

Keeping Children and Teachers Together (Part 2)

The Good, the Bad, and the Wonderful!

by Kay Albrecht, Linda Dziadul, Carla Gwinn, and Brooke Harrington

Much consideration has been given to teacher turnover and the negative impact turnover can have for children's development. Everyone is aware that too many changes in teachers can be a threat to children's emotional development, particularly if that change takes place in the early years.

Less attention has been given to the impact on teachers of children changing schools and how the teachers face and facilitate such change.

The following stories illustrate that changes in primary teaching groups impact children, their parents, and their teachers and suggest some ways to address these changes with teachers, parents, and young children.

Managing Changes in Primary Teachers

by Carla Gwinn

Teachers leave. It is a reality, part of our experience in the early childhood field. Primary teaching gives us the opportunity to make changes with children in ways that are beneficial to everyone. Here are some of the things we do to manage changes in primary teachers to limit the impact on the child, the family, the teacher, and the school.

Preventing change. The first thing we do is preventive in nature. We have an

initial employment agreement with every teacher. These agreements indicate the commitments that the school is making to the teacher and the teacher is making to the school. It specifies a one-month notice of resignation. Because we implement primary teaching, we must have ample time to find a replacement, complete their orientation, and overlap the new teacher with the departing one.

Although we operate in an employment-at-will state (one that does not enforce employment contracts), writing down our agreement for everyone to consider and commit to makes it clear

that we are serious about primary teaching and continuity of care.

We try to let the departing teacher guide the process of planning and implementing the departure. Experience has taught us that this conversation should be delayed until the plan is thought through and everyone is comfortable with it. The plan considers children, parents, and teachers.

Helping parents say goodbye. The most important part of telling parents about a primary teacher's departure is to share our detailed plan for the transition. Parents need to know BOTH that the teacher is leaving AND that we have a plan for the change. We make sure the lines of communication are open, both with the departing teacher and with the administrators. Program managers make a special effort to be available and to be seen when teacher transitions are in process. This gives parents a chance to ask questions, check on their child's response to the news, and plan their own goodbye rituals. If parents don't come to us, we ask them if they have any questions or concerns.

Helping children say goodbye. We talk with the children about where the teacher is going. For example, if she is going to stay home with a new baby, we talk about her taking care of the baby. We make sure to discuss with the children what is going to happen and who will replace the teacher. We talk a lot about feelings — being sad, missing each other, being mad or angry that the teacher is leaving, being anxious about the new teacher.

We also give the children lots of ways to express their feelings appropriately. We make goodbye books — one for the teacher and one for the classroom library — so children can remember and discuss the experiences they had with the teacher. Then the children and the

teacher together plan (or select) a documentation to leave behind in the classroom to remind the children of their time together with the teacher.

We plan our recruitment strategies to have the new teacher and the departing teacher spend time together and overlap in the classroom. First, teachers share information about each child using portfolios. The new teacher observes and then begins to interact with the children. Slowly the roles change and the departing teacher becomes the observer.

A conference is held with each family — attended by both teachers. This gives parents confidence that the new teacher understands their expectations and concerns — and the uniqueness of their child!

Helping colleagues say goodbye. The departure of a primary teacher is often hardest on the teachers who are left behind. They often feel the same abandonment that the children feel. They are losing a colleague and a friend. We make sure that teachers know why the teacher is leaving. Grapevines are not efficient or accurate ways to share information. All teachers need to know what is happening, why, and what the plan is to navigate the transition. Then the faculty at large can help if a parent expresses concern or needs someone to talk to.

We make sure to validate the dedication of the teachers who are continuing their commitment to their primary group of children and the school. Celebrating tenure anniversaries, sharing documentations or projects at staff meetings, and receiving thank-you notes from supervisors all help teachers feel validated while a transition is getting lots of attention.

Finally, we welcome the new colleague. New teachers bring new ideas and fresh insight. We know that teachers who commit to primary teaching are in for a special, challenging, rewarding, and exciting

experience that will change them forever. We also know that when a teacher leaves our school she takes with her an understanding of primary teaching and how it impacts children, parents, the school, and teachers. This is an astonishingly satisfying way to end one relationship and begin another.

Losing a Child From a Primary Teaching Group: Breaking Up Is Hard to Do!

by Brooke Harrington

Children leave for different reasons. Decisions are made, families move, schools change, or your time with them comes to an end because they have grown up. Saying goodbye is one of the more unpleasant aspects of primary teaching. I spend my days being surrogate mother, friend, and nurse, as well as early childhood teacher. Then the time comes to let one of them go. I have many different reactions to losing a child. I have felt relief when a child moves on to an environment better suited to his or her special needs. I have felt anger towards parents for moving a child (particularly when the move isn't absolutely necessary). Most of the time, I feel sadness at the loss of an intense, special connection that has endured over time.

We all have our own rituals for helping children make healthy transitions from one environment to another. But what about the teacher? Children have a magical way of weaving themselves into your heart; the longer you provide care and early education for a child (as in the case of primary teaching), the tighter that weave becomes. How do we accept the change?

I have become a participant in my class's goodbye rituals. Instead of facilitating, I join in the process of saying goodbye. When the children talk about how they feel about losing a friend (or

show me that they are sad through their behavior), I talk about how I feel. When we make goodbye books with photographs taken throughout the child's tenure in our group, I keep some pictures for myself.

I take advantage of the bond I have forged with the family over our years together. We exchange addresses and phone numbers and commit to keeping our lines of communication open. We set up times of the year to reconnect (birthdays, during the holidays, on Sunday afternoon). This helps keep me up to date on how my kids are doing. As a result, I have more pen pals than anyone I know!

When the time comes to say goodbye, there are still a few tears and lots of hugs and kisses. But I also can't wait to hear about their new friends and experiences. I begin to focus on the new relationship I will build with the child who replaces the departing child in my group. And I continue to talk about feelings. I often remind the children (and therefore myself) that it is okay to miss our friends. It is hard to say goodbye. And then I remind them that it is okay to be excited about the new friends and the new experiences we will have together.

What to Say to Children Who Are Leaving

When Lorrie's parents told her she was leaving our school, she crawled up in my lap and sat very quietly with her head on my shoulder. She said, "I am going to a new school and I will miss you." Then she laid her head back down and sighed. I said: "I will miss you, too. But I will always love you. When you go home at night, I can't see you because you are at your house, but I still love you. When you go to your new school, I won't see you every day, but I will still love you." She said, "I love you, too," and hopped down, ready to continue with her day.

Other things to say to support children who are leaving their friends, teacher, and school:

- There are three ways we can stay in touch — by telephone, letters, and visits. Which one would you like to try first?
- You might be sad and you can use your goodbye book to remember me and your friends. When we are sad and miss you, we will read our goodbye book and think of you.
- I know it is hard to say goodbye.
- I think you might be a little sad about having to leave to go to another school (or town).
- I will always remember you — when I look at your picture, I will remember how much fun we had on our field trip.
- I will always be your friend, and you will meet new friends, too.

Those Bonds Remain Forever

by Linda Dziadul

When a child leaves, it hits you hard. You know something is up when a parent with whom you have a strong relationship suddenly finds it hard to speak with you. Old insecurities surface — did I do something wrong? The child clings to you more and feels more needy (or is that my need for closeness?) Then it comes. “I HAVE SOMETHING TO TELL YOU,” the parent says. The lump rises in my throat and tears start to form. Instinctively, I hold the child closer, looking down at her as she looks up at me with special love. The distant voice says, “We are moving — not just across town but out of state.”

She says they have both known for some time but didn’t want to tell me because they don’t know how they will do without me. Who will they talk to about sleeping through the night, about falling out behavior, about throwing food? They say they want me to visit and to keep in touch.

My first reaction is: “I want to move with you!” But I have other children to consider, and my own life when I’m not at school. After the initial shock, depression, and sadness, I begin the process of saying goodbye. Completing the goodbye book (which chronicles the child’s time at school in a portfolio format) triggers the emotions again. I see how much she has changed, grown. The photographs show that she is developing into a wonderful individual.

She turned over, crawled, sat up, pulled up, and took her first steps with me (sometimes I just couldn’t wait for the parents to discover these new skills so we could celebrate them!). She started to babble, made words, tried new foods, experimented with sensations. She hugged, laughed, cried — at times I had so much fun I didn’t even want to go home! She called me “Mama” in a moment of need — even though she definitely knows the difference! Yes, saying goodbye won’t be easy. These bonds will never be broken. A strong connection will remain — not only to the child but to the family as well.

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D., is the founder and former director of HeartsHome Early Learning Center. HeartsHome joined the Bright Horizons/Family Solutions organization in December 1999. **Linda Dziadul**, BS, has been with her primary group for 17 months. She has five years of teaching experience the old way and never wants to go back! **Carla Gwinn**, BS, is director of HeartsHome. She was a primary teacher at HeartsHome for seven years before assuming the director role. Her longest tenure with the same group of children was almost four years (from two-and-a-half through kindergarten). **Brooke Harrington**, CDA, is an eight-year veteran. She is approaching the end of her second year with the same group of children.