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Letting My Butterflies Go

Helping Children Move on to Kindergarten

Every year in late spring, our class watches as caterpillars become pupa, then turn into butterflies. We release them outdoors during the last week of the school year. This activity symbolizes the children's growth during the past year and the new adventures that will lie ahead when they go to kindergarten.

Saying good-bye to a class of preschoolers is emotional for all involved—children, teachers, and families. The process begins in spring as children start talking about their summer plans and what lies ahead. Preparation for this important transition needs to unfold gently with increasing emphasis as the last day of the program year approaches. This article provides activities and tips that can help everyone say meaningful good-byes and move on to experience success in kindergarten and beyond.

Helping children

At the end of the school year, teachers can help children move on in many ways, whether they are off to kindergarten in a new school or the next class in the same program.

... Cope with feelings

■ **Acknowledge your feelings and the children's feelings about moving on to kindergarten.** Let the children know you will miss them and that they are welcome to come back and visit.

■ **Offer familiar activities, such as using playdough and hammering at the workbench, that let children release tension.**

When a new child is joining your class during the program year,

- Share information about the child and his or her interests with the class.
- Ask the children how they can help the child feel welcome.
- Use the buddy system to pair the child with a child who tends to be outgoing and helpful.
- Play “getting to know you” activities that focus on names and interests, like singing songs that include children’s names or charting favorite fruits.

and what will be different. Answer the children’s questions during the discussion and as they arise.

Schedule one or several visits to the new school or classroom. Take photographs to post in the classroom and to share with families.

Helping families with the transition

Near the end of the year, write a letter to families thanking them for the privilege of sharing some of their child’s growing time. Suggest ways families can help their children cope with their feelings about going to kindergarten (see *Message in a Backpack*, p. 23).

Many preschoolers have concerns about moving on to kindergarten. They worry that they won’t have friends, won’t like the teacher, will get lost, won’t be able to do the work, and so on. Teachers can help by acknowledging everyone’s feelings, providing information about the new setting, and spending plenty of time reminding children that they are competent learners who will be successful kindergartners.

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Transitioning from preschool to kindergarten, especially when it means entering public school for the first time, can be very stressful for dual language learners and their families. Preschool teachers can pave the way to success by helping families understand all aspects of transition.

The new school may have different rules and regulations related to class placements and teaching for dual language learners. Take special care to communicate to the new school details about the children’s skills in English and their home language. In addition to test results, observation notes provide very useful information.

Plan extra time for movement, dancing, and physical play—indoors and outside.

Read and discuss books in which the characters adjust to new situations and changes in their lives. Use the books to start conversations about what it will be like to move on to kindergarten.

Provide puppets and dramatic play props children can use to act out and make sense of their feelings about moving on. Encourage children to draw and write about going to kindergarten.

... Remember the good times

Talk with children—individually and in small groups—about their positive memories and what they learned during the year. Remind them about the skills they have developed. In the late spring I might make comments like, “Your legs are getting so long they won’t fit on the slide and climber. The playground equipment at your new school will be bigger.”

Play games that encourage remembering. For example, at circle time roll a ball to each child and say, “Tell us about something you like to do at school.” Fill a basket with items from the classroom (block, paintbrush, puzzle piece, and such). Ask each child to choose an object from the basket and tell how he or she played with it during the year. Share the children’s responses with families so they can talk with their children too.

Revisit photos taken throughout the year. Create a bulletin board display or make copies of the photos so children can make memory books to take home.

Make a “Friend, Friend, Who Do You See?” book (based on Bill Martin Jr and Eric Carle’s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*) in the winter. Include one child’s photo on each page and a photo of yourself on the last. Above each photo write, “[Child’s name, child’s name], who do you see?”; below each write, “I see [next child shown] looking at me.” Under your photo write, “I see all the children looking at me.”

This book will be a favorite for the rest of the year and a good one to read on the last day. When I get to the last page, I say, “I see all the children looking at me who I must say good-bye to and who are off to wonderful new adventures.”

... Learn about the new school

Discuss again and again what the children’s new schools are like. Tell the children what will be the same

In addition to sharing ideas from this article with families, sign and make copies of the *Message in a Backpack* on page 23. It’s available online (in English and Spanish) at naeyc.org/tyc.