes in behaviour that have an impact on a child's day in an early childhood centre but also on others in the environment. While the teaching responsibilities are recognised and planned for by teachers in accordance with the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) there are times when, teachers may not recognise the stress that is impacting on children. If teachers are not able to identify the possible causes and triggers of stress, this may have a long term impact on a child's wellbeing.

### Identifying transition triggers

Humphries and Rains (2015) identify that many children experience stress due to the complex contextual makeup of many families in today's society. Changes may be taking place in the child's home life that teachers are not aware of because the parents do not want to share information about their personal life. For example, information in regards to what is happening in a child's life, might be shared with centre management but may not be passed on to the teachers who have daily contact with children. However, we need to recognise that not all changes that affect a child's life are negative changes or transitions.

Teachers need to take into account what triggers there may be for children's behaviours. How many times do teachers judge a child's behaviour without considering what might be going on in the child's life? Not all behaviours have triggers that are significant life events. There may be a small change happening in the child's life such as moving from an activity to mealtime. Children may resist the changes that happen in their life due to not understanding the adult perspective. For example, a child may hear the comment "oh you're going to be a big brother and you will have to be a good helper for Mum". This is where a child is adjusting to the idea that there is a new sibling arriving soon. Children do not have an innate understanding of emotions and need to be taught the words for the feelings that they have (MoE, 2017). They also need to be reassured that what they are experiencing is a natural part of life. Should they also be supported in understanding the change in roles for them, such as what it means to become a big brother or sister?

What are some of the moments in a child's life that can be seen as transition or change moments? These could be a new sibling (new baby or blending of families), separation or divorce (absentee parent); death of a loved one; moving

house, town or country; transition to a centre; or the closing down of the centre they attend (Australian Capital Territory Human Rights Commission, 2018).

### **Understanding the child**

Teachers need to understand or seek support from experts to understand how children process information or changes that happen. If we take the time to listen to the child, we can identify the concerns or stresses that they may have. It is vital that teachers and parents communicate with each other to ensure that there is an understanding of why the child may have had an unsettled day and develop a plan with parents to support the child to understand the changes that are impacting on their life (O'Toolea, Hayes, & Mhathúnaab, 2013).

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) highlights that children refine and develop more complex working theories as they learn. The theories that children develop when faced with change may not seem logical to the adult, however to the child they are based on their own existing knowledge at that time. Children will use their existing knowledge to try to make sense of the changes that occur. For example, the addition of a new sibling can be a huge transition for young children to go through as they must start to share attention, affection, and space with another young person for the first time. Children may develop a working theory that they are not wanted or are being replaced, and responsive teachers can develop ways to support the child to redefine and develop their beliefs (Hargraves, 2014). Teachers could support children to consider other possibilities to reduce any anxiety, which may lead towards negative or not seen before behaviours.

The way that teachers and parents choose to respond to transition and the way they acknowledge the feelings of the child, will impact on the child's resilience and ability to cope with transition or develop self-regulation. This can contribute to ongoing issues with the behaviour of children. A child who is not able to self-regulate may continue or escalate behavioural issues. Teachers and parents can support children to give voice to their emotions (Wright, 2009). According to Wright (2009) "a child does not adapt to, and cope with change in isolation. Parents, whānau/families, siblings, peers and teachers in the child's world all play an important part in facilitating the process of change with children" (p. 1). Wright (2009) also states that teachers need to support the child and they also have the responsibility to support the whānau/family through the transition moment.

### **What are some of the behaviours that children can exhibit?**

Children can develop mood swings, sleep patterns can change drastically, toileting accidents could occur when they have not had any for a while, complaints of stomach aches, headaches, or they could have trouble concentrating. Children can become withdrawn, prefer time alone when they normally seek others, develop a refusal to eat, lash out or become angry, or non-compliant or say 'no' frequently. Some children may start to suck their thumb when they had not done this before, twirl their hair or pull their own hair, bully others, overreact to situations, have nightmares, and exhibit drastic changes in temperament.

### **What can you do?**

**Think positive:** Talk about up and coming change and transitions with children in a positive and exciting way, and acknowledge and help children express their feelings and emotions about the change. Also, think of ways to help children celebrate memories of their current situation as well as look forward to the future. Support the child to understand the ways that they can respond when they are feeling unsure about a change in their life (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, 2017).

**Time:** Allow time for the gradual building up of secure and trusting relationships between you, the child, and their parents, whānau/family (MoE, 2017). Once these are in place, the child will feel more confident exploring, playing, learning the rules of your setting, and getting the most of the experiences on offer (Humphries & Rains, 2015).

**Secure attachments:** Think about how you can foster secure attachments between yourself and the children you care for or between a key worker and the children in their care. Consider how you can support the child through empathetic engagement (Price & Steed, 2016) with the working theory they have developed about the transition.

### **Important things to remember**

One of the guiding principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) is Relationships. We are guided to ensure that we implement the sociocultural pedagogy and the importance of relationships between children, parents, whānau/family and teachers. Trusting relationships sit at the core of effective transition processes for young children and their families. This is not only when they transition into early childhood centres but also through life transitions. The Ministry of Education (2017) states that “safe, stable and responsive environments support the development of self-worth, identity, confidence and enjoyment, together with emotional regulation and self-control” (p. 26).

Transitions can be stressful for children and adults, and helping children cope with them and make them as smooth as possible will help develop their capacity to be resilient. Teachers can use the underpinning theories and perspectives of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) to guide them in their understanding of how children learn and process information. This will support children’s understanding of the life transitions that they experience.

## References

- Australian Capital Territory Human Rights commission. (2018). *"Kids have big thoughts too"*. *Life transitions: What children say about change*. Retrieved from <http://hrc.act.gov.au/>
- Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children. (2017). Position statement on challenging behavior and young children. *Zero to Three, 38*(2), 33-42.
- Hargraves, V. (2014). Children's theorising about their world. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 39*(1), 30-37.
- Head Start. (2018). *Supporting transitions: Using child development as a guide*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/>
- Humphries, J., & Rains, K. (2015, May/June). Lean on me: Helping children and families through disruptive change. *Exchange, 87-89*.
- Price, C.L., & Steed, E. A. (2016). Culturally responsive strategies to support young children with challenging behavior. *YC: Young Children, 71*(5), 36-43.
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.
- O'Toolea, L., Hayes, N., & Mhathúnaab, M. M. (2013). *A bio-ecological perspective on educational transition*. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/>
- Wright, J. (2009). *Transitions in early learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.govt.nz/>