

Easing First Day Jitters: Strategies for Successful Home-to-School Transitions

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It's the first day of preschool for Sophia, who just turned 3 a week ago, and she and her mother, Vanessa, are walking into the school for the first time. As Vanessa opens the front door, Sophia grasps her mother's hand a little tighter. They walk into Sophia's classroom where her teacher, Ms. Lisa, greets them warmly. Ms. Lisa shows them the children's cubbies and Sophia puts her backpack and lunch in her cubby. Vanessa bends down with tears in her eyes and hugs Sophia. Sophia whispers in her mother's ear, "I'm ready to go home now, done with school." Her mother tells her that she will stay at school with Ms. Lisa and the other children. Vanessa assures Sophia that she will come back after lunch to pick Sophia up. As Vanessa walks out of the classroom, she hears Sophia crying. Vanessa now has tears streaming down her face, and is having second thoughts about enrolling Sophia in preschool.

Families enroll their children in group care settings such as preschool, child care, or Head Start for a variety of reasons (Daniel 2009). Some families have two working parents, while others want their children to have more opportunities to socialize with peers. Regardless of the reason, the transition from home to school—that is, to out-of-home care—can be difficult, sometimes resulting in adjustment challenges that are stressful for the children, families, and teachers. Teachers, however, can use the morning transition time as an opportunity to help children learn the skills they need to express their emotions (Fox & Lentini 2006) and reduce the potential for adjustment challenges that might

extend into the day. Teachers can help children label how they feel—sad, angry, hurt, embarrassed—when their family members leave the room. It helps children when teachers tell them that what they are feeling is okay, and remind them that a family member will always come back to pick them up.

Children’s temperaments not only play a role in their development, they also impact their adjustment to school (Pelco & Reed-Victor 2003). Depending on the environment and situation, levels of a particular temperament trait may fluctuate. For example, a child who has a difficult time adapting to changes in everyday life, such as new foods or new routines, may have a harder time transitioning to school. However, a parent can slowly introduce the idea of what school is like to the child to help prepare her for this new period in her life. It is therefore important for teachers to remember that significant adults in children’s lives can modify the expression of temperament characteristics through careful use of purposeful strategies. Temperament characteristics are “biologically rooted individual differences in behavioral tendencies early in life” (Pelco & Reed-Victor 2003, 3). Adults can help modify temperament characteristics so that children feel comfortable in their new school. Children have different reactions to the home-to-school transition and may need support in a variety of ways to successfully adjust.

This article presents home-to-school strategies that teachers and families can use to reduce young children’s school adjustment challenges. We explore basic strategies, as well as more specific visual and auditory supports, and include specific examples of how they might be implemented at home and in the early education setting. These strategies and supports are useful for all children and their families, including children with disabilities and children who are dual language learners and their families.

Basic home-to-school transition strategies

Positive relationships between children and adults enhance children’s ability to learn and help them become more comfortable in their surroundings (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso 2012). Teachers build positive relationships with children’s families by initiating conversations and helping them feel comfortable. Daily communication with families (whether it be through emails, daily journal entries, phone calls, or face-to-face conversations) helps build the family–teacher relationship.

Once teachers and families establish positive relationships, they can work together to find the best strategy to ease the children's home-to-school transition. It is important for teachers and families to periodically reevaluate strategies to ensure that the plan continues to work. Some basic strategies teachers and families can use to ease transition anxiety include implementing a "window wave" and hug routine, bringing a familiar object from home, and assigning an arrival-time buddy.

Window wave and hug

The window wave is an easy strategy that can be done at a door, through a window, or on a school bus. After the parent and child say good-bye, the parent gives closure to the transition by waving to the child or blowing kisses. The child will know she is loved and is now ready to begin her day in a positive way.

Giving children a hug at the door helps them transition into the classroom or onto the school bus, and away from their parent. Children are reassured when parents let them know that they will be back to pick them up before saying goodbye. Sensing they are valued, they enter the classroom or school bus feeling safe and secure.

Ms. Lisa speaks with Vanessa when she returns to pick up Sophia at the end of her first school day. Ms. Lisa shows Vanessa the window and explains how the window wave and hug strategy works. She suggests that Vanessa and Sophia try the window wave before leaving, so that Sophia knows what to expect when her mother leaves the classroom on the following day.

Familiar object

Bringing a familiar object from home, such as a stuffed animal, blanket, or small toy (that doesn't make noise), helps children with the home-to-school transition. If children are having a hard time after the morning transition, they can hug the object from home to feel more comfortable at school. The familiar object can be reassuring throughout the day. The smell of home on the object can also help soothe children. It is up to the family, child, and school policy to choose whether to leave the object at school or take it home each day. While keeping the object at school may be an acceptable arrangement for some

children, other children may have to send the object home to reduce distractions and the potential for other problems that may occur in the classroom, such as other children trying to play with the toy and upsetting the child who needs it.

Arrival buddy

Children who form friendships with peers in the classroom often feel more comfortable and may acclimate to the school environment more easily. Teachers can ask peers who consistently arrive before children needing transitional help whether they would like to be an arrival buddy. The arrival buddy—who has previously received directions from the teacher—guides the child into the classroom, and then takes the child directly to an activity, such as playdough, puzzles, or books. The arrival buddy could be someone the child has expressed interest in or someone who, if the new child is an English language learner, speaks the same home language. Teachers need to monitor these peer interactions to be sure the arrangement is helping the new child and is not a burden for the arrival buddy.

Visual home-to-school transitions

To make the home-to-school transition more successful, it is sometimes helpful for children to have visual items that are specific to their families, homes, or cultures. Such visuals include family photographs, family trees, picture schedules, and home-to-school arrival charts.

Family photos

Children can make books with family photographs to look at during the morning transition and at other times during the day, as needed. When appropriate, children might carry the books around with them to feel safe and secure. Another way to incorporate family pictures in the classroom environment is to hang a large construction paper tree on the wall to display each child's family. This helps all children in the classroom feel connected to their classroom and their peers.

Picture charts

A picture schedule, hung at the children's eye level, can be checked each morning as the children and families arrive at school. The schedule might include clip art, pictures found on the Internet, or photographs of the children as they move through their daily routine.

When Vanessa and Sophia arrive in the classroom the next day, Vanessa points to the picture schedule and says to Sophia, “First you will have circle time, and then you will go outside to play. After that you will choose a center, and then you eat lunch. Then it will be time for me to pick you up from school!” Ms. Lisa and Sophia refer to the schedule throughout the day to see what has already happened and what will happen next.

It may be helpful to laminate the pictures for durability and Velcro them on a sturdy surface, such as the cover of a three-ring binder, so children can remove photos from the picture schedule as they complete each corresponding activity. As the children move through the day, they will be able to see that they are getting closer to going home.

The home-to-school arrival chart, another visual support, enables children to monitor their transfer from home to school through pictorial images. The chart should display prominent pictures of home and school—a picture of a house or apartment building on the left side of the chart and one of a school on the right. A distinct line drawn between the buildings will enable children to easily see which side of the chart belongs to home and which side belongs to school. Attach Velcro or magnets to the back of children’s photographs so they can mark their arrival by moving their pictures from the home side to the school side. When the children leave in the afternoon, they move the photo from school to home to signify their departure from school.

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Auditory home-to-school transitions

Teachers work hard to meet the needs of each child. Some children respond better to auditory cues than visual ones to help them adjust during the home-to-school transition. It is important to support children’s developing language and social skills, particularly if they struggle with the transition, because they will feel safe to express their needs to the

teacher (Delano & Snell 2006). Some auditory home-to-school strategies that can help support language and social skills are social stories, reading a book and saying good-bye, role-playing, singing a good-bye song, or playing a family member's tape recording.

Social story

Social stories are individualized short stories using pictures and text to describe a social situation and provide appropriate behavioral cues. Social stories were originally developed for use with children with autism, but are now used with all children. The stories offer guidance to children about the where, why, who, when, and what of a particular situation (Sansosti & Powell-Smith 2006). If a child is having a difficult time saying good-bye to family members and engaging in the classroom routine, a social story could include photographs showing the child entering the classroom, hugging the family member good-bye, and then engaging in one of his preferred activities, such as using playdough. The words on the page, written in the first-person, match the pictures and describe what the child does and says; for example, "I will come to my classroom and hang up my backpack. Then I will hug my mom and say good-bye. I will go to the table and play with playdough." This shows the child what is expected of him and helps him understand the social interaction of the home-to-school transition. Free examples of scripted stories for social situations like the one described here can be downloaded from the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning website (<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/index.html>).

For a social story to be effective, consistency is important; therefore, daily reading is necessary. Teachers need to keep in mind that as children become more comfortable and familiar with the morning transition, new behaviors and challenges may arise that require adapting the social story. Stories placed in a three-ring binder can be easily changed.

Special book

Family members can choose a preferred, relatively short story from home or school to help their child feel comfortable entering the classroom environment without prolonging the transition time. It may be helpful to read the same book daily or weekly, and even at home, to ensure consistency and familiarity. *The Kissing Hand* (1993), by Audrey Penn, and *I Love You All Day Long* (2004), by Francesca Rusackas, are two good transition time selections. Both books convey the message that the family loves the child and will return when school is over. Teachers can encourage the family member to say good-bye to the child after reading the book so the child feels closure from home and is ready to begin the school day.

When children are aware of their schedule and know what is going to happen, they feel more at ease and are less stressed.

Children who are dual language learners can read books with their families in their home language. The school can purchase books in children's home languages or the children can bring favorite books from home. The International Children's Digital Library (<http://en.childrenslibrary.org>) is a great source for helping teachers and families select books that reflect diverse cultures and languages.

Role play

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's position statement on developmentally appropriate practice (2009) highlights structure and orderly routines, suggesting they help children develop and learn in the school environment. When children are aware of their schedule and know what is going to happen, they feel more at ease and are less stressed. Teachers can reinforce the routine with children by role-playing the home-to-school transition (Ostrosky & Meadan 2010). This is done with or without the children's peers in the classroom. For example, the teacher can walk children through specific transition routines, such as waving through the window. The role-playing lets the teacher talk to the children about the emotions they feel in a nonthreatening and meaningful way. Reinforcing what happens each morning and talking about each step with the children may increase the chances for a positive outcome the next day (Horner, Bhattacharyya, & O'Connor 2008).

Transition songs

Introducing songs to the family is another useful strategy. Teachers or family members can ease transition challenges using songs that incorporate individual names, giving children a feeling of connection to a song. Teachers may recommend songs to the family members. If a child needs extra help, the teacher may sing the song to the child after the family member leaves. The book *Teachable Transitions: 190 Activities to Move From Morning Circle to the End of the Day* (Pica 2003) has several songs that family members can easily learn. Depending on the comfort of the particular child, adults singing might sit next to the child, hold the child in their arms, or simply look into the child's eyes. Initially, children may choose just to listen but may become more engaged with singing the song as it becomes more familiar to them.

Family voices

Teachers can ask family members to record familiar greetings for their children, such as “I love you” or “Have a great day,” to help the children feel comfortable when they miss their family or at specific times of the day, such as before or after nap time. Children access the recordings as appropriate, and families add new recordings as needed. For dual language learners, family members can make recordings in the child’s home language. Further, teachers might consider working with families to learn everyday words and phrases in the child’s home language. This benefits not only the child who speaks that language but the other children in the classroom as well—other children will also be able to use the familiar home language of the dual language learner.

During the day, Sophia tells Ms. Lisa that she really misses her mother. Ms. Lisa asks Sophia if she would like to hear her mother’s voice. Sophia emphatically replies, “Yes!” Ms. Lisa and Sophia go to the listening center to play the tape Vanessa made for Sophia.

Sophia delightedly places the headphones on her ears, and Ms. Lisa points to the play button. Sophia pushes the button and hears her mother’s voice saying, “I love you very much, Sophia. Have a great time at school. I will see you after lunch.” Sophia takes off the headphones and smiles because she knows that she is loved and will see her mother later.

Conclusion

The home-to-school transition can be difficult for many children and their families; however, with intentional use of specific strategies, this transition becomes easier. Teachers can choose from the strategies described in this article and use them with children and their families to help decrease children’s potential adjustment challenges. When teachers and families collaborate to implement individualized transition plans they increase children’s comfort levels and prepare them to have a successful day of learning.

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