

# Relational EXCHANGE

Sharing trauma  
informed practice  
ideas and strategies  
for the ACT's  
early childhood  
educators

## Transition and change: silent predators that need to be tamed

### Welcome

Welcome to our next blog piece relating to trauma-informed practice for the ACT's early childhood education and care (ECEC) community.

These pieces will provide elaboration on the essence of transition and change in the context of early childhood and will discuss different ideas for supporting children affected by trauma to deal with transitions in the safest way.

### Why Relational Exchange?

We have called this blog 'Relational Exchange' for two reasons. Firstly, because this reflects the importance of connection through relationship that underpins both child development and repair or healing from the impacts of trauma. The nature or quality of the relational exchanges we engage with children and their families are critical. And every relational exchange provides an opportunity for understanding and an opportunity for repair.

Secondly, because this can provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas amongst early childhood educators and other professionals. The topics explored here and the discussion questions presented will provide you with opportunities for reflection and exploration across your team, your site or centre, your networks and the broader communities of practice.

## Thinking about transition

We know as adults that change can be truly challenging and this is very much evident in our current world. Dealing with those transitions from one situation to another can leave us feeling wobbly and struggling to find a solid platform to manage the latest change. We are often experiencing a mix of feelings that, even when the change is something we want, always includes a sense of loss and anxiety at what is to come. A new sensation to connect to transitions is the uncertainty about whether these transitions will actually occur or not!

Transitions are tricky for us all but can be scary for children and terrifying for children who have experienced trauma. We know that for all children, and particularly those who have experienced constant uncertainty, challenge or trauma, any change at all can feel life threatening. Anything that is unpredictable, new or surprising (including happy surprises) can tip a child's physiology into defensive mode – which is preparing the to fight, run away from, freeze or collapse to deal with this invisible 'predator'. Young children's days are filled with change. The transitions children are asked to make each day, from one place to another, one person to another, or one activity to another, are so commonplace they are hardly noticed by everyone except a child who has experienced trauma.

For children, however, these transition events can be emotionally charged. They may be exciting and happy events, but sometimes they can be overwhelming and difficult. What we want as we centres reopen and we make the move back together is for all children to be able to play, learn and enjoy being with other children and adults. But, as Porges' Polyvagal Theory tells us, we can only play, learn and have fun with others when our nervous system detects that all is safe. Our job when working with children is largely to help them to feel safe but how can we do that when our parameters of safety are likely to have changed during these unprecedented times.

## Predictability as safety

The notion of predictability as safety can be a very helpful one at this time. It asks us to think about what we can do to ensure a child's day is predictable enough for them to be able to play, learn and connect. How might we be able to do that, particularly if we work in early education environments?

Environmental predictability might be the first step. This focuses on helping children understand what the environment will be like on their return. Can we provide children with photos of what the room will look like when they return to it before they make that transition? Can we also take them on a virtual tour of the service to remind them where things are before they come back in?

Relational predictability might be next. Who will be there to greet each child at the door? Where will that first greeting take place? Can we ensure there are special people at the entrance with a sense of connection and without too many people in the crowd? How will each child be greeted – has there been a special greeting that has been used each morning?

We can then think more about the comings and goings at the start and end of each day. Is there a sensory predictability that we can use? Examples of this might include having a consistent piece of music playing in the room, a textured item that each child is passed as they enter the room (that 'belongs' to them), a series of images that may be projected onto a wall during that

entry time (which might perhaps be landscapes or patterns) or a pleasant smell that is diffused in the room that can be tolerated by all of the children.

And then there is routine as predictability. One educator made the lovely point that we can talk about routines as rituals as this has a more positive connotation. What are our rituals during each session and each day? We also need to be clear that routines do not equal rigidity. We can build an appropriate level of flexibility into the day's routine – such as giving a choice for children between two activities to start the day or the session. However, we know that children will look for consistency and repetition in their experience of each day at this challenging time because so much of their lives have been turned upside down over this period. They are looking for what is still the same, what they can expect from the world around them, and the adults within it to help them to feel safe every day.

And while we have focused a lot on how to enter the day, we also need to pay attention to the transition at the end of the day – with the same principles of predictability applying.

You will note that all these layers of safety are predicated on one critical aspect and that is the relationships that we as professionals hold with the children with whom we work. We know that at this time of significant transition and change the relationships that we hold with children are going to be crucial to the child's experience of safety and capacity to navigate the inevitable changes that each day will bring.

## Transitions in children's everyday lives

How do we understand the emotional ups and downs that children may feel as they negotiate the transitions of daily life? It is the importance of familiar relationships with adults and other children that supports children through transitions.

Everyday transitions are the transitions that occur as a regular part of a child's day or week. They include transitions between different settings, the arrivals and departures children experience as they move from one place to another, e.g., from home to day-care or preschool or grandma's house.

Transitions also occur within settings. They include changes from:

- one person to another, e.g., parent/carer to educator or grandparent or babysitter
- one activity to another, e.g., packing up the toys, going to bed, transitioning to and from meal times

Transitions require children to adapt or cope with change. Individual differences in personality, temperament or self-regulation means that each child experiences transition differently. Age also makes a difference, with younger children being particularly vulnerable at times of transition.

How do we ensure that transitions are smooth and positive experiences for everyone? Let's look at different transitions and how to support the child safely through them.

## Different places

When children transition from one place to another they need to adjust to different environments, timetables and relationships. Each setting has its own rules and requirements and the transitions children make from one setting to another requires them to fit in with the different expectations.

To assist with the transition from one place to another arrival and departure routines or rituals are key. Some points to consider:

- the routine or ritual is the same each time
- providing a favourite activity on arrival
- bringing a favourite toy, book or blanket
- being greeted by the same person each time on arrival
- providing quiet, semi-secluded spaces to retreat to
- knowing where everything is, e.g., where their bag is, where to find their favourite activity or toy, etc.
- who is picking them up and when

Over time, as each place becomes more familiar to the child, the transition is likely to become easier.

## Different timetables or schedules

Long before children understand the meaning of time, their days are structured by timetables or schedules. They hear terms like; play time, group time, meal/snack time, pack up time, bath time, home time, bed time.

To support children through these transitions we need to consider some of the following:

- their age and stage of development (what do they understand, what can they do)
- transition activities (singing a pack up or hand-washing song, using a familiar game, initiating an action game, reading a bed time story)
- supporting the transition (doing it with them, being nearby, helping when necessary)
- ensuring the transition is child centred (not adult centred)
- preparing children for the transition (in 5 minutes you need to pack up your toys so we can go to grandma's house/day-care/kinder)

When we acknowledge the emotional effort that is required for children 'to stop what they are doing in order to do what must be done and fit in with the agenda of someone else' we support children to regulate their internal emotions and to stay engaged when activities change.

Reminders of what happens across the day also helps children learn to manage transition times. Using books and visual tools that describe and illustrate the sequence of the day's events will assist children to know about and prepare for transition times. Using the phrase 'what happens next' will help children understand and prepare for the next event or activity.

When there is a familiar routine and children know what happens next, they anticipate these times and may even devise their own 'transition'.

## Different relationships

Changes from one person to another and from one relationship to another, can be emotionally stressful for children.

When children transition between settings and within settings, they often change from one person to another. Supporting this transition is about providing reassurance, helping the child to make the transition from one important relationship to another, knowing that both adults are thinking about the child and that they will be looked after and kept safe.

It is important to ensure that children have smooth, manageable transitions from one relationship to another. Also allowing plenty of time for the transition from one relationship to another makes it more manageable for the child and for the adults. It shouldn't feel like an interruption. When children experience many interruptions in relationships they may become disorientated, upset or distressed. Minimising these interruptions wherever possible and preparing the child for the change is vital to supporting their emotional wellbeing.

## Where to from here?.

Familiar, predictable environments with predictable timetables, relationships and daily rituals support the familiarity of routines.

Regular reviews of transitions considering the child's 'perspective' invites the adults in the child's life to reflect on how the child might experience transitions.

Sometimes allowing children to choose when and how they transition can support a calmer more relaxed atmosphere with less stress. Many children are capable of making responsible decisions for themselves when given the opportunity to do so.

Rethinking transitions through observation, reflection and discussion can assist the adults in the child's life to make the necessary changes to support the child through the many transitions they need to traverse throughout their lives.