

The Rhode Island Early Childhood Newsletter



Starting Off on the Right Feet: Preschool Family Transition Workshops

by Chris Amirault, Director, Brown/Fox Point ECEC

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A few years ago, we noticed that our center had rough Septembers. Many parents and teachers seemed anxious, puzzled, and tentative; many children seemed confused and unhappy. Getting through the fall as best we could while we figured each other out was a strange, annual ritual.

It was also avoidable. With a few simple steps, we have figured out how to start off on the right feet together: parents, teachers, and especially children.

Research notes that school communities have cultures, rules, and expectations that are not readily apparent to the families those schools serve. That's no surprise to early childhood educators. We know that healthy social development depends upon adults helping children to see the invisible codes of behavior that we take for granted. Every program is different from another, and programs certainly are not homes. So why do adults rely on preschoolers to negotiate these complicated social and cultural nuances?

Programs that exemplify white, middle-class school culture present added problems. All cultural practices are hard to see, particularly for those people in that culture, and many white, middle-class educators are unaware of the invisible power and privilege of the codes they embody and perform. An educator's responsibility is to initiate this dialogue with families and to assume that her/his own cultural practices are hard to perceive and explain, even to herself/himself.

Given these issues, we decided that it was our center's responsibility to help everyone

make these transitions successful. We created a system to help families understand the cultural practices of our center, to help us learn the desires and concerns of our families, and to give everyone many opportunities to get to know each other.

Once the Family Commits, They Visit, Visit, and Visit Again

Whenever a family expresses interest in our center, we encourage them to tour during the school day. As soon as a family has confirmed enrollment, we ask them to visit with their child as often as possible and at *any* time. These informal regular visits accomplish many important things. Staff members learn the names and behaviors of the children that they will teach later in the year. Families learn about the center culture and staff. Administrators glimpse the issues that those adults will face when school starts.

Most importantly, regular visits allow children to develop a sense of comfort, trust, and confidence in their new school environment. Children will enjoy a much less chaotic atmosphere their first week of school when they are given the opportunity ahead of time to hear the sounds, smell the smells, see the sights, and experience what their body will feel like in their new environment.

Playgrounds are perfect for these visits. Children may feel more at home when they are on a new playground than when they are in a classroom. Informal social experiments take place on monkey bars and in sandboxes with far greater regularity and success than they do in forced

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Letter from the Editor

Thanks for picking up the latest issue of the newsletter. Our theme is *transitions*, and this third issue is larger than usual, due to the number of excellent articles and updates.

The lead article offers logical information about a transition system that can be used in center-based preschools. (Family child care or school-age programs can also benefit from the system presented in this article, with a few adaptations.)

The professional resource review is geared for infant and toddler educators, while the highlighted web sites and children's literature reviews offer useful information for all age groups.

Additionally, please note the extensive amounts of professional development—namely conferences—available in the upcoming months.

As longtime readers of this newsletter know, spring is my favorite season of the year. Colors never look brighter or more arresting; the scent of flowers in the air is both reassuring and enchanting. What a great opportunity to explore with children the transition of seasons. Spring's surge of new plants and life is a natural curriculum. Use this new cloak of beauty the world offers us to your advantage!

Joseph Morra, Editor

Statewide and National Calendar of Professional Development Opportunities

Mondays, March 26 - April 9, 2007

Options for Working Parents, Cranston
CHILDSPAN's Three-part
Workshop Series:
*Leadership in Early Education:
Identifying Your Strengths and
Challenges to Continue Your Growth*
Contact Jessica Baéz: (401) 721-6401

Thursdays, March 29 - May 17, 2007

CHILDSPAN, Pawtucket
Mini-Course:
Family Child Care from A - Z
(this course is available
in both English and Spanish)
Contact Jessica Baéz: (401) 721-6401

Saturday, March 31, 2007

Crowne Plaza Hotel, Warwick
Bradley Hospital's Annual
Parenting Matters Conference
Email Bonnie Braga at
bbraga@lifspan.org
for more information.

Wednesdays, April 4 - 11, 2007

CHILDSPAN, Pawtucket
CHILDSPAN's Two-part
Workshop Series:
*Building Developmental Assets in
Young People*
Contact Jessica Baéz: (401) 721-6401

Saturday, April 28, 2007

Rhode Island Convention Center,
Providence
RIAAYC's
**42nd Annual Rhode Island Early
Childhood Conference:**
Building Better Futures for All Children
Email shegrant@hotmail.com
for more information.

Wednesdays, May 2 - 9, 2007

CHILDSPAN, Pawtucket
CHILDSPAN's Two-part
Workshop Series:
*Interactions, Attachments, and
Influences in Early Childhood Settings*
Contact Jessica Baéz: (401) 721-6401

CHILDSPAN News

by Shevaun Keogh-Walker

It is March and believe it or not, spring is only three weeks away! You may have noticed the days getting longer and the mornings feeling brighter as you tumble out of bed to begin another day of providing quality programs for Rhode Island's children and youth.

CHILDSPAN is also "springing forward" to support you in these efforts through a number of exciting venues. This winter and spring CHILDSPAN continues to offer college credit-bearing courses to enhance early childhood head teachers and administrators with cutting-edge research on brain development, social and emotional competency skills, and strategies for promoting optimal infant, toddler, and preschool social and emotional development. The *Social and Emotional Development of Preschool Children Institute* began on February 27, 2007, and continues through May 24, 2007. This institute is available for graduate or undergraduate credit from URI for participants who attend all three 15-hour segments. Participants who do not need college credits may attend one, two, or all three segments and receive DCYF hours toward their license requirements. The Institute covers many important topics including sensory processing dysfunction, attachment theory, the impact of poverty on children's development, and nationally recognized tools to assess children's social and emotional development.

CHILDSPAN is also collaborating with other organizations to support best practice in the school-age and youth arena. The Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance is working closely with CHILDSPAN to develop and present our first joint school-age and youth conference. The conference, which is *free of charge*, will be held on May 30, 2007, at Bryant University in Smithfield. This professional development opportunity will include an advocacy and celebratory breakfast followed by a wide variety of workshops to promote best practice strategies for school-age and youth practitioners and administrators.

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Transitions...

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situations in pretend play while adults hover. And what better way to work off transition anxiety than by using gross- and fine-motor skills for climbing, running, and sliding?

Require All Families to Attend Transition Workshops

In our first summer of this system, we offered families an optional transition workshop that discussed foundational research about early childhood, provided clear overviews of transition challenges for young children, and showed families what we would and what they could do to support their children. I wrote down every concern or question that families had at the start of each session, and made sure all were answered. Finally, I devoted much attention to our use of "observing" comments, the developmentally appropriate descriptions of the world that adults can use with children to help them perceive the world, its rules, and its culture that our teachers use every minute of their instruction.

When the year started, all new families that had attended the transition workshops experienced no problems during the first few weeks of transition into school. Interestingly, all of the children who had drop-off issues, couldn't rest at rest time, and tended to be weepy during the day were in families that had *not* attended a transition workshop.

We now require every family to attend a transition workshop, in a group or individually. We do whatever is necessary for every family to attend one of these workshops: provide child care or translators, hold the workshops off-site, etc. Participation, however, is non-negotiable, because we know that, in the long run, it is essential for every child's success.

Provide Families with Concrete Strategies to Use at Home

Transition workshops provide obvious, general advice for parents and guardians, but the real results come from specific, concrete strategies that prepare children for child-care life. (Since these strategies support children in developing self-help skills, impulse control, conflict resolution tactics, and more, they are also very useful for parenting at home!) Strategies must be concrete, real-world suggestions that even harried adults can do to support their children. These strategies help children prepare for their other transitions as well as increase adults' confidence in their ability to help their children in new situations.

Parents have told us that these strategies work wonders not only in our program but beyond. Sitting in frustrating traffic on the way home? Tell your child that you're frustrated, and then, when the traffic eases, tell her/him that your anger has disappeared! Unable to find the type of fruit you want at a new grocery store? Explain that you're in a new place and have to learn how to find things; recruit the child's assistance, and celebrate when you discover the produce section and locate your fruit. These strategies teach parents and guardians that all adults can be experts at supporting children's learning.

Share Insights from Visits and Workshops with Teachers

When you ask parents to share their concerns with you and discuss strategies to help, you gather important information about your new children and their families. I share this information with every teacher in our building. We talk about the culture and social issues that families have discussed, the strategies I suggested for addressing concerns, and the matters that remain. It is a simple step that has been invaluable to the process. In particular, it helps teachers prepare culturally, socially,

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Professional Resources in Rhode Island

Aquidneck Island Directors' Association
Pam Griffiths, 683-0991

Child Care Support Network (CCSN)
Missy Deitrick, 222-5372

Children's Friend and Service
Beth Sousa, 276-4336

*CHILDSPAN:
Rhode Island's Child Development and
Education Training System*
Shevaun Keogh-Walker, 721-6400

*Family Child Care Homes of
Rhode Island, Inc. (FCCHRI)*
Maria Belliard, 461-8908

Mental Health Association of Rhode Island
Cynthia A. Barry, 726-2285

Options for Working Parents
Julie Valladeres, 946-2300
or 800-244-8700

Prevent Child Abuse Rhode Island (PCARI)
Katherine Begin, 728-7920

Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP)
Joyce Butler, 490-9960

*Rhode Island Association for the Education
of Young Children (RIAEYC)*
Jennifer DeFrance, 831-1219

*Rhode Island Child Care
Directors' Association (RICCDA)*
Kim Maine, 294-3510

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
Elizabeth Burke Bryant, 351-9400

*Rhode Island School-Age Child Care
Association (RISCCA)*
Erica Saccoccio, 738-7813

Rhode Island Head Start Association
Mary Nugent, 245-2833

*Rhode Island Head Start
Collaboration Project*
Lawrence Pucciarelli, 462-3071

*Rhode Island Parent
Information Network (RIPIN)*
Vivian Weisman, 727-4144
or 800-464-3399

*URI, CE, Children, Youth,
and Family 4-H Program*
Marilyn Martin, 277-5255

Children's Literature Reviews

by Cheryl Space

Bunting, Eve. (2001). *Jin Woo*. New York: Clarion Books.

In this warm story with glowing illustrations, a family welcomes their newest member, Jin Woo, a five-month-old baby boy they are adopting from Korea. Big brother David is understandably nervous about the new arrival. However, he helps his parents prepare the bedroom, celebrates with them at a Korean restaurant, and waits expectantly at the airport for the baby to arrive, the whole time wishing that his family could just stay the same. David's emotions begin to change when he is the first to make Jin Woo giggle. David's mother also helps when she shares a special letter. (Ages 4-8)

Recorvits, Helen. (2003). *My Name Is Yoon*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Yoon, a recent immigrant from Korea, doesn't like how her name looks printed in English. In fact, she is not sure she likes America at all. However, she uses her active imagination and drawing skills to communicate with her new teacher, thinking herself to be a bird, a cat, and then a cupcake. Finally, she shares a laugh with a new friend and a hug with her welcoming teacher. She thinks, "Maybe America will be a good home...maybe different is good, too." The fanciful illustrations by Gabi Swiatkowska are beautiful works of art. The author lives in Gloucester, Rhode Island. (Ages 4-8)

Nagda, Ann Whitehead. (2000). *Dear Whiskers*. New York: Holiday House.

Jenny, a fourth grader, is assigned a second-grade pen pal. Instead of writing as herself, though, she has to pretend to be a mouse. Ugh! To make matters worse, her pen pal, Sameera, a recent immigrant from Saudi Arabia, doesn't write back. With the encouragement of her sensitive teacher, Jenny finds a creative way to include Sameera in the mouse project and make her feel welcome at the new school. (Ages 7-10)

CHILDSPAN News

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CHILDSPAN also continues to partner with the Providence After School Alliance around quality practices, and is currently participating in their RI Program Quality Assessment Pilot Project as consultants. Staff are working with school-age and youth programs in Providence to assist them in using this tool as well as to evaluate the process.

As we look further ahead, CHILDSPAN is already preparing for our next Leadership Institute, which will be held on September 28, 2007, at the Amica Insurance Corporation in Lincoln, RI. This Institute, which is a full-day professional development event, focuses on experienced early childhood, school-age, and youth practitioners and administrators. In addition to being highly informative, this Institute is also a day of celebration for the individuals who have demonstrated such a strong commitment and dedication to their field. We hope to see you there!

As always, I want to close by thanking all of you for the work you do to provide high-quality learning experiences for children and youth. I commend you. Happy spring!

Internet Information

Moving into a new home and/or community and leaving friends, familiarity, and established routines behind can produce stress in children, regardless of their age. The following two web sites offer practical advice (including book suggestions, moving tips, and strategies on how to involve children in decision making) to families and educators experiencing this new transition:

<http://www.sesameworkshop.org/parents/advice/article.php?contentId=1103>

http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/health_advice/facts/movinghouse.htm

Provider Appreciation Day!

May 11, 2007

Call Sue Williamson, National Provider Appreciation Day Co-Chair, at (888) 334-7781,
or via email (info@ProviderAppreciation.org) for further details.

Transitions...

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and developmentally appropriate materials in their classrooms for those first few challenging weeks and beyond.

September Is Transition into School Culture Month!

Let's face it: the first four to six weeks of curriculum focuses on children's effective transition whether we plan for it or not! An effective transition program encourages teachers to pair student-centered, emergent activities with repetitive instruction of basic classroom routines, placing emphasis on those components of the transition process that children need first and most. We also focus all of our parent interactions on reinforcing the basic elements of the transition workshops, and pay particular attention to using "observing" comments with both children and adults.

Hold Respectful Follow-Up Meetings with Families—and Respond Appropriately

While we try to do this throughout the year, we place a special emphasis on parent/guardian check-in meetings in the fall. We learned the hard way that avoiding awkward, anxious situations only leads to unproductive confrontations later in the year, and children pay for the errors and fears of adults.

Frank, open discussion about concerns is critical: trying to smooth over difficulties just creates more problems.

Most of those matters will require all adults, at home and at school, to change their behaviors responsively. If required changes are connected to the cultural practices of the school, administrators and teachers must reflect honestly on those practices and make the difficult changes necessary. Do the classrooms reflect the linguistic and cultural traditions of that family?

Are classrooms expecting children to behave in manners that are not culturally appropriate? These tough questions require real honesty and willingness to change, but programs that take these steps seriously build mutually respectful relationships with their families that are difficult otherwise.

Provide Responsive Parent Workshops and Materials Throughout the Fall

Every year is different, and as the fall continues, you'll start to get a sense of what the significant issues are for your families. Behavior challenges at home? Early literacy anxieties? Changes in family structure? If you listen carefully, you will hear what topics would benefit your families most, either in workshops, brief handouts, or one-on-one meetings.

Workshops are particularly helpful: it's often easier for people to talk in a group about shared concerns than to feel that they are suffering alone with a recalcitrant preschooler!

One final note, particularly for administrators: the system above can seem pretty daunting. There are many components, and it is not just "punching the clock." Every hour you invest proactively, though, pays off, by reducing hours of reacting to confrontation, misunderstanding, and unhappiness.

There are always transitions to address in early childhood. Why not take the right first steps together?

Children are the true connoisseurs. What's precious to them has no price—only value.

- Bel Kaufman

2007 Caldecott Award and Honor Books!

Caldecott Medal for Best Picture Book:

Flotsam

illustrated and written by David Wiesner

Caldecott Honor Books:

Gone Wild: An Endangered Animal Alphabet

illustrated and written by David McLimans

Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom

illustrated by Kadir Nelson, written by Carole Boston Weatherford

2007 Newbery Award and Honor Books!

Newbery Medal for Best Book:

The Higher Power of Lucky

by Susan Patron

Newbery Honor Books:

Hattie Big Sky

by Kirby Larson

Penny from Heaven

by Jennifer L. Holm

Rules

by Cynthia Lord

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Professional Resource Review

by Sheila Dandeneau

Miller, Karen. (2005). *Simple Transitions for Infants and Toddlers*. Beltsville, Maryland: Gryphon House.

Transitioning from one part of the day to another can be difficult in any classroom, but more so in an infant and toddler classroom, where routines are important. *Simple Transitions for Infants and Toddlers* reminds us that these transitions are not the only ones children and teachers must manage. Moving into a new classroom, entering child care for the first time, and helping children to learn what to expect are all examples of transitions. This book offers practical tips, suggestions, and activities that can ease these difficult times.

The section on morning transitions offers valuable advice for establishing welcome rituals and goodbye rituals. It can be upsetting for a parent to leave her/his child in the care of another adult; teachers sometimes need to comfort a parent as well as the child. The author offers strategies to make this emotionally charged experience easier for parents.

Simple Transitions... devotes six pages to what is possibly the most difficult transition for *toddlers*: the transition time from lunch to nap. In this section, there is a list of tried-and-true suggestions as well as more creative ideas that may help teachers ease children into this time of the day. For example, I liked the idea of a class puppet who gives each child a kiss as they settle down, and the "Magic Sleep Spray" that creates good dreams.

An extra bonus is an impressive list of recommended books about separation, security objects, friendships, sharing, and naptime included in the appendix.