**Reducing Stress around the Transition to Kindergarten**

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***Abstract:***

One school’s exploration of a 6-month transition plan focusing on reducing common stressors experienced around the transition to Kindergarten. The plan was based on the study of Dr. Stuart Shanker’s work around self-regulation and the impacts that stressors can have on a person’s behaviour. It also considered Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, the theory that higher needs will come in to focus once the lower, more basic needs (physiological and safety and security) are met. The focus group of the transition plan was the students and families of Year One learners (Junior Kindergarten) who were entering Kindergarten in the 2018-2019 school year. The redesigned plan identified and reduced common transitional stressors in an attempt to decrease stress and stress behaviours. The work also prioritized increasing confidence and feelings of safety and security by establishing deeper connections between the educators and families.

***Reasoning:***

The beginning of school is an important and exciting event for children, families and educators. It is a time to lay the foundation for a love of learning that a child can carry with them throughout their educational career. Too often though, the transition to kindergarten is not prioritized to the extent that it should be. The team of educators involved in this work felt that the focus of this transition needed much more attention and analysis in order to foster connections, reduce stress and ensure that children, families and educators felt mentally and emotionally prepared for school. The group decided to reflect on their beliefs around self-regulation, their values and their learning as a means to develop a plan that met the needs of the children, parents and educators.

***Stressors:***

A large life change, such as entering the formal school system, for a child and for families can increase stress significantly. It can be an exciting time for some and an overwhelming experience for others. From a survey provided, it was reported that though the experience may be different for each person, there were many common stressors amongst the groups of educators, parents and children.

***Common stress among educators included:***

Common stress indicated by educators included: not knowing families well prior to the first day (history, custody, cultural beliefs, etc), lack of transition plans for students requiring support, separation anxiety in both children and parents establishing new routines with a large group of young children and change in teacher assignment from the previous year.

***Common stress among parents included:***

Common stress indicated by parents included: a general fear of the unknown for their child as it relates to beginning school, worry about the young age of child (age 3-4) and uncertainty of their independence, difficulty in making the choice of the right school for their child, separation from their child, worry about child’s behaviour, unfamiliarity with new routines (including bus, pick up, drop off), worry about the amount of children at school (400 students) and the size of school, nervousness about how the child would handle second language introduction in the French Immersion stream.

***Common stress among children included:***

While children may experience the common fears and anxiety for this age including separation from parent and loud/unfamiliar noises (Focus on Family, 2014), there are a multitude of other stressors that may impact a child’s transition to school.

In the book Self-Reg, Dr. Shanker describes 5 domains in which people of all ages can experience stress: biological, emotional, cognitive, social and prosocial (Shanker, 2016). The transition to school is ripe with potential causes for dysregulation amongst students. The team of educators (including certified Teachers and Registered Early Childhood Educators) analyzed each of these 5 domains and identified the following list as common and potential stressors for new students entering school.

Biological stressors might include long days, lack of flexibility to eat, busier schedule, rushing in the morning, bright lights, loud volumes, constant noise, proximity of people, classroom clutter and the amount of people

Emotional stressors might include fear of unknown people, routines and building, separation from parents, frustration with sharing, anticipation, confrontation and feeling unsafe in a new environment

Cognitive stressors might include second language, multistep instructions, memory of routines/layout, confusion, new learning, information overload, multitasking, prioritizing tasks and overstimulation

Social stressors might include interacting with new peers, sharing materials, making new friends, joining in play and being a part of a big group

Prosocialstressors might include parent or other student’s stress and demonstrating empathy.

According to Dr. Shanker, “Stress behaviour is caused by too high a stress load”. (Shanker, 2016). Stress behaviours witnessed by educators in previous years during the transition to school had included crying, yelling, pulling parents closer, avoidance, flight, withdrawal, hiding and reluctance to speak. Maslow suggested that “Before a student's cognitive needs can be met, they must first fulfill their basic physiological needs. For example, a tired and hungry student will find it difficult to focus on learning. Students need to feel emotionally and physically safe and accepted within the classroom to progress and reach their full potential” (MacLeod, 2018).

The team posed this question as they rethought how they would support new learners and families entering school: “If we decrease common stressors surrounding the transition to school for all parties involved, will stress behaviours decrease and feelings of safety and security increase?

**Plan:**

Over the past 5 years, this school had experienced many different plans to support their early learners when entering Kindergarten. Typically, in the winter there had been a Welcome to Kindergarten Night, where registration would occur and activities would be set out for children to “experience school”. Reflecting on this, the educators wondered the effectiveness of one single event so many months before the actual start of school. Another, more recent, attempt to change the transition had been a Welcome to Kindergarten event in the spring. This gathering offered provocations and play based activities that mirrored what was typically offered in the classrooms. Though they felt that this gave families a better understanding of what they offered in their programs, it still didn’t allow for the connections, communication or consistency that was required to reduce the stress and to build a base of safety and security.

In studying and implementing Dr. Shanker’s work throughout their classrooms and school, the educators believed that a successful Transition to Kindergarten plan needed to focus on some of the core steps he outlines in his book titled *Self-Reg* (Shanker 2016). *These steps include reframe, recognize and reduce and are described below:*

**Reframe:** They reframed the “behaviour” often associated with children entering school. The group believed that crying, nervousness, withdrawal, anger, fear, etc... were means of communication of a stressor that had not yet been addressed. They further reframed the idea of a worried and nervous parent as a way to communicate that their needs hadn’t been met either and that excessive stress may be present.

**Recognize:** They began to assess the former transition plans looking for ways to target and reduce the potential challenges. From the data gathered and the list they had created, the group identified the following 5 stressors as their main priorities.

1. Lack of time and opportunity to prepare emotionally/mentally for school
2. Lack of connection between family and school
3. Unfamiliarity of new people including staff and other students
4. Unfamiliarity of layout, building and materials
5. Fear around the large amount of people

**Reduce**: The group attempted to reduce the stress load for all parties by designing a 6-month transition to school plan that allowed children a more gradual entry and incremental exposure to school. The goal was to reduce feelings and expressions of dysregulation by increasing parent and child comfort with the routines, layout and fostering more developed connection between the family and the school.

***Monthly Events Hosted During the Transition to Kindergarten:***

**Parent night:** The first event in the transition process was intentionally designed only for the parent community to attend. Normally the main “Welcome to Kindergarten” event had involved families; however, the team wanted the opportunity to share with parents what their school had to offer. They wanted parents to be able to ask questions, meet the staff, tour the school and feel confident in their choice of school for their child. The focus on the first step in the plan was to reduce the stress for the parent around the decision of school for their child; as many parents had reported this was a significant source of anxiety for them.

Once children were registered in the school, the focus of the plan shifted to the child and to reducing their stress around coming to school. A variety of events were hosted by different educator teams including a Teacher and Early Childhood Educator, and located throughout the school. The intention was to expose the children to different staff, groupings and school materials through these planned events. Each gathering was hosted by one educator team, allowing children and families joining the various events to meet and interact with the entire kindergarten team. These evenings took place in the library, classrooms, gymnasium and playground, slowly introducing the young learners to the different physical spaces of the school and reducing the overwhelming size of the building. The following are examples of the events put on by the educator teams:

1. **Story Night** was held in March in the library, beginning the transition with a safe and familiar activity of reading a book. The educator team read *The Mitten* and offered some puppet play, story retell and craft opportunities. It allowed for a relaxed atmosphere for parents to interact with their child and meet the members of the staff.
2. **Hands on Science Night** was held in April in the Kindergarten classrooms. Two classrooms were transformed into hands on science laboratories. Students could dig for dinosaur bones, shine coins with different solutions, explore slime, test out magnets and make volcanoes. This event provided students the opportunity to begin to interact with different materials offered in the kindergarten classrooms and to allow parents to see their child’s independence and curiosity in the classroom setting.
3. **Yoga Night** was held in the gym in May. Families were invited to experience both the active fun that can be had at school in the gym as well as the mindfulness practices that are consistent throughout this school’s kindergarten program. A primary focus throughout much of this school is in sharing mindfulness practices with children to support their self-regulation.
4. **Outdoor Adventure Night** was the final event in June and took place on the playground. The students were read a book, explored the outdoor activities and played with the parachute together. This event permitted educators to step further into their roles and to actively play with the children, continuing to build and deepen the connections while allowing the parents to take a step back and begin to observe this relationship. It was evident at this event that the comfort level of the both the children and parents had increased and that relationships between educators and students had been established.
5. **The Night Before Kindergarten Barbeque** took place the day before school started in September. Families were welcomed one final time to connect with the staff, tour their assigned classroom and to discuss the logistics of the transition to school for the following day. Students were able to see where they would be dropped off, locate their coat hook and learn where the bathrooms were. They saw the physical space exactly as they would see it on the first day. The intention was to ensure that students felt safe and secure not only with the interpersonal relationship, but with the physical space and predictability of what that first day of school would bring.

***Data:***

The data collected allowed the team to reflect on the strengths and next steps in their new kindergarten transition plan. Nineteen families completed and returned the questionnaire allowing the group to gather the following data:

Of the 19 families responding, 15 had attended the parent information night and 5 didn’t, which was a 75% attendance rate for that initial event. The feedback from this event suggested that it supported parents to make an informed decision of schools for their child and to remain confident in their choice.

When asked if the transition events were helpful in reducing the stress of their child’s transition to school, the average satisfaction score on a scale of 1-10 was 8.6/10. This score increased to 9/10 for families attending 4 events and to a 10/10 for families who attended all 5 events. This suggested what the team had hypothesized: the more events a family attended, the more it had helped their child’s transition to school.

When reflecting on the reduction in their own stress around the transition, parents responded that on a scale of 1-10, the average stress reduction score was 8.2/10. Again this number rose from a 6/10 for families who attended only 1 event, to a 9/10 stress reduction for families who attended 4-5 events. Indicating again that the more events parents attended, the greater the reduction in their stress.

When asked if they felt that they had the opportunity to meet various staff that may work with their child, the average satisfaction score was 8.4/10, with numbers as high as 9.7/10 for parents attending 4 events.

Finally, when asked if they had enough opportunities to connect with their child’s educators the average satisfaction score was 8.7/10 with the number increasing to a full 10/10 for families who attended all 5 events.

The attendance taken at the final event, the Night Before Kindergarten Barbeque, was 98% of all registered Year One families in attendance at that event.

***Reflection:***

With observations from the data as well as the first days and weeks of school, the staff reported that it was evident that the new transition plan helped to ensure a much smoother entry to school for the vast majority of families both emotionally and logistically. Educators observed that the drop offs for the first few days of school were easier and there was a reduction in observable stress behaviour compared to previous years. Educators felt that they were more connected to and knew the children who were entering their classes and were more familiar with the families and their backgrounds.

Parents reported that they also felt more connected with the educators and more prepared for the beginning of school. With their own reduction in stress, parents suggested that they were in a better place to support their children if and when they required more reassurance.

Overall, children were said to be more excited for school and to see their teachers again. They appeared comfortable and confident in entering and exploring the physical spaces, interacting and connecting with their peers and in separating from their parents.

A few things that have been taken from the feedback given by parents is that more support could be given to managing the minor logistical stressors such as entering the locked school, the cashless school system, bell times, list of supplies, etc... by providing a hand out in advance. Another suggestion that came up multiple times was to establish a set time for parents to visit and sit and speak with the educators individually. Both of these will be considered as the team looks forward to next year’s plan.

It is said that “fundamental to a smooth transition are relationships that serve as a bridge between the family and school, and provide for continuity from pre-school to kindergarten”(Kraft-Sayre M & Pianta R.) and this transition plan helped to build those relationships and ensure that smooth transition. The team believes that as they work to decrease common stressors and increase safety and security in their youngest learners, they help to put them in a better place to be prepared for school and the enjoyment that can come along with that. However, with interactions constantly being an exchange of emotion, stress and mood, all of the people supporting these children must be taken in to consideration to truly ensure the smoothest transition for all learners. The team acknowledges and prioritizes the needs of the entire community of students, parents and educators and emphasizes that this will remain a major focus in their transition plan moving forward.

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