Supporting Children through the Transitions of Early Learning
by Carol B. Hillman

Helping Young Children through Daily Transitions by Tara V. Katz

Supporting Successful Transitions to Kindergarten for Children with Special Needs by Claudia Avalos-Snyder and Kirsten Haugen

A Graduation Story by Donna King
“Adversity brings knowledge, and knowledge brings wisdom.”
Welsh proverb

I like to think about words. We are, in large part, the words we choose to express, as well as the words that we choose to hide within ourselves. We are formed by past words, those that parents, siblings, relatives, friends, or even strangers have said to us. Those words have raised our spirits and have inspired us, or have caused us hurt or made us deeply sorrowful.

I also like to think about young children, about their individual and collective lives, about the influences that impact upon them, about how and why words have been, and continue to be, so powerful in shaping their lives.

As teachers, we need to be realistic about promoting life skills. We need to prepare young children for kindergarten, first grade, and beyond, where there will be many small or large hardships to handle.

As young children grow from infancy through childhood and on to young adulthood, they are collecting words along the way. They are thinking about what words or phrases to use and which to keep within themselves, what words to carry alongside them on their journey. As they grow, these children are, in part, forming and shaping themselves; they are building their own sense of who they are. They are also storing memories. Young children are building a repertoire of phrases and stories that they can replay over the years. These can be words or phrases of encouragement. These can also be words of warning or criticism.

As youngsters, they change and grow and change again over time; all the while, they are continually listening to the sounds of words. After what may seem like a whole world of time they begin to notice letters, and question what signs say and mean. Soon after, they are welcomed into the intriguing world of the written language and eventually on to the exquisite pleasure of reading.

Seemingly overnight, through the written word, their world becomes a different place. Now, even more than previously dreamed, their horizons are being pushed and stretched, and their imaginations can take even further flight. Enlightenment is right at their fingertips. And so, at any moment, youngsters are reading from an extensive collection of words. It is from these words, and from the memory of their own experiences, they determine the paths they will follow.

All of us are acutely aware that parents, grandparents, and other early caregivers are children’s first teachers: those who look after, protect, and shape the lives of our young children. It is through this early caring that children’s eyes become more focused and their vision becomes clearer. Their experiences, and from the words they hear in and around those early experiences, help to form how they relate to other human beings. Because youngsters are so vulnerable and dependent, it behooves us to be as thoughtful and wise with our words, both with what we say, how we say it, as well as what we choose not to say.

It is because of these various factors that my thoughts turn to the positive power of the negative, the tremendous stinging impact that comes from harsh words and experiences, and how we as caregivers have the opportunity to respond to these negative impacts, and thus make a difference.

There is much that goes on in the daily lives of young children: a stream of activities that encircles a wide range of social and emotional experiences. We have to expect that there could also be that same wide range of emotional reactions that may follow. As caregivers, we have the opportunity to help children process whatever has taken place.

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Within all of these many happenings, youngsters extract just a few fragments to store within their memory. It is most often the very joyful times, along with the very disheartening times, that they carry deep within themselves. These experiences can replay over time, somehow taking hold within their consciousness.

Have you ever heard a youngster say: “You are not my best friend anymore, and you can’t come to my birthday party?” For a youngster, best friends and birthdays are close to the top of life’s prized gifts. Bearing witness to such a negative situation can be really hard for all concerned. The positive effect of many such negative situations can be difficult to handle in the moment; however, its long-range effect should be taken into consideration.

Young children gain experience in understanding themselves and others when encountering these new and difficult situations. They are learning through these endeavors how to transition from one point in time to another. They are learning to navigate the hills and valleys of their lives.

Young children need to gradually come to terms with the reality that people can feel differently at different times: people can get mad at one another, that there are ups and downs in any relationship. Young children need to begin to recognize and internalize that the process of addressing a negative situation and working it out can be in their best interest. It is of the utmost importance to have a thoughtful and supportive adult close by to help children come to terms with the here and now. Friends can have a falling out, and can become friends again. Hurt feelings can mend, and eventually heal, and there is great learning and solace in that. It is imperative that the early childhood educator be close by as the gentle facilitator.

There are other times when a child is, by his or her own volition, or having been urged by others to gang up on another child and called her “Four Eyes” because of her new glasses. Can you also remember hearing the singsong chanting: “Baby, Baby, stick your head in gravy,” directed towards a timid classmate who wouldn’t yet dare to climb to the highest rung of the jungle gym? It is in those hurtful words, it is in the inflection of a child’s voice when the words are said, that expose who he is, at that very moment. These are the times when a youngster needs help, when a youngster can be encouraged by a supportive adult. It is important that the child be encouraged to say: “I don’t like it when you talk to me that way.” Advocating for yourself can become a vital component of a negative encounter.

From the very beginning, the early childhood classroom must become a microcosm of the larger world. That sacred space should exemplify ethical standards of behavior. We must each be firmly committed to creating a climate within our classrooms that demands mutual respect for both children and adults. Children share responsibility for others; there is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. This means asking young children to live their lives in a reflective way.

We should let the children see that we all make mistakes, large and small, that things do happen, and it is really okay. As teachers we need to be open and flexible, and believe in the value of failure. We need to allow for space, time, and many opportunities for actions not to be successful. And then, let the children figure out what went wrong, and what to do about it. Children need to see block buildings come crashing down, paintings where the colors run together and look like mud, play dates that didn’t work out because Emil got mad and just wanted to go home. Children (and adults) grow, not only in their own abilities, but also in their view of themselves, when they have overcome adversity, tried again, and perhaps again, to “make a go of it.” Only then can youngsters feel the accomplishment of having coped with a difficult situation and moved on.

We acquire knowledge in various ways. One powerful mode is through our own observations. As teachers of young and impressionable children we have the greatest opportunity to create a climate within our learning environments where excitement about life, mutual respect for individual difference, and a consciousness about the power of words reigns supreme. It is through these beliefs — and the practices that build on them — that we create classrooms where children can be supported as they make the transitions that constitute early learning.
I always walk the same way to my local cafe, with my little pug trotting along happily by my side, confident in the direction we walk; in fact, he’s almost cocky, as if he’s showing me how to get there. Then, one day I decided to walk a different way. Poor Pablo immediately loses confidence and looks at me as if to say, “What next?” Even though the change was slight and we ended up in the same place, he was confused.

Dogs, like children, are creatures of habit. Children also love knowing what is coming next and are confident in rhythms and routines. When familiar rhythms are thrown off, children struggle: we see tears and tantrums. So how can we guide children through the ebb and flow of daily life? There are three things I’ve found that help make everything a little easier:

- singing
- only giving choices when they’re real
- less truly is more

Singing

The first thing, and possibly the most delightful, is singing. How many of us have heard, or sung, “Clean up, clean up, everybody, everywhere . . .”? Well, it works! After almost 30 years of teaching, I have found that a little song puts everyone at ease and lets the children know what to expect without a lot of words. All too often adults talk at children, overwhelming them with information. A song that is used to signal a transition is like magic; in fact it is so magical that one has to merely hum the well-known tune and children will immediately go into the transition. Taking well-known tunes and writing your own words is the easiest way to get a message across. I write songs all the time using the words I need, including songs in Spanish. Repetitive words help children quickly learn and remember the words, even in new languages, like this one about handwashing:

Lava, lava tus manitas.
Lava, lava tus deditos.
Lava, lava tus manitas.
Todos las mananas.

Even handing out snack we break into song:

Water flag.
Put up your water flag, please.
Or else you’ll get a cup of tea.
These are little moments that could gather momentum creating a loud classroom, which is never comforting to little ones. Instead, when you carry the moment through on a song, the children float through the transition with ease and joy.

The first word is ‘let’s’ (‘let us’). This simple word gives comfort and suggests to a child that she is not alone. During a transition to clean-up time, children can feel overwhelmed by the thought of having to clean up everything they’ve just played with or constructed. The simple phrase, “Let’s go tidy up” accompanied by a little tune is a Mary Poppins moment. When a child feels they have the love and support of the adults taking care of them, they want to join in on activities and will learn that it’s not an insurmountable task to tidy up.

**Giving Real Choices**

The other word is “may”: as in “You may get your coat on.” The most common way we ask our children to do something is: “Can you please get your coat on?” Honestly, are we asking the child’s permission? Because as soon as we ask a simple question such as, “Can you get your coat on?”, we set ourselves up for a simple answer, “No.” If there’s no choice, we should not offer one. It’s confusing to children to ask them if they want something, and then when they tell us yes or no, not to honor it. These moments create a disruption in the flow of activity and cause a turbulent transition.

**Setting Expectations**

Children expect us to tell them what comes next and what we expect of them. The difference between, “You may set the table for me” and “Can you set the table?” is day and night. As adults we sometimes think we nurture children to be strong independent thinkers when we ask them if they want to wear their coats or what they want for dinner. Such questions are only appropriate when the choice is real. What children need is for the adults in their lives to let them know what is expected of them in a consistent, loving, manner. Daily rhythms and routines and clear language will help them achieve that goal. In a society that values individuality, the idea of guiding children in an authoritative manner, instead of as their friend, can feel uncomfortable.

Here is an example of how a transition can affect children by the adults around them:

When I am in my classroom and it’s raining out, every child knows what is expected of them: rainpants, raincoat, and rainboots. They may not like it, and I have had the occasional child protest how much they hate the idea. My response is sweet and simple, “It’s not a choice.” I then lovingly help them into their gear. I don’t get angry. I am not trying to justify to the child, telling them in many ways how I am doing this for their own good. With a hum or a quiet tune I deliberately get them ready and take them outside. It takes exactly one time for that child to understand how this routine goes. The children always return from a glorious hour playing in the rain and mud, arms wide open and ready to deliver a hug and huge smile, letting me know how happy they are.

Occasionally I will hear an adult say, “Well, I don’t like being outside either.” The parent is setting a mood: “We don’t like going outside in the rain.” One mother who arrived at school each rainy morning asked if the children had to put their
rain gear on. Every morning I would smile and answer, “Yes.” She would moan, the child would moan, both getting crankier by the minute. I waited for her to catch on to how happy her daughter was, being allowed to play in the rain for an hour, but she just could not get past her own feelings about rain. At our parent-teacher conference, I brought up the topic. I try to speak from a place of compassion and non-judgment. I spoke about the difficulty we face in rainy Seattle, laughing about my own challenges to overcome my dislike of inclement weather. We then talked about how children pick up on our cues and I asked her if she could try a more positive approach to rain gear, reminding her how it keeps clothes clean and dry. I told her I was happy to help her daughter into her gear in the morning. The next time it rained, she came in and did not ask about the gear; she was cheerful, and she let me help her daughter. These are the glory moments we hold on to. Not everything is this easy. As for her daughter, she loved the rain — and her rain gear. Once the mother’s attitude changed, the child was able to transition gracefully into her rain gear.

Talking Less and ‘Less is More’

The last point I would like to bring up is the ‘less is more’ philosophy. We humans are social creatures. We love to be together and naturally join in herds; just look at us going to restaurants, movie theaters, cafés, playgrounds . . . and meeting socially is very important to our sense of well being.

In early childhood programs, we nurture the children in their first steps as social beings. We help them learn to share and take turns; use their words and not their hands; not to bite others; and that when we hurt a friend, we take care of them by letting them know we are sorry. As teachers we often give the children the words to deal with these moments: “Please stop,” “I don’t want you to do that,” “I’m using this and you can have a turn when I am done.” We teach some children how to overcome shyness and step toward friends. However, in our work there lies a temptation to talk, talk, talk. When we talk incessantly to children, we break their quiet and agitate their nervous systems. This does not mean we shouldn’t talk to children, rather that we should let them talk to us.

All too often we are hurrying our children from one activity to another: Little Gym, ballet, soccer, birthday parties, violin, Spanish classes . . . the list goes on and on, and this can apply in the classroom as easily as it can at home. Yet what does the child ask of us? They yearn for dream time. Time to be unhurried. What if we did less in class, or at home? In my experience, where we welcome the children and then have a natural free-flowing hour where the children are welcome to play, or do a craft project, or help with snack, or just to sit and look at books, and then we began to sing quietly: “Clean up, clean up, everybody, everywhere” there is a seamless transition towards snack.

Food is a driving force for most children, especially food that smells and looks good and getting the clean up done so that we can eat makes the work go quickly and happily; couple that with a morning that is simple, un-rushed, and stress-free and everyone wants to move on to the next activity. Additionally, the children know what is coming next, and so there’s no wondering and everyone moves on joyfully.

When we let children play with their peers in an uninterrupted way, they enter into their play with a depth that’s unattainable if we are constantly asking, “What are you doing?” and similar superficial questions. When children have an hour of unstructured play, they are naturally ready to come in and have snack, and the transition goes smoothly.

Children need our help in learning how to get along in the preschool classroom. This work involves gaining confidence in initiating and following their own interests and following the classroom routine. When we set clear expectations for children that are based on developmentally appropriate practices and our understanding of each child, we can guide children through the activities and transitions of each day in a way that builds their skill and confidence level, allowing them to master the classroom environment and experience success in school.

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Visit our website to find an Out of the Box Training Kit to train your staff “Eliminating Transitions = Eliminating Chaos”
Moving up to kindergarten means getting to know new teachers, places, activities, and expectations — all at once. In contrast to most preschools, “developmentally appropriate practice is less common in kindergarten, and primary teachers face many constraints and pressures that teachers of younger children are not yet experiencing in the same intensity [although preschool appears to be next in line for ‘pushdown’ curriculum]” (Jones, Evans, & Rencken, 2001). For a child with special needs — developmental delays, physical or sensory challenges, communication challenges, social or behavioral differences, or significant health concerns — the transition process becomes much more complex. Fortunately, early educators are in a unique position to contribute to a smoother transition process by becoming more informed, building relationships, supporting the family, following a clear transition timeline, collaborating with the receiving school, and above all, supporting each child to feel safe, welcome, and competent in the new environment. Many of these ideas can be implemented over time and will benefit all children in your program.

Children with Special Needs Face Unique Transition Challenges

Some transition challenges may stem from meeting the unique characteristics and needs of the child, while others relate to the logistics and impact of changing programs and services or to addressing policies and legal requirements:

- **Changes in curriculum and expectations**: Children with special needs may take longer to adapt to a new setting and structure due to differences in abilities or learning styles or the lack of necessary accommodations and supports. “Although academics may be becoming increasingly more important, research shows that social skills are what most affect school adjustment” (Ladd & Price, 1987; Ladd, 1990).

- **Involving the family**: As the center of the child’s life, the family needs to be part of the transition process, if not the lead. Each family has its own strengths, priorities, and challenges, and some families may need more support than others.

- **Re-qualifying for services**: Not all children who qualify for special education support as preschoolers will continue to qualify under the different diagnostic criteria used in primary education. Other children who have not previously needed special supports may require them as they enter kindergarten. To avoid disruption or delays in meeting a child’s needs, the team must take steps to ensure the child qualifies for services prior to the start of kindergarten.

- **A dual enrollment process**: Tracking both the standard process for enrolling in kindergarten (orientations, registration deadlines), as well as special education procedures including meetings, assessments, individualized education planning, and so on, requires additional time, planning, and energy on the part of families.

- **Shift in organization of services and procedures, roles, and responsibilities**: Most often, a transition from preschool or early intervention programs to a K-12 special education system will include a change in service providers, and the structure, delivery, and even funding of services.

- **Transfer of records**: When multiple agencies are involved, and no clear intra-agency agreements are in place, difficulties with exchange of records can prove to be a major barrier to a smooth transition. “Due to confidential-
ity of records parents need to be involved in such transfers, which in itself may occasionally prove problematic” (Janus et al., 2007, p. 632).

Training and preparation: Oftentimes, the staff at the receiving school may need additional training or support to meet a child’s needs, such as adapting activities and materials for children who are visually or hearing impaired, or adapting and implementing a specialized behavior plan.

Become Informed

Understand and support the transition process for all children by becoming familiar with the kindergarten programs and options in your area. Obtain contact information for the district and school offices and other programs that coordinate services for children with disabilities. Find out if there are advocacy or support groups for parents of children with disabilities. Develop a basic understanding of special education laws and procedures and how they are implemented in your area. Wrightslaw.com and similar advocacy organizations provide legal information, as well as links to state agencies and advocacy groups. Obtain resources from your local school districts, advocacy organizations, and agencies to assemble a small library of websites, handbooks, articles, newsletters, and forms to share with staff and families. “Each community is unique, and the transition process needs to be developed in accord with the needs of families and programs” (Brault et al., 2005, p. 22). There is no one-size-fits-all, but most states or districts have handbooks or other materials available online that address the transition to kindergarten, with sections or additional handbooks on the transition process for children with special needs. Many include especially helpful timelines and worksheets.

Build Relationships

Introduce yourself to the people and programs that will serve the children from your program in the future. Arrange to visit and observe kindergarten classrooms, including those serving children with special needs, to get an idea of each program’s pedagogy, resources, environments, and expectations. Get to know the specialists who work with children with disabilities. When it comes to sharing information about a specific child and transition, the relationships you’ve invested in will pay off in improved communication and trust.

Build a Transition Team

The relationships you nurture will help you and the family to build the best possible team to plan and oversee the child’s transition. This transition team will include the parent(s) or other primary caregivers, teachers, and administrators from both the sending and receiving schools, advocates and current and future specialists as needed, including occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, school psychologists, nurses, and any other relevant personnel who together can provide a comprehensive, well-rounded view of the child’s current development and the best fit for the child among available placement and service options. Anyone who has worked with the child recently and has input that would help the child to be more successful in her new environment should be consulted. Throughout the transition, the team will work with the family to ensure they understand their child’s current development and needs, feel informed and empowered to make placement decisions with input from the team, and are fully aware of and comfortable with their options.

Support the Family

Families, specifically the parents, primary caregivers, or guardians, face many challenges when their child with special needs moves into kindergarten. They often must follow the standard enrollment process for all children at the same time they’re learning about, evaluating, and advocating for special programs or services for their child with special needs. Early educators can help by keeping up to date on local timelines, procedures, and requirements for enrolling in kindergarten and accessing special services:

Find out about the typical kindergarten enrollment process.

Put dates for events such as open houses and suggested enrollment activities on your program calendars. Ask the primary schools in your area to help you notify families about these events, and any enrollment requirements or deadlines.

Help families of children with special needs negotiate the dual process of enrolling in kindergarten and qualifying (or re-qualifying) for special services.

Help families locate advocacy organizations and special services in the community, as well as parent groups or perhaps other families who have already transitioned from your program.

Share the transition resources you’ve collected, including relevant websites, printed handbooks, and newsletters from federal, state, or local agencies and advocacy organizations.
Many states or advocacy agencies have handbooks specifically for families. Help the family obtain copies at the very beginning of the transition process.

Some families may need help to make sense of the complicated array of transition tasks and resources, but it is critical to help each family remain a key part of the process as much as possible.

Follow a Timeline

If a child is currently receiving special education services, or if you suspect a child may need special education support in kindergarten, begin the formal transition process at least a year in advance. Typical timeline activities include the following:

**Fall:** A year before the start of kindergarten, give all families information about kindergarten options and procedures. For any child with special needs (formally identified or not) discuss any concerns you or the family has about the child’s upcoming transition, and provide them with information about the transition process and how the team is formed. If all agree, formally refer the child for an assessment and begin forming a transition team.

**Winter:** By winter, families of children with special needs are on a dual track: most schools offer open houses, tours, and informative events for all prospective families, while at the same time the transition team should begin observing and reviewing potential programs to determine if the program will fit with the child’s unique skills and needs. Some families may need help making this assessment. Gather the child’s records and obtain written permission from parents to share it. Begin the assessment and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process, and contact potential team members (teachers, administrators and specialists) from the receiving school(s).

**Spring:** Typical activities for all families include completing enrollment forms (including health and immunization records) and attending orientations. Remind families that orientations also offer a good chance to meet other families and even set up summer play dates with future classmates. For children with special needs, the assessment and IEP must be completed, with participation from the receiving school. Identify any needs the receiving school might have for support, training, and records. Ensure the family has appropriate contact information for the new placement and specialists and a timeline for activities they must complete prior to school.

**Summer:** For most families, preparation includes shopping for school supplies, talking about the new school, and in some communities a home visit from the new kindergarten teacher. If a child has special needs, the team must also ensure the receiving school has all necessary paperwork, as well as any related equipment, materials, training, and strategies to meet the child’s needs. Some children will benefit from a visit to the new teacher and classroom before the first day of school, when other children aren’t present. A child with autism may need to establish a sense of familiarity and safety, while children with sensory impairments can learn how to be in and move around the physical space. If a child uses mobility equipment, make certain the child can navigate classrooms, hallways, and bathrooms.

**Fall:** As the children start in their new school, find a time to check in with the families and new teachers of children with special needs to ensure each child has started school as planned and is settling in, and that any arrangements for training or special services have been fulfilled.

Collaborate with the Receiving School

Building ongoing relationships with kindergarten programs will help you understand the qualities of each and which will

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**Is This the Right Program?**

Providing families with a simple checklist of what to look for in a kindergarten classroom will help them assess and compare any classrooms they may visit in relation to the skills and needs of their child. You and the family might customize the list for a given child, but consider these general questions from Karr-Jelineck (1994):

- How many steps are given at a time in directions?
- What types of words are children expected to understand?
- How does each individual child compare to the other children?
- How long are children expected to sit still in a group?
- How often do children speak out of turn or move around when they should be sitting?
- How much independence is expected?
- What type of work in small groups and as seatwork is being done?
- Where might my students with special needs need extra help?
- What kind of special information can I pass along to the teacher about each child?
likely offer a good fit for specific children with special needs. Established relationships with the receiving school and specialists will open up channels of communication when you need to share information, recommendations, concerns, and support. Your program is responsible for sharing with the transition team your understanding of the child’s educational abilities and needs, and giving input on an appropriate placement and supports. During the actual transition process, be sure that the receiving district and placement have all the necessary paperwork, including legal documents such as assessments, education plans, and standard enrollment forms, such as immunization records and demographic forms.

Support the Child

Above all, the most important way to prepare a child for kindergarten is to continue doing what you already do well. Giving a child the opportunity to develop skills and experiences in preschool is an integral part of the transition process. You’ve already begun preparing the child for the transition to kindergarten by providing a safe, nurturing learning environment. If you can provide this, you help the child feel at ease and happy to be in a school setting. Once you establish trust in the preschool setting, you will also learn things about the child and his style of learning, which can be a helpful insight for the child’s future teacher.

Expose children from time to time to some of the more structured activities that may occur in a kindergarten setting. Introduce the child to routines and taking responsibility for belongings. A visit from the future teacher to your classroom or a visit to the new placement during a school day might be a fun adventure. Consider planning a joint play time or story time — don’t forget to take photos.

Conclusion

As early educators, the day-to-day experiences and nurturing you offer set your young children on a path to a positive and successful education. When a child has special needs, added attention to the transition process provides critical support for the child’s journey. The connections and planning you invest in before and during a child’s transition will impact both the child’s and the family’s future school experiences for years to come.

References and Resources

Barnes, E. (2001). Paving the way to Kindergarten: Timelines and guidelines for preschool staff working with young children with special needs and their families. Syracuse, NY: Center on Human Policy.


Find more articles on our website: “Catching Preschoolers Before They Fall: A Developmental Screening” by Carol Stock Kranowitz
At our best, early childhood teachers create experiences that reflect our deepest values, speak to the aspirations of families, and communicate a clear-sighted respect for every child. Of course, in the moment-to-moment reality of our hectic and unpredictable lives with children, we don’t always realize our highest ideals; we have smooth days when the gap between intention and action narrows, and difficult days when the gap seems to swallow us whole. One lovely thing about important transitions is that they require planning ahead, and thus invite heightened attention to living our intentions.

When we create ritual to mark transition, we ask ourselves: What story does this celebration tell about the children? About their families? About teachers and our work? Any celebration is a chance to communicate confidence and pleasure in a child; warm appreciation for a family; or joy and pride in your own work. But perhaps no celebration offers a richer opportunity to tell these stories than the end-of-year ritual many programs call ‘Graduation.’

There are probably as many wholehearted ways to celebrate Graduation as there are teachers saying goodbye to children they know and love. This is the story of one Graduation at Children First, a small school serving 12 preschoolers in a mixed-age group.

April: Teacher’s Planning Meeting

It’s time for my teaching partner, Sarah, and I to sit together with the calendar, and face our mixed feelings about the goodbyes ahead. As leaders of the school community, we are responsible for logistics, but even more, we are charged with holding space for feelings. All of us — the families and children who are leaving; and the families, children, and teachers being left behind — will experience grief, excitement, anxiety, and anticipation in this transition. If Sarah and I enter this time in tune with our own feelings, we are more likely to move through Graduation in a way that helps everyone else stay present to theirs.

I bring our ‘big list’ — the five-page document that captures what we’ve learned in years past about how to make Graduation happen. We divide tasks and map out the timing of events. Graduation will be the foreground for this last month of school, but we know we must leave space in the background for the wholesome daily fare of preschool life — pretending, time in nature, sensory play, and open-ended work with materials.

We consider ways to make this demanding month more nourishing for teachers. We know that for a ritual to resonate with children and families, many elements need to stay the same from year to year. At the same time, we will bring more energy to our work if some elements are fresh and some time-consuming tasks drop away. So we weigh the value of each item on the list and decide which to keep, which to simplify, and which to let go.

Finally, we remind ourselves what kind of story we want this celebration to tell about each Graduator — a story that acknowledges both challenge and achievement with tenderness, honesty, humor, and optimism.

And so, we settle on a plan. Traditionally, our Graduators prepare gifts for their families as keepsakes of their time at Children First. We want this final project to reflect what the children love, and to showcase their skills with many expressive languages. We decide that each Graduator will choose a ‘scene’ from their lives at school to represent in a diorama, including a self-portrait ‘action figure’ they will draw, and digital photographs of their playmates.

Also in keeping with our tradition, each Graduator will have a Special Day sometime in May. On that day, teachers will host an early morning Progress Conference for the child and family. Later, all the children will help make the Graduator’s crown, and add ideas to the ‘diploma’ — a big piece of chart paper we will fill with a list of things the Graduator has learned to do.
Sarah and I leave our meeting organized and energized. There is hard work ahead, but we know it is work we have chosen for important reasons.

**Mid-April: Planning with Families**

It’s time to bring families into the process. I update our annual Graduation newsletter and send it out. Sign-ups are posted. Graduating families choose dates for Special Days, and other parents volunteer to cover the classroom while teachers are in Progress Conferences. A crew of parents will come one Saturday to raise a giant tarp over the playground in case of rain. Another crew will help teachers set up the playground on the day of the event. Everybody who comes will bring food to go with the pizzas we’ll order for dinner, and one family will bring a huge cake decorated with the Graduators’ names. We need this help, and we believe that the celebration is more meaningful for families when they pitch in.

**May 1: Planning with the Children**

Today when the Graduators arrive at school, they find their names on the morning message: “Gwen, Casey, Kai, and Noam will meet with Donna in the library.” These four children — three of whom saw their older siblings graduate, and all of whom were ‘graduation partners’ last year — have been excited about their own Graduation all year. We’ve been careful, though, not to talk about it much; we would rather children focus on the here and now. But with the turn of the calendar to May, Graduation is upon us, and there are decisions to make.

This meeting is an opportunity for these children to make familiar traditions their own. They choose which songs we will sing for each of them at the ceremony, and negotiate with each other about which dance to do together (as often happens, Joanie Bartels’ wild and silly “Martian Hop” wins the day). Then we brainstorm possibilities for the Graduation piñata we will make from cardboard and paper-mâché. After a series of votes, the winner is “Abiyoyo” — the Pete Seeger monster who has loomed large in stories and games this year.

Later, each Graduator meets with Sarah to choose the scene he or she will represent. What space, experience, and friends will each child claim as most important? We smile with recognition when Casey chooses a game of Rocketship at the creek; Kai, digging “Bob Lake” in the playground’s Sand River; Gwen, playing Mama in the Loft Room; and Noam, being the baby in the Playhouse.

At our end-of-morning meeting with the whole group, the younger children draw names out of a hat to learn what job they will do as ‘Graduation Partners.’ Now we know who will carry each diploma up to the stage, and who will deliver each graduate’s gift from the teachers. What matters most is that everyone has a part to play.

**May 2: Songs**

There is exciting mail for all the kids this morning: we’ve put the four graduation songs on a CD so that kids and families can practice singing them together. Gwen chose Red Grammar’s “Hooray for the World,” the cheery song we sang two years ago for her older brother. For Kai, we will sing Sara Pirtle’s “The Sun Inside Us”: “You’re so strong, you’re so smart — you were born with a loving heart.” Red Grammar’s rollicking “ABC’s of You” is a perfect song for a kid like Casey who enjoys words. And Noam, a boy who loves a tender story, has volunteered to take “Puff the Magic Dragon” — the song we use as the grand finale every year, precisely because it invites the tears that often need to be shed for an important goodbye.

**May Days: Graduation Work**

Most days, there is graduation work to do. The Graduators slowly assemble their detailed dioramas. They design a t-shirt, and families order them in favorite colors. All the kids pitch in to build, paint, and decorate the Abiyoyo piñata, scouring the classroom for just the right materials to represent scraggly hair and long toenails. We sing the Graduation songs, and draw the images they bring to mind. Teachers make a gentle note of ‘last times’ — the Graduators’ last trip to the Eno River; their last turn to pick a reading word; their last Story Day. We talk about mixed feelings: sad goodbyes and kindergarten excitement.

**Special Days**

In the midst of other May Days, each Graduator’s Special Day comes and goes. Early that morning, around a table set with a candle and a simple breakfast, parents and teachers
shared stories of learning and growth they had prepared for the Graduator. Now, the Graduators enjoy wearing the beautiful necklaces we helped them make as tokens of those stories: each bead on the necklace representing something important they have learned. The finished crowns look spectacular sitting in the window, each a colorful reflection of the child who will wear it. The diplomas hang in the classroom, and teachers, children, and families add to the lists until the pages are overflowing with celebratory words: Gwen can “Play Germs, Baby Monkeys, Fairies, Creek Alligator, and Creek Rocketship.” Kai can “Tell amazing stories and make up songs to go with them.” Casey can “Tell people what’s really better because he knows lots of stuff.” Noam can “Be Martin Luther King and the Bus Driver in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.”

Rehearsal Day

It’s the day before Graduation. Yesterday, Casey’s parents were here to help the kids paint the banner that will hang behind the stage. Today, though, we ask parents to arrive early and exit quickly. We are eager to dive into the many tasks of Rehearsal Day.

A few kids head to Creation Station to make pretend diplomas, gifts, and flowers to use as props. We set up the stage on the playground, then play-act the ceremony from beginning to end. One by one, the Graduators take turns standing on stage in their crowns and leading the singing of their songs. Partners get to hear their names called and make their way to the stage with the important object they will deliver to their Graduators. Sarah and I get to practice crying a little when we sing Puff. Then we all cut loose with the Martian Hop. It feels great.

After rehearsal is done, I meet with each Graduator one last time. We read through the entire diploma, adding a few final words if there’s space left on the page. Finally, we choose five especially important things they have learned for teachers to read aloud at Graduation.

Sarah invites each Graduator to paint a tile for the Old Friend mosaic that hangs in our classroom, and takes a photograph of the Graduators together to hang in the bathroom. These are concrete ways we say, “You will be remembered.”

Graduation Day

Arrivals this morning are very tender for families, aware that they are reading the morning message and waving at the Goodbye Window for the last time. Teachers feel it too, and there are lots of hugs in the office.

For the kids, we allow space for simply being together at school: the bike deck is roaring, the loft room is abuzz with pretending, and there is a team of diggers making “Bob Lake” one last time in the Sand River. Meanwhile, there are four big, brightly-colored paper bags waiting to be filled, and teachers invite kids to join a treasure hunt for things the Graduators will take home tonight: decks of reading words; almost-full story journals; wood, wire, and clay sculptures; family ‘action figures’ from the block area, family photos from the magnet board. The Graduators paint a watercolor where teachers will write messages of appreciation for their families. We help the kids wrap their finished dioramas, taking a few minutes to study the carefully crafted scenes and savor the stories that accompany them. We imagine together how delighted the families will be when they open these gifts tonight.
are ordered; tables are set; music is plugged in; citronella candles are lit to keep away the mosquitoes. It’s raining, but for now the tarp is holding. When we’re finished, we take a moment to sit and soak in the magic of the transformation. As kids will say later, “It’s school, but not school!” We’re ready. Graduation!

And now the kids and families are arriving, many in their Graduation t-shirts. We’re excited to see many alumni families, too. The kids snack and play in the rain as the grown-ups spread their blankets around the stage, and situate their potluck offerings on the tables. Teachers make sure that diplomas and gifts are in the right hands, and help the Graduators into their crowns. We get a little nervous about a family who is late, then breathe a sigh of relief when they arrive. It’s time to begin.

Sarah and I take the stage, and call the alumni Children Firsters up to join us. This small choir — now aged six to 21 — lead us in singing the graduation version of our traditional gathering song: “Here We Are Together.”

And now it’s time to call the Graduators. Sarah and I alternate as Gwen, then Kai, then Casey, and finally Noam come up front. For each, there is the presentation of a flower as they take the stage. They stand beside their teacher as she reads out the five things chosen from the diploma, then stand alone as we sing their songs. The teacher calls one graduation partner to bring the CD, and another to bring the diploma, and each partner receives a flower in exchange for their delivery. Then we call for “one last round of applause,” placing a hand on the Graduators to hold them there for a moment; we want them to look around, as we do, and see the love coming back to them from the smiling and tearful faces that surround the stage.

Then we call all four Graduators back to the stage, and invite everybody to get up and dance to the Martian Hop. After four minutes of hilarity, the crowd takes a moment to settle back down, and then, just as I’m about to introduce the Abiyoyo piñata, a graduating parent stands and asks for a moment on stage. Other graduating parents follow, and they speak together of their appreciation for the teachers, and present a gift. Sarah and I are so grateful — not just for their generosity, but for the way that families have claimed space for what they want to express in this ceremony.

The parents sit back down, and we invite everyone to make a huge circle around the piñata. We have prepared a careful list of the children we expect to be here — from the youngest sibling to the oldest alumni — and, beginning with the youngest, we move through the list, inviting each to take his swing at Abiyoyo. Sarah and the kids have built this piñata to last — we want all the kids to get a turn with the bat. Abiyoyo crumbles nicely just as we get to our college-aged alumni. Out falls a pile of simple treasure bags, each labeled with a name. Everybody knows they will get their share, and there’s a busy exchange of bags as kids read the labels and deliver them to each other.

And now it’s just a pizza party in the rain — eating, playing, and cutting the cake. Sarah and I wait for a moment when each graduating family is settled together, then bring out the surprises for the kids to present to their parents. We watch with satisfaction as the parents exclaim over the projects we’ve kept a happy secret for so long.

Finally the party ends as all parties must — with clean-up. Graduating families take down the banner, and cut it apart to save the piece with their child’s name. Sarah and I stay to the end, working alongside a crew of parents to put the playground back together, and taking breaks for goodbye hugs as kids leave with their families, arms full of bags and gifts and crowns and diplomas.

The Day After . . .

The cycle begins again. Sarah and I meet for a late breakfast, and debrief. First, we exchange versions of the event, dwelling on moments we especially loved: The way Casey held eye contact with his big sister the whole time he sang; the way even the shyest Graduation Partners made their deliveries; the way families were good sports about the rain; and the way kids turned the rain into fun. And then the Big List comes out again, and gets a hard look. What worked, and what didn’t work so well? What new ideas will we try next year? In this way we end our year the same way we hope the children have ended theirs — satisfied with what has gone before, and hopeful about what lies ahead.

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