Effective Transition Practices

Facilitating Continuity

Outcomes

As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

Evaluate the impact of transitions on individuals and how they are helped by various internal and external supports

Identify the stages of the change process experienced during transitions and the factors that influence the ability to cope with change.

Develop effective transition practices to address the individual and developmental needs of children and families who are adapting to expected and unexpected changes in routines, roles, environments, and relationships.

Develop strategies to involve all staff in continuously supporting children and families as they experience transition.

Key Concepts

When children and families transition from one setting to another, they inevitably encounter change, which requires them to adapt their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to meet the new experience.

While everyone experiences the process of adapting to change differently, common stages of the process include:

Letting go
Uncertainty
Taking hold

Knowing how transition affects you can provide a basis for understanding the internal change process. Helping children and families who may experience the process differently requires shifting the perspective away from yourself.

Team transition planning involves all staff and parents in developing comprehensive strategies to provide support, information, and continuity of experience to families and children. Program strategies should include a wide range of practices to address transition throughout the year.

Parents provide stability for children and can facilitate continuity when they are included in the transition process.

Background Information

All cultures acknowledge major life events such as births, coming of age, marriage, and death with rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. These rites of passage mark the end of one stage of life and the beginning of another. However, development does not happen abruptly. Through continuous growth and experience, children mature at their individual rates. They do not instantly become adults at eighteen, nor do they instantly become ready for an academic environment at age five or six. Instead, **developmental transitions** occur over time as children are cared for in nurturing environments that meet their individual needs. Gradually their ability to adapt to changing expectations increases as they develop.

Supporting Children and Families

Ideally, children would move to new early childhood settings only during periods of developmental stability. In reality, **transitions between early childhood settings** do not always coincide with a child's individual developmental needs. Change occurs because of many reasons. Some programs, like traditional Head Start, serve children for a limited time. Other programs, like family day care, may be available for longer periods but often have changes in enrollment due to family circumstances.

Children cope with transitions differently depending on internal supports, individual developmental needs, and the amount of resources available to the family. **Internal supports include the temperament a child is born with and other unique characteristics and abilities that develop as the child grows.** Each of these factors affects how much external support is needed to ease transitions for child and family. **External supports are the people, activities, and environments that help children accomplish developmental tasks and cope with change and stress.** Comprehensive strategies and involvement of all staff and parents in ongoing transition practices increase the likelihood that program supports will help ease both planned and unplanned transitions.

Process of Adapting to Change

Throughout early childhood, both children and their parents experience transitions as a **process of adapting to change**. This process occurs as children and parents adapt their thoughts, feelings, and behavior to prepare for and cope with multiple changes. Not only is the environment different, but the caregivers are new, the routines may be different, and program policies vary. These **changes in settings create both subtle and abrupt changes in expectations.** For example, the child accustomed to napping in her own crib may suddenly be faced with sleeping on a cot in a large classroom. An older child who has been encouraged to explore learning centers finds he is expected to sit quietly and complete academic exercises. Parents who have been responsible for meeting their child's special needs must develop advocacy skills to ensure that the needs continue to be met in the new setting.

When adults understand the change process from a personal perspective, they can appreciate the need for supports that children have during transition. Even adults, who have acquired more internal resources, often need outside support to **let go** of old patterns of behavior and **take hold** of new roles. As individuals look for ways to accomplish these two tasks, they struggle through a stage of **uncertainty**, not knowing exactly how to maintain their sense of self as they change. Although each person experiences the change process differently, there are three common stages of the process, which are characterized by specific thoughts, behaviors, and feelings.

Letting Go

Whether planned or unplanned, a transition affects relationships. Feelings of sadness and resistance to change occur as individuals experience the *letting go* stage of the change process. **When individuals experience changes in their lives, they need to acknowledge what they are losing** - whether it is an attachment to people, roles, or settings. **They also need to celebrate what they have gained.** Rites of passage during developmental transitions provide individuals with a formal acknowledgment of their accomplishments and symbolic support as they meet new challenges. Similarly, ending ceremonies and celebrations such as retirement parties serve this purpose during personal transitions. Formal celebrations are not the only way to mark transitions. Regular ongoing activities such as making scrapbooks, taking photographs, or making mementos of who or what you are leaving all offer individuals a way to celebrate the past.

Uncertainty

Transitions can cause fears, concerns, and mixed feelings. Transition creates confusion and makes it difficult for people to act on their own during the *uncertainty* stage. It is a time when people need extra encouragement and

support. Individuals in this stage may have difficulty understanding the connection that their past experience has to the new one. Providing information and support during a change helps those affected to imagine how their skills will help them in a new role.

Because children are concrete learners, they gain information best by visiting a new setting or taking part in joint activities with older peers from the new setting. After the visit or activity, children can express their feelings by writing stories, drawing pictures, or discussing stories about transition. Conducting these follow-up activities with children helps adults understand children's feelings. An understanding adult can help the children by calming concerns.

Taking Hold

Taking hold of new thoughts, feelings, and actions allows individuals to change so they can meet new demands. This stage begins with the individuals in transition clarifying expectations - learning the rules, defining responsibilities, and knowing when they have done something right. Individuals in this stage are ready to change their behavior when they understand expectations. They express confidence and an appreciation for the personal growth that they gain by accepting new challenges. It is not easy to take hold of new expectations when they do not relate to past experiences. However, when individuals find that they are prepared for these new challenges, transitions become an opportunity for growth and development.

Effective Transition Practices

Effective transition practices address the needs of children and families even before they enter a program and continue after they leave the setting. Staff can provide continuous support at all stages of the change process. For example, celebrations help children in the *letting go* stage. Answering questions both formally and informally assist children and families in the *uncertainty* stage. Setting up buddy systems for children and families who have left the setting helps create a welcoming atmosphere so important to the *taking hold* stage.

Exercise - Provide the correct response to the items listed below	
1. **Which of the following would be an example of *internal support* for a child?**	☐ a. Talking to a child. ☐ b. The child's temperament. ☐ c. Parent conference. ☐ d. All the staff working together.

2.	**What does "transition" mean?**	☐ **a.** **Adapting to the process of change.** ☐ **b.** **Going through a developmental stage.** ☐ **c.** **Everybody working together.** ☐ **d.** **A child going from Head Start to kindergarten.**
3.	**A symptom of *uncertainty* in a child or parent would be?**	☐ **a.** **The child stops coming to the center.** ☐ **b.** **Celebrating the child completing a year in Head Start.** ☐ **c.** **Asking questions about moving to a different school.** ☐ **d.** **The child refusing to develop.**
4.	**The *letting go* stage of the change process could be characterized by?**	☐ **a.** **sadness and resistance.** ☐ **b.** **a sense of confidence.** ☐ **c.** **rejection of past experiences.** ☐ **d.** **all of the above.**
5.	**Effective transition practices address the needs of children and families**	☐ **a.** **immediately after the change is made.** ☐ **b.** **begin at birth.** ☐ **c.** **are never certain.** ☐ **d.** **even before they enter a program.**