

Supporting Infants' and Toddlers' Emotional Needs During Transitions

[Music]

Announcer: Welcome to “Head Start Talks,” where big ideas support your everyday experiences.

Dawson Nichols: Hello, and welcome to “Research on the Go,” a podcast that digs into the latest research in the field of child development to find research-backed practices that will help infants and toddlers learn and thrive. My name is Dawson Nichols, and I’m talking today with Beth Zack.

Beth Zack: Hi, Dawson. Dawson and I are from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, and we’re both based at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Dawson: We are. And we are here today to talk about the latest research in social and emotional development. And today in particular, we are going to talk about transitions. Infants and toddlers go through a lot of transitions. [Both laugh] Moving from home to some other kind of care environment, moving from one program to another sometimes, moving from one classroom to another, from in-person services to virtual services. Transitioning from an Individualized Family Service Plan, an IFSP, to an Individualized Education Program, an IEP. Or even just returning to a program after a period of absence, even just a vacation. These are transitions. And that’s what we’re discussing today.

Beth: Those are all great examples. I do want to mention, we’re also referring to smaller transitions, too. That might be separating from a caregiver at drop-off, even moving from one activity to another. Going from nap to diaper change or from outside back inside, getting ready for lunch. And you know, navigating even these small daily transitions, they can be a real challenge.

Dawson: Yes. I like the idea that you’re making this a larger umbrella. We’re talking about big transitions to a child’s daily routine, but also smaller changes within that environment. There are transitions within transitions, nested transitions, and children need to deal with all of these.

Beth: Right. That’s an interesting observation because really what we’re talking about is how we as the caring adults are helping children adjust to change. For very young children, it’s up to us, the adults, to do the adapting for and with the child.

Dawson: Nice. As you’re talking, I’m thinking about children going through developmental changes, which are also happening during this time. When we talk about transitions, are we also talking about developmental changes, too?

Beth: Oh, yes, definitely. There's these, on the one hand, external changes that a child has to deal with, such as where they're going, how they're expected to behave, what they're asked to do. But so many internal changes during this time, too, and a child really needs help adjusting with those. Yes, those are also transitions.

Dawson: I like how you're framing that. Helping children adjust to change. When I think about it that way, I feel like that's going to help me on every single level, helping a child with any transition. That's what transitioning is. It is adjusting to change.

Beth: Right, and change can be difficult even for adults.

Dawson: [Laughs] Oh, I've got stories.

Beth: Don't we all?

Dawson: How much time do we have? [Both laugh]

Beth: But, you know, change is especially difficult for infants and toddlers. You know, they don't have the same resources we do for dealing with change. But they do have us, and we're really key to children's healthy social and emotional development. And these early relationships, that's what provides the sense of security and the comfort and the belonging, sense of belonging that children need to help regulate and to adjust to new circumstances. Those are the things that make transitions smooth and effective with our help.

Dawson: As you're talking about these, it makes me feel like what we're saying is that helping with transitions is really just one element of helping with healthy social and emotional development.

Beth: Right. And as we've said, change is inevitable. Small-scale changes, the big-scale changes, developmental changes. You know, learning to navigate change is a life skill, and it's part of social and emotional development.

Dawson: [Singing] Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes. [Speaking] It never stops. Oh, my gosh. But let's stick with children. OK, where do we start?

Beth: Why don't we start with these earliest relationships? We like to say that babies are born with a kind of superpower, this natural inclination to focus on people. And our brains, they're wired for social connection. We know from research that babies are drawn to our faces, and even things that vaguely resemble them. There's this cool study that was done where they showed infants three squares, and so they're arranged like two eyes and a nose. Two squares on top, one in the middle. And then, now picture those squares flipped so that it no longer looks like a face. And the researchers found that newborns prefer to look at the squares in the face-like configuration.

And you know, it turns out, babies are social from birth. You might have heard about this study, but I think it's worth repeating because it was so important to our understanding of how babies

understand the world. In this classic study, Dr. Andrew Meltzoff went to hospitals and stuck out his tongue at newborn babies, and he wanted to see whether or not they imitated him. And they did. They stuck out their tongues back, and this was quite remarkable and surprising at the time. Because of this research and research that's come since then, we know that babies are born ready to make social and emotional connections with us, which is super amazing.

Dawson: There is so much research supporting this, that, you know, a nurturing adult already has a foothold with even a newborn baby because they have this way of engaging and making these first connections.

Beth: Exactly, and it begins that process of building those attachment bonds with caregivers. Your time together with children, that builds familiarity. And then during that time, caregivers provide responsiveness, comfort, consistency. And then babies learn to look to those caregivers for protection and support, and that includes emotional support.

Dawson: What if a child is in a completely new situation? We're talking about adjusting to change. What if they're in a situation that is either new or just they haven't even been in it for a long, long time? How do we help them with that?

Beth: Right. Well, like we said, change is ... It's part of life. But navigating something new or a new situation, that's just an example of one of these larger changes. And the way to make it easier on a child is to use that trusting, caring relationship you've built.

Dawson: That trusted caregiver is key.

Beth: They are. But, you know, a transition may be more challenging for some children even when there is that trusted caregiver, and I think this is important to highlight. Let's take a transition for a child with disabilities, for example. These transitions may require additional steps for coordination and planning to ensure the unique needs of that child are addressed in a transition plan. You might gather strategies during meetings with early intervention staff and the family. You can also use some of the same general strategies that are great for helping all infants and toddlers navigate the unfamiliar.

Dawson: This is good. Good. And I want more. More strategies. Let's talk strategies.

Beth: We've highlighted familiarity and regularity being important. For coming back to an environment you may have been away from for a while, remember that you had to establish connections with the child once before, right? You can do it again. Be responsive, is the main thing. Being tuned in to what that individual child needs and really establishing consistent routines as quickly as possible, because children thrive on predictability.

Dawson: So do I. [Laughs]

Beth: Same. Me too. And for programs, you can establish routines that really meet children where they are, so both socially and emotionally, and use their family support. Work with families to learn about their culture and what practices they use at home. And then you can

adapt and align your own practices to meet each individual child's needs. Another thing that's very important to remember is that families are likely adjusting to change, too. You know, when their child transitions to a new program, or maybe it's even just a big shift in sleep schedule at home that's affecting the family. These changes in their child's needs and abilities, to their child's daily schedule, new settings, they are affecting families, too. We need to acknowledge that and to work to support families through transitions, as well. And one thing we can do is just make everything as predictable as you can. Drop-off, pick-up, your staff, transitions between activities.

Dawson: I love this reminder that, you know, these families are going through these transitions, as well. And it's one of the reasons that I think posting schedules can really help. It helps not just the child, but the family, as well.

Beth: Right. Yes, for both children and families. Think about toddlers and especially children with a disability or suspected delay. They may take comfort in seeing the posted daily schedule. And families, too. So that they know what their child's going through throughout the day, and it can help them think about how to talk about their day when they're at home, so they know what that predictable schedule looks like. And, you know, pictures for toddlers are especially important if their language skills are still developing, so it gives them something that they can understand. They're great for children who are dual language learners, and even infants. They'll recognize the regularity of having that posted schedule and seeing an adult consulting it and talking about it.

And remember, routines and establishing this new system, it takes time, but children will respond to consistency and your responsiveness. We also can't be rigid, though. Routines provide a flexible schedule, and so that means it has to adapt to the needs and patterns of each individual child.

And above all, remember, a child's family knows them best. Check in with them first and often about what routines they're using at home. And we check in with them often because, as you know, children's needs change quite quickly over those early years. And then when families know your routines, it's easier for them to help facilitate smooth transitions at home. For home visitors, you can work with families to build predictable routines into everyday activities like getting ready to leave the house or preparing for mealtime or bedtime.

And then one last one I want to highlight, and that is make routines fun when you can. Think about how much more eager you would be to do something if you knew there was something fun coming next, like knowing a book comes after I put my pajamas on or – You know, at my house, I got my daughter excited to put her shoes on in the morning by making her left foot and her – her left shoe and her right shoe, they talk, and they try to get on her foot first. And now she begs me to say – You know, she's like, "Mama, make my shoes talk to try to get on my feet first." And she's got a preference for the right always going first, and, you know, poor left shoe just always has to go second. It's this fun thing that we do. And, you know, we don't have battles over putting her shoes on anymore, which is awesome.

Dawson: Many things that need to get done during the day, if we have this attitude, they can just go much more smoothly like that. But, you know, transitions can still be tricky even when you have these systems in place. I have a couple of techniques that I want to throw in here. I mean, when my daughters were little, one of the big ones that we used was rehearsing big transitions beforehand.

Beth: Oh, that's great.

Dawson: And it made them feel more comfortable when the transition actually came if they'd had some experience with it beforehand. We didn't come up with this, of course. This is a well-known technique, but it's a really good one. Giving children and families the opportunity to tour the space, for example, can be one way of rehearsing that transition, spending an hour or two in the space, sharing the schedule with the families ahead of time, and encouraging those families to talk to their child about what a typical day might be like. That kind of anticipation is really helpful for a child. You know, if you can, incorporating home visits is also really helpful. One of my daughters had a preschool teacher who came to our house before preschool began. When my daughter entered this new space that was completely new to her, there was this person there that was at least partly familiar. And that helped so, so much.

Beth: I love that.

Dawson: In every way that you can, the more contact that you can help the child have with the new situation, the less of that situation that's brand new, the easier that transition is going to be for that child. I also find that talking with families about how they transition in and out of activities in their own day, in their own house, in their own home, is also really helpful – because, again, those transitions can be examples for the child and can be used as models to help the child understand what's coming. For home visitors, I would say, you know, if you can help a family see the consistency that they already have and help them build on that consistency, perhaps building new routines, that can be really, really helpful. Again, build on what's already going well in that situation and see if you can help them take that even further for, again, more consistency, more comfort for the child.

Beth: Focusing on those strengths – I love that. That's great.

Dawson: And then the only other thing that I would love to mention is, you know, giving opportunities for families to meet one another and learn from other families, families who are going through the same thing or have already gotten through it but may have some techniques that they can help you with. These transitions are difficult, but, you know, families do develop strategies, and they can share those strategies amongst themselves and that can be a wonderful way to help the children.

Beth: Those are all great ideas, and I love that last one, you know, really leaning on other families who are going through similar things with children for their support. That's – Other families are a wonderful resource for you, too, and I think sometimes we forget that.

Dawson: Absolutely.

Beth: And I want to mention, for smaller transitions, Dawson sort of talked about this a little bit, but really talking about what comes next, showing those pictures if you have them, and giving children time to process can be helpful. Something like, “We’re going to play for two more minutes, and then we’ll wash our hands together before lunch.” You can imagine pointing to the clock and a picture of a sink and then a picture of something representing lunch during that situation. And remember that encountering the unfamiliar is something we’re helping children do and through, and so the more that we can make something familiar, the better.

For families, we can encourage them to visit the space, to introduce their child to teachers or providers or other children in comfortable settings ahead of time when possible. For home visitors, remember that when you begin a relationship with a new family, you’re the unfamiliar person in their home. Your role is to support them. But part of that is making them and their child feel comfortable with you there. You might play a game, read a short book, establish contact ahead of time. Sort of play into that, like, making things fun, finding something familiar for the child to help sort of ease your way in and build that relationship. And, remember, familiarity can take a while, but it will come.

Dawson: And I would say they could also encourage the children and the families to identify something that the child might be able to bring from home to help make them feel comfortable in other situations.

Beth: Yes, absolutely. My daughter brings her favorite stuffy, Wolfdoggie, to school every day still because that is the thing that makes her feel comfortable for naptime at school. You know, familiar things help a child feel at home. This is something that’s talked about often, but not just adding photos of family members to your space, but actually referring to them throughout the day and really highlighting those for children. And this can be especially helpful for children who are dual-language learners and children with disabilities or suspected delays. Again, with all these techniques, never forget that the most effective thing to help with transitions is the responsive caregiver – you. That familiar adult responding to a child’s needs in real time –that is key. Being comforting and soothing, a stable and consistent presence.

Dawson: Nice, nice. I’ve got to say, though, that, as you’ve been talking, I’m reminded of this tension with children. There are just so many, many studies that show how young children are attracted to new and novel things. And novelty is a big part of these transitions. Now, new things can be really exciting, but with transitions, there can be a lot of new and unexpected things, and children can also feel overwhelmed by all these new things.

Beth: Oh, that’s right, and that’s often why you might see a child so excited. Maybe they’re ready to start a new activity or go to a new place. And then they get there, and they either shut down or maybe they’re crying, and you’re like, “What is happening?” But it’s because they have these conflicting feelings. They’re attracted to that new and novel, but transitions are still hard. Again, providing responsive, predictable care is key in helping children manage all the new and unexpected things that come with transitions. And speaking of those new and novel

experiences, throughout infancy and toddlerhood, children are learning about attention. “What should I pay attention to? How do I stop paying attention to something?” And “How can I shift my attention from one thing to another?”

Dawson: Oh, I’ve never thought about it this way, but that’s kind of the smallest sort of transition, isn’t it? Shifting attention from one thing to another thing.

Beth: In a sense, that’s right.

Dawson: It’s a transition.

Beth: It is. But it’s also a learned skill. And infants rely on adults to help them with this. It’s one of the reasons these early relationships are so important. One example of the early things children are learning, especially watching us, is following eye gaze and pointing. It really helps children know where to focus. And then providing cues – adding language onto that. And responding to children’s cues bring you into this beautiful back-and-forth interaction. And when you add that language in, as children develop more language skills, that helps them even more know what to focus on. Just remember that children are watching us, and we can be an example to them of how to navigate their environments, the way we move, our tone of voice, our attitudes. Children get so much from our body language and our nonverbal cues.

Dawson: And these nonverbal cues, we probably should mention, are culturally bound.

Beth: That’s right, across settings, education staff. We’re talking about teachers, family child care providers, home visitors. We all need to be aware of cultural differences and the nonverbal cues we use. I remember this story a family child care provider shared with me. They were caring for an older toddler who never looked them in the eyes during conversation, and they found this concerning, a little distressing, and they were trying to figure out why. And, you know, it turned out that, in that child’s – in their family’s culture, they believe it’s disrespectful to look someone in the eyes.

Dawson: Right. We need to be sensitive to things like that. If that caregiver had known that information earlier, they might have been able to better support that child in their care.

Beth: Exactly. It’s so important for education staff to adjust how they use and support children’s use of nonverbal cues. And that means learning from families, too.

Dawson: And there are a lot of ways to engage in the back-and-forth interactions that we talk so much about. But it’s not just verbal. It involves our whole bodies, and it is different for different cultures. It’s different for different individuals, too. It’s like a dance that you have to play with the child.

Beth: I like that, being like a dance. And you’re right. It is so true, and it’s all part of responsive caregiving.

Dawson: OK, there's a buzz term. That's one that we've all heard of. But let's get into what exactly responsive caregiving is.

Beth: Ah, yes, that's important. Really, we've been talking about it throughout this whole session, but I do think it's important to highlight exactly what we're talking about here. Responsive caregiving refers to parenting, caregiving, and effective teaching practice that is consistent, nurturing, and responsive to a child's temperament, which is the way they approach the world, and responsive to their needs.

Dawson: And helping with transitions is a part of this responsive caregiving.

Beth: Yes. For example, recognizing when a child is overwhelmed in a new space and how that child is reacting, then being ready with a response. The child might need comfort. They might want to be moved to a calmer place. Providing culturally relevant care – and so that might be using a familiar object or toy, a familiar activity, or even familiar language. And then home visitors can model these types of responses, as well. Think about helping families provide that calm, responsive care to their children during transitions. And checking in with a family during any type of transition – that's key.

Reminding families that their child's transition back home after a long day away – maybe being in outside care and a different learning environment – that is also a transition for them. You know, some children, they have to – they spend all day keeping it together in that learning environment and they get home to this familiar, loving caregiver, and they fall apart a little bit. That transition home can sometimes seem extra hard. Working with families, talking about what strategies you use in your learning environment, what strategies they use at home, asking about what activities or toys comfort the child – these things can be really great.

Dawson: I love that reminder that, you know, the transition from the care environment back into the home environment, if they're different from one another, can be a big transition for kids. And it can be a difficult one. And families sometimes don't think of that as a transition. They feel like it's just the return to normal, but for the child, that is a big transition. And they may often respond to that. Those are really helpful examples. Do you have examples from smaller transitions that we can share?

Beth: Yes, I do, but before I do that, I really just want to remind all of us – and I always need this reminder, too – that as much as we want transitions to go smoothly, making things entirely smooth – it's not our goal. You know, none of us enter this profession because we thought this would be easy. We do this because we're dedicated to helping children learn and grow. And for children and us, the tricky and sometimes difficult parts are often when the most learning happens. Which is key here. Our purpose is to raise healthy, happy, capable children who are good at bridging these transitions for themselves. This is something they need to learn. And, of course, we don't want it to be hard. It's hard to watch a child struggle through something. But when it is hard, we need to remember that that's an opportunity. That child might be learning about shifting their attention or working with others or regulating their emotions. A little difficulty, it's OK.

Dawson: Things are hard throughout our lives, and this is when they're learning about how to deal with those hard things. That's something I like to remind myself all the time when I'm with a child who's going through a difficult period is that this is difficult – for both of us ... But it is also one of those learning opportunities. It really is. And it's an important one. That's a great reminder. Thank you.

Beth: Indeed. I do want to bring us back. You had asked about navigating smaller transitions. For the youngest children, it's really about helping them regulate their emotions, and we can help by providing consistency and comfort. In the caregivers, that they're building relationships with and their environment and our behavior. Knowing what behaviors and places soothe them. Do they respond best to singing, reading, rocking, or a combination of those things? And then, also, have several options available for comfort and for activities. You know, because sometimes you might want a favorite book, or another time, your blankie might be what you really need, you know, when you're having a hard time. For older toddlers, the materials might be different, but, really, these practices are the same. That comforting, safe, stimulating space, caring adults, including continuity of care. When children have the same caregivers over time, that's how they build these meaningful, responsive relationships. And then, that also helps us as the adult. It helps us better understand the child's needs and helps them feel safe and cared for.

And then, finally, having systems and routines in place – everything from drop-off procedure to regular naptime, time outside, accessible sink and toilet, using small groups. All those types of things, when you put them all together, can really make for a smoother day. And then, remembering that different families and cultures communicate differently. Work with families to align practices and to be able to use familiar words and routines. You know, for example, one child might – you might be talking about doing a diaper change, where at home they refer to it as a nappy. You want to make sure those terms are aligned. Because it'll help them understand what's – what you're doing and what's coming next.

Dawson: These are all great ideas and techniques and things. I just – We've already said this, but I want to remind people that sometimes a child will be upset despite the regular routine ... If they're transitioning from activity time to snack time, for example. There are just some times when kids get upset.

Beth: Ugh. So true! And, in that case, as adults, we have to keep in mind that behavior has meaning. Then, our role is to try to figure out why the child's having difficulty and then to address that issue. But we know this is easier said than done. It can be very try – Can be very tricky. Young children could get upset for so many reasons that don't always make sense to us, like when they ask for something, and you give that to them, and then they – then they cry. And you're like, "But that's what you asked for!" Even when this happens, it's important for us to validate the child's emotions and then work with those emotions in constructive ways. Some tools you can use to help them calm down, including breathing. Like, just a simple breathing technique. And you can model that and do it along with them. Helping them find a quiet place. And that might mean sitting with them as they calm.

Some children, having that supportive caregiver just even nearby can be an additional support. And then, once they are calm – for toddlers, you know, you talk about what upset them and give them some context. You know, for example, you might say, “I know you were so excited about that tall tower you were building, and it’s frustrating to have to stop, but now it’s time to eat our lunch. All our friends are hungry, and we eat lunch together.” And, you know, if they are able to return to that tall tower again later, say that, too. You know, “We’ll be able to come back and play some more with that later,” so giving them that context.

Dawson: I think that’s great. And as I’m listening to this, I’m distilling this all down. It seems like responsive caregiving and navigating transitions, they both rely on caregivers who are able to be flexible in the moment so that they can respond to a child’s needs in that moment.

Beth: Ah, flexibility. Thank you for highlighting that. It’s something we hadn’t talked about a lot yet. And just remembering that these interactions happen in specific settings and contexts. Setting the stage for successful transitions is just as important, and we can do that by creating nurturing environments with schedules and regular routines, building environments and activities that are significant to the child. Considering family, your community, and the culture to really build belonging in your learning environment. We also need to build systems to support consistent communication, having programs work with families to develop strategies to stay in touch about changes at home or in the learning environment and how to best incorporate those familiar routines from a child’s environment into their day.

Dawson: Good. I see that we’re coming to the end of our time, but before we do, I want to add a quick reminder that the healthy relationships we’re talking about, these involve two healthy people. I want to encourage people, don’t forget yourself. Looking after your own social and emotional well-being is really, really important.

Beth: Oh, yeah, so important. Thank you for bringing that up.

Dawson: I always think of the announcement on the airplanes – you “Place your own oxygen mask on first.” I think it’s a really good metaphor here. Looking after your own health is part of your work. It’s part of what is going to make you effective in your work with grantees and families and children. Encourage your grantees to take care of their health, too. You know, when they feel healthy, they’ll be better able to help children build these strong relationships and to develop in every area but especially socially and emotionally.

Beth: Oh, I couldn’t agree more. And I just want to add that the strength and resilience we get from relationships come from all kinds of relationships. Show your grantees the importance of not only fostering relationships with the children in their program but with their adult communities, too. Building those relationships with other adults, that’ll give them the same kind of strength and resilience that they provide for the children in their care.

Dawson: I think that’s a great place to end, but we have covered so much, so I’m going to try and do a quick recap. I’ve been taking notes.

Beth: Awesome.

Dawson: Children are clued in to other people from the very get-go, from birth. And this allows them to develop earlier relationships with consistent and nurturing caregivers. These relationships are key to helping children learn how to regulate their emotions.

Beth: And I'd add, regulate their attention, too.

Dawson: And their attention, yes. And attention is key to navigating transitions. The same stability and consistency that builds supportive relationships helps with transitions. These smooth and effective transitions are built by – here, it's in my notes. I have three things. First, comfort. Comforting and familiar spaces and activities. Second, predictability. Having regular schedules and routines and helping children understand those routines. And, three, alignment with families, communication with families, and, of course, the larger communities of which we are all a part. And, of course, finally, and most importantly, familiar and responsive caregivers.

Beth: Right. Thanks for summing up all those up. I just want to emphasize one more time to remember to take care of yourself and support your grantees in taking care of themselves. And then, just before we leave, just a big thank-you to everyone listening. The work you do with and on behalf of children is so important, and we truly appreciate all you do.

Dawson: Yes, we do. I second that. I would third it if I could. [Both laugh] But the work is really important, and we hope it's also rewarding, too. And we want to do everything that we can to help support you, so I do want to mention that you can find more information about transitions, social and emotional development, and many, many other topics that you can use with programs and families on the ECLKC website. There are a lot of really helpful resources there. You can also find other podcasts like this one on a number of different topics. Please do make use of that resource. And thank you so much for listening. And, Beth, thank you again, as well.

Beth: Ah, thanks to you, Dawson. It was fun.

Dawson: Thanks. Bye.

Beth: Bye-bye.

Announcer: Thank you for joining "Head Start Talks." For more information on what you heard today, visit the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, or ECLKC, at eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov.

[Music]