

“Life Transitions”
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“How many stress points do you have?” The question can be heard in the halls each trimester as the health teacher introduces the mental health unit and students rate themselves on the stress scale. The scale assigns a certain number of stress points to particular life circumstances. Moving to a new home may be 50 points, divorce may be 75 and loss of a parent 200. Add them all up to have an indication of the level of stress being experienced at that time.

One student has a few points because his dad just changed jobs and has different hours now. Another student is off the chart. Her mother died of cancer last week. Her father moved out five years ago and remarried. He has two babies in his home now and no room for another child. That means moving in with Aunt Sherry and starting a new school. Pets aren’t allowed where Aunt Sherry lives, so Pugsy has to go live with a friend. Aunt Sherry has three kids of her own. And so it goes.

Whatever the situation, most of the items on the stress chart involve a transition of some kind. Stress and change are often partners. As school counselors help students through times of transition, they can teach students life skills and help them build resiliency, all while ensuring academic success continues.

Every day, students enter the classroom to partake of the education being offered. They do not, however, enter on an equal playing field. John comes from a stable two-parent family, has been in the same home all of his life and receives help with his homework each night. He comes to first-period English prepared, alert and ready for the day.

Sarah comes from a single-parent home where her recently divorced mother works two jobs to keep the family going. Sarah helps with childcare and meals for two younger siblings. She started a new school this year when her parents split and she had to move. She often falls asleep while doing her homework alone after her siblings have been put to bed. Sarah arrives at first-period English with inadequate sleep, incomplete

homework and with her mind on what is in the cupboards to make for dinner that evening.

Even one life transition can create a multitude of challenges for children and for the school attempting to educate them. School counselors should take a multifaceted approach that considers the needs of all students dealing with transitions while providing support to individuals with more personal needs through groups, individual responses, parent collaboration and community resources.

Meeting All Students' Needs

The ASCA National Model describes school counselors as advocates for the academic success of all students. While addressing specific needs for special situations, we know that all students will experience some form of transition. Teaching all students the skills for dealing with change will benefit them in all three domains – academic, career and personal/social.

Let's look again at health class. Wouldn't a classroom lesson handling life transitions and the inherent stressors naturally follow the activity on stress points? Teaching all students that change is inevitable and following with lessons on how to manage change and the accompanying emotions not only enhances the initial activity but also provides valuable information and resources for those actually experiencing a difficult life transition.

When schools have thoughtfully developed a plan for welcoming in new students, transitions are made easier. Often new students are experiencing a number of other transitions concurrently – new home, new friends, new family situation. Acknowledging the challenges of entering a new school community with welcoming activities in the classroom, a peer welcoming committee and/or parent letter with information about the school can soften the often painful experience of moving. Peer welcoming committees teach all students valuable insights into transitions as well and provide models in the school community for acceptance. It is important to note here that the introduction of even one new student into a school community is likely to create some kind of transition for students already there as friendship groups may shift. All of our students need training in how to handle transition, and all of our teachers need to be experts in facilitating transition.

Teachers can have a large impact on successful student transitions. Using the example given earlier, let's look again at John (from the stable home) and Sarah (from the home in transition). Without some understanding of each student's background, the first-period English teacher could easily consider John to be an academic star while seeing Sarah as a lazy student, lacking motivation toward her own academic progress. With an understanding of Sarah's situation, however, the teacher will be in a better position to offer the support Sarah needs, refer her to the school counselor or collaborate with her parents on ways to make school more successful for her. School counselors can develop in-service programs for staff on specific challenges students in transition face and ways to facilitate their success in the classroom.

Helping Individual Students

Single-parent families are not uncommon, but for a child who started life in a two-parent family, the transition to a single-parent family or split family may create difficulties and require some special attention by school personnel. This transition may come about through a parent's separation, divorce, abandonment, incarceration or death. Depending on the size of the community, the amount of communication between the home and the school and the ability or willingness of the family to share, school personnel may or may not be aware of the transition for a period of time.

Share information: Schools can encourage the sharing of information through newsletters, weekly class notes from teachers and by creating an atmosphere of trust in which students of all ages feel safe sharing the changes in their lives. A newsletter may include a list of ongoing groups or a list of topics that may be covered when different issues arise for children. A weekly class note from a teacher could include a paragraph that states, "Remember, as a parent, you know your child best. If there are circumstances at home that may affect your child's learning or behavior in school, please let me know. In this way, I can better understand your child and better help him/her to be successful in school."

Once school personnel are aware of a transition in the child's life, they should contact the parent(s) if the parents haven't already contacted the school. If a good relationship has already been established with the classroom teacher, it is likely that parents will make the contact. It's important for classroom teachers to be aware of

counseling services available through the school counseling program so teachers can share the knowledge with the parent. Consider developing a reference brochure outlining these services so teachers have something to give parents who may or may not be ready to consider counseling options at that moment.

Develop groups: Counseling groups that may offer support to these children might be called a changing families group, or you may want to use a canned program such as Banana Splits. The changing families group could include those transitions mentioned above but could also include children who have experienced the addition of a sibling including one with special needs, the loss of a sibling, a long-term illness of a family member or a move into foster care.

Offer bibliotherapy: If there isn't a group setting that would work to offer support for a child in these types of transitions or if the parent prefers a one-on-one setting, individual counseling may be the alternative. "Dinosaur's Divorce" by Lauren Krasny Brown and Marc Brown is a great book to use to help children understand what is happening in a separation and/or divorce transition and to facilitate a dialog between the students and counselor. For upper elementary and middle school students, a great book is "The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce" by Richard A. Gardner, M.D.

Understand the grief process: Students who are going through these transitions are also going through the grief process. What was normal for them, a two-parent family for example, has changed. If the transition is because of a parent's separation, divorce, incarceration or abandonment, the grief process will be much the same as when a parent dies. The difference is that with separation, divorce, incarceration or abandonment, there is no finality. There is often the movement of a parent in and out of the child's life and, just as the child may be adjusting to the change, the parent may move back into the child's life. With this in mind, a school counselor working with an elementary child in this transition may want to continue to check in with that child periodically after the end of a group or the end of individual counseling sessions. If that support is not continually available throughout the year, it is one more transition the child will be experiencing.

Help parents: A child in transition represents a family in transition. Whatever has caused the transition in the child's life is having an effect on the entire family as well. Parent contact and collaboration is a key to supporting a student through transition.

Parents, while proving a valuable source of information about their children's needs, may also need to draw on the school counselor's familiarity with community resources and services. It is much easier for a child to navigate the turbulent waters of a life transition when the family has some direction as well.

America is a society in transition. We have changed dramatically in the last century. Most children are no longer reared in the same neighborhood by both of their natural parents. They move. They experience blended families. They have to leave childhood friends and make new friends, maybe several times. We are faced with the challenge of imparting a rigorous academic program to students with varying backgrounds and circumstances. As we become more skilled in offering support to our students through a variety of life's transitions, we help them meet the school's academic demands, and we truly prepare them for the changing world in which they live.