



TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH WITH EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

Transitions are difficult for all of us, but for children and youth with emotional and behavioral challenges, transitions are often both more difficult and more frequent than for their peers. Even “normal,” age-defined transitions such as the transition to kindergarten or the transition to independent living are often extremely difficult for children and youth with emotional and behavioral challenges, and for their families or other caregivers. Transitions—accompanied by the disruption of routine and the need to interact with unfamiliar people—are precisely the types of situations that are often most unsettling and stressful for these children.

Due to their unique needs, children and youth with emotional or behavioral challenges are also disproportionately likely to face transitions which are neither planned nor desired by their families or themselves: a parent may be asked to withdraw her child from a daycare or preschool, one teenager may be transferred from a mainstream classroom to an alternative school, while another is treated on an inpatient basis at a psychiatric hospital, and yet another enters residential care. One child may be placed in foster care, while another becomes involved with the juvenile justice system and ends up in a long-term correctional facility. Even when the child and family are not in crisis and things are going smoothly, discontinuity is often the norm: programs and funding come and go, therapists retire, caseworkers return to school, insurance coverage changes, and laws and policies are continually revamped.

This issue of *Focal Point* presents a variety of voices—the voices of young people and their family members, as well as the voices of researchers and service providers—discussing the topic of transition. The unfortunate refrain, from a variety of voices describing a variety of transitions, is that transitions for children and youth with emotional and behavioral challenges are frequently chaotic, painful times when the children and their families suffer and struggle. What is more, the research described and cited in the articles reaffirms that

despite the best efforts of families and children, transitions all too often end up with results that can only be considered unsuccessful.

But there is also a more hopeful message that emerges from the articles in this issue: we continue to learn about how to make transitions more successful. Encouraging models for transition are emerging around the country, making it possible to envision successful transition as the norm rather than the exception for children with emotional and behavioral challenges. What is also encouraging is that successful transition programs and experiences tend to rest at least in part on a shared set of basic features, regardless of whether the transition is from a correctional facility to the community, from residential treatment to home, or from high school to work or further education. The articles reveal that, across these settings, successful transitions are facilitated when treatment planning, services, and supports:

- build in and build on what remains stable in the child’s life, particularly family relationships and relationships with others who are providing ongoing support;
- are individualized and family and child-driven, taking into account the unique situations and the particular capacities, needs, cultural values and goals of children, their families, and their communities;
- capitalize on and enhance the strengths of the child and maintain activities, program involvement, and other supports which have worked in the past;
- anticipate and prepare for transition well in advance and maintain transition supports past the actual point when a setting or situation changes; and
- are coordinated, while also managing and sharing information in a way that is both efficient and respectful to the child and family.

Furthermore, a number of the articles point out that much of the trauma associated with transition can be eliminated when transitions are made less frequent or when they are avoided all together. If staff at a preschool can be supported to maintain a challenging child in their program, that child may not have to face the transition to a new setting until kindergarten. Similarly, if a child and family can be supported with community services and respite, the difficult transitions to residential care and back home may be completely avoided.

Implementing transition programs and plans based on the attributes listed above is of course difficult to do well. Furthermore, each transition plan or program has

to fill in the specifics behind these generalities in ways which creatively address the challenges surrounding a given type of transition. The articles in this issue provide this level of detail, and offer descriptions of programs and experiences which demonstrate that the elements on this “wish list” of transition attributes can indeed be made real in ways that positively impact the lives of children and youth with emotional and behavioral challenges, and their families, supporters and allies.

Janet S. Walker, Ph.D., is Associate Director for the Research and Training Center and Editor of Focal Point.