

IDEAS FOR TRAINING STAFF

MARGIE CARTER



## Transitions, Rituals, and Celebrations

As I watch programs continually ride the seasonal waves of enrollment and staffing transitions, I've been wondering what kind of mindset, systems, and traditions could be put in place to make these constant transitions go smoothly? How could the ever-present changes be seen as part of *the curriculum*, rather than a difficult disruption for the program? What kind of training would help staff approach things this way so that they could invent meaningful rituals and celebrations to take them through all the comings and goings in child care programs?

### Give Staff Time to Experience Comforting Rituals

The world today seems to be in constant upheaval with hunger, war, natural disasters, and politicians jockeying for resources and power. Nearly every month new technology is transforming our everyday lives. We are clearly living in a time of permanent white water, unprecedented rapids, and a climate of fear and uncertainty. The specifics of all of these changes are beyond the cognitive experience of very young children, but there is no doubt they feel the essence of anxiety in the adults around them.

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In this context, everyday changes assume larger significance and may be harder to handle. Children and teachers, friends and parents can suddenly disappear. What and who can we count on? Where can we find comfort when things keep shifting and changing all around us?

#### Strategy:

A time for acknowledging how things are

If adults are to offer comfort and offer reassurance to children, we need ways to calm our own fears, and to harvest a sense of new possibilities. Staff meetings cannot be group therapy sessions, for that is beyond the boundaries of our time and expertise. But there are many ways we can genuinely come together to comfort and reassure each other, not with pep talks or a discounting of feelings, but with a naming of how things are and a symbolic ritual that replaces fear with comfort. Each program has to find its own way with this, depending on the composition of the group, dispositions toward change, and the skills of self-reflection and group processing.

Some programs find it helpful to just give staff scrap paper and pens and ask them to privately write what is stressing them or producing anxiety. These can be placed in a basket and taken out of the room and then symbolically replaced by the lighting of candles, the singing of songs, or reading of an uplifting story. Other programs may use a process to have these concerns named out loud as they are given up to the group for transformation.

What's important here is to be simple and authentic, to let the difficult things be named as part of a process of getting power over our anxiety, rather than allowing it to have power over us. Avoid the temptation to jump to talking people out of their feelings or going right into problem solving. Just provide time where a stiff upper lip isn't required. And offer a simple ritual to move from this time to the next, thereby transforming the feelings in the room.

Likewise, be sure to create simple little rituals of celebration for some of your staff meetings. Beyond birthdays and traditional holidays, what kinds of joys and accomplishments really need to be named and held up for genuine celebration?

When regular staff gathering time is devoted to comforting experiences of real human connections like these, you create a program climate for thriving, even as you navigate the rough waters and rapids. This, in turn, gives teachers ideas for what they might want to be doing with the children and their families.

### Identify Transitions That Need Rituals

Early childhood programs are made up of ongoing transitions. New families and staff come and go, the daily schedule requires shifting from one activity to another, one place to another, one person to another. The accomplishments of human development have their own transitions as one moves from crawling

to walking, diapers to toilet, preschool to kindergarten. There are teeth that fall out, new weather to get used to, new jobs to learn, new places to live, changes in families with adoptions, births, separations, and deaths. Staff members have their own versions of these transitions and all of this is bubbling and boiling and letting off steam in our programs.

As a program, get input over time, from staff, families, and children, through observations, story telling, and interviewing, to determine which transitions can become ritualized as part of your individual and group routines, and which might deserve more attention with a ritual or celebration.

An example of a wonderful naptime routine comes from Debra Lawrence. She created a basket of beautiful pictures that was passed around for children as they settled down on their mats. Each child was invited to choose a picture that they wanted to dream about as they went to sleep.

Ann Pelo works with children to create little keepsake books for when children are individually joining or leaving her class, or when a group is moving up from another class. Classmates of individual children make pages for a book with drawings and words of special things they know about the departing child or a favorite memory of her or him. For an arriving child or group of children moving up to her group, Ann invites the children to make pages for a book which describes what new kids should know about being in her room.

And couldn't some of these ideas be adapted for arriving or departing staff? You might also want to read the book, *Taking On Turnover*, by Marcy Whitebook and Dan Bellm, which has a number of suggestions for easing the transitions of staff turnover.

### Strategy:

#### Find related picture books

Keep your eye out for children's picture books, which through a story, rather than didactic text, convey different ways of handling transitions. Use these with the adults, as well as the children, and together consider how something parallel could be invented for particular transitions in your program. Favorite books of mine for this purpose include the following:

- Joyce Dunbar's *Tell Me Something Happy Before I Go to Sleep*
- Susi Fowler's *I'll See You When the Moon is Full*
- Angela Johnson's *The Leaving Morning*
- Margaret Wild's *Tom Goes to Kindergarten*

You might even hold a meeting in a library or children's bookstore for the explicit purpose of finding books to support this idea of inventing rituals for transitions.

### Strategy:

#### Invent celebrations for significant events

One of my all time favorite children's books is Byrd Baylor's *I'm In Charge of Celebrations*. The narrator reminds us that there are a number of everyday and special encounters in the world that need to be celebrated. Read this book in a staff meeting, followed by a discussion of celebrations that could be developed for the children and adults in your program. Learning to walk, moving out of diapers, zipping a coat, solving a big problem, writing one's name, getting a new family member, finishing an important project, mastering a new tool, rescuing a spider, overcoming a fear — the list is endless.

You can find ways to celebrate the life of someone in your program who dies. Myrna Canon worked with children in

her three-year-old room to decide what to offer the family of one of the children in her group whose mommy died of cancer. They ended up together planting a rose bush in the family's garden. Teachers at the Cabrillo College Child Development program worked with the children to plan a celebration in honor of one of their teachers who suddenly died. They shared favorite memories and ate his favorite food. Through simple, heartfelt rituals like these everyone drew comfort during a time of grief.

When a new child is born to a family in her classroom, Myrna Canon also draws inspiration from picture books such as *On the Day You Were Born* by Debra Frasier and Debi Chocolate's *On the Day I Was Born*. She uses this occasion to create a classroom book with pages contributed by each family and teacher in the group describing the story of their birth.

## Consider Gift Giving Traditions

Given our consumer oriented culture, we would do well to re-think our gift giving traditions to ensure they are reflecting the values we hold in our program. How do we provide for the joy of giving and receiving a gift while not getting pulled into commercialism? A gift doesn't have to be purchased, or when it is, doesn't have to be expensive. Rather, it can be a thoughtful, joyful expression of what we know we share as values together.

### Strategy:

#### The gift of books

I know a number of programs that have adopted the tradition of having a family bring the gift of a book to honor a child's birthday. This could be an open-ended request, or focused around certain topics that you are hoping to have a strong collection of, perhaps

titles like those referenced here. What better way to carefully build your literacy resources?

**Strategy:**  
**Children making gifts for each other**


I don't remember the particulars of how this tradition came about, but I was very moved by the lovely documentation panels at several of the Chicago Commons Child Development sites with the story of how children made gifts for their friends in the program. The process of figuring out what would bring a friend joy and then experiencing and seeing that joy as the gifts were opened is at the heart of the gift giving tradition. We do children and ourselves a great service when we get back in touch with this non-commercialized experience.

**Strategy:**  
**Children and families making group gifts for each other**

Ann Pelo has started a new tradition for her parent meetings. She has the children plan a surprise gift that they make for their families who will be coming to a meeting. For instance, one year the children made a mural of their self-portraits and put it on display for the parents to try to find the picture of their own child. The parents, in turn, decided to create a gift for the children and created a mural of their collective homes, all lined up on a neighborhood street. This was posted for the children to find their homes and to discover that they are symbolically a neighborhood and that their homes are part of their classroom. The story of this is visible in the video, *Building Bridges Between Teachers and Families* (Harvest Resources,

www.ecetrainers.com), but the idea here is to think of ways you can invite the children and their families to work together to make surprise gifts for each other.

As you struggle to not just stay afloat, but thrive in these difficult times, review all the changes that the people in your program typically experience over the course of a year. Imagine a surprise or two thrown in, welcomed or not. Now take this list and turn it into an intentional set of rituals and traditions that reflect the heart of every day living that early childhood programs can be focused on.

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