

“I Almost Missed It!”

Easing the Stress of Transitions by Studying Children's Competence

by Victoria Porter

We have no outdoor play yard in our program so every day our lively class of preschoolers exits the school, walks down the city block, crosses the street and plays at a public playground. This proves to be challenging with 21 three- to five-year-olds. As a staff we reflected on our schedules and routines and agreed transitions were a high point of stress for both the children and teachers. We wanted to figure out how we could improve our transitions to be as smooth and stress-free as possible. I decided to start by studying our transitions. I wanted to become a master transition artist. I'd take photos, listen to the children and teachers, and then reflect.

To focus my transition study I created a question: What happens when I slow down, learn to be present, and trust the competency of the children? These three stories illustrate my discoveries:



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seeking the richness of a diverse classroom by intentionally enrolling families from the varied socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, religious traditions, gender identities, and cultures represented in the city of San Francisco. She continues to evolve as a reflective teacher and is learning every day from the most honest and effective teachers, the children.

Healing Hands

The cathedral's bell tower strikes at noon, “Dong, dong, dong...” Before the bells finish their resonate song, I'm urging the children to find their partner and follow me, “Let's go! It's almost circle time!”

As I was lost in this frenzy of rushing, something happened that jolted me back to the present moment. A child accidentally tripped and fell, freezing on the ground where she landed. I saw that she was not seriously hurt. I could have held out my hand and sweetly said, “You're okay, stand up please, let's go!” What character and values am I modeling when I say something like this?

Luckily, before I could exhibit my impatience, my co-teacher Solitaire and the other children responded first. They demonstrated that they have their priorities straight. They stopped everything and knelt down beside the fallen

child, placing healing hands tenderly on her body. Despite, or because of, the emotionally sensitive nature of transition time, the children exhibited compassion and loyalty to their friend and classmate. Our director, who was assisting with this transition, captured this touching moment in a photo.

And I almost missed it.

This moment I almost missed perfectly exemplifies the values I want to cultivate in these young children. Ironically, it was the children who were teaching me a lesson on empathy and caring.



Reflecting together about this moment later on in a meeting, our staff realized that empathy and tenderness knows no schedule. How many moments like this are hiding in plain sight throughout the day? Slowing down and being present was opening my eyes to the competency of the children.

I wanted to continue on with my study.

I asked myself: Where else was I overlooking or even interrupting the children's competency? What else would I uncover and discover?

Walking on the Wall

Walking back to school from the park, I often find myself automatically saying, "The wall is not for walking on; we're safe when we walk on the sidewalk."

Today, I decided to pause and reflect. I took a mere moment to ask myself: "Why?" I did a quick benefit/risk analysis. What is beneficial about walking on the wall vs. what are the risks? So there I was, about to reflexively tell the children to keep their feet on the ground. Instead, I took a deep breath and called a meeting with the children.

I told them I noticed they liked to walk on the wall and after some reflection, I've decided to let them. I framed this "yes" as an opportunity, a challenge! We created some safety rules together. Only walking. No pushing. Communicate with the other children if there was a problem. I told them I had high expectations because this was a bit risky. If the safety rules weren't met, then that child would walk on the sidewalk and try again the next day. The children took this challenge very seriously.

What happens when I slow down, learn to be present, and trust the competency of the children? What if instead of saying "No" I say "Yes!"? The children rose to my high expectations. There have been no injuries. No one has fallen. The children have deepened their relationships and I have a newfound understanding of what is possible.

This transition has become one of the smoothest of the day. The children knew the answer to improving this transition all along. They knew the challenge and joy of walking on the wall would ease this transition. All I had to do was open my eyes and mind and let them.

And I almost missed it.

Wake Up Wonderland

It's wake-up time from nap and I hear myself saying the familiar, "It's time to fold your mat and go have a yummy snack."

As usual, the dreamy-eyed child stares back at me. Resistant.

I try a common 'trick.'

"How fast can you clean up your mat? On your mark, get set, go!"

This usually works and can be fun and playful. But I felt dissatisfied with our wake-up transition. We get stuck in our routines and do things just because we have always done it that way. One day I paused and reflected.

We often spend up to a full hour coaxing a child to fall asleep. We go to great lengths: creating a soothing nap environment with a white noise machine, special pillows, stuffed animals and blankets from home, family photos, back rubbing. Feeling safe enough to fall asleep might be the hardest transition of a child's day. It's right up there with separating from her family at drop-off time. After all the effort to get the children to 'let go' and drift off to sleep, why on earth are we rushing them awake?

What would happen if we didn't rush them? My director and co-teachers knew what I was up to by now and were on board with becoming more reflective and sharing in this informal research. They agreed to step back and observe what would happen if we had a 'chill wake-up time.'

Like anthropologists, we took photos and wrote down the children's words. We noticed there was heartwarming social connections and blossoming independence happening all around us.

And we almost missed it!

My co-teachers' responses to our new 'chill wake-up time' were:

"This is heaven."

"I thought we wouldn't have time, but we do!"

"I wish we'd thought of this earlier!"

"How many years have we been rushing them, and why?"

No More Missed Moments

Reflective teaching practice has improved the quality of our program and the well being of both the children and teachers. It definitely transformed the way I think. I used to think there is no time to pause and reflect. Now I know the children will lead us to finding time in each moment of our day. I used to think research is separate from teaching. Now I know teachers have many roles and teacher-researcher is crucial for our intellectual engagement.

This transition study strengthened and deepened the relationships with my co-workers. It increased trust and forced us to take an honest, critical look at our habits of thought and action. We started a system where each teacher brings 1-3 observations to our weekly meetings. We study these photos, videos, audio, and work samples and use our reflections to guide our curriculum. We also project 1-3 photos on the wall each Friday to reflect with the children about their learning.

Studying transitions, an often-overlooked part of our preschool day, opened my eyes to a multitude of opportunities hiding in inopportune times. If I follow the children's lead, learn to be more present, and trust in the children's competency... I see the beauty all around me that I almost missed.