



Sarah Merrill and Donna R. Britt

## Helping Babies Make Transitions

**KEISHA IS IN TURMOIL.** Last week she was the assistant teacher of young 3s. Unexpectedly, she is now a teacher in an infant classroom, caring for four babies ranging in age from 6 weeks to 12 months. Keisha knows she has the skills and abilities to work with babies, but she does not know the children or their routines. She is scared. She is not sleeping; her stomach has been upset. If only there had been time to follow the center's transition plan, maybe she would not be so anxious. At least she can talk to her family, the director, and other staff about her feelings.

But the infants in Keisha's classroom are coping with a transition too. Unlike Keisha, they can't use words to explain their feelings of uncertainty, frustration, loss, and fear.

"Transitions are about change, a passage from one experience, stage, or activity to another" (Early Head Start National Resource Center 2004, 2). Keisha is going from one position to another. She is able to voice her feelings of concern and associate them to her physical ailments.

But 6-month old Jiymeon doesn't understand what happened to Tabitha, who had been taking care of her since she was 8 weeks old. It isn't that Keisha is doing anything wrong; she just doesn't hold Jiymeon the same way, nor does she talk to her, feed her, play with her, or change her diapers the same way. She doesn't even smell the same! So, Jiymeon expresses her frustration and fears in the only way she knows how: she cries, fusses, and clings to her family members when they drop her off.

### Observe, Ask, and Respond—Three steps to helping babies with transitions

Some of the transitions that occur during the infant and toddler years are due to internal forces, such as physical development. Think about how rapidly a newborn grows from a helpless baby to one who can roll, sit, and crawl. Then the crawler becomes a very mobile toddler, walking and climbing. Other transitions occur due to outside forces—changes in caregivers and teachers, in routines such as arrival and departure, in foods and feeding practices, in temperature and lighting, in room arrangements, in the toys that are available for play, and in the responses of adults to infant and toddler behaviors.

Because adults expect many of these changes, early childhood programs prepare transition plans. These plans help staff and families facilitate smooth, positive transitions for infants and toddlers. But even with written transition plans in place, unexpected things happen. With Tabitha gone, Keisha has to work even harder to help the infants and toddlers and their families feel safe and secure. During this stressful time, Keisha can use a three-step process—Observe, Ask, and Respond (OAR)—to help Jiymeon and the other infants in her care adjust positively to this unexpected change.

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**Sarah Merrill, MS,** is a training specialist for the Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHSNRC) at ZERO TO THREE in Washington, D.C. Sarah has 14 years of experience as an infant/toddler teacher and was a National Head Start Fellow, focusing on Early Head Start, in 2000–2001. [smerrill@zerotothree.org](mailto:smerrill@zerotothree.org)

**Donna R. Britt, EdD,** is a distance learning/senior training specialist for the Early Head Start National Resource Center. Donna develops online lessons for the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center Web site and conducts face-to-face training for EHSNRC. [dbritt@zerotothree.org](mailto:dbritt@zerotothree.org)

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## Observe

The first step in the three-step strategy is to observe all the children and their families' behaviors, moods, arrival and departure schedules, and practices. Here are some tips for observing from the Early Head Start National Resource Center (2006):

- Record what you see. You have many things going on during the day. Write down children's actions and their reactions to the environment. For example, note if a baby hits at you when you greet the parent and child; if a child sits with her back to the group, examining a car; or if a child clings to your leg and cries if you move. Then you'll have notes to go back to over time.
- Be objective. Don't assign meaning to what you see; record only what is actually happening without offering interpretation.
- Use all of your senses. Infants and toddlers respond to what they see, smell, taste, touch, and feel. What do you notice with your eyes, ears, nose, and skin?
- Note your own responses. How are you feeling? This can give you clues to how a child is feeling. Think about Jiymeon's reactions. Perhaps she is responding to Keisha's feelings of frustration and uncertainty as well as her own.
- Watch again and again. Do as many observations as possible over time. Watching a child once gives you a snapshot. To get a complete picture, you need to watch again and again. Each time you watch, you will learn something new!

## Ask

The second step of OAR is to ask questions. While you're observing, questions will probably come to mind that you need to ask yourself and others. It is important that you include all of the caring adults when asking questions. Each adult sees a vital aspect of the child's world. Looking at all the pieces helps put the puzzle together.

Sometimes asking questions of others can be a bit awkward. It may seem like you are questioning their abilities instead of trying to understand the child's view. Beginning questions with "I wonder" is a great way to ask without appearing judgmental (Parlakian 2001). Posing such questions allows all the adults to think about the child's emotional well-being and offers them an opportunity to include additional information in their answers. Some of the "I wonder" questions Keisha might ask the children's families and her co-workers are

- I wonder how [*baby's name*] usually reacts around strangers.
- I wonder if [*baby's name*] has a special blanket or toy here that provides comfort.
- I wonder if [*baby's name*]'s family told Tabitha about any special ways they use to hold, feed, diaper, and care for [*baby's name*].
- I wonder if any of [*baby's name*]'s behaviors were occurring before I came into the classroom.

## Respond

Your observations and "I wonder" questions will provide you with information that you can use to respond respectfully and sensitively to each child during a transition. For Keisha and the babies in her care, some responses might include

- Encourage family members to stay an extra few minutes to allow the child to settle in.

- Set up the environments so that there are toys and experiences of special interest available as soon as children enter the room.
- Encourage family members to bring in a special toy or blanket that the child uses for comfort.
- Accept the child's feelings and proceed at his or her pace.

Follow these routines as best you can until you have developed a positive relationship with each child.

It is important for adults to recognize that even infants and toddlers react to the smallest changes in their lives. Caregivers are responsible for identifying those changes and providing sensitive, responsive, transitions that respect children's individual abilities to cope. We can do this by using a transition plan and by implementing the three-step process of observe, ask, and respond.

### THINK ABOUT IT

- Think about the definition of transition stated on page 1. How have you helped the infants and toddlers in your care deal with change?
- How would you use OAR to help you develop a transition plan if you don't already have one?

### TRY IT

- Try one of the strategies of observing.
- Wonder with parents or staff.
- Use one of the listed responses the next time a child in your care is going through changes.

### References

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- Early Head Start National Resource Center. 2006. Lesson 1: Watch. Part of digging deeper: Looking beyond behavior to discover meaning. Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) Web site On-line lessons. [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/eclkc/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/eclkc/index.html). Select "Areas of Interest" in the Main Menu; go to Professional Development and select On-line Lessons.
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### Recommended Resources

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