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Information Sheet 20



Bridging the Gap: Transitions in School Life

By Louise Whelan, Family Counsellor

The beginning of a child's school life is a point in time that everyone would recognise as a significant transition period.

Parents have usually put a great deal of thought into deciding whether their child is ready to start "big school" and hopefully the child will have had time and opportunities to prepare himself or herself mentally for school.

Feelings of anxiety and apprehension about moving out of the small and familiar world of family jostle with feelings of excitement and curiosity about stepping into a new and bigger world of school and peers.

Many children will have had the experience of Rebecca who, approaching the gates of school on the first day, confided in her mum, "I have a sort of horrible, excited feeling".

Rebecca was talking about how it feels when approaching the unknown.

The unknown in a child's mind (indeed in an adult's mind) can be a frightening 'space' because in a new situation one's sense of self can suddenly feel quite fragile. This space or gap needs a bridge or something to hold on to that reminds us of who we are and how to find our feet or sense of confidence.

Rebecca found that words were her bridge over the gap.

By putting her feelings into words, she was able to communicate a rather complicated set of mixed emotions to her mum who could respond with empathy, supporting her in a potentially fragile moment.

Children arriving at a new classroom full of strangers often find ways to build themselves a bridge over the gap of the unknown that faces them.

One child might scan the classroom looking for children he or she knows from day care or preschool, while another might seek out familiar toys such as Lego.

By making these links back to the familiar world they have left behind, children can make their first step into their 'new world' with confidence. It is as if they are saying "well I do know something about what school's going to be like after all".

If a gap is not bridged in this way, it can feel more like a dangerous crevasse.

Some may share the experience of Mark. Mark arrived at his new school rigid with terror, unable to play or be curious about any of the other children or even move from the teacher's lap. All morning he held a pen that he brought from home in a vice-like grip.

He did not use it as a pen. It seemed to give him the feeling that he needed to hold himself together very tightly inside in the face of a frightening situation.

At recess, he discovered his brother in the playground, running to him. Soon after, Mark showed the first signs of spontaneous interest and enjoyment in school life. Interestingly the pen was also put down, not needed anymore as a vital link to home.

Long after the 'crisis-like' beginnings experienced by some children, we still see signs that children struggle to step from the world of home to the world of school, needing a bridge between the two to make it manageable.

How many parents have experienced their child deciding to rush back into the house to find a toy to take to school at the last minute before stepping out the door or into the car?

This might lead to a heated exchange over the toy, without understanding that this moment of separation, an ordinary and everyday occurrence, has temporarily stirred a moment once again of feeling unsure about leaving the family world (and mum or dad) behind for the day. The toy is a link with home, as a reminder perhaps of someone at home.

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We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

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- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

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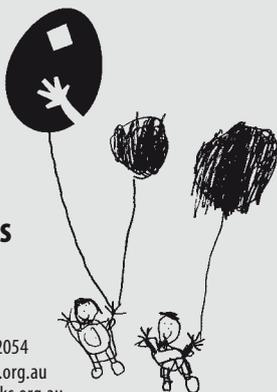
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Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

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At the other end of the day, parents often find that their child has trouble, especially in the infants' years, in communicating what their school day has been like.

They might get something like "I don't know", "nothing" or "I can't remember" when asked, "how did the day go?"

Tiredness aside, it is as though the child feels that the two worlds – home and school – are too different to try to bring together in their mind. As a child gets older his or her sense of self feels solid enough to straddle these two worlds and they are not seen as separate from each other. This makes the transition more manageable from a psychological point of view.

Sometimes it is hard to see 'from the outside' why a crisis might arise. This is because human development proceeds not only according to external, chronological time, but also according to an inner emotional timetable.

This inner sense of time, a sense of being psychologically ready (or not ready) for further independence can influence the way a child perceives important transition times.

One Year 6 girl, for example, who had become very anxious about leaving primary school and going to high school, said "I just need more time".

From the outside, academically and intellectually she looked ready, but on the inside her feelings told her that she did not have a strong enough sense of self to leave the safe and familiar world of her primary school environment. The external clock did not match up to her inner clock.

We may have experienced or heard of a similar situation to another child, Sarah, who had settled into school well and was in Year 2.

Suddenly Sarah began to find it difficult to leave her mother in the mornings, crying and clinging. For her mother, these separation difficulties came out of the blue.

Sarah's mother, like many others, began to enjoy the breathing space that comes when a child is settled into school. She also had a toddler and was enjoying the quieter days with only one child at home.

On reflection, Sarah's mother realised that it was only now, in Year 2, that it had dawned on Sarah that so many of her days would be spent at school while her little sister's days would be spent at home with mum.

Sarah was not jealous but rather finally and very intensely feeling the loss of a closeness and intimacy with her mother and perhaps also realising that particular time would never come again. She had made the transition to being a schoolgirl without quite realising all the emotional implications at the time.

There is no other place quite like school with its regular rhythms of year beginnings and year endings, to make children aware perhaps for the first time that "time marches on". This awareness of time is quite different than for the preschool child.

With the end of an era so clearly arrived for the child who now goes to school, many feelings about life and change are poignantly and sometimes profoundly expressed.

The idea of the end of life, for example, is often thought about in a new way. The death of parents, grandparents or pets may have new meaning and greater reality in the mind of a child who now sees that things in life eventually come to an end.

A child who has older siblings or another who sees bigger children in the playground is often reminded of what is ahead.

A Year 2 child looking ahead to being a primary school child often has mixed feelings – on the one hand looking forward to being that much closer to the "top of the pile", while on the other, knowing that so much more will be expected of them. They may look back in a nostalgic way to kindergarten where acknowledgement of their 'little-ness' was part and parcel of the way their teacher knew them.

A child in Year 2 will by now be aware of some of the strengths and limitations of their capacity to learn and work. They may not know whether their achievements will be good enough to get them through the next challenges in primary school.

An older child in Year 5 is very much aware that important times are ahead of them and this intensifies in Year 6.

Schools may consider doing more to give children at this upper primary age some opportunities to talk about transitions, reflecting on their fears and hopes as the end of an era comes into view.

For the child entering high school, many of the memories of starting school will be re-activated – memories of being the smallest, getting to know new surroundings and new faces.

It may come as a shock that alongside feelings of being ready to move away from the primary school world, there may be feelings of reluctance, or even a feeling of dread and apprehension.

It is important for adults to recognise that transitions in a child's life always involve mixed feelings and that space needs to be found where children are encouraged to express their whole range of feelings, even if some appear contradictory.

A child is often helped more by sharing their experience with someone who knows how confusing it is to have a mixture of feelings, than being reassured or told to 'look on the bright side'.

One girl, Penny, who did not feel she could express her mixed feelings about independence and growing up to her family began to have "growing pains" instead, as if her body was doing the talking for her. Her fears needed to be put into words before her physical symptoms disappeared.

Adolescence is always a vivid example of the difficulty of living in or between two worlds.

As parents and teachers know, teenagers insist one day on being granted the greater freedoms of the adult world, while on the next they want adults thinking, remembering and organising for them as if they were much younger children. Teenagers seem to inhabit this transitional world for a very long time and parents often realise they are living with not one personality, but several!

Teenagers face a very large gap of inexperience about the adult world and their place in it and naturally enough this stirs anxiety.

Some may feel that they can bridge the gap of uncertainty in their minds by a kind of "psychological leap", becoming very grown-up, very fast. Their behaviour shows they feel that they can bypass the pains of growing up, leaping over adolescence instead of struggling through it and learning about themselves on the way.

All the obvious transitions of adult life – leaving home, starting a new job or relationship, having a family, making major life changes – challenge us to let go of something old, familiar and safe to expand our lives in new directions.

The store of inner confidence that we hopefully feel when facing change is accumulated throughout childhood by being with adults who can think about a child's inner world and help them "bridge the gap".

We are used to thinking of development and growth in childhood as being a linear process, always in one direction – onward and upward.

The physical evidence of the growing up process is very clear. As we all get bigger and in the intellectual or cognitive area, generally, we expect to become more able as we grow older.

We see plenty of evidence that children are continually looking forward to the future, to being one year older with new privileges attached to their new status and indeed to being grown up.

What is often not so clear for us are the times when our children have mixed feelings about growing up. It can be even more difficult to see when our children don't have the words to communicate their true feelings.

One girl who did have the words to express her mixed feelings about leaving primary school said "I just need more time".

She did not mean that she was unprepared academically. She meant she did not feel ready to leave the feelings of security and familiarity behind her in making that step into the new and unfamiliar world of being a high school student.

We need to be aware that in making any new step forward, we consent to leaving something of our old selves behind, and generally, what we leave behind is a sense of the world being predictable and our place in it being known and familiar.

How many children will occasionally during challenging times at school, look back rather wistfully to an earlier time (perhaps when they were in kindergarten) where there was much less pressure and less expected of them?

"I wish I was in Miss B's class again" is a way of saying "I still feel little at times inside myself and need support".

The simple fact of understanding a child's mixed feelings about "ever onward and upward" and sharing that understanding together, is usually sufficient for a child to feel they can gather themselves together and bravely take the next step forward.

Perhaps it's more realistic to expect "two steps forward, one step back" in a child's emotional development.

The moments when a child gathers himself or herself together, assesses their external support (family, teachers, friends, etc) and gathers their internal resources are crucial transitions in a child's emotional development. Life is full of them.



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