

MORE THAN MILESTONES: UNDERSTANDING TRANSITIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Transitions are often spoken about as distinct moments in time - starting school, moving to a new setting, or stepping into something new. They are framed as milestones, markers of development, and signs of progress. Yet for young children, transitions are rarely confined to these singular events. Instead, they are woven throughout the fabric of everyday life, quietly shaping how children experience change.

From moving between activities to saying goodbye at the door, from coming inside after outdoor play to settling into a new routine, children are constantly navigating transitions.

While these moments may appear small from an adult perspective, each one requires an adjustment. Each one asks the child to shift their attention, regulate their emotions, and adapt to something different. Over time, these everyday experiences begin to build a child's understanding of change - not just what it looks like, but how it feels.

THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF CHANGE

At the heart of this is the emotional experience of transition. For young children, the world is grounded in familiarity. It is built on predictable routines, known environments, and trusted relationships. These elements provide a sense of security that allows children to explore, engage, and learn with confidence. When something changes, even temporarily, that sense of security can feel uncertain. In response, children often seek reassurance, connection, and stability.

This understanding is closely aligned with the work of John Bowlby, whose attachment theory emphasises the importance of a secure base. When children feel emotionally safe and connected, they are able to move confidently between experiences, knowing that support is available if needed. When that sense of safety is disrupted, even slightly, children may respond in ways that reflect their need to regain it.

What we observe as hesitation, clinginess, emotional responses, or withdrawal are not simply behaviours to be managed, but expressions of how a child is experiencing change. It is important, therefore, to recognise that transitions are not solely practical or organisational events. They are relational and emotional processes. They are shaped not only by what is happening, but by how it feels to the child moving through it.

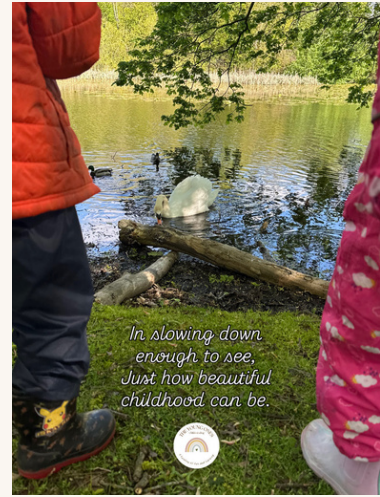


WHEN SMALL MOMENTS SHAPE BIGGER TRANSITIONS

While larger transitions, such as starting school or settling into a new setting, are often given significant attention, they do not occur in isolation. They are built upon the child's prior experiences of change. Every small transition throughout the day contributes to a child's developing sense of what it means to move from one experience to another.

Sometimes, these moments can be easy for adults to overlook. A child who becomes upset when asked to stop playing, struggles during tidy-up time, or finds separation at the door difficult may not simply be resisting the routine itself. They may be responding to the emotional demand of transition - the uncertainty of what comes next, the ending of something familiar, or the effort required to shift emotionally and mentally between experiences. When we pause to see these moments through a relational lens, we are better able to respond with empathy rather than urgency.

When transitions feel rushed, unpredictable, or unsupported, children may begin to associate change with uncertainty. Conversely, when transitions are approached with consistency, connection, and care, children begin to build trust - both in the process of change and in the adults guiding them through it.



SEEING TRANSITIONS THROUGH THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

This perspective invites a shift in how we view transitions within early years practice. Rather than focusing solely on the outcome - how quickly a child settles or adapts - we are encouraged to consider the experience itself. What does this moment feel like for the child? What do they need in order to feel secure as they move through it? These questions move us beyond managing transitions and towards understanding them.

Research further supports the significance of this approach. The Education Endowment Foundation highlights the critical role of social and emotional development in children's long-term outcomes, emphasising that emotional security underpins effective learning. Similarly, the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales identify warm, responsive interactions and emotionally available adults as key factors in supporting children's wellbeing.

Transitions, when viewed through this lens, become opportunities - not simply to move children from one point to another, but to support their emotional development in meaningful and lasting ways.

Understanding transitions in this way also helps us to see them from the child's perspective. While adults may focus on structure, timing, and organisation, children are navigating something far more relational. They are asking, often without words: Who is here with me? Do I feel safe? What happens next? These internal questions shape how they experience each transition. For some children, this process may feel manageable and predictable. For others, it may feel uncertain and require additional support. Neither response is right or wrong; both are part of the process of adapting to change.

When we begin to recognise this, our role as adults gently shifts. Instead of guiding children through transitions as efficiently as possible, we begin to move alongside them. We notice more. We respond more thoughtfully. We prioritise connection over pace. This is not about adding more to what we do, but about deepening our awareness of what is already happening within these moments.

LOOKING AHEAD

Ultimately, transitions are not confined to the larger milestones we often focus on. They are part of children's everyday experiences, shaping how they come to understand change, security, relationships, and themselves. When we begin to recognise the significance of these smaller, ongoing moments, we are better able to support children not only in the present, but as they approach the bigger transitions ahead.

In my upcoming webinar, "Big Changes, Little Feelings: Supporting Children Through Transitions," I will build on this understanding to explore how we can support children through some of the most significant transitions they face - including starting school and settling into new environments - with practical, thoughtful approaches that prioritise emotional wellbeing, connection, and emotional security.

Because when children feel emotionally supported through transition, they do not simply learn to cope with change - they begin to feel secure within it.



FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

- Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and Loss: Volume 1. Attachment.
- Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) – Personal, Social and Emotional Development: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/personal-social-and-emotional-development>
- Siraj, I., Kingston, D., & Melhuish, E. (2015). Assessing Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) Scale.
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2012). Establishing a Level Foundation for Life: Mental Health Begins in Early Childhood. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/establishing-a-level-foundation-for-life-mental-health-begins-in-early-childhood/>

JOIN US!

Georgina led a webinar related to this blog on:

Wednesday 3rd June 6.45-7.30pm

Big Changes, Little Feelings: Understanding transitions in Early Childhood

Watch this space for future webinars related to this subject.

UPCOMING SUMMER TERM WEBINARS

- Tuesday 7th July: Loose Parts, Big Thinking: Unlocking Open-Ended Play
- Tuesday 18th August: Schemas Behind the Scenes: An Introduction to Schematic play

To book your place or to find out more, please email natalie.sph@childhaven.n-yorks.sch.uk

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georgina Young is an experienced early years educator and the founder of The Young Ones Childminding and Guiding The Young Ones. Having worked across the sector in both nursery and home-based settings, she is passionate about supporting high quality practice, rooted in child development, emotional wellbeing, and meaningful relationships. Georgina is committed to reflective practice and professional collaboration, and enjoys supporting other educators to feel confident, valued, and empowered in their everyday practice.