Helping Your Child Cope With Big Feelings During Transitions

As the family of a four-to-five-year-old child, you may wonder about the big feelings your child is having during transitions — big feelings might mean your child is scared, sad, confused, or just stressed. You may even have big feelings yourself when your child is going through transitions. You may wonder:

"How do I support my child in the moment they are having big feelings?"
"How do I help my child adjust to transitions?"

A transition is another word for a change or a shift to a different activity, space, or routine, like from playtime to bedtime. Four-to-five-year-old children experience many transitions and routines throughout the day. Moving through transitions and routines can be exciting — but also stressful when a child feels rushed or is not yet ready to move to the next step.

From four years old to kindergarten entry, children learn to:

- Identify and communicate about strong emotions with help from a caregiver
- Regulate emotions that come with transition
- Apply expectations for behavior across different situations
- Follow routines to maintain a healthy lifestyle

Ways Families Support Children During Transitions

Supporting transitions and routines at home can help children develop resilience when approaching all the transitions of the day in early learning settings and later in school. Families' everyday interactions, routines, and experiences are opportunities for children to identify and express their emotions, manage their reactions, and become more flexible across different situations.

Children vary in how they adapt to changes. Some children may need more time to adjust to transitions. Children may also act differently depending on the type of transition. Each family has their own expectations for their child's behavior. For example, some families have more defined times and routines for meals or bedtime.

As you think about your child, ask yourself:

- Which emotions come up for me when my child is going through a transition?
- What are some ways that I guide my child through big feelings, such as excitement, anger, surprise, fear, or confusion?
- How can I work with teachers to prepare for major transitions like moving to a new class or grade level?

ACTIVITY IDEAS for Families

At breakfast or family time, share your daily schedule with your child. For example, explain that each day has many of the same activities and routines, like drop-off, pickup, bathtime, and bedtime: "Every day we have breakfast, we brush our teeth, and then we walk to school!" Make a visual schedule in your home language — have fun taking pictures with your child to use for the visual schedule! Go over the schedule every day.

When talking to your child, take time for an emotional check-in about transitions — for example, "How do you feel about going to school today?" Invite your child to make a face in the mirror and use a word for how they feel today: silly, mad, surprised, scared, excited, sad, or happy. Share your own feelings about the day. Help your child communicate about how they feel in their body by asking, "How does it feel in your body?" Then provide language for them: "It sounds like you have butterflies in your tummy."

At bedtime, share a story about a character participating in transitions or routines, like going to sleep or going to school. It could be a book or a story about your own experience or that of a sibling or cousin. Talk about the character's feelings about the transition or routine: "He feels angry because he does not want to wake up." Consider how the other characters provide support for the main character.

During play, explore ways to regulate big feelings together. For example, you might have dolls, stuffed animals, or puppets you can use to reenact a story and act out how the character coped with their emotions: "Llama was feeling nervous, which gave her the jitters. She danced it out and shook her whole body." The next time your child seems nervous about a transition, invite them to "shake it out" like Llama did. Other strategies you can practice with your child to regulate big feelings are taking a quiet moment for deep, calming breaths or getting cozy with pillows or other comfort items. For more ideas, ask your child's teacher or the local library for information and resources on regulating big feelings.

Learn More About Children's Coping Skills During Transitions

Explore more about your child's development using the *Nevada Pre-Kindergarten Standards*. Below is a summary of key knowledge and skills from the standards that relate to how children cope with big feelings during transitions.

Approaches to Learning	Children are flexible in their thinking and actions.
Social Emotional	Children identify emotions and use strategies to manage emotions.
Health, Safety, and Physical Development	Children practice healthy lifestyle habits.

The project described herein is supported by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative (PDG B-5), awarded to the Nevada Department of Education, Grant Number 90TP0099 from the Office of Early Childhood Development, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Early Childhood Development, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.