

Preface

The assertion that early experience affects later experience represents a triumvirate of theory, research, and conventional wisdom. A basic tenet in the study of human development theory is that the early childhood years leave an indelible imprint across the lifespan. Likewise, research in neuroscience suggests that the brain seeks patterns in complexity, drawing upon previous experience to interpret subsequent experiences (Jensen 2005; Rushton and Larkin 2001). Even from the perspective of the general public, the conviction that initial experience shapes later experience is widely accepted and reflected in everyday expressions such as “starting out right,” “getting a head start,” or the old adage that “first impressions are lasting ones.” For all of these reasons, most parents/families, early childhood educators, and professionals from other fields are in agreement that children’s first experiences with child care, preschool, kindergarten, and other academic programs are important (Einarsdottir et al. 2008).

Some of the more common transitions that characterize the early years are from home care to group care, from home or preschool to kindergarten, and from kindergarten to more formal educational experiences. In addition to these fairly predictable transitions, individual children often are expected to make an extra effort of adaptation to many other circumstances, such as adjusting to a different cultural context, coping with changes in family configuration, or learning in a second language—to name just a few. Thus, transitions can be one of the most challenging issues for children, families, and educators because they frequently involve not just one change, but complex interactions among various changes. The child who cries on the first day of kindergarten also might be one who witnessed violence in his family, fears his mother will abandon him as his father did, lives at a shelter, grieves for the dog he was forced to surrender, and worries about expectations for him at school. In fact, researchers estimate that 48% of children experience moderate to serious problems with adjustment to kindergarten (Pianta et al. 2007). Other studies, including the recommendations of the National Governor’s Task Force on School Readiness (2005), research on parents’/families’ involvement in children’s transitions (McIntyre et al. 2007), teachers’ evaluations of young children’s adjustment issues (Rimm-Kaufmann et al. 2000), and cross-cultural comparisons of transition

practices all concur that transitions are not necessarily managed well when they very much need to be.

In this volume of the *Educating the Young Child* Series, we have gathered together the insights of a group of distinguished teachers/scholars on transition practices throughout the world. The book's primary purpose is to support early childhood educators as they strive to make transitions as seamless as possible. The ways in which such stressors are handled are etched into the child's memory and often have lifelong significance for ways of coping. Consider, for example, the situation of three-year-old Laura. She could not contain her disappointment when her sister, cousins, and friends boarded the big yellow school bus in late August and left her behind. Laura yearned to join their ranks and flatly refused to accept the explanation of "you're too little to go." Those "big kids" had backpacks and lunchboxes, library books and homework; they carried home tales about school that surprised and fascinated her. When Laura's aunt came to visit, she was well aware of the child's eagerness to attend school so she presented the three-year-old with a toy school bus loaded with chubby passengers and a plastic lunchbox that included containers for food and drink. These items led to hours of play about being at school, riding the bus, eating in the cafeteria, and the good/bad behavior of children. Laura would line up her stuffed toys to represent a group of students, scribble on the board, give them assignments, reprimand their misbehavior, and pretend to read them a book. Whenever possible, she would draw her extended family into the play, and new dramatic possibilities would be added to the school theme, such as being sent to the principal's office, having a mean teacher, or getting sick and needing to come home. This "going to school" theme dominated Laura's play for two years, an indicator of the personal relevance that transitions have for the very young.

Three points serve as preparation for readers as they explore these distinguished authors' perspectives on transitions during the early years of life. First, to consider the child's point of view; second, that adults often have misconceptions about the kind and amount of support young children need; and finally, that the human costs of poorly managed transitions are considerable.

Perhaps the first lesson adults need to learn is that the child's perspective is qualitatively different from that of grown-ups. The experience of five-year-old Justin underscores this point. He attended a church-affiliated preschool two days a week at ages 3 and 4, and was ready to begin kindergarten at the local public school. Justin's grandparents, who were his primary caregivers, attended an orientation program sponsored by the school district. Justin also had the opportunity to spend the afternoon at his new school prior to beginning. The evening before his first official day of kindergarten, his grandmother laid out the clothing Justin would wear. Together they equipped his backpack with school supplies and packed a special lunch. The next morning, Justin and his grandfather walked to the school a few blocks away and that afternoon, his grandfather accompanied him on the walk back home. Justin's grandparents were relieved to hear that things had gone very well. That evening, as they began preparations for the second day of kindergarten, the preschooler appeared to be puzzled and then said, "You mean I have to do this *every day*?!" As Justin's perspective illustrates, young children often have very different questions

and concerns than the ones adults anticipate. If ever we hope to effectively smooth transitions from one early childhood experience to another, we first need to identify with the child and really listen to what that child has to say.

Of course, adults can have misconceptions about the best way to support a young child's transitions; this is another important point addressed in this volume. Often, these misconceptions are based on what they recall from their own lives as children or spring from a desire to hasten the developmental process. When an international group of parents and their teachers convened for a workshop on helping their child adjust to a new country, language, culture, and school, a father from Germany asked it is best to ignore a crying child. The presenter said that being cold and rejecting, while *seeming* to be a way to put crying to a stop, would actually tend to have the opposite effect if a young child is genuinely distressed. She then stated, "I assume that you now have a warm, caring relationship with your son; otherwise, you would not have attended this session and bothered to ask." The father nodded affirmatively. "Then consider this," the presenter went on, "your son sees his big, strong father acting strangely. He understandably becomes worried, fearful, and clingy—and that is the very thing you had hoped to prevent. What he really needs is to 'borrow' some of your calm and emulate your confidence so that he can learn how to cope with stressful situations." The father appeared to be satisfied with this answer and afterwards, when the teachers were meeting with the presenter over lunch, they expressed their gratitude for explaining the issue in a way that the parents could understand. This is another goal that *Transitions to Early Care and Education: International Perspectives on Making Schools Ready for Young Children* strives to accomplish. The authors demonstrate how early childhood educators can bring all of their compassion, experience, and wisdom to bear on the issue of transitions as they work with families.

When a transition is managed poorly, it ripples out to affect every person in the process. If, for example, a child does not want to go to school and dreads it so much that he or she becomes physically ill before the bus arrives each day, then the family is in crisis, opportunities for that child's learning are diminished, peer relationships are disrupted, and reciprocal trust and respect between the family and school personnel is compromised. Consider the case of six-year-old Chris. His mother decided to keep him out of kindergarten for a year on the advice of family, friends, and neighbors. Chris was, in her words, "a little backward" and spoke with a lisp. When the child attended kindergarten, other children teased him about "talking like a baby" and his teacher would insist that he repeat after her, drawing out the "r" sound in words. One morning Chris arrived at his classroom door where the two kindergarten teachers stood and one of the teachers said derisively, "Here comes Cwis." Then both of them laughed.

When Chris came home that day, he went directly to his room and could not be coaxed into talking. Hours later, he said tearfully, "My teachers made fun of me today at school." The inexcusable behavior of Chris' first teachers formed a lifelong rift between his family and the educational system; they never again viewed the school or district positively because of this one, thoughtless and heartless act. From that point forward, Chris believed that he wasn't good at anything. His teachers were worse than incompetent, they are a disgrace to the profession.

As educators enter the early childhood field, they must, above all, embrace their solemn responsibility to put children first. We need to identify with the very young, advocate for their needs, protect them from harm, support their development, and optimize their learning. As children wend their way through various educational programs, settings, and policies, our role is to offer gentle guidance and support. We have an obligation to make new educational experiences, affirming and welcoming ones; we need to make schools ready for young children.

Mary Renck Jalongo

Transitions to Early Care and Education
International Perspectives on Making Schools Ready for
Young Children

Laverick, D.M.; Renck Jalongo, M. (Eds.)

2011, XVI, 204 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-0572-2