

Be You In Focus Webinar Transcript

Understanding transitions in the context of disaster recovery and resilience

Presented by Ben Rogers, Dr Kathryn Hopps, Billie Newton and Brad Bannister on 30 November 2021

Ben Rogers

Good afternoon, everyone and welcome to our Be You Bushfire Response Program webinar for today – *Understanding transitions in the context of disaster recovery and resilience*.

My name is Ben Rogers and I'm the manager of Families and Education at Emerging Minds.

If you haven't attended a session like this before, you will notice that you won't be able to use your mic, webcam, or chat box and that you're in listen-only mode. This is just due to the large number of attendees who are here today, but you can ask any questions or write comments in the Q&A box and we have some of our wonderful colleagues online to answer those today.

Before we get started, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet and pay our respects to Elder's past, present and emerging. We extend our respect to all Elders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. I personally am meeting on the lands of the Kurna people today of the Adelaide Plains and I'd also like to acknowledge that our presenters are meeting on the contested lands of Ngarigo and Bidwell, Ngunnawal Lands and the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation.

Remember that your own wellbeing is a priority. As we discuss the content today and if anything that arises has any impact on your wellbeing please refer to the wellbeing tools for educators, which is available on the Be You website, along with your Employee Assistance Program Provider, and please do take care of yourself today and take as many breaks as you need.

And I think it's really important that before we start that you take a moment to think about when we're talking about mental health in any context, including trauma, it can affect us all in different ways. You'll all come with your own unique experiences. If there's absolutely anything that we covered today that raises any uncomfortable feelings, please feel free to opt out or take a break and reach out to your own support network. We've collated a few key information on the screen for your reference if you need to connect with a service as well.

Just a reminder that today's session is recorded so that you're able to watch it at a later date.

So we're really excited to welcome you all here today to this webinar which is presented by Be You Bushfire Response Program and hosted by Emerging Minds. This webinar is actually a series of two. We have this webinar today and we'll have a follow up webinar in March next year.

We're focusing in on supporting the knowledge and understanding of disaster recovery and resilience. Today's focus, as you know, is on transition, so really important topic as we think about the context that you as educators are working in. As you can see, we've got three really interesting learning objectives that we're going to explore today. We'll start off by looking at the research related to transitions and then we'll unpack your role as an educator in supporting transition and blended throughout today's presentation is really

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practical things that you can use in your early learning service or school to support children and young people in your setting.

Before you meet our presenters today, I wanted to just give a little bit of information about the Be You Bushfire Response Program. As you can see through this visual on your screen, the program is funded by the Department of Health and the program provides support to early learning services that were impacted, and schools impacted by the 2019-2020 bushfires. Since that time, Be You has supported more than 480 Learning Communities following the impact of the Black Summer bushfires. We wanted to take a moment to acknowledge that many of you are here today – a big hello to everyone that's joining us from those schools and early learning services.

As you can see the program model now has been shaped to really acknowledge the context of what it's like for Learning Communities eighteen months on to two years following the bushfires and to acknowledge the cumulative impact. We know that COVID-19, floods, drought, and other experiences of community trauma have impacted Learning Communities across the country.

This program is led by Beyond Blue and delivered in partnership with Early Childhood Australia and headspace. The program continues to offer support to Learning Communities as they transition to support offered through a Be You Consultant. This will involve professional learning and resources which are part of the Be You initiative.

That's enough of me talking for today. I wanted to introduce our wonderful presenters to the webinar, Dr Kathryn Hopps, Billie Newton and Brad Bannister. Welcome everyone. Before we get into the presentations today, what I wanted to do is invite each of the presenters to share a little bit about what's captured their interest in today's topic. I know that this is a really important topic for a lot of our presenters, and we might start with you Kathryn.

Dr Kathryn Hopps

Yeah, thanks Ben. What got me into transitions? Well, I've been working in the education sector for over 20 years now in various roles, but I originally trained as an early childhood and primary teacher, covering education from birth to age twelve. Because of this, I worked in a diverse range of education settings including early learning, school age care and primary schools as well. Essentially, transitions have always been part of my role as an educator.

In my work supporting children and families, I drew very much upon the research of Sue Dockett and Bob Perry from the original Starting School research study in Australia. I eventually stepped away from teaching to pursue a PhD focusing on transition to school, particularly communication between educators. Since then, I have been involved in a number of local and national transition to school studies, as well as my own doctoral studies. I've talked to lots of children, families and educators all around the place about transitions and learned a lot about fantastic transition practices that are happening.

Now in my current role as a Be You Consultant for Early Childhood Australia, I'm interested in mentally healthy transitions, and I continue a research interest as an Adjunct [Research Associate] at CSU [Charles Sturt University] particularly interested in transitions during the pandemic. So that's me.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, Kathryn. Billie, did you want to tell us a little bit about your experience in supporting educators and Learning Communities in this area?

Billie Newton

I've been working as an Occupational Therapist for the past eight years with children, families and educators in a range of school and community settings. My current role is at Royal Far West and I'm working on a bushfire recovery program which involves supporting children, families, schools and preschools in New South Wales who were impacted by the 2019-2020 bushfires. This involves working closely with Learning Communities to identify their recovery needs and then putting together a program of services to meet their needs. Some of the things we do are group programs for children, workshops and consultations with carers and educators, and individualised therapy for kids as well.

I'm really passionate about helping children recover from community trauma through play, connection, finding their voice and having agency in their recovery. I've seen how children are finding transitions increasingly difficult following the accumulation of experiences and events that Ben's already mentioned. I've also seen how essential it is to collaborate with the adults around changes that support their recovery.

Ben Rogers

Thanks Billie. Brad, you're the principal of a school that was impacted by the fire. Why is this topic of transitions really important to you?

Brad Bannister

Thanks Ben, thanks ladies. Firstly, I'm a passionate advocate for public education, as well as supporting young people who may be struggling with anxiety or mental health issues.

Our school and its community are already very isolated. We were down in the foothills of the snowy mountains and nestled right on the border of Victoria and New South Wales. We were basically horseshoed by the fires for a four-month period, that meant there was only one way in and one way out. We found that every time we came back to town, you sort of mumbled to yourself, 'Oh, the town is still there', which is not really nice at that particular time.

Being part of a small community, I needed to be able to put my skill set to the best use to support not only the students in our transition back to school after the holidays, but also my staff and the wider community because most of my staff lived here in town or lived on the properties out of town, and the wider community and how we can best support them.

We are a very small school in a very small community and, as such, we had the opportunity to ensure that we would just be the glue that basically helped the community come together during that time of crisis. My previous school, where we had a large percentage of the school population from refugee backgrounds, working with those children and families gave me a skillset and experience to support my current school. Working with all families in transitions to school in a wide variety of contexts has been close to my heart for a long period of time.

Ben Rogers

Thanks Brad. I really wanted to invite the participants today to give a big, warm virtual welcome to our presenters. Just hearing each of your backgrounds, I'm really excited to hear your presentations today and we'll have time at the end for questions from the audience as well.

We're going to get things started today by hearing from Kathryn who will be exploring some of the key research in this area and she'll also touch on the role of educators in supporting children with transitions. So over to you Kathryn.

Dr Kathryn Hopps

Thanks Ben. I thought I'd begin today talking about 'what are transitions?'. If we consider Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory, transitions are movements between and within settings. They're about people, processes, context and time.

Time is a really key one in distinguishing transitions from sudden or one-off events. Transitions don't begin and end, for example, on a child's first day at school, they extend over many weeks, months and sometimes years. From research on educational transitions, we know that transitions are a key time to support wellbeing. They're also a time that brings both opportunities and challenges. Transitions involve both continuity and change.

Drawing on several decades of research about transitions, we're going to go through a few key considerations that I think are really important. These can be applied to a range of transitions that children and young people experience, such as starting in an education setting for the first time. It might be returning after a long absence, or it could even be some daily transitions like those that happened between, for example, home and school or home and early learning service.

The key considerations that I'm going to talk about today are wellbeing and safety, relationships and belonging, family engagement, active participation of children and young people, and a nurturing environment.

The first one I wanted to talk about is wellbeing and safety. It's absolutely fundamental that during times of transition children, young people and their families feel that they're safe in their education setting. This includes both physical and emotional safety. Research has highlighted for families who have history which include trauma that there may be increased anxiety about leaving their child or young person in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people. For example, transition research really advocates it's essential that children and their families know who's looking after them and keeping them safe. Whilst there are some challenges in the current pandemic context with familiarisation activities and maybe even just making plans, and things that involve coming into education settings, there are still many things that we can do to build that sense of safety by connecting people. Transitions are also opportunities to build children's, families', educators' and communities' resilience.

The next key consideration is around relationships and belonging. Key to all transitions across all contexts are relationships – relationships between and among children and young people, their educators and families. Transitions are actually really good opportunities to build and maintain, and maybe even repair, relationships. Protective relationships for children can buffer against the risks and the stresses, and the challenges of transitions including transitions in the context of disaster recovery. One measure of a successful transition is when a child and the family experiences the sense of belonging to the education setting. We know that belonging is crucial for mental health of children and young people, so this is a key consideration for times of transition.

The next consideration is family engagement. Families are entitled to feel confident that their children's wellbeing will be supported at school. Confident families will reflect positively on children's experiences of transitions too. When we seek partnerships with families, where there are many opportunities for two-way communication and the building of trust right from the get-go, this supports transitions and for families to know the ways that your Learning Community supports their child or young person's wellbeing as well as their learning. If we think specifically about disaster recovery, research on the transition experiences of families with complex support needs has highlighted that transitions are actually a time where many families seek and are receptive to support. So, transitions are a key opportunity to support families and children.

The next key considerations are around the active participation of children and young people. Transitions are really best seen not as something that just happens to children, but as a time in which they actively participate. They influence and are influenced by their transition experiences. Seeking children and young people's views and responding to these as important, such as asking questions and wonderings, asking about children's concerns, asking children for their advice, and also their hopes and aspirations. It is important to understand that even very young children can actively contribute to transitions. For example, a young child choosing a transition object or toy from home to bring to the education setting and provide that connection between their home and Learning Community.

My last key consideration is around nurturing environments. Nurturing environments incorporate all of the four considerations that we've already covered. Nurturing environments are always important but even more so with transitions in the context of disaster recovery. For example, for young children right from birth through the early years of primary school, nurturing environments include opportunities for play, for rest and relaxation, for security in routines and rituals, having emotionally available and supportive educators, and continuity of staffing. For all children and young people, nurturing environments can be described as those that attend to their social and emotional wellbeing as well as their learning.

We're now going to hand over to Billie. Thanks Billie.

Billie Newton

Thanks Kathryn. Today, I'll shed some light on what transitions can feel like for children and why they can sometimes be really challenging. As you can see in some of the photos that will pop up, my job involves coming up with fun and creative ways to support kids, build on their strengths and help them with everyday challenges. Today I'll discuss the strategies that I use and recommend to support transitions.

Transitions can happen over the course of months, like moving from preschool or primary school; over a few minutes, like from playground to classroom; or a few seconds from one activity to another. All of these examples cause us to move from one state of expectations to another which causes a level of stress.

Our ability to cope with the stress is dependent on our regulation and this is where it is helpful to understand the window of tolerance. When a person is within their window, they are regulated. They feel safe, they are calm, they are energised, and are able to deal with whatever is happening in their life. They might feel some level of stress, but they can cope with it. Within their window, a person can learn and engage from others. This is the green section you can see on screen.

Stress can cause a person to move outside that window into a hyperarousal state (meaning higher energy, feelings of anxiety, anger, overwhelm, or feeling out of control) or a hypoarousal state (meaning lower energy, zoned out, feelings of sadness or loss of motivation). A person who is resilient, thanks to a strong support system, will move back into their window after experiences of stress and will spend most of their day there. What we see in children and adults for experiences of high stress or trauma is a narrowing of their window. They have less capacity to remain in their window and are more likely to move outside of their window from stress, no matter how minor the stressor may seem.

Some key things to consider in terms of transitions are recognising that a child may experience the transition as a stressor and move outside of their window, meaning the transition has overwhelmed their ability to cope and you may see a reaction that is more intense than expected for the transition. This understanding allows us to approach the child with greater acceptance and empathy and adjust our expectations. Additionally, acknowledging that as an adult, if you are outside your window, it would be very difficult to support a child that is also outside their window. This is why looking after yourself and your wellbeing is so important.

We all want our kids to be able to self-regulate, but what we don't often appreciate is that self-regulation is a high-level skill that can only be achieved if we have had adequate co-regulation. Co-regulation happens when an adult uses their safe, predictable presence to calm a child. In times of stress, we look to someone we know and trust to know if we are safe, and this is the premise of co-regulation. For example, if the fire alarm goes off at school, the children will look to the teacher for guidance, they will notice her body language and facial expression and before she even speaks these cues will calm or alert their nervous systems. Just as a mother does to calm her baby, adults can use their tone of voice and facial expression to send cues to a child in distress that they're safe. Since transitions can be stressful, these will be your best tools for keeping things calm. Generally, using a conversational tone of voice, moving more slowly, not positioning yourself too close to the child, and showing your concern and empathy in your facial expressions and body language will communicate safety.

As Kathryn highlighted, having strong relationships with each of the children you work with will support co-regulation during transitions. Children's relationships with each other and their parents or carers also support their regulation in a similar way. A few ideas for school include educators greeting each child as they enter the classroom and build co-regulation into the start of the school day. The two by ten strategy involves an educator spending two minutes each day for ten days with a student in need, not for learning but to be with them, listen to them and get to know their interests. This builds safety and trust and lets the child know that they are valued. You can also foster peer relationships through structured play, buddy systems and allowing siblings to be together during play times, if possible.

Preparation is a key step in supporting transitions and a great opportunity to involve the child. Answer these questions together: what will it look like; who will be there; what is expected of me; what are my concerns; and how might it feel? Make it child-friendly by exploring these questions through pretend play, drawing, role play, videos, books, conversations, whatever is appropriate for the child's developmental level and interests. A key part of this is exploring and validating their feelings. It might feel scary and make them feel nervous. It might also be exciting and fun. It might be confusing having these competing emotions at the same time. Communicate that all of these feelings are okay and normal. Before I start therapy with a child, I send them a personalised letter with photos and a video of what to expect. We use visuals as much as possible as we know that when a child is stressed, the part of their brain responsible for language processing is harder to access, but the visual system of the brain is online and can process an image.

After you have explored concerns and feelings, make a plan to support the child at the time of the transition. Again, this is an opportunity to draw on the strengths and interests of the child, along with other things we

know are regulating, such as relationships, sensory input, routines, and visuals. For example, a child who is having difficulty getting to school in the morning may benefit from bringing a toy or a photo album from home. You might agree they can call the parent for a couple of minutes at recess, you might build in a movement break or use a weighted toy for sensory input. They may have laminated visuals of what to expect with them. Another important strategy is purpose. One of the kids I support arrives early to plug in the iPads in the classroom and this incorporates his interest in technology, it gives him a purpose for getting to school on time.

Consider the child's individual triggers that might be associated with the transition and plan for these. These could be sensory, emotional, environmental, relational, or social. A sensory trigger could be increased by the noise level at the time of the transition. A relational trigger could be the teacher leaving the room briefly. Emotions such as rejection, injustice or loss of control might be the cause of distress in a transition. Keep in mind that triggers aren't always obvious. If you're at a loss as to what set a child off, look at the whole situation and consider what happened. Often things that seem insignificant are actually triggers.

Again, consider whether you are within your window of tolerance before supporting the child. What can you do to come back into your window by building in a pause? As adults, we have a greater ability to self-regulate by exhaling or using our thoughts to calm down first. Use a graded approach if you have time and slowly introduce new unfamiliar people, tasks or environments. Can you lengthen the time the transition takes? Can you reduce the number of changes or the number of triggers that are associated with the transition? The final consideration is complete the stress cycle. A stressor such as a transition sets the wheels in motion. Even if we resolve it or take away the stressor, the stress strain is already rolling, and our bodies will hold this stress until it is released. We need to take time to support the child and often ourselves to complete the stress cycle after transitions, knowing what helps the child really helps here. Examples could be moving or stretching the body, running a lap of the oval, or blowing bubbles to encourage those long exhalations.

Thanks everyone. I'll now hand over to Brad who's going to share his experiences with you.

Brad Bannister

Thanks Billie.

Good afternoon, everyone, thank you. As the principal of Delegate Public School, we were sort of on the ground and the kids and their families were very much impacted by what was happening around us. It was really important for us that we recognise what was happening to our community during this disaster period. We needed to listen to stories to allow others to share their stories. In terms of deep need like these fires brought us, we needed to pare things right back so we can best understand the needs of the community on all levels, not just on an educational level. In our school context, it was vitally important to understand that transition are much more than just a child transitioning to school or back to school after a disaster. Transitions in our context spread much wider in fact. It also included parents having to cope with the separation of the child transitioning back to school. It was also managing and supporting staff who experienced the same traumas as the students and families because they lived in the same area, and families transitioning back to their workplace. It also included things like family breakdowns, parents losing employment as a result of the disaster and financial issues.

So, for us, we needed to really understand what was experienced by the school from January 3rd, which was when the fires became really intense here, through to 2020 and through to this day in fact because we're going through the transitions now. There has been no blueprint for our success. A large part of our body of work has been reactive in its nature. When in fact, schools operate on a model of being proactive and planning for lessons and events etcetera – that hasn't been the case during the last eighteen months. I, as an educational leader in my community, needed to be present, both physically and emotionally, and this provided great stability and availability to my community.

We needed as an institution to recognise and in a sense normalise what was happening or has happened in our community. It was vital that during those times of transition that we, as a collective, young and old, share the stories of what everyone was going through and how events have affected and shaped us all. It's fundamental that during the times of transition, children, young people, and their families feel that they are safe in their educational settings and it's great that the research that both Kathryn and Billie talk about backs that up.

Relationships – both Kathryn and Billie talked about relationships, and I just can't reiterate this point enough. I can't use the word relationships enough. It is what the human race thrives on, relationships both negative and positive that keep the world revolving. In a small community, such as ours in normal times, relationships are always at the forefront of the community thinking. The neighbour watching out for a stranger when strange things are happening in the street. The friend picking up kids from the school because mum and dad are stuck somewhere else in a different town doing shopping. The kids in kindy playing happily with kids in year six and vice versa. Brothers and sisters playing happily together in the playground because they are just another kid in our context, or even me, Brad being Brad at the pub because there is no other pub to go to, and Mr Bannister in the school ground. Well in times of disaster and uncertainty, these relationships were magnified intensely and, in fact, family feuds that were put aside for the time being just for the common good. Humans, we're strange like that.

This is a picture of my library before the fires. We needed as an institution to recognise and in a sense normalise what has happened or is happening, as I said before. It was vital that during those times that we as a collective, young and old, share the stories of how events have affected or shaped us all. We needed to create an environment where a child wants to walk in the gate where it's so vital for us. None of us would willingly walk into a cage full of worrying lines, why then would we expect children as young as five to walk confidently in a new environment that not only doesn't promote and project safety, but one that doesn't exhibit it as a band of its daily functions. Families expect this, children expect this, and society expects this. For me, teaching is the easiest part of any school I've ever taught in. The hardest part is actually getting the kids through the gate. Once in the gate, I'd say, 'we've got them'. Nothing in the day to day running of operations of a school should be a secret unless it's of a personal nature, of course, and to me the following is needed to create and promote safety: transparency, communication, honesty, and fairness. I'd like everyone to remember this photo that we're just having a look at now.

Communication makes transitions easy for all participants. It is vital that all communication channels are opened, and that they operate both ways, both from us and for us. Schools need to give it and make families comfortable to communicate with us. It needs to be clear and concise. Don't confuse the already stressful situation with unclear or shifting advice. If we don't know something, we need to communicate that too, and that includes saying that we don't know and as soon as we know, we'll let you know. Not knowing is much better communicated than sending out the wrong information. It needs to be timely. As soon as we know, or I know, you will know. It needs to be positive – that is something that we are so bad at schools generally. We ring home when a student misbehaves, we grab mum at the school gate and say little Mary has been naughty today. But, in a sense, we need to encourage staff, and I encourage my staff, that for every negative piece of communication you have with a parent, you also need to provide two positive ones. For us, one of the things that helped us in that area, we introduced and ramped up our school Facebook page, filling it each day or even much more often of the great things that were happening at our school. This was not just necessarily to paint us in a great light. It was also to give parents greater piece of mind that they could watch their children at school and understand that they were actually happy, rather than being stressed out about what's going on at school. Communication needs to be consistent, so consistency was a key. Communication home always looks the same, it should be on the same letterhead, should be in the same format. Communication home for events or requests is done with a vision to allow parents and families ample time to prepare the kids for whatever we're doing and whatever was going on in the school.

Return of routine is an interesting one for us. There is a very fine line between returning to regular routine in transitions and being overwhelming for those transitioning. For us, safety, calmness and opportunity were the things we needed to provide for a return to routine. We recognise that for the previous four months of intense bushfire activity that occurred in our area, the return to routine was in the first instance simply just coming through the school gate and being here. Whilst educational outcomes and regular lessons were still important and relevant, they weren't the most important thing for us. If a child needed to sleep, we let him sleep. If a child needed to share a story with an individual, be it an adult or another child, then provision and time was made for this to occur. If a child was hungry, we had food available to help in this area too. In essence, the routine of being at school between 8:30am and 3pm gave the kids respite from what was happening in their real world.

Remembering that photo that I had before on the slides there, this is the changed library. We needed to provide colour and light to these kids' lives. What could we do to shed some light on a grim situation in these kids' lives? Remembering that the fire started for us on the 15th of November 2019 and went through to the 15th of March (2020). For some kids, a number of firefighting dads worked for ninety-six or ninety-

seven days consecutively on the fire front and missed Christmas, New Year and Australia Day, and birthdays, and things like that with their family. During this time, the kids' world was just dark and gloomy and when I say dark, I mean very dark. I personally, during this period, didn't have the skill set to hit the ground and fight the fires like the other people in our community. So, I used my skill set that I did have to create a more positive learning environment for all just using colour. Over the course of four months, the kids and their families not only had been confronted with the gloom of fire, smoke, and ash, they also hadn't had the capacity to go anywhere. In my mind, I needed to create a new colourful and vibrant space that gave students some brightness. I painted the library with bright colours as you can see, changed the furniture in the library space and revamped the classrooms as well. It looks fantastic and we've got some really great feedback around that. We arranged both whole family, including parents, and whole school excursions to give families just time together in a more relaxed and social setting.

And that's it from me and I'd like to pass over to Ben. Thank you, Ben.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Brad. Thank you to Billie and Kathryn as well, such interesting and insightful presentations. Thankfully now we've got about twenty-five minutes of questions from the audience – if you have any, please filter them through to us.

While I have you here Brad, as I've been listening to your presentation, I've been thinking about the layering of stress for you as an educator and your team. Do you have any advice or guidance for educators as they move into this upcoming period? You know we've got lots of different kind of stresses in communities with floods, this new variant [of COVID-19] and lots of different things happening. What kind of guidance do you have for educators and education leaders in supporting their own wellbeing?

Brad Bannister

Yeah, that's an interesting one, Ben. For me, I think I got to around the middle of the year and I thought I was going great, I thought everything was fantastic, Brad's handling it really well. I had a visit from my director and also Kathy Powzun, who is in the NSW Department of Education as the Executive Director of Bushfire Recovery. Both of these people asked me the question, 'How are you going?', and I was like, 'I'm fine. What do you mean, how am I going?'. I think at that time, I was just running on adrenaline. I went home that night and I thought, 'Jeez, has someone said something? Has someone said that I'm not going well?'. But it actually made me reflect that indeed I wasn't going very well.

I'd sat in front of a computer for the last six to eight months. We went straight from bushfires into floods into COVID-19. We're so close to the border, the border closed, which meant some of our kids couldn't come to school and all those things. I just sat in front of a computer just operating and I put on weight. I was getting lots of headaches or not sleeping well. I really had a hard look at myself in the mirror and I took time to say, 'Right, I need to make time for myself for an hour a day'. That was just half an hour of exercise and half an hour of just me time, whether it be with the dogs or with my wife. I think that that helped me and over the course of the next three months, not even three months, I lost fifteen kilos. That was a great thing for me. I stopped having headaches and I started not having chest pains, and all that type of thing. I think just that one person that said to me, 'Are you okay?', made me stop and reflect and think about how I can better manage my own health. For those educators out there and our departments aren't very good – they're being reactive and the information that they're giving us around COVID-19 and all that type of thing. My best advice is stop, take a breath, and take time for yourself because we're not very good at doing that.

Ben Rogers

Thanks, Brad. It sounds like really looking out for your peers as well those around you is a key factor.

Brad Bannister

I will say though, we need to care up, I don't think we care up enough. As people in executive positions, we're very good at asking people that work for us or work in a line management situation below us, we're very good at asking them if they're okay. We need to be better as a society of caring up, so asking my boss if he's okay and asking the bosses above us, 'Are they okay?'. As it gets to the pointier end, I think there is a great deal more stress. I think that caring up is just as important as caring down.

Ben Rogers

I really want to circle back to you as well with some of the questions that are coming through from the audience. But to you next Kathryn, one of the questions that has come through is around how we involve children and young people in transitions. I guess just broadly speaking as they move into this upcoming period, what are your thoughts and reflections around that?

Dr Kathryn Hopps

Yeah, it's a great question, Ben. There was one example I gave in my presentation that even very young children, so infants and toddlers, still actively contribute to transition. The example that I gave was around providing the opportunity for a young child to choose something from home to take to the education setting and then they've got that agency and power of making that choice. I realise more now than when I was an educator, that that's their attempt to connect the settings of home and school or home and early learning services. You can be intentional about providing the opportunity if you're an educator. You can encourage family, 'Look, it's totally okay to bring a toy or a comfort object from home and we'll support that' and for a family just to know that that's okay and actually something positive that you can do.

For older children or you know even very young children as well, being ready to listen when they do share. It might be about their emotions, how they have been feeling about an upcoming transition. But it might involve us to intentionally ask, 'How are you feeling about starting school?', 'How are you feeling about returning to school after being away for a long time?', and opening that opportunity that it's safe, that that's on the table for conversation.

Then we have opportunity as an educator or as a family member for a child to share with us how they are feeling. So that's another practical, by being ready to listen and respond if children want to share and sometimes that can come at moments we don't really expect. But also, we might do some planning around okay, 'Let's have a conversation around how children are feeling about the transition', so just being really open for the conversations. As an educator, there's other things that you can do around, 'Okay, we won't have a conversation but I'm not sure how to bring this up. Let's read a book about starting school or read a book about moving house or becoming a sibling' and having the conversation that way. If you have those books available in your learning environment when children choose them that could also be an opportunity as well.

There's lots of ways that children can be actively involved. Maybe it's not about whether we do something, but a choice in how to do it. So that could be as simple as how we're getting to school, 'Would you like to walk all the way, or can we drive part of the way and get the scooter out of the car and do that for the second half?'. So even if children are feeling a little bit anxious about returning to a school setting, school or early learning service, providing some choices as to how we might get there, what you might take, are really practical ways as well.

Ben Rogers

Yeah, thanks, Kathryn. As you were talking, I was thinking about that sense of agency we can give to children and Billie you mentioned some great practical approaches that kids can do. I'm sure a lot of the educators are curious about some of the things that you mentioned. You talked about the two by ten approach and what's that like for a child to engage in, talk us through that in a little bit more detail.

Billie Newton

Yeah, sure. The two by ten strategy is all about building a stronger relationship with the child and adults around them. Building trust, respect and it allows the adult to support the child through co-regulation in those times of stress like transitions. The stronger your relationship is with the child, the easier and more quickly you're going to be able to use those keys to be able to help them to calm when they are stressed during the transition. What it could look like is you could build that two minutes into the day at recess, at lunch, in the morning, during class time if it's appropriate. It's a really small amount of time and you might just approach the child and just ask them some questions about what they're interested in and start a conversation, just really listen to what they want to do. You might even just comment on something they're doing, really showing interest in them, and allowing them to feel valued by you and listened to.

Ben Rogers

Yeah, it sounds like as Brad alluded to the busyness of the classroom or learning context, this tool or strategy is something you can do for two minutes through the day. We will, for the audience, be sending some information as part of resources so we'll get Billie to add some more info around that.

Brad, thinking about unexpected transitions is a key one, I know, for educators. There's the stuff we can plan, what was it like for you planning the unexpected stuff or how did you approach the unexpected stuff?

Brad Bannister

Well, that was interesting because we're such a small, remote community, our tentacles go far and wide. A lot of people knew a lot of other people in other areas. A news reporter behind us or just the discussion can trigger things in kids that, at strange times throughout the day, not only our families but also my staff. So, just having people available and having the time.

I have an interesting story, one of the little boys, we've got loads and loads of extra counselling, which is great in a school because we don't have great a number of counselling as it is, but we've got lots of extra counselling. I said to the class, 'Anyone need extra support through this today?'. One of the boys said, 'Yes, I'll go for that'. Later on in the day, I was just having a chat with him, I said, 'Did you talk to the counsellor today, mate?'. He goes, 'No, no'. I said, 'Do you want to?'. He said, 'No, no, it's okay now because I just needed to know that he was there'. So just having us there, whether it be me, whether it be the classroom teacher, that consistency of people. For us, as a very small school, we only get a really small general allocation of school counsellors, and I mean small, that is only two days per term, but because of the bushfire recovery, we had someone there pretty much two or three days per week for a good couple of terms. That was great for the kids, just knowing that Mr. B's going to be there, the classroom teacher's going to be there, the counsellor's going to be there.

It allowed us to better deal with those things that popped up in front of us – those extra triggers, they were random. It might have been just a kid talking about something else, it might have been the sight of smoke in the distance, it might have been a parched ember that they found on the ground from months ago, or a parched gum leaf. Those triggers, we couldn't have predicted those, and we couldn't have prepared for them, but just having us all there and the availability to kids helped them massively.

Ben Rogers

Yeah, I'm thinking about what Billie said there around co-regulation and the importance of how an educator is holding the space even their facial expressions and tone of voice and how you met that boy, Brad, in that moment of 'Hey, that's absolutely fine'. That relationship side of things, Billie, is really important. Any practical ideas that you have for the educators on managing these unexpected transitions, similar to what Brad was saying, but any other practical ideas?

Billie Newton

Yeah, really good question and obviously we can't prepare for everything that happens. It's good to be able to support kids through those unexpected times. I think the first step would just be acknowledging the child's feelings around that and reducing expectations around the transition. The next step would just be thinking about that co-regulation and thinking, 'How can I help this child feel safe and supported through this uncertainty?' Again, tapping into that tone of voice, facial expression, body language, so thinking about the way that you're approaching them.

You might want to emphasise your words that you understand what they're going through. You might say, 'I can see this is really hard and you're feeling upset'. It's amazing, I find in my work, how often just saying that to a child when they're upset that often they don't want to respond, they might be so upset that they can't use their words, but you can see that they take that on, and it helps them so much. You're putting out that hand and just saying, 'I can see what you're feeling, and I see that and I'm here for you'.

You know when they're a bit calmer, you might want to offer some options to move on together, to be giving those choices around what's going to come next. Even if it is within something that needs to be done allows that sense of agency so they're able to make a decision within the transition and within the uncertainty. I'd be trying to use visuals, if possible, because like I said, it's often hard for the child to process what we're saying verbally and take that information in, but the visual system is often online. You can use drawing,

even just demonstrating with using what you've got, shiny objects or whatever it is, that will help to communicate that message.

Another thing I think is really helpful is just having a little debrief afterwards with the child. When you're both back into your window, when you're both calm again, it's just that opportunity for repair and to learn from the transition together and even problem-solving next time.

Dr Kathryn Hopps

I just wanted to add Ben as well, from an early childhood educator's perspective, what children might need when there's an unexpected change as well. So that can be something as simple as, all of a sudden, you might need to move to a different space and that wasn't expected and anticipated by everyone. For children that you know that this type of transition and change might be difficult, it could be as simple as 'Would you like to hold my hand as we walk to that next place?' or 'Would you be able to carry this for me?'. So, they've got a bit of a role going back to Billie's example with the plugging in the iPad.

Just recognise it could be as simple as eye contact, the acknowledgement that 'I wasn't expecting this either, I just need to take a bit of a breath for one moment before we move to that other room'. Educators are such powerful role models for how we might regulate and manage our own emotions and feelings when there is an unexpected change that we weren't expecting either. So, it can be really, really simple and subtle, but really effective. Being aware of which children may experience additional difficulties as part of it as well, anticipating that and having some things up your sleeve like what Brad and Billie suggested there as things that you can use at those times.

Brad Bannister

That brings up an interesting point for me, Kathryn, is that one of the most common feedback from a year six kid transitioning to a high school situation is their biggest fear is just that it's a much bigger place and there's more rooms they have to find. So, in that transition space they're just scared of not being able to be in the right room at the right time.

So, in a smaller primary school, that's a really easy thing to manage because we can do as a you said, Kathryn, and grab them by the hand and walk them around and show them. But in a high school situation, there's just many more rooms that they need to get to, and they need to get them there themselves, we're not lining them up like we would do in a primary school setting. You're so right there Kathryn, you're so right, 100%.

Dr Kathryn Hopps

Sometimes it can just be, even with that example, and I'm just thinking in the current context where it's quite difficult for children and young people to visit the next education setting, you can do all sorts of things with maps as well, 'Let's download a map of the school'. The other thing is to remind children and young people when they have navigated that, 'Remember when we had to go over into the city, and we really didn't know where we were going and we were feeling a bit anxious about it but what did we do?'. So, reminding them of other times where they have successfully navigated, finding different rooms in unfamiliar places might give them the reassurance of, 'Oh yes, I have done it before. I am feeling anxious, but I do know that I can do this'.

Ben Rogers

I want to take us forward to the start of next year as children and young people are transitioning into the New Year. Kathryn, you referenced that just based on the experiences that a lot of Learning Communities and families have faced and the accumulative stress of the other impacts that there will be a level of anxiety and stress that's probably natural for the context that we're living in. Now, one of the things is how can educators meet this and what kind of words can they share with children during these times?

Dr Kathryn Hopps

Yeah, absolutely. It is really handy to have on hand things that you know that you can say to reassure children and young people. If you do open up a conversation about how you're feeling about an upcoming transition and a child does say, 'Look, I'm worried or nervous. I'm not sure. I don't want to' the most important step that I've learnt, mostly from being a Be You Consultant, is to acknowledge those feelings and

that they're okay and that lots of people feel that as well. It could even be going that next step and saying, 'I'm unsure and a bit nervous as well'. So always acknowledging and just giving them a bit of space. You don't need to immediately go on to, 'but actually there's lots of things to look forward to'. It's okay to sit with that for a moment, that's okay and understandable because there's lots of things that we don't know.

I guess the next step would be around, 'Okay, so we're feeling this way, maybe it's about something we're unsure about. Who could we ask?'. It could be something around, 'I really want to know if I can take my soccer ball to school next year. Are we allowed to do that? Well, how about we go to the school, or we contact the principal or assistant principal and find out, is it okay to bring your own soccer ball or will there be equipment available?'.

Modelling that, the next step is around what can we do positively. It could be around seeking help, so asking someone. It could be around, 'Okay, we just need to keep having conversations about this as the transition comes'. It could even be around things like identifying where in the body that feeling is. If it's a nervous feeling, 'Is it in your tummy?', and just really recognising that that's okay. We don't necessarily need to solve or make that feeling go away, but they're role modelling around things we can do, feeling safe around emotions, that that's okay and other people feel that as well. When we increase our own emotional literacy and are aware of our own feelings, we can assist children and young people to identify them, name them, describe them, have them out there. Even just the sharing of them can be really beneficial, without necessarily having solutions, but modelling what we can do when we're feeling that way as well.

I do recommend talking positively about transitions but also not completely dismissing the other feelings. Yes, there's things we're looking forward to, but there's also things we're not sure about and that's okay to have mixed feelings.

Ben Rogers

Thinking about the window of tolerance stuff that Billie mentioned as well, and about the importance of being in your own window. As that first step, if we think about that context Brad, moving into next year, do you have any guidance or recommendations for educators or leaders who are listening in today to help them navigate that transition?

Brad Bannister

There is no rush, there is no rush. So, for me, one thing that the pandemic has taught us over the last two years, so remembering that a child that started kindergarten at the beginning of 2020 in our school setting has nearly up to now missed the whole year of school. There is no rush. The kids are nowhere near as far behind as the media or some people would have us believe. Their wellbeing is the most important thing, so the reason we went into lockdown is to keep everyone safe, so it's okay and we can all catch up in the end.

Another example, so eloquently, for our school is a little boy that started at the beginning of 2020. He was a behaviour concern. He's spent a lot of time in my office sitting with me after being quite disruptive in his classroom. But now, if you had seen him today, he's such a good little fellow. He works really hard in class, he's way ahead of where he's supposed to be at grade level. When he started, he was probably behind where he was supposed to be at grade level, so there is no rush. Let's not rush them in that transition.

Let's listen to their stories as both Kathryn and Billie have said. Let's take the time to connect and build that relationship and that's something that we always do well as schools. But the pandemic had taught us that that there's no rush, we just don't need to rush. We can help them get settled into where they've got to get settled into.

We all know, as adults, if we started with a new job and everyone expected you to know everything straight away, that's an impossibility. So, let's just take the time and be here to support them and they'll catch up. I say to any young intern that I've had in my class or any prac teacher that I've had in my class, and I don't know if this is actually the right thing to say now that I think about it, but I say to them, 'There is nothing that you can do in the next two to ten weeks that I can't fix when you're gone'. So, if something gets messed up, we can fix it. There's no drama around that stuff so if something gets messed up in the transition coming back to school next year because of COVID-19 or fires again or whatever or floods, we can fix it, you know we can fix it. So, let's just take our time and help them get the right transition. The right transition is wellbeing first, for me, wellbeing first all the time.

Ben Rogers

Thank you, Brad. I feel like that's a nice place for us to finish today, and naturally there's lots of other questions from the audience that we'll be able to get to with the resource pack to follow. One of the key things that's really sitting there for me is the importance of relationships. We talked a lot about that Brad, Billie, and Kathryn, taking that time to connect, thinking about next year and the two by ten strategy that Billie mentioned, or creating space. Brad, what's sticking in my mind is what you talked about the importance of wellbeing, looking after yourself, and getting into your own window as an educator and being aware of that through the day and how it naturally will move in and out just based on the stresses that we experience.

I just wanted to say a big virtual thank you to each of you today. We've really unpacked a lot of different things throughout the presentation, and I really appreciate that. [To] all the participants that are listening in from Learning Communities across the country, we wanted to thank you for your time as well. We could see a lot of the participants stayed the whole way through today, and I hope you've taken some of the key learnings and knowledge from our speakers.

Do keep an eye on your email as we'll send through the recording and some resources that will help you in this time of transition. Finally, remember that the next webinar that we'll have is in March [2022] and we'll also send a reminder out for that one as well. On behalf of Be You, I wanted to send a big thank you to everyone and we'll see you again soon.

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