



Helping Children Transition to New School Situations

By
Diane Mierzwik

Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 - Instilling Confidence

Chapter 2 - Arming with Information

Chapter 3 - Clarifying Expectations

Chapter 4 - Focusing on Positives

Conclusion



Introduction

I started my son in school with the best of intentions. He was four when I began visiting local elementary school, public and private, in search of the perfect fit for my child. I had visions of sending him off to a place where he could be intellectually stimulated, he would make friends and he would become the apple of the teacher's eye, as he was of his mother's.

I found the perfect place. It was a church school only a block from where I taught, had a class size of ten and was highly recommended by a colleague. Wes and I visited. We observed the class activities then went to recess with the children, giving Wes an opportunity to play with the children and me the chance to talk to the teacher, Ms. Sprig. During recess, one of the children fell and scraped her knee. The teacher picked her up and it was apparent - the teacher made the hurt go away, not by offering a band-aide or blowing on the boo-boo or offering to punish the offending pusher, but by being the teacher.

I signed Wes up that day and rested peacefully until September.

On the first day of school, I looked for Ms. Sprig. I looked for the other kindergartners gathering in front of the class we had visited in the spring. Finally a woman approached me and told me Ms. Sprig had left and Wes was now in a combination class, Kindergartner and First Grade with Mrs. Blewer.

The situation became unbearable when I was screaming at Wes to quit crying because he didn't want to go to school. I pulled him out of the school, unsure where he was going to go, but sure it wasn't there.

This was the first of four school changes Wes has been through in his nine years of school. It has become important for me to become adept at preparing him for the change. Hopefully, his next big change will be the transition from middle school to high school, then high school to college. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. And if there is one thing I know for sure, I can't count on things to go the way I planned.

Whether you are a teacher helping to transition children into your classroom for the first time, or a parent preparing your child for a new school situation, the following ideas, gleaned from my own experiences as a parent, and as my eighteen years as a teacher, will help to make the transition as beneficial and joyful as possible.

Chapter One -Instilling Confidence

Our belief at the beginning of a doubtful undertaking is the one thing that insures the successful outcome of the venture.

- William James

When Wes was in first grade, his class put on a cowboy show in which the class square danced and sang several songs. The big performance for the parents was Friday night, and, unfortunately, we had to be out of town, leaving directly after school. To be able to see the performance, we were invited to the dress rehearsal. It was an enchanting show, as only a show can be when being performed by cherub, six year olds.

After the performance, the first grade teachers approached us to tell us how much they were going to miss Wes for the Friday night performance. My husband and I thought the teachers were being polite and thanked them for their kind words, when they said, "No, really. Wes is the

only one you can hear singing. Is one of you a performer? Do you work on that at home?"

Bill and I were taken aback. We stammered and shook our heads. Finally I shrugged my shoulders and answered, "We sing really loud with the radio."

Without knowing it, we had instilled in Wes confidence in his singing ability. He may not have had the best voice, but we didn't know because neither did we. We never criticized Wes, only encouraged him.

I wish this story had a neat ending... Wes now regularly performs solos with his school chorus, but the truth is, he isn't even in chorus any longer. That's the thing with kids, and with life, you never know what changes lay ahead.

The story does have a point. Wes had confidence and therefore performed well. If we instill confidence in our children and students, we can help them, too, to perform well.

Change

When we are faced with change, as humans we inevitably imagine what the change will look like. Whether it is a transition to a new school, a new

class, or a new subject to be studied, what lies ahead begins with what we imagine it to be.

It is natural for children to talk to trusted adults about how they are imagining the transition to occur. This is our opportunity to instill confidence by guiding their imagination toward future success.

When I teach a poetry lesson, I am always faced with students who claim quite boisterously, that they HATE poetry. I acknowledge their feelings and try to imagine why they might dislike the subject. Usually, students who feel like they can not be successful with a subject, hate that subject.

"Do you listen to the radio?" I ask.

"Of course." They answer, sure I am trying to change the subject so as to distract them from how much they HATE poetry.

"Do you ever sing along with the lyrics?"

"Yes."

"Can you sing me some lyrics now?"

Most teenagers are eager to share with me some of their favorite lyrics, to which I respond that those lyrics are poetry.

Suddenly, the student sees the future as something different from what he or she has imagined and therefore, the outcome could be different; they may be successful at the endeavor.

Redefining the change helps children redefine the imagined outcome.

The redefined imagined outcome allows for the possibility for success.

The possibility for success leads to confidence.

Perceived Failure

Sometimes the child has a belief that there will be a negative outcome which is based on past experiences.

Ezeriah did no work in my class for the first eight weeks of class. None. Finally, one day while the class was walking to the library, I was able to talk to him about the situation.

"I'm horrible at English."

"Eze, you know my class is a safe place to make mistakes. Just turn something in and let me decide if you're horrible."

Ezeriah is now passing my class. He does have some spelling and reading challenges, but he is capable of much more than he gave himself credit for.

I didn't tell Eze he was wrong. Doing that would have been dismissing his perception of reality, making him bad at one more thing. Instead, I acknowledged his belief and allowed for a new future.

As adults we can help children see themselves as capable despite the past, by imagining for them and with them a new outcome. Asking questions such as:

*what's different about this situation?

*how are you different this time?

*what could happen to make it a good situation?

and other such questions will help children feel confident in their ability to face situations which may have been difficult in the past.

Confidence

Maria Shriver was on Oprah quite a while ago and I remember her talking about how when she was a child, her father made her feel so special because every time she entered a room where he was, he was always so happy to see her.

I have tried to do that with Wes. Recently I picked him up from school early and was waiting in the office for him as a student TA retrieved

him from class. When he finally came around the corner, he had the demeanor of a middle school boy: hunched shoulders, downcast eyes, leery stance. Then he looked up at me.

"There's my favorite boy."

Wes immediately straightened and brightened. His confidence in himself was physically restored by my belief in him. I witnessed the transition in him.

As parents and as teachers, we can do this for all the children in our lives.

Chapter Two - Arming With Information

As a general rule, the most successful man in life is the man who has the best information.

- Benjamin Disraeli

Before school starts each year, our middle school has a day when parents can pick up their children's schedules and walk their children around, pointing out the classrooms, the bathrooms, the cafeteria and other important parts of the school.

When we found out that Wes's new school didn't have such a day, but handed out the schedules the morning of the first day of school, we took him to school ahead of time so we could walk around, become familiar with the campus. We knew we couldn't map out his day for him, but we could provide him with as much information as was available, making the transition more comfortable for him (and for us).

Providing children with information about the upcoming transition allows the child to become comfortable with the parts of the transition that are knowable.

Information

When we are forcing children into a transition, it is our responsibility to provide the child with information about the transition so the child has a sense of predictability and security about the transition.

Children thrive when their routine is predictable. As a teacher, I spend the first two weeks of class, teaching my students the routine: what they can safely predict will happen each day in class. (Of course, I grow dismayed when a child asks me in April what we are doing in class today, to which I respond, "The same thing we do every Wednesday." That is another story☺).

Having a classroom structure which is predictable allows the students and me to concentrate on the subject matter we need to learn, rather than losing concentration because we are trying to prepare for the unpredictable.

Likewise, the difficult thing about a transition for a child is the lack of predictability. Information about what to expect alleviates this difficulty.

When a child enters my class in the middle of the term, I reassure the child that after a week, he or she will understand the routine, and THEN be expected to keep up with the assignments.

Information allows children to feel secure in the transition by providing them with tools to handle the transition. Just like we get out a map to find out where we are going, gathering information, telling a child who his teacher is, or where her classroom is, will help that child be more comfortable during the transition.

As adults, it is imperative to collect any information for children which will arm them with tools to handle the transition effectively.

Chapter Three -Clarifying Expectations

The difficult we do immediately: the impossible takes a little longer.

- An Air Force Motto

When I was an elementary physical education teacher, I was amazed how difficult first graders could be.

I would tell them to line up in a single file line. Easy - right? Little six year olds would be meandering around, some facing me, others facing each other, still others pushing one another. I always ended up walking around and placing my hands on the shoulders of about half of the students, walking them to the single file line, and then the other half fell into place. I thought this was the way teaching first grade worked.

Finally, my curriculum supervisor came to visit. After observing my first class, and trying to hide his chuckles, he offered to conduct my next class.

When he asked the children to line up he did not use what I thought was universally understood by all, "single file line." Instead, Scott said, "I

need everyone's toes on this line, facing me, arms length apart." Within twenty seconds, they were lined up, single file.

Scott smiled at me, "It's all about clear expectations."

Once our children have had a taste of the transition, a day or two in the new school, new class, new subject matter, it is time to check in and clarify expectations.

Asking questions such as:

*is there anything you don't understand?

* are you comfortable with everything?

*are you having any problems?

*do you understand what is expected of you?

allows children an opportunity to articulate any difficulties they may be having. This also prevents these difficulties from turning into failures and then lowered expectations of themselves.

As the adult it is also important for you to intervene if you see a child having trouble adjusting.

When a new student enters my class, as the rest of the class is participating in an activity, I explain to the new student what we are doing

and what the expectation is for the activity. My veteran students have internalized these expectations, so for a new students, these expectations may not be evident without someone to explain them.

As a parent, when Wes comes home with a failing grade on an assignment, we discuss what went wrong. I do not blame him for the failure. I assume he did not understand the expectations and we work hard at meeting the expectations for the next assignment (and contact the teacher about redoing the failing assignment if that is appropriate).

Clarifying expectations allows children time to adjust to a new environment without the fear of failure. When adults recognize the time needed to adjust to new expectations and are patient with the adjustment period, children are capable of meeting and exceeding our expectations for them.

Chapter Four – Focusing on Positives

Faith is an act of rational choice which determines us to act as if certain things were true and in the confident expectation that they will prove to be true.

- William R. Inge

Wes and I just got done having it out. He brought home an essay he was to complete, but was unsure of how to complete it. He wanted my help, but whenever I made a suggestion, he told me it was wrong. No matter that I am an English teacher and have some inkling of how to complete essay assignments.

We were at an impasse. I told Wes he could either do his best and get whatever grade he earned, knowing that it might be low since he was unclear of the assignment expectations or not do the assignment because of his uncertainty and be sure to fail.

We focused on the positive, doing one's best.

When children are in the midst of transitions, it is inevitable for there to be road bumps. How we handle the road bumps determines the

difference between success and failure. As adults, we have the unique opportunity to be able to train children how to handle road bumps.

The first thing we want to do is acknowledge the trouble the child is having. If we try to downplay the trouble or ignore the trouble, it feels for the child that we are not listening to and validating their experiences.

Next, it is important to repeat back to the child what we heard the trouble to be then to ask what went right. Closely examine what went right. Ask lots of open ended questions about what went right.

Finally, use the information gathered about what went right and see how the child can apply that to what the trouble was. A child re-experiences the positive aspects of the day, class or subject matter as he or she talks about it. When you reintroduce the road bump, he is able to use those positive feelings to solve the trouble he felt.

Wes is now finishing his essay in the other room. We talked about how his teacher is a reasonable person who values all the work he turns in. Wes told me about the good grades he has earned on other writing assignments in her class, then felt capable of completing the task at hand, knowing he would be rewarded for his efforts, even if they were not perfect.

Conclusion

As adults, we have learned how to make transitions as smooth as possible. How did we learn to do this? Either by painful trial and error, or by following the example and guidance of an influential adult, we learned to accommodate the changes and transitions that are an inevitable part of life.

Now, as parents and teachers, it is our turn to provide guidance for the children in our lives. When we are helping them to transition into a new situation, a new class, a new school, a new subject matter, our patience and help can provide a child with the confidence to face not only the transition at hand, but future transitions.

When we instill confidence in a child by pointing out how capable the child is, preparing the child with information about the new situation, clarifying expectations and troubleshooting to resolve any problems, we guide children to healthy and happy transitions.

Someone once said the only thing that never changes is change. The better we prepare our children for change, the better prepared they are for the future.