

Supporting children through change and transitions

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Transitions and change are part of primary school life, but there are lots of little things we can do to support children who might be anxious or worried. Dr Pooky Knightsmith offers her ideas

Child cribsheets: A simple tool which takes minutes to create and compiles useful information to help school staff support a pupil through a period of change - *Adobe Stock*

Transitions can stir up a whirlwind of emotions for children. Moving from one educational phase to another often brings excitement and anticipation, but it can also trigger anxiety, uncertainty, and even a sense of loss as familiar routines and faces are left behind.

It is essential to recognise that these mixed feelings are natural. Supporting children through this emotional rollercoaster is just as important as preparing them academically.

When we discuss transition, we naturally think about arrival in school or indeed year 6 to 7 – but the ideas below will also support change and transitions throughout a child's primary education.

So, here are some practical strategies to help your pupils navigate the ups and downs of change – ensuring they feel secure, resilient, and ready for what's ahead.

Preparing children for change

Building resilience and giving children a clear picture of what to expect helps lessen anxiety and gives them a sense of control during transition. When children know what lies ahead, they are more likely to embrace the change and adapt more quickly. Try these practical ideas:

- **Story-telling sessions:** Share stories that mirror the transition experience, allowing children to identify with characters who overcome similar challenges.
- **Visual road-maps:** Create simple, colourful charts that outline the journey from one phase to the next, highlighting key milestones. These work brilliantly on classroom displays where children can refer to them regularly.
- **Personalised transition journals:** Give children a simple notebook where they can record thoughts and feelings throughout the transition process. These can be revisited later to reflect on how far they have come.

Parental communication and involvement

Parents are crucial allies in supporting successful transitions. Engaging them helps reinforce the support provided at school and ensures children receive consistent reassurance both at home and in

the classroom. Clear, regular communication creates a collaborative atmosphere where everyone works towards the child's best interests. Try these practical ideas:

- **Parent workshops:** Host informal coffee mornings where parents can learn strategies to manage their child's anxiety and understand the new environment. Keep these relaxed and conversational rather than formal presentations.
- **Online support forums:** Set up a simple WhatsApp group or closed social media group where parents can share experiences, ask questions and exchange ideas. This works especially well for busy parents who cannot always make it into school.
- **Individualised transition meetings:** Arrange brief 10-minute chats with parents to discuss any specific concerns about their child, ensuring tailored support is in place. These don't need to be formal affairs – a quick catch-up at pick-up time can work wonders.

Quick child cribsheet

This simple tool takes just minutes to create and can be easily shared via email or uploaded to your school's learning platform. Include:

- **What sparks joy?** Topics, activities or subjects that consistently brighten the child's day – this helps the new teacher create an immediate connection.
- **Comfort strategies:** What helps the child calm down when struggling – perhaps a quiet reading corner, a calming colouring activity, or a chat with a familiar teaching assistant.
- **Triggers to avoid:** Situations that might upset the child – knowing what to avoid prevents accidental distress.
- **Key interests:** Hobbies or passions – these serve as brilliant conversation starters, helping build rapport quickly.
- **Communication preferences:** Whether they respond better to one-to-one chats, written notes, or visual cues – this ensures comfortable, effective interactions.

This streamlined approach ensures that even the children who are harder to reach receive consistent, empathetic support during transitions.

Establishing positive associations through visits

If the change involves moving classrooms or indeed schools then transition visits should be more than just a quick “show-around”. Multiple, extended visits allow children to become genuinely familiar with their new environment at a pace that helps anxiety begin to fade. Spending proper time in the new setting enables children to learn the layout, meet staff and peers, and develop a sense of belonging well before the first official day. Try these practical ideas:

- **Extended pre-visit days:** Organise several visits rather than a single tour. Depending on the transition point in question, allow small groups of children plenty of time to explore key areas – such as the library, dinner hall, and playground – in a relaxed manner.
- **Buddy systems:** Pair incoming pupils with older children who can accompany them on these visits. This provides both practical guidance and helps foster a friendly atmosphere where the new environment feels less daunting.
- **Interactive scavenger hunts:** Create fun hunts that encourage children to explore the school's layout. This makes discovering new spaces memorable and helps build a lasting connection with the school.

Peer support and social integration

Establishing positive relationships with fellow pupils can ease the stress of adapting to a new environment and fosters a sense of belonging. When children feel socially connected, they are more likely to feel supported and confident. Try these practical ideas:

- **Small group activities:** Organise ice-breaker games during the first days, encouraging interaction in a low-pressure, fun setting. Simple activities like “Find someone who...” bingo work brilliantly.
- **Peer mentoring:** Create a system where older pupils volunteer to help their younger peers adjust. This could be as simple as playground buddies who help children find someone to play with at break times.
- **Social clubs:** Encourage engagement in lunchtime clubs centred on common interests, which can help children connect with like-minded peers outside the classroom setting.
- **Celebration of diversity events:** Host simple events that celebrate the unique backgrounds and talents of all pupils, promoting inclusivity and fostering new friendships.

Continuous evaluation and adaptation

As transitions are inherently dynamic, it is vital to continuously monitor and evaluate the strategies in place. On-going feedback from both children and staff can help identify what is working well and where improvements are needed.

A flexible approach allows you to adapt practices to suit the evolving needs of your pupils, ensuring that support remains effective throughout the process. By regularly reviewing transition programmes and maintaining open channels of communication with all stakeholders, schools can create a resilient and responsive environment.

Final thoughts

Remember, supporting transitions is not one-size-fits-all. Strategies that work brilliantly for one child might need tweaking for another. Trust your professional instincts, be ready to adapt, and keep empathy and compassion at the heart of everything you do. Your understanding and support during these times of change make all the difference to the children in your care.

- ***Dr Pooky Knightsmith is a passionate ambassador for mental health, wellbeing and PSHE. Her work is backed up both by a PhD in child and adolescent mental health and her own lived experience of PTSD, anorexia, self-harm, anxiety and depression. Visit www.pookyknightsmith.com. Find her previous articles and podcast appearances for Headteacher Update via www.headteacher-update.com/authors/dr-pooky-knightsmit***