Welcome Children and Families to Your Classroom

When children join a new class, they may be nervous and unsure about what to expect. Families want to know if they will be welcome and if the teachers will value their suggestions and appreciate their child. Use these tips to help ease transitions year-round and to get a new year off to a great start.

1 Start with a clean, well-organized room. Dust the shelves and wipe sticky surfaces. Make sure curtains are laundered and floors and carpets are freshly cleaned. Eliminate clutter by storing extra papers, supplies, and other items in cabinets.

2 Decorate the walls. A few pieces of carefully selected artwork and a splash of color can do wonders for the classroom. Such simple decorations will invite the children in without overwhelming them with too much to look at. You will also be showing the family that the classroom is a child-friendly place.

3 Have cubbies, labels, class lists, and name tags ready. This may seem obvious, but being prepared tells children and families, “We are happy to see you.” A labeled cubby shows a child where to safely stow belongings. Parents will feel their child is welcome when they see his or her name already entered on the class sign-in sheet.

4 Create a new year bulletin board. Post photos and fun facts about the teachers: “Ms. Jeanie has two iguanas at home.” Add a calendar, menus, and information about classroom activities planned for the next month. Post messages from other families so the new parents will know their child will grow and learn in a safe and supportive setting.

5 Display photos of the children and their families. If possible, take photos during an open house or home visits before the first day of school. Or ask families to share some of their own family photos. Post photos on cubbies and at children’s eye level throughout the room. When children see the photos, they can feel connected to their families during the day.

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Learn families’ names before the first day. It can be a challenge to memorize the names of all new family members and how they prefer to be addressed. However, it creates a welcoming atmosphere when teachers can greet everyone by name and title: “Good morning, Ms. Thompson and Justine. Welcome to the Butterflies.”

Offer warm greetings. Smile while introducing yourself and your colleagues by name. Not only are smiles contagious, but a warm face and voice help children feel safe and show the family that their child’s teachers are caring individuals.

Set up learning centers and tables with a few engaging toys and materials. Families can spend some time playing with their children as everyone becomes familiar with teachers, classmates, and the room.

Create a welcome area. Put out a small journal or set up a whiteboard or an easel with paper so current families can write messages to welcome newcomers. The new families can introduce themselves and their children. Add a welcome sign and other decorations that show this is a special day. Include welcome or hello in the languages of all the families in your program.

Identify volunteer family ambassadors. Invite current family members to serve in this role when there is a new family or at the beginning of the year when several new children will join the class.

Follow each child’s individual schedule for feeling comfortable. Be as flexible as possible during the first few weeks so new children—and their families—can follow their own pace for getting to know the room, the routines, the teachers, and their classmates. Acknowledge children’s strong feelings about being apart from their families or their former teachers. You will be taking the first step toward building relationships based on trust.

For more resources on welcoming children and families to your program, go to tyc.naeyc.org/articles/programCollection.asp.

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

With all the adjustments that families have to make when they are new to our country, a warm welcome at school or child care is certainly appreciated. It is important to identify the languages of the families entering your program as soon as possible so you can gather appropriate books and materials and locate volunteers to help with translations right from the start. Names are an important part of each child’s identity; learn to pronounce each child’s name the way his or her family says it.