

Self-study notes

Unit No. 9: Transitions and Trajectories

Unit objectives

- To consider the developmental trajectories of vulnerable children and identify the impact of intervening at various stages
- To understand the importance of providing support at the earliest possible stage
- To identify the important transitions experienced by looked after children
- To explore effective ways of managing and supporting transitions

Outline of Unit

- Introduction
- Developmental Trajectories
- Activity: Personal Transitions
- Presentation: Understanding transitions
- Case example: Identifying transitions
- Managing transitions well in practice
- Activity: Making transitions work well
- Video clip

Introduction

Welcome to the unit on Transitions and Trajectories. This unit focuses on two interconnected topics. Initially it examines the idea of developmental trajectories focusing particularly on education. There are numerous anecdotal accounts that early years workers are able to identify those children who will be failing in school and/or in serious trouble in their adolescence and young adulthood. Research has to some extent backed this up and a number of longitudinal studies have helped to identify both the factors in early life that are associated with difficulties later and also positive interventions that appear to have persisting effects across several years of children's lives.

Good transition management for looked after children is particularly important in ensuring that their development is not adversely affected by the multiple changes they may experience. Most of this part of the unit focuses on children who are looked after away from home who invariably experience at least one life changing transition and often many more. Many children who are looked after at home, however, may also experience numerous changes of caregiver, living environment or school as a result of complicated or chaotic family experiences.

Download the PowerPoint slides associated with this unit. We shall be using them throughout this unit.

Developmental Trajectories

Look at slide 1. A developmental trajectory describes the course of behaviour over age or time. By using the concept of trajectories to explore the patterns in looked after children's lives we are not suggesting that a child's destiny is already fixed by the time they reach the educational system. It is, however, true that altering such trajectories become much more difficult and resource intensive the older children become (slide 5). The Dunedin study (slide 2) is a longitudinal study taking place in New Zealand which has had very high retention rates so its figures are likely to be reliable.

Other studies across the world have also identified different developmental trajectories to do with violence and delinquency. They show that most children peak in their aggression between the age of 2 and 3 and this gradually diminishes over their childhood. In other words violence is unlearned not learned. The quality of the relationship with parents, particularly mothers, seems to be associated with this reduction in aggression. Children vary in their initial level of aggression with some children never being aggressive and others displaying varying levels of aggression from low to high. Each of the studies identified a small group of children with high levels of aggression at the age of 2 which do not diminish over the subsequent years. These children are most likely to have very young mothers and poor attachments.

Adverse home environments are also associated with poor educational performance. In slide 6 we can see that poverty alone can profoundly affect the trajectory of educational achievement so that by the age of six the less able children of parents with a high socio-economic status have overtaken more able children from impoverished backgrounds. Many looked after children come from families in poverty but they can also have a history of chaotic parenting and poor attachments. You should recall the information about children's experience before they became looked after from the unit on Pre and Post Care Experiences.

There is good evidence that parenting programmes and high quality pre-school education can have enduring effects in improving outcomes for children (slides 9 and 10). Slide 8 however shows the level of public spending on children and young people's education at various life stages. Compare this with the graph in slide 7 showing the return for investment at the same stages. The least money is spent at the point where it could have the largest effect. Public policy is changing and the renewed focus on early years provision for children and support for families may change this picture.

Look at the two slides on the attainment of looked after children (11 and 12). These slides demonstrate the disturbing educational trajectory of looked after children. Although the figures on attainment show looked after children achieving less well on average than their peers from very early in their school

careers, the gap is widening by the end of S2. We know that the figures become even more concerning as young people approach their formal examinations and by the time they leave school only about 6% will undertake higher education compared with almost 50% of other young people. More recent research (slide 13) has, however, shown that some adult care leavers are able to change the path of their lives by successfully undertaking education, sometimes many years after leaving care. This is an important and hopeful piece of research as it shows that many care leavers are capable of considerable achievements even if their experiences of moving into independence were poor. It also, however, highlights the negative and inadequate provision of services encountered by many young care leavers.

So far we have concentrated on the big picture and policy issues. These ideas can also be very useful in direct practice. The final slides in this section describe real experiences. They highlight the fact that individual relationships, interactions or responses can have the effect of helping a child make a small change in direction. A small shift in direction at the age of five, ten or fifteen can make a major difference to outcomes several years later. This is particularly true for interventions that provide children with opportunities to develop secure attachments and/or recover from trauma. Teachers and carers may not see the impact of the effort they put in to their work with looked after children but that does not mean that it has none. Many adults who were looked after as children can identify particular relationships or even specific interactions that they believe transformed their lives.

Activity: Personal transitions

Spend a few moments completing the following activity.

Think of a time when you changed job:

- What were some of the feelings that the change evoked in you?
- What sort of physical and psychological responses did you have?
- Were your existing skills sufficient or did you have to acquire new ones? If so where and how were you able to do this?"

The purpose of this activity is to get you in touch with the powerful impact of change. You may have experienced a number of different even conflicting emotions. Although you may have actively looked forward to your new job it is likely that you will have experienced some degree of anxiety, apprehension or even outright terror. In most new jobs there is a period of deskilling which makes us feel less competent and affects our functioning. Even for well-resourced adults, change can have a negative as well as a positive effect. You probably had some choice about your new job. Although having some control over change is helpful it does not prevent all the negative effects. There may be physiological changes arising from anxiety that affect our functioning and make us feel uncomfortable. In particular we may become hyper-vigilant, more aware of own and other people's reactions and responses. The more changes we have

to deal with simultaneously the more difficult it can be to cope. Having to move house as well as job, for example, increases the stress experienced. Inherent in every change is a degree of loss and this can affect us unexpectedly even when we are enjoying the positive gains of a new situation.

Children looked after away from home experience many changes, moving from one care environment to another, adjusting to new adults and/or other carers, as well as having to participate in a learning environment. When adults embark on change, there are often supportive networks of family/friends to discuss things with and other things that remain constant. This is not always available to children and young people. The physiological impact of loss and change may quite literally make it difficult for children to hear and see what is going on around them and to respond appropriately.

Even if children are looked after away from home to protect them, they have not only been removed from the abuser. They have also left familiar and possibly supportive family members, often including siblings. Children should, wherever possible, be maintained in the same school when they become looked after away from home even if this means travelling some distance. Continuity of schooling can be extremely reassuring, and provide continuity in relationships, at a time when a great deal of change is taking place in other aspects of a child's life.

Understanding transitions

The next few slides highlight the components of successful transitions. The reality for many looked after children is that many of the transitions they have experienced have been abrupt and unplanned. Often there has been little continuity from one setting to the next and children have experienced multiple losses and considerable confusion and distress. It is important to recognise that despite the difficulty of transitions for many looked after children helping a child to manage a transition successfully can increase their resilience and make future transitions easier. Careful planning wherever possible and maintenance of links between settings all help to make transitions easier. Where a sudden unplanned transition is inevitable it is important to help children understand the reasons for the move and deal with the emotions evoked by it,

Looked after children experience difficulty with transitions for a number of reasons besides the disabling effects of their backgrounds. The quantity and nature of transitions that many looked after children have to manage would leave most adults unable to cope (slides 18 and 19). This becomes particularly acute as young people move into adulthood and support is reduced for them at the point where they have to face numerous challenges (slides 25 and 26). This is explored in more detail in the unit Leaving Care Well.

You should remember that children who are looked after away from home often experience a number of transitions on a day to day basis that can be very unsettling. Children in residential care for example have to cope with changes in shifts, staff holidays, staff or other children arriving or leaving, family contact

etc. Children in foster care do not have so much turmoil built in to their living experience but they too have the complexity of balancing their family contact and their daily life in the foster home. The increased intensity of living in a family may, however, make the contrasts and conflict of loyalty even starker than for children living in residential environments.

Slides 20-24 are quotes from young people or professionals highlighting the emotional experience of some of these transitions

Activity: case example identifying transitions

Think about the history of a looked after child that you know well, focusing on the transitions they have experienced. Try to identify every change of living environment, school, significant adults etc. Now categorise the transitions into those that are developmentally driven (such as starting school), those that are to do with family factors, those that are to do with the wider systems involved with the child and those that are to do with the child directly. Try to identify significant losses and gains at each transition point.

It is likely that you will find that most transitions in this child's life were outside the child's control. Some changes in the lives of older children may come about as a result of their difficult behaviour but this is usually built upon a history of many difficult and abrupt changes earlier in their lives. It is important to contrast this experience of multiple changes across a range of dimensions with the relative stability of most children. You should remember that change and transition of themselves are not destructive and indeed can often signal exciting new opportunities. Managing such opportunities constructively, however, may require internal and external resources such as self-esteem or a strong support system that are not always available to looked after children.

Managing transitions well in practice

The final four slides outline effective ways of supporting children and young people through transitions. If you want to explore this further you could look at the NICE guidelines on looked after children which emphasise the importance of stability and the maintenance of positive relationships if a child has to move placements. YoungMinds also has a good guide for schools on managing transitions which outlines helpful and sensitive ways of supporting children through transitions which you might like to explore.

http://www.youngminds.org.uk/training_services/training_and_consultancy/for_schools/wellbeing/transitions

It may also be useful to look at some examples of good practice. You might want to view the video of Liz talking about supporting transitions from nursery to primary school for children looked after at home. She describes acting as a bridge between the different people involved with the child as well as providing a direct link for the child during this transition. The Scottish Government research on the educational pilots identified that management of transitions was a key

theme addressed by many of the pilot authorities. Brief descriptions of all the projects are available in the research report which is contained as part of these training materials. Try and find local examples of interesting attempts to manage transitions more successfully

Activity: Making transitions work well

Think about the same child you focused on earlier and answer these questions:

- What transitions does this child experience on a daily/weekly basis?
- What predictable transitions are there in the near future?
- What plans are in place to help this child cope with these transitions?
- Are there any contingency plans for unexpected disruptions?
- Could they be improved?

Do not just think about the current care plan for the child. You should be trying to think creatively and innovatively about the transitions facing this child. Use your capacity for empathy to really understand what these transitions might make the child feel, particularly in the context of the child's history. What might help this individual child at this time? It might be helpful to discuss some of your thoughts with colleagues and use their contributions to enhance your reflections. Ideally you should use your ideas to inform future planning for this child.

Video clip: View one or more video clips. Select from Zachari, Saffron, Zoie, Mandy, Ashley, Tony. In each case, the young adults with a looked-after background talk about transitions in their lives, barriers they faced and the people who supported them. Consider issues (e.g. support and key transition points) stimulated by the films.