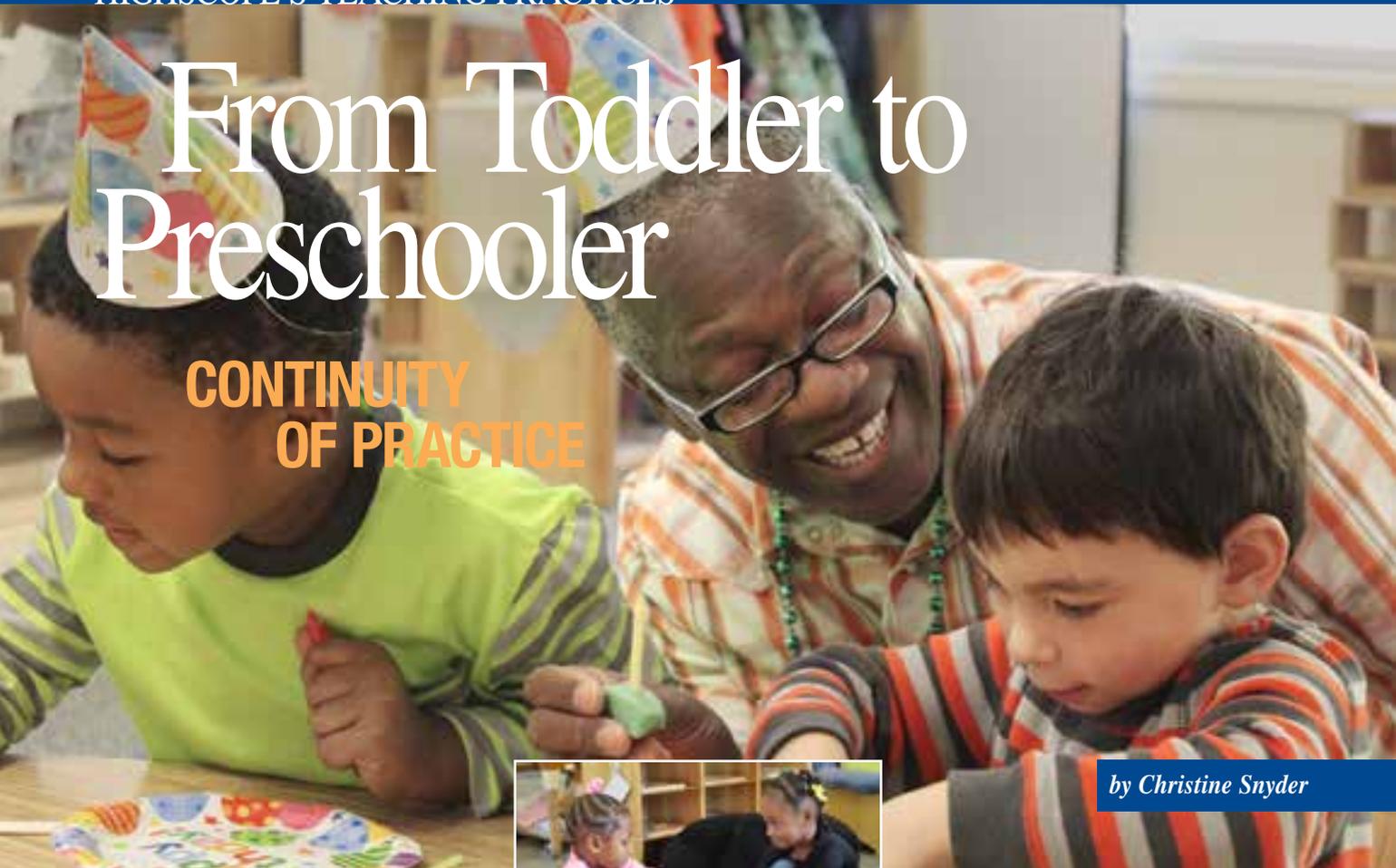


# From Toddler to Preschooler

## CONTINUITY OF PRACTICE



by Christine Snyder



*Establishing continuity of practice eases the transition from toddler programs to preschool.*

**A**ny change we experience — big or small — causes stress relative to the degree of change and the impact it has on our lives. Change can be exciting or terrifying; it can happen in an instant or occur over time.

We can ease the process of adjusting to change for children, parents, and teachers by preparing for the changes that children will experience in our education setting and by implementing specific strategies to ensure continuity between classrooms. Though stress always accompanies change, continuity of practice can help to reduce the stress experienced by children and their families as it softens the transition to preschool.

### Continuity for the children

First and foremost, our obligation is to the children — to have high regard for their perspectives and individual needs. This impacts our daily decisions and implementation of the curriculum, but it is equally important to consider the child's perspective when planning for the move to a new program. Toddlers

moving to a preschool classroom may be excited, cautious, curious, nervous, or even unaware of what the change might mean. Toddlers are concrete thinkers and they are focused on the here and now, so it can be hard for them to understand that “going to preschool” is a long-term plan rather than something they are doing just for today. The strategies below can help maintain familiarity and continuity between the toddler classroom and preschool program.

- **Encourage visits to the preschool classroom.** Plan trips to have toddlers spend time in the preschool classroom during various parts of the day. These visits should occur with a familiar caregiver, ideally the primary caregiver from the toddler classroom. Children may enjoy

visiting during work time when they have an opportunity to freely explore the materials, observe the other children in play, and interact with the preschool teachers and children. Visiting at this time of day allows them to become familiar with the new space and the new people without the expectation of following a routine they are not yet familiar with. During this time, help children locate materials that are similar to the types of things they enjoyed using in the toddler classroom. Helping them find things they enjoy will create a positive connection to the preschool classroom and encourage a sense of belonging. Other times to visit would be mealtimes or outside time. Visiting during these times will help children to understand how preschool and their own program share many parts of the daily routine.

- **Invite preschool teachers to visit the toddler classroom.** In addition to visiting the preschool classroom, it may be helpful to invite the preschool teachers into the toddlers' space. This



Using visuals to introduce the new space or unfamiliar sequences in the daily routine accommodates toddlers' concrete thinking.

will allow the toddlers to interact with the new teachers in their comfort zone. In addition, the preschool teachers will be able to witness how the toddlers engage, observe their current level of independence, and see the types of materials that interest them. This will inform the preschool teachers as they stock the

**First and foremost, our obligation is to the children — to have high regard for their perspectives and individual needs.**

preschool classroom with materials that are both interesting and safe for the entering toddlers to use.

- **Engage in positive conversations with the children.** Prior to the move to preschool, talk positively about the new space; highlight similarities between the two spaces. “You often choose to use the fire trucks during choice time,” you might say. “The preschool classroom has fire trucks too.” Following the move to preschool, teachers can continue to build the connections between the two spaces. This will help children

carry over positive experiences from one space to the other.

- **Use visuals.** Because toddlers are such concrete thinkers, visuals can be a positive, supportive way to introduce ideas about the new space. Prior to the transition, show children photos of the teachers and a picture sequence of the routine in preschool. During and following the transition, it can be equally valuable to offer children photo sequences of the daily routine and any specific sequences within the daily routine that they might not be familiar with, like the process of getting dressed to go outside, cleaning up after mealtimes, or taking care of personal bodily care needs.
- **Create personal space.** A real sense of belonging can be established by creating a space for children’s personal belongings. In addition, when the space for children’s belongings is an easy-to-find spot at their level, it will support children in participating in storing and retrieving personal belongings — an important step in establishing a sense of independence and self-care.

### Continuity for the families

One of the best ways we can ease transitions for children is to support their families. When parents feel posi-

tive and confident about a change, they are more capable of passing on those feelings to their children and focusing on what their child needs during this time of change. It is important to consider what kind of information families will need and in what form. The following ideas will help families feel informed about the upcoming change so that they can maintain the same connection to the preschool program that they experienced in the toddler classroom.

- **Give parents advance notice.** Let parents know about the transitions well in advance, including all the plans you have in place to help them and their child become familiar with new people, routines, and spaces. When possible, prior to planning a transition, it will be helpful to find out what concerns and questions the parents have about the new classroom and what the transition will mean for their child.
- **Meet and greet.** Provide a time for parents to meet the teachers outside of the classroom and the busy dropoff or pickup times. Establishing a trusting relationship and a comfort level between parents and teachers will set the foundation for future positive interactions.
- **Offer a classroom tour.** The director or preschool teacher can show the parents around the classroom, helping them to see what kinds of materials children will be using and the daily routine their child will be participating in. This should also include letting them know where to find parent information in the new space and walking them through the daily dropoff and pickup routines. The director or teacher can show the parent what their child will do at dropoff time and where personal belongings go so parents are able to easily guide and assist their child at dropoff time.
- **Arrange home visits.** Prior to the child’s start in a new classroom, teachers should visit children’s homes. This will allow for additional time for the teacher to interact and bond

with the child and parents. Home visits may also include orienting the child to the new classroom routines and expectations, gathering parent input on goals for the year, and answering any additional questions parents may have.

- **Encourage families to maintain a similar home routine before school.** As children move into a new classroom, it can be helpful if other components of their lives remain the same. Following a routine that feels normal to the child will minimize the number of changes that is experienced at one time.
- **Assist families in establishing a new dropoff routine at school.** Find out what a typical dropoff was like in a toddler program. Help parents to know what is expected at preschool dropoff and help them

establish a new routine that is as similar as possible to the dropoff routine the child was familiar with in the toddler room. Consider the amount of time that families would like to stay to support a dropoff. Time and space to read a quick book or engage with a toy could contribute to a successful transition into the classroom, and therefore a positive start to the child's day.

- **Provide a curriculum night or parent workshops.** Offer opportunities for parents to learn about the preschool curriculum and share ideas for how parents can extend their child's learning at home. This will help parents to talk positively with their child about the new routine and what is happening in the new classroom on a day-to-day basis, and to engage their child in similar ways outside of the classroom.

- **Schedule parent events.** In addition to workshops and curriculum nights, parents and children will benefit from social experiences that allow them to casually mingle with the

**Like families, teachers are best able to focus on the needs of the children when they feel like they have enough information and support.**

teachers, as well as other parents and children. Building connections between children and other families will amplify their comfort level and sense of belonging in a new place.

### **Continuity for the teachers**

Like families, teachers are best able to focus on the needs of the children when they feel like they have enough information and support. Preparing teachers for upcoming transitions will also require careful attention and planning but will in turn ease the process of change for them.

The following ideas will assist in making sure teachers are well-equipped to meet the needs of the children and families entering their program.

*Consider the information that families need in order to feel confident about a change so they can focus on the needs of their child during transitions.*



- **Work as a team.** Bring the teaching teams together to make a balanced plan for transitions. Toddler teachers and preschool teachers can work together to make a transition plan that will allow for input, appropriate expectations, and continuity of practice between classrooms.
- **Warn of upcoming transitions.** Prior to a transition, be sure the lead teachers are aware of the change and have an opportunity to offer input. Likewise, be sure all assistant teachers and support staff know about upcoming transitions as well as the plans in place to meet the needs of the children, families, and teachers.
- **Make classroom modifications.** Following classroom visits and opportunities for toddler teachers and preschool teachers to connect, it will be necessary for teachers to make slight changes to the classroom to meet the needs of the children coming into the program. They should carefully determine that the materials available match the children's ability. This will require making decisions both for safety as well as interest. In addition to making decisions about materials, it will be necessary to make several other decisions about the environment. Teachers will need to carefully consider whether children are able to reach the things they need, if there is personal space for each child, and if appropriate visual supports are available to help children.
- **Differentiate for individual children.** Just as they do with the learning environment, teachers will need to use observations of individual children and their knowledge of child development when planning experiences for children coming into their program. Careful observation of the children will allow for meaningful planning and consideration for the new children's varying developmental levels.
- **Support during a time of transition.** As teachers are supporting new children in their program, they may benefit from extra support. They will



*To support transition to the preschool classroom, consider individual children's developmental needs when planning experiences and making changes to the learning environment.*

be assisting children in following and understanding a new routine and taking greater responsibility for their personal needs. Likewise, toddlers are used to much lower adult/child

**Prior to transitions, creating an intentional plan for supporting children, parents, and teachers will help everyone feel prepared and able to focus on the needs of the children.**

ratios and greater access to adult support. They too will benefit from having a familiar adult who knows the classroom routine, such as a volunteer, an administrator, or a student teacher to whom they can turn for support and assistance.

### **Creating an intentional plan**

Like the children in the preschool classroom, it is important to follow the plan-do-review model when implement-

ing big changes. Prior to transitions, creating an intentional plan for supporting children, parents, and teachers will help everyone feel prepared and able to focus on the needs of the children.

Throughout implementation of the plan, make changes to support the long-term outcomes for children. For example, if during a visit to preschool toddlers are very comfortable and eager to engage in the preschool environment, allow children to stay as long as they are comfortable (and ratios allow), even if that means staying longer than originally planned.

Following the transition to preschool, reflect on the process. Consider which parts of the plan were most successful and also areas where improvements could be made. Ask for input from parents and teachers to determine what additional support is needed.

Change can be hard. But when we use similar strategies between classrooms and establish a commitment to continuity of practice, we can ease the stress of transition periods. ■