



Unit 5

Life Transitions

Introduction

Life includes many transitions. Some can be prepared for and are positive experiences, such as a new sibling or moving. Others are not planned and may not be positive, such as divorce and the death of a loved one. No matter what the circumstances are, it is important that all children and youth receive the information and support that they need in order to make transitions easier. Sometimes as adults, it is challenging to know what to say to young children when something bad happens, so often parents will say nothing. This may have negative consequences and it is often best to try to find a way to explain change and transition to children. Early learning educators, teachers and team members may be able to assist.

Children with developmental delays and disabilities may have less capacity to understand these transitions and cope with them. Children will experience transitions differently based on their age, maturity, temperament and ability. Children often have less time to prepare for transitions, as well as fewer skills to cope with them, so they are more vulnerable than adults. Parents and caregivers, with support from teachers, health practitioners and community resources, can make transitions easier for children to cope and adjust through these periods of change. Some children may not adjust as well as others and may need professional help. If your child has continued anxiety, depressive mood, or problems with sleeping or eating for a prolonged period of time, you should consult your child's physician or pediatrician.

Divorce

Divorce is a transition that is experienced by many families in Canada. Having a child with a disability can be very stressful for parents and may add strain to a marriage.

Divorce can be considered as several transitions, which may include moving to a new home or neighbourhood, living with one

or both parents on a rotating schedule and the introduction of step-parents and/or step-siblings. These transitions are difficult for any child to experience and can impact children differently depending on their developmental stage.

Challenges:

- The experience of parental conflict can be stressful for a child
- Adjusting to the routine of a new custody arrangement between parents
- Possibly moving to a new home and loss of pets, friends, school
- Introduction of new family members, including step-parents or step-siblings
- Potential loss of family members such as grandparents

Strategies:

- Protect your children from exposure to marital conflict.
- Keep as many routines and surroundings intact as possible - many transitions at once are much harder to cope with than one or two at a time.
- Give your child lots of physical presence and support.
- Give your child as much information as possible – let her know that she is not responsible and is loved and will be cared for.
- Talk with your child about how the changes are making him feel.
- Keep your expectations appropriate to her developmental level. For example, do not ask young children to pick up extra household chores unless developmentally appropriate.

Loss

The loss of a loved one through death or other separation is a difficult transition for children because they may not be able to understand what death means or that their loved one is not returning. Sudden death or loss can be especially difficult to deal with because the child is less prepared for the transition. The

grieving process for children involves coming to an understanding of the loss, and then coping without the loved one. This can be an ongoing process, as the child may need to reprocess the loss as they develop, and their understanding of death matures.

Challenges:

- The child's stage of cognitive development will impact how he thinks about death. Children may understand loss in different ways and say funny or distressing things. It is important to remember the development of the child in explaining death.
- Children may grieve in different ways. For example, they may be sad for short periods of time and then seem fine.
- Children often use play as a way of understanding death. For example, some children will play "funeral". This is normal, and reflects a child's efforts to make sense of what happened.
- Parents may underestimate a child's experience of loss because of their own experience with grief or because the child does not appear to be grieving.
- When children are distressed, they are less able to process complex and abstract information.

Strategies:

- Talk to your child about what he is thinking and feeling about the loss.
- Share your own feelings.
- Be patient and prepared to repeat yourself when trying to help your child understand the loss.
- Find ways for the child to cope. Helping them make a memory or scrapbook can be helpful.

Moving

Moving into a new home can be one of the most stressful experiences in a person's life. Moving, whether it is to a new home, neighbourhood or city can be especially stressful for families of children with disabilities. A move can entail multiple losses: familiar surroundings, routines, supports, friends, and school.

It may also require an introduction to new surroundings, people, routines, schools, service providers and support systems. Children with disabilities may find these changes overwhelming and difficult to adjust to.

Challenges:

- Children may be stressed with the loss of familiar surroundings and friends.
- The introduction of new routines can be difficult to adjust to.
- Children may have difficulty understanding why they have to leave their home.

Strategies:

- Provide consistency in routines as much as possible.
- Be physically and emotionally available to your child.
- Access new community services and neighbourhood supports.
- Provide children with productive outlets such as arts and crafts, physical activity, music and pretend play.
- Keep connections with friends and family.

A New Baby in the Family

A new addition to the family is an exciting time, but can also present challenges. The addition of a new sibling can be difficult for children to adjust to, and jealousy is a common reaction. Children may be worried about getting less attention or being replaced. Children with developmental delay or disability

may have more difficulty understanding and adjusting to a new sibling. Parents and family members can take steps to reassure children and help them build a relationship with their new sibling.

Challenges:

- Children may feel jealous or resentful towards the new baby.
- It can take time for a child to sort out their feelings towards a new baby.
- Other changes in routine or household such as moving bedrooms for a new baby can be stressful.
- Caring for a new baby takes time, which may mean that parents have less time to spend with older siblings.

Strategies:

- Start preparing your child for the new baby during the pregnancy, particularly when the mother starts to show her pregnancy.
- Involve your child in preparation for the new baby, such as decorating the baby room.
- As the due date arrives, explain to your child that mom and dad will be going away for a couple days, and try to keep as much of his routine intact during the birth.
- Once the new baby arrives, be patient and give older siblings time to meet the new baby.
- Supervise closely to keep the baby safe.
- Encourage your child to talk about what she is feeling towards the new baby.
- Try to set aside some time for just yourself and the older sibling every day.