

The First Grade Challenge: Transition Stress

by David Elkind

Change is stressful, and change is particularly stressful for young children. The transition from an early childhood center or a kindergarten setting, to a first grade classroom is a major change, and, therefore, a major stress. The challenge for young children is to make the leap from an early childhood to a formal classroom setting without undue emotional turmoil.

Most quality early childhood programs resemble the home more than they do the school. Many are outfitted with a variety of toys, plants and animals, a climbing loft, and a reading/listening area with soft chairs and carpets. Early childhood educators structure the classroom but allow children the freedom to choose their own activity within that structure. Play is valued both as a means of self expression, and as a venue for learning social skills. Early childhood educators feel comfortable holding children on their laps or giving them a hug when the child communicates that this is needed, and wanted. Finally, parents are usually welcomed into early childhood settings.

The first grade classroom is generally a more formal arrangement with desks or tables where children have an assigned seat. Usually there are no toys, lofts, or reading/listening areas. Activities, as well as the materials, are chosen by the teacher and all children are involved in the same activity at the same time. Learning activities are more structured and don't allow much space for exploration and creativity. Because the focus is upon learning academic skills there is an emphasis on "right" and "wrong" as well as upon working quietly without getting up and moving around at will. First grade classrooms, of

course, vary tremendously; and many first grade teachers try to retain some of the flexibility and warmth of the early childhood setting. Of necessity, however, first grade life is much more programmed, and scripted, than is the life in an early childhood setting.

Helping Children Make the Transition

In helping prepare children for the challenge of first grade, parents often make an understandable, but incorrect assumption. They assume that what their children need to succeed in first grade are the basics of reading and arithmetic. In fact, most first grade teachers will have a different set of expectations for successful adjustment to first grade. These are:

- The ability to listen and follow instructions given by an adult.
- The ability to start a task and bring it to completion without help.
- The ability to work cooperatively with other children, take turns, stand in line, and so on.

If a child has these three social abilities, learning the academic skills is much easier than it is without them. It is important to communicate to parents how important these social skills are and to encourage them to reward and support these skills in their children. Of course they should continue to read to their children and help them learn the names of the letters and numbers; but the social skills should be given equal, if not more importance.

There are a number of other things parents and teachers can do to prepare children for the challenge of first grade. It is helpful, for example, to think of the transition to first grade as what the late sociologist Erving Goffman called a



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“frame switch.” Frames are repetitive, social situations with their own unspoken rules and expectations. In block play, for example, the rules are that you do not throw the blocks or hit other children with them. The expectation is that something will be built with the blocks. Frames also have an

emotional rhythm with a beginning, middle, and end. A child interrupted in the middle of block play is upset because the emotional rhythm of the play has been disrupted.

The transition from an early childhood setting, to a first grade classroom is a very big frame switch. It is a switch from one set of rules, understandings, and expectations to quite a different set. Advance preparation is the best way to help children make frame switches. One kindergarten teacher, formerly an airline stewardess, prepared her class for going home in this way. “We are going to land in fifteen minutes, so I want you all to put away your things and get in your seats in preparation for landing.” Letting children know in advance that a frame switch is coming allows them the time to mentally and emotionally close the frame they were involved in. In the case of moving to first grade, preparation might involve a visit to the classroom and a meeting with the first grade teacher over the summer. Talking about the entrance into first grade before it happens is an additional way to help children make the frame switch to first grade.

Ideally, it would be most helpful for children entering first grade if there was communication between the early childhood and first grade teachers. The early childhood educator has a great deal of information about the children that he or she could impart to the first grade teacher. Knowing something about his or her new charges in advance can make the transition to first grade less of a challenge for the teacher as well as for the children.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Creating frames: Create some transition frames to support children in preparing for transitions. Try out the three things Elkind suggests children should be able to do: listen and follow instructions, start a task and finish it without help, and behave cooperatively like taking turns, standing in line, and so on to make these elementary school frames more familiar. Choose times to pretend we are at elementary school and cue children when they are making the mental and emotional transition even though they aren't making the physical transition.

Checking expectations for 1st grade: Use the facilitating ideas suggested by Mendez to improve the success of children's transitions. Take the first step to reach out to schools to which children will transition and encourage them to reciprocate.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Expectations About the Transition by Gilberto Mendez

A study of expectations by children, parents, and teachers (Docket & Perry, 2001) found that as children got mentally ready to enter first grade they were concerned with *Rules* (the basic dos and don'ts), *Relationships* (who will I play with, who will I know?), and *Disposition* (what will the teacher and things be like?). Parents were concerned about *Adjustment* (their children's ability to cope in the new setting), the *Environment* (will children be safe and well-cared for?), and *Disposition* (will teachers like and help my child?). Teachers were also concerned with *Adjustment* and with *Disposition* (by children) and also about *Skills* that children brought to the school. There are common grounds as far as expectations go in some settings, the key differences being the focus on *Relationships* by children and on children's *Skills* by teachers.

Children, especially those exposed to preschool experiences, are expected to have a series of skills and attributes upon entering first grade. They are largely expected to be physically fit, with sound gross and fine motor skills, socially and emotionally ready, and with basic cognitive and language foundations. Unfortunately, this may not hold true. An assessment of school readiness (Murphey & Burns, 2002) found that less than 50 percent of children entering school were able to perform as expected on: solving social situation problems, expressing emotions appropriately, following simple rules, using problem solving routines, paying attention, initiating activities, recalling events, and approaching adults.

Obviously, it is important to reduce readiness gaps both on the part of children (what they bring in) and school (the reception environment). Schools are also expected to provide a more flexible and supportive child-friendly setting, and to have staff committed to the success of every entering child. Schools and families, preschool and first grade teachers, and, in fact, the communities where children live need to be more in tune to facilitate the difficult transition that children face. Fragmentation of vision and mission among the major actors that support young children does not help.

Research conducted in Honduras by Christian Children's Fund under the auspices of Bernard van Leer Foundation has shown that despite substantial support experienced by children participating in community-based preschools, some still fail first grade, subsequent grades, and even drop out of school. A study aimed at finding ways to strengthen collaboration among key actors found that first to third grade teachers tend to focus on children's acquisition of *intellectual skills*, basic subject competency, and social skills. On the other hand preschool teachers (drawn mainly from the local communities) tend to focus on

children's self-esteem and self-confidence, resilience, discipline and responsibility, and creativity. In turn parents focus more on children being able to behave well in school, interact with other children and teachers without fear (the social readiness), and to learn the basics (reading, writing, mathematics). Preschool facilitators and parents seem to be more interested in children's psychosocial development, whereas teachers focus more on cognitive development.

Facilitating Transition

Clarification of expectations is a key step in building bridges between parents, preschool, and school teachers. The studies in Honduras suggest the following options to strengthen communications and collaboration among key actors that can make preschool-to-primary school transition easier for children:

- School teachers should work more closely with preschool teachers, especially toward the last month of the school year to know more about children who will enter first grade. Moreover, if school teachers visit preschools a few times, preschool children will see familiar faces upon entering first grade.
- Schools should allow visits by preschool children and teachers.
- The school system (or district) should encourage and facilitate communication and collaboration among families, preschool, and school teachers.
- Preschool and school teachers and staff should share expectations with parents and coach them on ways to support their children's transition to first grade/school.
- First grade classrooms should have materials familiar to children and use activities that are familiar to children; preschool and school teachers should share syllabi, prototype materials, and ideas.
- Curriculum for first and second grades of primary school should be revised to incorporate more child-centered, active learning, and flexible activities that are commonly found in the preschool learning environment; concurrently, first and second grade teachers should be trained on children's holistic development and early stimulation.
- First grade teachers should allow transition time for children (at least two weeks) so that the latter can adapt to the new environment.



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