

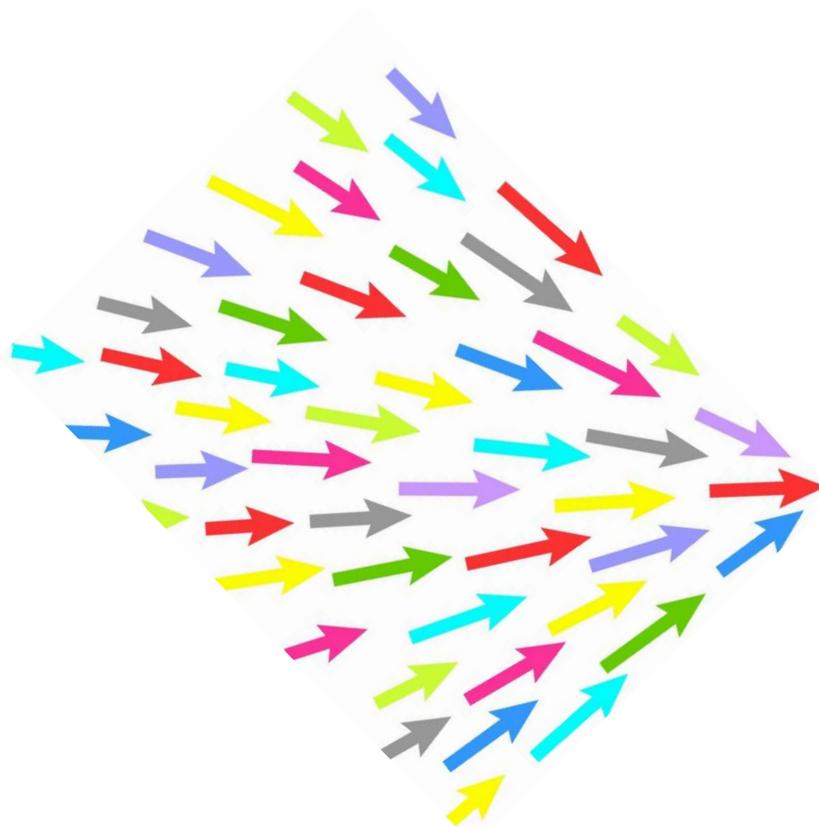


# What supports effective school transitions?

A literature review and good practice guidance document

Newcastle Educational Psychology Service

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## Introduction

'Transition' is often defined as a change from one position or stage to another (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). In terms of education, 'transition' usually refers to the significant transfers that occur for children and young people, throughout their school experiences (Fleischer, 2010). These tend to occur between key stages or school placements. However, the term can be conceptualised differently by the individuals involved, with some believing that transition is a singular event and some referring to it as a longer-term process involving both 'visible and invisible changes' (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). This could create differences in the timing of transition planning and preparations and there is therefore a need for a shared understanding of what 'transition' means, with all stakeholders involved.

Most recent published transition research seems to focus on primary to secondary transfer and therefore, this is the focus of the current report. Transition between primary and secondary school has historically been recognised as a significant event in the lives of most children (Edwards, 2017; West, Sweeting & Young 2010; Hanewald, 2013) and can be the most difficult transition in their educational career (Zeedijk et al., 2003; Van Rens et al., 2018). It is also likely that the recommendations within this document are relevant for other age phase transfers including pre-school to primary school, first school to middle school and middle school to high school.

### What can impact on the vulnerability of children at transition points?

Although not the focus of this report, the literature often discusses 'risk factors' which can lead to a child demonstrating vulnerabilities through transition, which we felt was worth noting here. Although these characteristics often cannot be changed, it may be worth raising awareness of where targeted support may be helpfully placed at transition points.

The following groups (presented in no particular order) can find transition more challenging (though, we must stress that not all of these children will find transition challenging as these are not homogeneous groups):

- Children who are eligible for free school meals (Galton et al., 1999; van Rens et al., 2018; Anderson et al, 2000; Evangelou et al. 2008)
- Children who are less than fluent in English (Galton et al., 1999)
- Children with special educational needs (SEN) (Galton et al., 1999)
- Children with 'low academic achievement' (Anderson et al, 2000; West et al., 2010; Hanewald, 2013; Lester et al., 2012; van Rens et al., 2018) may experience peer victimisation during transition, lower attainment, depression or anxiety.
- Children who demonstrate 'prior problem behaviour' (Anderson et al, 2000; van Rens et al., 2018)
- Children who experience anxiety or low self-esteem (West et al., 2010; Hanewald, 2013; Lester et al., 2012, van Rens et al., 2018) may experience peer victimisation, lower attainment, depression or anxiety during transition.

- Children from some ethnic groups (Galton et al., 1999), particularly if there is a decline in the representation of their ethnic group going into their new school (Benner & Graham, 2009)
- Boys can struggle with school transitions generally and those who don't look forward to transition are often male (Hanewald, 2013; van Rens et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2011)
- Girls can struggle with forming new friendships during transitions (Hanewald, 2013; van Rens et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2011)

### **Common concerns/worries at transition points**

In completing this piece of work, we are aware that we have not engaged directly with children and young people who are about to, are undergoing, or who have recently undergone, transition. Therefore, consideration of their views through previous literature is important. Prior to secondary transfer, children's worries or concerns often focus on:

- Social issues (bullying, loneliness, making new friends) (Heinsch, 2020; Ashton, 2008; Zeedyk et al., 2003; Rice et al., 2011)
- Workload (Zeedyk et al., 2003)
- Homework (Rice et al., 2011; Hanewald, 2013)
- Getting used to new routines and environments (Zeedyk et al., 2003; Hanewald, 2013)

Jindal-Snape (2016) noted that the focus on academic concerns often materialised during the first year of secondary school, as the focus to begin with often resides with building new relationships and maintaining existing relationships.

Parental concerns are often different to pupils' concerns and can focus more on safety and social issues such as fitting in (Hanewald, 2013).

### **Rationale and Method**

There is agreement in the research literature that well considered and carefully implemented transition programmes can make a difference in supporting children, their families and school staff through the transition process (Hanewald, 2013, van Rens et al., 2018). Supporting school transitions is a current priority for Newcastle City Council.

This literature review was conducted by searching recently published academic journals from two databases, that were relevant to answering the question, 'What supports effective school transitions?'. Although transition was considered broadly (rather than focusing on any given population), the majority of literature explored the primary-to-secondary transition. Twelve relevant articles were reviewed thematically and five themes were generated.

## **Findings: What helps to support school transitions?**

### ***Role of teachers***

Teachers play an important role in making transitions positive experiences by supporting children and young people to move in, between and out of school (Coffey, 2013; Topping, 2011). Students' positive perceptions of school climate and academic motivation are linked to teacher support (Hanewald, 2013). Teachers who were more attuned to peer group affiliations seem to promote more successful environments and students' improved views of school social climate and adjustment during the school transition period (Hamm et al., 2011).

Researchers recommend that educational professionals are sensitive and responsive to students, so that they feel nurtured and supported during the transition period (Martinez et al., 2011).

### ***Role of parents/family***

Families play an equally important role in pupils' transitions between schools (van Rens et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2000; Hanewald, 2013), particularly by:

- Remaining a constant (Hanewald, 2013), emotional (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2018), social (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Virtanen et al., 2020) and practical support;
- Sharing their own memories of transition (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2018);
- Monitoring their child's activities (Hanewald, 2013) and being present and available before and after school (West et al., 2014);
- Intervening positively (Hanewald, 2013);
- Having a good understanding of the new school's processes (Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019);
- Getting to know their child's teachers (Coffey, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019);
- Collaborating with school staff (Strand, 2020) and communicating effectively with the various stakeholders (Elias et al., 2007; Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019).

This seems to be an often-overlooked support mechanism during transitions and there is a need to build further support for and from families (West et al., 2014). Supporting families to support their children would mean tapping into and strengthening their regular support network (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Family support can promote a child's post-transition engagement, in terms of their behaviour (Virtanen et al., 2020). And therefore, families should be empowered and actively made aware of the important role they play during their child's transition.

### ***Role of peers***

Close friendships and peer relationships that survive transition have a considerable effect on how children settle into secondary school (Weller, 2007). To promote a successful transition to secondary school, primary schools should pay attention to constructing good relationships between students. This work can be continued in the

first few years of secondary school, by guaranteeing continuity in students' relationships with their peers (Virtanen et al., 2020). Heinsch et al., (2020) found that many students made friends due to proximity and shared interests, suggesting that an increased range of structured activities might be warranted in the transitional phase. This is consistent with Gowing and Jackson's (2016) qualitative research where students and staff suggested that certain subjects and activities—such as music, sport and excursions—could create unique relational spaces and opportunities to this end.

### ***Belonging/Connectedness***

Hanewald (2013) found higher connectedness to secondary school was related to fewer classroom and peer problems, fewer emotional problems and greater pro-social skills through transition. Virtanen et al, 2020's research also suggests that higher connectedness at primary, through peer relationships, leads to effective transition to secondary school as well. These students also had less difficulty in the actual transition itself, all of which was caused by the schools giving priority to pastoral care strategies and focusing on helping students to achieve academically. Anderson et al., (2000) agree with the importance of creating a sense of community belonging within the receiving school, as do Lester and Cross (2015) who found a strong association between school connectedness and wellbeing during transition.

To help vulnerable children cope with, and even benefit from, the period of transition, we need to focus more on the social and personal experiences at this time (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). There is a need for interventions to improve social and mental health outcomes (Lester et al., 2013). Waters et al., (2012) suggest early detection of children who are vulnerable to a poor transition to enable support, tailored to their particular needs, to increase their connection to the new school environment to minimize the potential of long-term negative implications.

In order to promote school connectedness, Bharara (2020) suggests that schools must create opportunities for children to participate in extra-curricular clubs as well as creating a nurturing atmosphere in school.

### ***Transition activities***

Literature suggests that environmental contexts have a stronger effect on the outcome of a transition than a child's developmental characteristics (van Rens et al., 2018; Anderson et al. 2000). Schools that use formal transition programs can see fewer incidents of bullying during transition (Hanewald, 2013). Research suggests that both pupils and parents would like there to be more familiarisation-related opportunities (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019), and that these can be effective (Sirsch, 2003; van Rens et al., 2018) in building their understanding of the new physical and human environment. Examples include:

- More induction/taster days (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019; Evangelou et al., 2008)
- More opportunities to meet others (pupils and key staff e.g., head teacher or form/support teacher) from the school (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019).

- More opportunities to discuss what will happen in secondary school (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019).
- A clearer map of the school (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019)
- Information booklet/handbook (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019; Evangelou et al., 2008).
- Help from secondary school to navigate their new environment, such as tours of the building (van Rens et al., 2018; Evangelou et al., 2008).
- Supporting pupils to 'become' secondary pupils for example, treating them as adolescents rather than children whilst also giving them time to learn and adjust to the new environment and systems. For example, gradually introducing systems, new learning approaches and marks/grades as an assessment tool across the early weeks (van Rens et al, 2018); providing encouragement, support and assistance with homework (van Rens et al., 2018; Evangelou et al. 2008) and in lessons (Evangelou et al. 2008).

These elements are all often featured in a successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008) and it is helpful if these can start in the second last year of primary school (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). Children who *feel* that they had access to lots of help to settle, from secondary school staff, are more likely to have a successful transition (Evangelou et al., 2008). Therefore, overt and explicit support mechanisms and activities may be more likely to be helpful than more subtle and low-key approaches. School leaders and teachers also emphasise the importance of collaboration through the process of transition, both at the school level and with the individual families (Strand, 2020).

Programmes/activities aimed at building children's responsibility, independence and academic skills prior to transition are also deemed to be helpful (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019). The language used in transitions may also play an important role. For example, discussing transition as a 'progression' rather than a 'loss'. Jindal-Snape and Cantali (2019)'s research suggested that those who anticipated problems prior to transition were often those who experienced problems, suggesting a self-fulfilling prophecy. This has implications for thinking about the narratives around transition and the anticipation of transition (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019)

## Summary

Transfer from primary school to secondary school has long been recognised as an important change in the lives of most people (West et al., 2010). There is consistent evidence to suggest that most pupils experience some degree of anxiety around transfer (West et al., 2010), and those periods of transfer can be stressful as well as anxiety provoking (Tobbell & O'Donnell 2013).

Effective transition practices focus on building secure relationships between children, families, communities, educators and educational settings. Five themes arose through our analysis of recent research literature: *the role of teachers, the role of family, the role of peers, belonging / connectedness and transition activities*. Taken

together, they seem to emphasise the importance of the community, collaborative working and investing in transition.

Below are a range of organisational, social, and academic strategies to support an effective transition.

### ***Before transition***

- Sharing information concerning the child: secondary staff attendance at review meetings, communications with Y5/6 teachers, Y5/6 parents' evening.
- Building connectedness and belonging and social peer relationships during primary school.
- Schools share information about friendships or any difficulties within the peer group.
- Building resilience and emotional literacy skills in Y5/6 and across primary.
- Building independence skills in Y5/6.
- School staff training regarding emotion-coaching, and nurture-based approaches.
- Teacher training about transition for Y5/6/7 teachers and leadership – including summary of all of the above, such as the importance of peers and family and how could they support this in their school?
- Building a shared understanding of what we mean by 'transition' and 'sense of belonging'.
- More frequent visits to linked secondary school (for example, PE lessons, sports day, performances, collaborative learning days).
- Greater links and collaboration between primary and secondary schools.
- Family information sessions – emphasising the importance of parental engagement with school and during transition – awareness of school procedures, building relationships with school staff, and good communication with school staff, importance of availability of family before and after school, when possible – building relationship with their child and emotional literacy.
- Sharing photo books of schools.
- Support to develop organisational skills needed for secondary school, for example, share example timetables and talk through them, have timetable quizzes, use timetables for 'pack schoolbag' activities.

### ***During transition***

- Head teacher/other key staff visits to primary pupils.
- Secondary school staff being friendly, inviting and welcoming during visits.
- Collaboration between professionals and families.
- A safe psycho-social environment – empathetic, attuned staff, who are emotionally available.
- Considering the language used around transition, in terms of a progression rather than a loss.
- Care taken to ensure friendship groups are placed together in classes.
- Secondary school visits, taster days, induction days.

- Time given to children to learn to 'become' secondary pupils, giving them time to learn the new rules and procedures.
- Meeting current secondary pupils.
- Help with finding their way round, tours of the school, scavenger hunts around school.
- Y7 pupils give their parents a tour of the school in the first few weeks.
- Family information session – recap and specifics for their secondary school – building the relationship with their child and emotional literacy.
- Written information/documents (handbook, maps, timetable etc).

### ***During transition and beyond***

- Building belonging and connectedness in the lead up to transition and during Y7 – encouraging attendance at extra curricula activities.
- Emphasis on belonging, inclusion, connectedness, resilience.
- Primary and secondary schools to consider how they can build links with their community to a greater extent more generally.
- Predictability of routine.
- Regular meetings with parents during Y7 – building relationships between school and parents, parental engagement across transition and lower-secondary, involvement is key for emotional and behavioural outcomes.
- Frequent opportunities for parents and families to be part of the school community.
- Opportunities for more discussion and reassurance around academic support as Y7 progresses.
- Primary friendships maintained through form groups.

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