

"There is in every child at every stage a new miracle of vigorous unfolding." Erik Erikson

As Term 4 begins and Christmas looms ever closer, I'm aware that this time last year my mind was full of goodbyes and new beginnings. My father had died, a new job was on the horizon and my eldest child was about to finish primary school. Thinking back over the past year, I'm reminded that whether planned or unexpected, celebrated or mourned, transitions are part and parcel of life. As Erikson's quote highlights, human's develop and change throughout life as we continually encounter new experiences and develop a greater understanding of ourselves and others.

Childhood and adolescence in particular, is a time of life characterised by transitions. Starting school for the very first time, moving from primary school to high school and then beyond school altogether towards living independently. Transitions are often cause for celebration (eg. graduation), while at the same time posing challenges. Susan Heitler (2012) refers to transitions as a paradox that involves two challenges: letting go of the past and embracing the future.



The 'task' of transitioning requires us to leave a past that has been reasonably predictable for a future that will be different. A useful metaphor when considering times of transition is to regard 'now' as a bridge between a familiar past and an unpredictable future (Heitler, 2012). The bridge may be short, long, steady or of the wobbly suspension variety depending on situational and personal factors.

Celia Lashlie (2005) also used the metaphor of a bridge when she described the transition of teenage boys to men as a time when boys cross the "bridge of adolescence" between 11-18 years. Lashlie (2005) suggested that the role of parents during this period was to set clear boundaries that act as guard rails on the bridge to prevent their adolescent boys 'falling off'. Heitler (2012) advocates that the metaphor of a bridge need not suggest that the past be left behind during a period of transition. There will be treasured memories worth holding onto and valuable past learning to take along on the journey. In fact, the past provides an important foundation for the skills that we will need to make a successful transition.

Schlossberg (2011) advocates that successfully managing a period of transition involves achieving a balance between personal resources and deficits, which she clusters into the 4 S's:

1. **Situation.** What else is going on in your life at the time of a transition? Are you juggling a number of changes that leave you feeling under-resourced?
2. **Self.** A person's inner resources.
3. **Supports.** People you can count on.
4. **Strategies.** A variety of coping strategies that will naturally differ between individuals.

One of the most common transitions for children and adolescents, that is often on families' minds at this time of year, is school transitions. Whether that involves starting school for the first time, or moving on to High School, the process of transitioning and adapting to a new setting can be stressful. School transitions are not just about the first day. The process begins when the child/adolescent & family start to prepare the year before and continues into the first weeks & months of the following year. There are a number of changes involved and a spectrum of reactions to the change. Some children/adolescents look forward to making new friends and the challenge of a new environment. Others feel nervous about the unfamiliarity of a new setting and on occasions that anxiety can become overwhelming.

First day nerves are a normal reaction to a new environment. Most children and adolescents have previously experienced transitions in their life (eg. moving house, starting preschool). These experiences help the child/adolescent to develop skills for managing new situations. Considering how a child/adolescent has managed previous transitions provides important information about how they cope with change and this information can help the child/adolescent and family plan and prepare for the changes ahead. A history of successful life transitions promotes resilience and confidence in their inner resources for managing the stress associated with change.

Intentional support alongside warm, unconditional regard helps children and adolescents to articulate and develop the skills they require to manage transitions. This involves active listening and providing clear feedback about the skills that parents witness their child/adolescent using to manage a situation.

For some children and adolescents, transitions are experienced as stressful and overwhelming, resulting in symptoms of anxiety and depression. Anxiety, the physiological and psychological response to a perceived threat, is the second most common mental health disorder in children and adolescents in Australia (Hazell, 2017). A common means of managing perceived threat is to avoid anxiety-provoking situations. As such, school avoidance is a common manifestation of anxiety in children/adolescents because it can trigger a variety of worries, including separation anxiety, social anxiety and trauma-related concerns associated with bullying. A past

that involves these types of worries can impede school-related transitions. Cognitive behavior therapy is an effective means of treating anxiety and mild to moderate depression.

Dan Siegel (2011) suggested that parents have two options for assisting their child to manage distress. The first option, the 'survival response', involves pacifying the child/adolescent in the moment and moving on. The second type of response involves teaching the child/adolescent to tolerate distress and 'surf the emotion wave'. Siegel advocates that both parenting responses are used interchangeably in day-to-day life depending on what is most pragmatic at the time.

Developing the emotional & social skills to 'surf the wave' is a long-term process. The part of the brain that plays a key role in emotional intelligence, the frontal lobes, continues to develop throughout childhood and adolescence, reaching it's full potential around our mid 20's. Children and adolescents require intentional support with this developmental process. However, over time, as the process of maturation occurs, children/adolescents will require less support and begin to self-regulate their emotions (at which point the guard rails become increasingly less necessary!).



To sum up, transitions are a regularly occurring, normal phase of life throughout the lifespan. Childhood and adolescence, by their very nature, are characterized by inevitable and frequent transitions that may also impact on the family as a whole. Successfully managing periods of transition involves intentionally drawing on the pre-existing coping strategies and resilience of the child/adolescent, while encouraging the development and maintenance of these skills. When the balance is tipped towards the child/adolescent feeling overwhelmed and under-resourced, psychological therapy, in particular cognitive behaviour therapy, has much to offer in terms of supporting children/adolescents to develop coping and emotion regulation skills.

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