

TIP SHEET: Managing Transitions

Changing schools or moving to a new classroom are two examples of the kinds of transitions that can be very stressful for many children and youth. Transitions can be particularly hard for children and youth with learning disabilities (LDs) and their families.

Why might transitions be more difficult for individuals with LDs?

LDs can make it hard to interpret social situations and other information. This can make new places and situations intimidating. This can feel scary or overwhelming and could heighten any existing anxiety. This may be true even if the situation the youth is leaving behind is negative.

LDs can get in the way of allowing a youth to apply their coping skills from the old situation to the new situation. This is because some individuals with LDs are very concrete and rigid in their thinking and behaviour. This can prevent her from adapting skills to fit a new situation. While concrete behaviour may help by making life predictable, this can also make it very difficult for them to be spontaneous and adapt easily to new situations and surroundings.

When leaving a familiar situation or place, the youth may worry that he will not be able to achieve the same level of comfort in the new situation.

Past negative social experiences, such as being teased, bullied or ignored can result in the youth expecting to have painful experiences in the new setting.

Transitions and High School

Entering high school can be especially challenging for the whole family.

Adolescence is a time of growing independence and great physical, intellectual and emotional growth. Adolescents are often seeking greater independence, and facing changing roles and expectations. These changes can affect the presentation of an LD, and how a youth may respond to it. These changes can be met with a range of emotions: relief, empowerment, anxiety or even sadness.

What can parents do to minimize their child's anxiety and discomfort with this transition period?

Validate the youth's fears. Comments meant to soothe, such as, "don't worry it will all work out" may not reassure the youth. Rather, she might feel that nobody really understands her experience. A more helpful comment might be, "change is hard for lots of people. I know it might be extra hard for you. Let's talk about what makes it hard and what we can do to help you with the change."

Work together to find solutions. Once the youth's fears are validated, parents can help them find solutions, such as visiting and getting to know the new setting and its staff, or finding out about other potential supports for the youth within the new setting.

Parents can help the youth identify what has helped in the past. Involving the youth in finding solutions may also help him to feel more empowered and to take charge of the challenges of transitions.

No matter what the youth's chronological age, it is important to accommodate his or her needs and to determine realistic expectations for the particular individual. It is important for parents and youth to plan for transitions, including:

- Daily transitions (e.g., leaving school and going to an after school program)
- Seasonal transitions (e.g., the end of the school year and start of a summer routine)
- Life transitions (e.g., leaving middle school and starting high school, or moving from one house to another)

What can you do?

- Start talking about the transition well in advance.
- Describe what might happen in the new situation (who is going to be there, how many people etc.)
- Remind the youth about past successes and strengths. Talk about how to use those strengths in the new situation.
- Acknowledge worries, negative thoughts and feelings but try to keep messages positive
- Parents need to prepare themselves for the challenges ahead by maintaining balanced thinking about the challenges that transitions can present

It is important to remember that despite the difficulties involved, transitions represent opportunities for growth that will contribute to the youth's health, well-being and success.