

# SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS:

## Using Child Development as a Guide



## Transitions Are Part of Life

During the course of a child's life, change is inevitable. Families move, siblings are born, school begins and, consequently, transitions happen. Knowing about children's development can help us understand how children respond to transition. In addition, when program staff collaborate with families, they can learn how individual children experience change. Staff can also learn how to help children feel secure and comfortable during transition.



As an adult, think about the many transitions you experience or have experienced—big transitions, such as starting a new job or moving to a new place, and small transitions, such as getting up in the morning or coming home from work. All transitions involve changes in the world around you (e.g., changes in place, activity, or routine). With each transition, you adjust internally to handle the change. How do you manage transitions? How do they make you feel? Do they make you feel excited, nervous, or stressed?

Children, just like adults, experience feelings as they anticipate or react to transitions and show them in their behaviors. Their responses reflect their developmental stage as well as who they are as unique individuals. Because each child's temperament, resiliency, and prior experience vary, transition affects them in different ways. While one child may manage transition smoothly, another may have difficulties. Keeping child development in mind helps us understand children's emotions and behaviors as they face transition. This brief draws the connection between children's transition experiences and their development in the domains of social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language and communication, and cognitive, perceptual, and motor development.

Adults—including family members, teachers, caregivers, family service workers, and home visitors—play an important role in supporting young children through transition. Adults can help children feel safe and secure and can turn transitions into learning experiences that support children's growth and development in all domains. Supporting children during transition can have far-reaching effects on their emotional well-being and academic success.

Learning how to manage change requires certain skills. There are many ways we can help children and their families learn how to cope with the big and small changes that are part of life. One way is to provide them information in advance about predictable changes. Also, we can share information with families about the range of reactions to these changes that can be expected in children at different developmental stages.

Communication between staff and families about how transition may affect them and their child can help promote successful and seamless transitions.



*“When children feel good about themselves and what they can do, they engage more fully in learning opportunities.”*

Head Start Early Learning  
Outcomes Framework

## Meet the Sanchez Family

It is a busy morning in the Sanchez household. From his crib, sixteen-month-old Arturo watches his three-year-old twin brothers, Ricardo and Raymond, get dressed. They were just enrolled in the Las Cruces Head Start center-based program two weeks ago. Arturo is enrolled in the Early Head Start home-based program.

“Hurry, hurry! You’re going to be late for school,” exclaims Reyna, their mother. Raymond stomps and shouts, “I can’t find my shoes!”

Reyna puts Arturo on a blanket in the living room with some board books and says, “You can look at your books while I help Raymond find his shoes.” Arturo pushes the books off the blanket and walks after his mother, crying. When Reyna doesn’t respond, he falls down and begins kicking and crying louder. Reyna assures him, “I’ll be right there, Arturo.”

As Reyna looks for the shoes in the bedroom, she calls out to Raymond, “Look under the sofa.” Raymond finds them and shouts happily, “My shoes!” Reyna ties the twins’ shoes at the door and gives them both a kiss goodbye.

Ricardo clings to her legs and cries, “No . . . Don’t wanna go.” Reyna gives him a big hug and tells him, “Maria is going to walk you to school with her kids today. I’ll pick you up after lunch.” Ricardo lets go of his mother, “Okay . . . after lunch.” Raymond pulls on Ricardo’s arm, “Let’s go. I wanna play with the cars.” Ricardo reluctantly walks away, looking back over his shoulder several times as he walks down the front steps.

Reyna picks up Arturo, dries his tears, and says, “You had to wait a long time! I’m here now.”

Arturo sniffs, points to the fruit bowl, and says, “Nana.” Reyna replies, “Would you like a banana for breakfast? That would be yummy. Would you like it on some toast with peanut butter?” Arturo nods his head and says, “Toast.”

“Okay,” Reyna replies. “But first we need to change you out of your wet diaper and then you can eat. And, guess what? Lydia, your home visitor, will be here after breakfast. Won’t that be fun?”

### What’s happening here?

This scenario depicts morning transitions that are fairly typical in households with young children. Raymond, Ricardo, and Arturo are learning how to express their needs and feelings through behaviors and interactions with their mother, Reyna. In busy moments such as these, children have to handle their distress and may need to do it briefly on their own. They will be better able to manage their attention, feelings, and impulses if they have ongoing support from adults. Knowledge of child development helps adults understand the behaviors and feelings children exhibit during transition and set realistic expectations based on their developmental stage.

Consider how the developmental level and individual characteristics of Raymond, Ricardo, and Arturo influenced the way they behaved and interacted during the predictable and unpredictable morning events in the Sanchez household.

- Managing separation from trusted adult: Raymond separates easily from his mother. Ricardo shows his separation anxiety by clinging to his mother.

- Managing feelings and emotions with the support of familiar adult: Arturo calms himself and stops crying when his mother turns her attention to him. Ricardo is reassured and manages his emotions after his mother gives him a hug and tells him she will pick him up after lunch.
- Managing actions and behavior with support of familiar adult: Arturo first reacts by crying and kicking to get his mother’s attention and later actively listens and verbally responds to her when she addresses his needs. Ricardo and Raymond understand and follow their mother’s instructions to get ready for school.
- Communicating needs and wants: Arturo communicates his feelings non-verbally by kicking and crying. Ricardo and Raymond communicate their wants verbally (“No . . . Don’t wanna go.” and “I wanna play with the cars.”).
- Anticipating familiar routines: Raymond and Ricardo understand they will be picked up after lunch. Arturo knows he will have breakfast after his diaper change.
- Using adults as a resource to problem solve and meet needs: Raymond looks for his shoe with his mother’s help. Arturo points to a banana so his mother will feed him.

## Child Development as Our Guide

Knowledge of child development can help us understand how transition may affect the developing child. The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) describes children’s development of skills, concepts, and behaviors over time. Consider how the specific skills and concepts in the various domains play a role during transitions.

### Social and Emotional Development

#### Building relationships with others

The ability to build close relationships with adults and other children is critical for children’s healthy adjustment during transition. Developmental research indicates that from infancy, children develop emotional connections and attachments to familiar adults. Trusting relationships with familiar adults provide children with security, comfort, and a strong base from which to explore new environments and learn. This is especially true in new or difficult situations when children need the reassurance and comfort of adults. During transitions from home to school or from one early education setting to another, children separate from their families or familiar caregivers and need to develop secure relationships with new, unfamiliar adults. They also develop relationships with other children in the new environment. Research indicates that children’s abilities to engage in positive interactions with peers and adults and to

#### Connecting with Dual Language Learners

Warm, responsive interactions between children and adults are important during transition, especially for children who are dual language learners. They may feel nervous or confused if they do not understand or speak the language spoken in the new early education setting. Whenever possible, at least one staff member should speak the language spoken by the children. Even when this is not possible, educators can still help children who are dual language learners overcome communication challenges and feel welcome and comfortable in the program. The use of non-verbal cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and words in the child’s home language (such as “hola” for hello or “baño” for bathroom) will help the child understand what is going on and what to expect. Stories, activities, and music that reflect the child’s home language and cultural tradition will also help the child develop a sense of belonging.

resolve social conflicts, such as taking turns and negotiating, are related to a positive adjustment in the transition to kindergarten. During early childhood, children develop relationship-building skills through responsive, meaningful interactions with others.

Adults can help children feel self-confident and secure through transition by fostering positive, trusting relationships with them. Experiences and routines that build on children's prior and current experiences can help them feel connected and develop a sense of belonging.

Children manage transition best when adults:

- Respond predictably and consistently to children's needs in order to develop a trusting relationship
- Engage children in warm, supportive interactions
- Model positive social behavior



### Expressing and managing emotions

Adjusting to a new environment can be stressful for children. It may involve strong feelings and emotions, such as sadness, fear, or excitement. Some children may express their emotions by withdrawing, crying, kicking, or rolling around on the floor.

Children's reactions to transition and the strategies they use to cope are often related to their development stage. An infant may experience separation anxiety and cry uncontrollably when a familiar caregiver is absent. Infants may self-soothe by sucking their thumb or calm themselves in response to singing or humming. Toddlers may seek adult support and comfort themselves in different ways. For example, they may use a familiar toy or blanket from home (a transitional object) to help them with the home-to-school transition. Preschoolers may manage emotions more independently, using a range of ways to handle strong feelings. For example, they may ask questions or take deep breaths to calm down. Research indicates that children of all ages may display regressive behaviors for a few days or weeks during or after transition. They may show behavior they have already grown out of, such as temper tantrums, thumb sucking, or bedwetting.

Individual differences also play a role in children's reactions to transition. While some children easily adjust to the new environment, others may need more time to warm up. Children's temperament and the intensity of their emotional reactions to different situations impact their adjustment during transition. Transitioning to a new learning environment may be particularly challenging for children who have a difficult time adapting to new situations and people in everyday life. The strategies children use to manage emotions may also vary depending on their cultural background. Some children may self-soothe and others may seek adult comfort. Children entering a setting where their home language is not spoken may experience additional feelings of loneliness, fear, and confusion. It is important that early educators consider children's individual differences during transition.



## Approaches to Learning

### Self-regulation skills

Young children are developing self-regulation skills to learn how to cope with experiences that are challenging or frustrating. They are still learning to control their feelings and manage their behaviors. With encouragement and guidance from adults, children develop emotional, behavioral, and cognitive self-regulation skills that can help them manage transition successfully.

Children learn to use words to convey strong feelings, ask for adult help, and control their impulses. They are better able to understand and follow basic rules in different settings; for example, they can sit and participate in activities at group time. They are also able to demonstrate flexibility in thinking and behavior and adjust to changes in routines. Moving from one activity to another is sometimes hard because a child is deeply involved in the current activity, wants to finish, or is less interested in the next activity. As children develop self-regulation skills, they are better able to handle small, everyday transitions as well as big transitions, such as moving into a new early education setting. These same skills also help children acquire knowledge and abilities in all domains of learning.

Early forms of self-regulation emerge when children are in consistent, responsive relationships

with caring adults who model and scaffold self-regulation skills during ordinary activities. Adults can teach children a variety of ways to manage emotions. They can model behaviors, prepare children for what happens next, and help them find the words to express their needs and feelings. Adults can help children identify and use individualized self-soothing or coping strategies, such as holding their blanket or drawing a picture for their mother.

Transitions present children with opportunities to develop strategies to manage their emotions and behaviors. Children manage transition best when adults:

- Establish predictable routines and set clear expectations
- Help children learn how to manage and express their emotions
- Have realistic expectations of children based on their development and temperament
- Encourage and reinforce children's effective coping strategies
- Teach children strategies to handle stress and manage their actions and behavior

## Language and Communication

Children’s language development plays a significant role in successful transition. Their ability to comprehend language (receptive language skill) helps them attend to and understand spoken language. Their ability to use language (expressive language skill) helps them communicate their needs and feelings and ask questions about the changes they are facing. Dual language learners may have stronger receptive and expressive language skills in their home language(s). Learning about children’s receptive and expressive language skill level in every language they are using will help early educators individualize support during transition.

Infants know how to communicate at birth. They become familiar with the non-verbal as well as verbal communication their family and other caregivers use to interact with them. Very soon, the infant learns to initiate as well as respond to these communications. For example, they may make eye contact, coo, smile, and even wave their arms as they start a “conversation.” With repeated interactions, caregivers develop an understanding of the infant’s intended meaning as it becomes increasingly refined, and they respond accordingly. When an infant is introduced to a new caregiver, they will need time to get used to the new sounds, gestures, and words the caregiver uses. Unfamiliar with the non-verbal messages the infant is trying to send, the new caregiver will also need time to adapt.

During the toddler and preschool years, children’s language skills rapidly expand. They have larger receptive and expressive vocabularies in the language(s) they are learning. When a transition occurs, older toddlers and preschoolers can use words to talk about their feelings and needs. They may, however, need time to learn the words specific to the new setting, such as “group time” or “library.” While they are figuring out the vocabulary of the new setting, some children may talk very little or not at all. Dual language learners typically go through a silent period when they observe and listen but do not yet express themselves in the new language. Their receptive language skills will therefore develop first. By

observing children and communicating with their families, and prior early educators when possible, teachers can learn about children’s verbal and non-verbal skills in all languages.

*Young children rely on trusted adults to help them manage transitions.*

Children with language delays may have limited abilities to understand or use language. If their receptive language is limited, they may not understand explanations about what is happening or going to happen. If their expressive language is delayed, they may not be able to communicate their needs and feelings, especially during times of stress, such as transitions. Families, teachers, and other caregivers may need to adapt how they communicate with a child with language delays and provide additional supports, such as PECS diagrams (Picture Exchange Communication System), to help the child understand what is happening.

Children manage transition best when adults:

- Are sensitive and responsive to their attempts to communicate
- Model the use of words to describe feelings
- Use gestures, visual aids, and other non-verbal communication
- Ensure there is an adult available who understands and can communicate in the children’s home language(s)
- Know their receptive and expressive language skill level in the language(s) they speak



## Cognitive, Perceptual, and Motor Development

### Learning about the new environment

During transition, children need to learn about the new environment, daily routines, and the people who are part of the new setting. The ability to remember people and events, to explore and experiment, and to predict what will happen next helps children adjust during transition. Cognitive skills contribute to the way children respond to transition, and the transition experience itself may be an opportunity to further develop these skills.

When a transition occurs that involves a move to a new setting, young children are aware of changes in usual routines or caregivers. Children's memory skills help them recognize differences between familiar and unfamiliar people, objects, actions, and events. Their memories of previous experiences help them understand new experiences and learn rapidly about their environment. At a very young age, children have an understanding that people and objects still exist when they are out of sight (object permanence). Young children notice when a familiar adult leaves and expects to see them

return. For example, they may watch and wait at the door for their family member to return.

Perceptual, gross motor, and fine motor skills help children move around, explore, play, and function in the new environment. They actively explore people and objects and use perceptual information to understand the properties of objects. They make things happen and learn to predict outcomes of actions. For example, they may bang with a spoon on a table to make a loud sound or cry and anticipate that the caregiver will come to help. Over time, children also learn to use a variety of strategies to solve everyday problems based on their previous experiences and knowledge. For example, a toddler might find a stool to stand on to wave goodbye to their parent from a window. Children are natural explorers. By fostering a safe and secure relationship with children, you provide them with the confidence to explore, discover, and learn about their new environment.



## Developing a sense of place and time

As young children become familiar with the new environment, they begin to remember the location of objects. For example, they come to know to build with blocks in the big rug area and look at books in the library area. Preschool children develop a more mature sense of place. They learn about the characteristics of familiar locations, such as their home and classroom, and can form a mental map of how their classroom is arranged. This helps them connect objects and activities with specific locations and therefore function in the environment more independently.

Young children also learn to anticipate routines. For example, first it is cleanup time and then it is mealtime. During the preschool years, children begin to develop a more mature sense of time—past, present, and future. They can recall and talk about their past experiences and relate them to their current ones. For example, a book about riding on a bus might prompt a child to share about an experience of riding on a bus to the zoo. Adults can support children in developing and using their sense of time by modeling “time marker” vocabulary (e.g., yesterday, today, and tomorrow). Preschool children also begin to anticipate and plan for events in the near future. For example, “After tomorrow, I am going to visit my grandma.” When the child has no similar past experiences, anticipating the future is a cognitive challenge. It requires that a child imagine what will happen, often when the future is unpredictable. Preschool children are able to anticipate predictable events that happen in the near future. This skill allows them to cognitively and emotionally prepare for transition.

Children manage transition best when adults:

- Arrange a well-organized environment with clearly defined areas
- Encourage and facilitate exploration of the environment
- Help them anticipate and prepare for what is coming next by using visual aids and prompts
- Promote problem solving skills
- Model language that describes past, present, and future events in relationship to one another

### Children Like Routine

Some transitions are predictable. They have a consistent, familiar timing and order to them, like mealtimes and bedtimes. Other transitions are unpredictable, such as when a child is sick and cannot go to school. Unpredictable transitions have an inconsistent timing that is unknown to the child and their family.

Predictable routines make transitions easier for children and families. Very early in life, children learn to anticipate routines and like knowing what happens next. Familiarity helps a child feel safe, secure, and cared for. Stability and continuity help children gain self-confidence and the capacity to manage transitions effectively.

# Partnering to Support the Sanchez Family

Toward the end of their Early Head Start home visit with Lydia, Reyna shares about that morning's transitions. She describes how Raymond lost his shoes, Ricardo clung to her, and Arturo cried and fell on the floor kicking. Lydia listens empathetically and says, "It takes a lot of energy to get three young children up, fed, and ready for the day!"

Reyna shares that mornings are often a hectic time. She knows that each of her boys responds differently because of their age and personality. Lydia commends Reyna for understanding that Arturo communicates many of his needs and feelings through his behavior. They talk about how he does not yet have the ability to wait or manage his emotions at his young age. Lydia uses this opportunity to discuss transitions and how children's development affects their understanding of and responses to transition.

They also discuss how some transitions are predictable and happen regularly, like their morning routine, and others are unpredictable, like Raymond losing his shoes. Lydia asks Reyna if she can think of other predictable and unexpected transitions or changes that Arturo and her twins might experience.

Immediately, Reyna responds, "I've really felt stressed lately. Even though the boys do not know what is going on, I think they feel it, too. My husband lost his job unexpectedly. He will be home a lot more when he isn't out looking for a new job. We won't have as much money to spend. And, we may even have to move. Those will all be big changes for us. I am worried about how to handle it all. What can I do to make it easier on my children?"

Lydia and Reyna decide to focus next week's home visit on how to support her children during this major transition. Lydia will bring information on child development to help them come up with strategies to support Arturo and the family in coping with the upcoming change.

## What's happening here?

When we develop positive, goal-oriented relationships with families, we have the privilege of working alongside children's first and most important teachers. We build a strong foundation by beginning our interactions with families in a positive manner and focusing on their strengths. Helping families understand how and why children react to change at various stages of development can enhance how families nurture their children and strengthen the program/family partnership.

Reyna's approach to transition demonstrates that she:

- Understands the importance of consistent routines
- Handles the challenges of morning routines calmly and responsively
- Is developing realistic expectations of her children based on their developmental abilities
- Anticipates that big changes will affect each of her children in different ways and that preparing for them is important
- Understands that big transitions can trigger strong emotions in adults as well as children

Lydia partnered with Reyna to:

- Build on Reyna's understanding of her own children's development and use that knowledge to support them
- Discuss how children's development influences their reactions to transition
- Plan to identify strategies at their next home visit that Reyna can use to help her children cope with the upcoming, unpredicted, major changes in their family



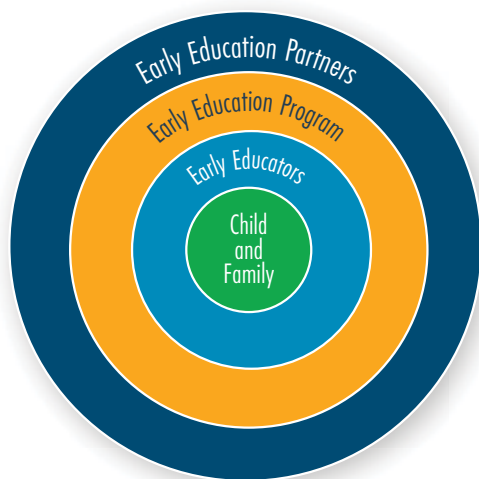


## Putting It All Together

Early educators and families can work together to anticipate, prepare for, and manage change. Partnering with families is essential to understanding each child and how best to individualize their care. Knowledge of child development helps early educators and families gain a deeper perspective on how children's development influences their responses to transition. Children's social and emotional skills and their approaches to learning can tell us how they may express and manage their emotions during transition. Their language and communication skills let us know how well they will be able to understand information shared with them and express their needs and feelings. Knowing children's cognitive, perceptual, and motor development skill levels can help adults support children as they explore and learn about new environments and routines. By building awareness, planning for, and supporting children and families during times of transition, early educators can provide a foundation that prepares them to manage change successfully.

# Where to Learn More

## Transition Briefs in This Series



## SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS:

Using Child Development as a Guide

Early Educators Partnering with Families

Program Policies and Practices

Working with Early Education Partners

## Resources

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework>

How to Help Your Child Transition Smoothly Between Places and Activities

[http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk\\_transitions.pdf](http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu/do/resources/documents/bkpk_transitions.pdf)

News You Can Use: Transitions

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/news-you-can-use-transitions>

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/framework>

Positive Parent-Child Relationships

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/rtp-parent-child-relationships.pdf>

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## Guided Discussion: Exploring Transition with Families

This resource introduces types of transitions that families and their children experience in their lives. Teachers, caregivers, home visitors, and family service workers can use this resource to guide discussion with families. Invite families to think about transitions their child experiences, as you meet during a home visit, teacher/family conference, workshop, or parent meeting.

Transitions are changes that happen outside of a person’s control—for example, a change in place, activity, or routine. Sometimes transitions are expected; they are predictable, and you know when, how, and what will happen. For example, when your alarm goes off in the morning, it might initially startle you, but you know it means you must start your day. You transition from being asleep to being awake.

Other transitions are unexpected and unpredictable. You do not know in advance what will happen or when. For example, your car might break down on your way to work. Or, perhaps, a neighbor asks you to watch her children at the last minute.

Children experience both predictable and unpredictable transitions. What are some transitions your child has experienced recently?

<b>Predictable (Expected) Transitions</b>	<b>Unpredictable (Unexpected) Transitions</b>
<b>Example:</b> Child woke up and got ready for school in the morning.	<b>Example:</b> Child became ill and could not go to school.

## Guided Discussion: Exploring Transition with Families (continued)

**Think about the following questions:**

- How did your child react to the predictable transitions?
- How did your child react to the unpredictable transitions?
- How would you describe your child's reaction (e.g., calm, upset, excited)?
- What can you do to prepare your child for the kinds of transitions on your list?

### Helping Children Manage Transition

All children like knowing what will happen and when. However, even when transitions are predictable, children may still need your guidance and help. How can you use this information to help your child develop skills to handle predictable and unpredictable transitions?

**Here are some tips to help you support your child with transitions:**

- » Tell your child what will happen in advance—for example, "After your nap, we will go to the park."
- » Give your child a five-minute warning—for example, "In five minutes, it will be time to take your bath."
- » Acknowledge your child's feelings and reassure your child when plans change suddenly—for example, "I understand you are frustrated. Sometimes plans change, but we can go to the library on another day."
- » Share your feelings about unexpected changes—for example, "I am feeling disappointed that the library was closed today. Maybe you feel that way, too."
- » Use or create routines and rituals to use during transition times—for example, sharing a story about the day each night before bedtime.