

Copyright © Exchange Press, Inc.
All rights reserved. A single copy of these materials may be
reprinted for noncommercial personal use only.
Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com or
call (800) 221-2864.

Lean on Me: Helping Children and Families through Disruptive Change

by Jane Humphries and Kari Rains

Many programs are dealing with change in the lives of the young children in their care. This change is disruptive to a child's emotional competence and can create stress for early childhood program directors and teachers. What is most important for programs to recognize is that these children are experiencing major disruptions in their care by the primary adults outside of the early childhood program. Children are often caught in the chaos of changing living situations, caregiver entry into or exit from their lives, and financial strain. This article focuses on change in the lives of three children in one early childhood program.

Initially, the program director and teachers realized that the consistent and caring early childhood program offered the most stable environment in these children's lives. The flood of emotions displayed by each child required a sensitive and knowledgeable adult within the classroom to provide support for healthy social and emotional expression.

Communication with each one of the families was paramount. While sometimes difficult and uncomfortable, beginning conversations with the focus on the child was this director's strategy. Both the director and teachers viewed their roles as collaborative. When advocating for the children, each made a commitment to lend support to each other as well as to the children in their care. After these foundational talks, the director turned her attention to the three-year-old classroom where twins were struggling with their parents' divorce.

Taylor and Tate began acting out during routine activities in the classroom. Drop-off, pick-up, and circle times were occasions for extreme negative behavior: biting and difficulty participating in activities. At mealtimes they grabbed other children's food, pushed chairs over, and yelled. To complicate matters, the teachers in the classroom felt caught in the middle of the twins' parents. The situation was becoming too much for the staff to deal with, and other parents were beginning to complain about the twins' behaviors.

At times like this the director's professional influence and role is key. Initial steps included the director calling each parent separately to acknowledge the difficulty the teachers were having with communication, as well as the children's emotional outbursts. The director communicated to both parents that a meeting—either together or separate—was crucial for addressing the needs of the children. By keeping the focus on the children's needs, the director was able to schedule both parents for the same meeting place and time. Care for the children was arranged and provided by a teacher assistant. The meeting agenda was set to include establishing expectations for communication and boundaries between the parents and with staff, as well as sharing strategies to help the twins manage their strong emotions.

On the day of the meeting, Tate and Taylor's parents met with their teacher and the director; it was agreed that:

- a spiral-bound journal would be kept in the classroom to foster communication between the parents and all involved in the care of the children.
- the director would put all financial information related to the children's account in two separate envelopes; that way everyone had equal access to information and this limited the tense communications felt by the teachers and director.
- a picture schedule placed in each child's cubby along with a photo book with pictures of their mom, dad, and other family members would help facilitate the twins'



Jane Humphries and Kari Rains are with an Oklahoma based company called Creative Educational Strategies & Services. They are dedicated to providing educators, administrators, parents, and other caregivers with the information and research that supports best practices when working with children and adults, especially those who struggle in the areas of social and emotional development. To read more about their innovative products, ideas and services go to www.fiddlefocus.com.

movement between the parents' homes. The picture schedule showed the classroom routine and activities as well as the routine at home. The parents would add or change pictures of where the twins would be in the evening and what they would be doing. These visual cues helped clarify expectations for the twins.

- The children would be given special assistance during difficult times: circle time, transition, and nap.
 - Each would be given small items such as a squishy ball, Busy Hands™ (see Resources), or other objects during times of upset or distress to help calm and facilitate emotional regulation. The items were small enough for the children to carry with them and use when they felt overwhelmed or were seeking out sensory stimulation. The objects also helped when the group needed to transition. The teachers noticed that when Tate had access to items with different textures he rubbed these against his face, which helped him calm and regulate his emotions during nap time. The director and teachers allowed Taylor and Tate to take their items home with them. Over time it was found to be a great transitional object and support that helped with consistency in addressing behavior across all environments.
 - Naptime for Tate included moving him to a more open space in the classroom away from other children and allowing him to manipulate his small object until he drifted off to sleep.
- To combat his angry yelling, Tate would be encouraged to yell into the "Mad Jar" that his teachers made, with his help. The jar was placed in his cubby and could be easily accessed when he needed to 'get his mad out.' After a couple of times being coached on how to use the "Mad Jar" by his teachers, Tate took full advantage of the strategy. Initially he used it a lot, but over time his use tapered off as he began to regulate his emotions on his own.
- The parents would implement a "Mad Jar" at both parents' homes when they learned of its effectiveness.

With multiple approaches and strategies in place to assist the twins, the director could turn her attention to an issue in the toddler room with a child who had been at the program for a little over a week.

At 18 months of age, Rashaun's opportunity to live with his aunt came as a major life change. Fortunately, Rashaun's aunt had been involved in his life from a very early age. When the director and teachers observed Rashaun closely in the first few days of his enrollment, he talked about his aunt "Mama" and happily greeted her each day when she picked him up. As the director and teachers began developing a relationship with his aunt, they learned that Rashaun's mother had made an abrupt and traumatic departure from his life. This included the police coming to their home in the night only a few weeks earlier and taking her away in handcuffs by the police, and his being taken into protective custody. The next morning his aunt, who was contacted by child protective services, assumed custody. Within days, she had located the program and enrolled him, as she needed to return to work herself.

While Rashaun seemed to accept the initial enrollment and participation in the early childhood program, within days he began clinging to his aunt at drop-off and crying if he was not held by his teacher throughout the day. The teachers in his classroom, while trying to help Rashaun manage his feelings, were struggling to manage their responsibilities for the classroom. Rashaun required so much attention. Due to the delicacy of this child's situation, the director and teachers wanted to understand more about attachment and trauma, to communicate regularly with his aunt, and to think of ways to provide consistency in his day to help cope with his emotions.

Children in this age group are still developing attachments to caregivers. Attachments can be nurtured during this developmental age by consistent responses to distress, reliable caregivers, and positive peer interactions. For Rashaun, attachment to significant adults had been difficult as a result of the trauma in his life.

In initial conversations, the director and Rashaun's aunt decided:

- his aunt would stay for a few more minutes at drop-off until he was engaged in activity and transferred into the care of a teacher. This included having Rashaun's aunt bring him to the program at a designated time every morning so that extra staff were on hand to help.
- extra staff would allow Rashaun's teachers to focus on him, by holding him and then helping engage him in a classroom activity. As research has found, touch is essential for children's growth, development, and overall health, as well as the primary means to foster healthy child-caregiver attachment.



- his aunt would bring a picture of him with his aunt and a special object from home (e.g., stuffed bear, blanket) to school. When he longed for her, he could pull out the picture as well as the special toy to allow him to remember his special relationship with his aunt and to be close to something that was special to him throughout the day.
- the teachers would have Rashaun sit in their laps during group times and make efforts to engage him in leadership roles with classroom duties, such as carrying toys for them.

Within a few days, the classroom began to run more smoothly. A coordinated and consistent routine began to emerge. While it was a bumpy first few days, Rashaun recognized the daily routine and he began to initiate his own play and engaged in class activities with his peers. Rashaun's aunt remained consistent with the time she dropped him off and reported that the schedule had helped to settle him down at home. The director and teachers found that while the initial investment of time was great, within a few weeks Rashaun's transition into the program was complete.

When it came time to facilitate his movement into the next classroom, Rashaun was slowly introduced and spent one-on-one time with his new teachers over the course of a month. His aunt was also involved in this transition, visiting the new classroom at drop-off and pick-up while Rashaun was with her. She also talked about his new teachers and friends when she and Rashaun were at home. Overall, the collaborative effort helped Rashaun through a very

difficult time in his life. Developing secure and safe attachments at this age was crucial to his developing a sense of trust; and it was imperative that the early childhood program provide, in conjunction with his aunt, as much consistency in caregiving and routine as possible.

The children described here needed caring support from their teachers and the director. A key element was the communication between the significant adults in these children's lives. In addition, consistent nurturing responses to behavior in the classroom helped ease the children's adjustment and activities were carefully planned to address their needs. Ultimately, the staff within this early childhood program accepted these challenging situations with a high degree of professionalism and commitment to the families and children involved. This included ongoing access to information to increase their personal knowledge and understanding. Their commitment to each child's ability to adjust and build their emotional competence was met with

an informed, coordinated, calm, and nurturing environment — ALL essential ingredients when dealing with significant change in the lives of children.

Resources

- Bruce, N., & Cairone, K. (2011). *Socially strong, emotionally secure: 50 activities to promote resilience in young children*. Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House.
- Hewitt, D. (2012). *So this is normal too?* (2nd edition). St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. (2012). *Challenging behavior in young children understanding, preventing, and responding effectively* (3rd edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Saifer, S. (2003). *The early childhood teacher's manual: Practical solutions to practically every problem*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Sperry, R. (2011). FLIP-IT Transforming Challenging Behavior. Devereux Center for Resilient Children. Retrieved from www.devereux.org/site/DocServer/FLIP_IT_for_NHSA_HANDOUTS_4.1.11_RS__1_.pdf?docID=12721
- Busy Hands™ can be found at www.fiddlefocus.com, a product of Creative Educational Strategies & Services LLC.