

The Sunshine Call: Celebrating Children's Successes

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Editors' Note:

One of the main goals of early childhood education is to support children's social and emotional development—helping them grow into caring friends and attentive students. For some young children, the transition from home to school—even a warm, playful preschool—is tough. Preschool teachers devote a huge amount of their time, energy, and love to easing these transitions and improving children's behavior. As this article shows, sometimes a little celebration of progress is just what children, and their teachers, need.



The sky outside the preschool office windows has turned gray and gloomy. Thunder rumbles in the distance as Ms. Donna enters on a Thursday afternoon, hand in hand with 4-year-old Brady. I wonder, Now what?

In the two months that Ms. Donna has worked in our early childhood center, I have watched her interact with the handful of children who display the most challenging behaviors. I can tell Ms. Donna loves what she does, and she's good at it. But it's a difficult, often thankless job.

Two or three times this week I've walked past Ms. Donna sitting with Brady in the hallway, quietly speaking to him, trying to calm him. In class, Brady often becomes overwhelmed and frustrated, lashing out by hitting, kicking, yelling, throwing things, and sometimes even running out of the classroom. Ms. Donna regularly encourages him to make better choices and teaches him how to take deep breaths to calm his body. She explains that hurting others is not acceptable and running away doesn't help.

Some days are tougher than others. Tuesday afternoon, Ms. Donna used the office phone, and I overheard her explaining to Brady's mom that he was having a very hard time—could she please come take him home for the rest of the day?

Thunder booms, closer now, bringing my attention back to today and the situation at hand. Rain begins to tink on the windowpanes as Ms. Donna settles into a chair by the phone. "Ms. Kim, may we use the phone? We need to make a Sunshine Call."

"Of course," I respond. "What's a Sunshine Call?"

“Well, Brady is having such a great day today. He’s making awesome choices and being kind to his friends, so I thought we’d call his mom and dad to give them the good news.”

Ms. Donna looks up Brady’s mother’s phone number, dials, and leaves a brief message with a heartwarming account of Brady’s amazing day so far. She then hands Brady the phone and he tells his mother all about it in his own words. He ends the call, after a bit of Ms. Donna’s prompting, with a cheery, “Bye, Mom. I love you!”

The two of them repeat this scene again, this time on Brady’s dad’s voicemail. Even the end is the same: “Bye, Dad. I love you!” Then out of the office they go, back to the classroom, both of them grinning from ear to ear.

This, I think to myself, *this* is what keeps Ms. Donna and all the other preschool educators like her coming to work each day. This is what makes all the difficult days worthwhile. It’s what early childhood education is all about: one caring teacher, a proud little boy, and a Sunshine Call in the middle of a rainy Thursday afternoon.

Preventing Challenging Behavior (From the Pages of *Young Children*)

For some young children, adjusting to preschool is extremely difficult. Just as Ms. Donna did with Brady, it’s important to be consistently warm and supportive while guiding children as they learn to regulate their emotions and make better choices. Planning ahead can help prevent children—and teachers!— from feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, and anxious.

One very common source of young children’s challenging behavior is transitions. Big transitions, like going from home to school, and little transitions, like moving from free play to group story time, require children to redirect their attention and control their feelings—skills they are still developing.

To make transitions easier, teachers and family members can work as a team, trying out some of the following tips in the classroom and at home.

- **Signal what's coming:** Create visual cues for transitions and post them where children can see them—put an activity schedule that includes school and family plans on the refrigerator at home, or hang images of winter clothes in the area where children prepare to go outside. Use a cleanup song, or some other set song, to help move children from small group activities to lunchtime. When children know what's in store, they can better prepare to transition to something different.
- **Use the first–then model:** Frame your statements in a way that helps children understand your expectations and develop patience: “First we’ll have story time, then we’ll put on our coats and mittens so we can go outside!”
- **Help redirect attention:** Shifting children’s attention and helping them see past the point of transition can make a difficult moment easier: “We’re going to learn a new song now! We can start as soon as we clear away the blocks so there’s room for everyone.”
- **Offer a workshop:** Give family members a chance to come together and learn about how you handle transitions in the classroom, role-play difficult situations, practice new strategies, and connect with one another.

This box on preventing challenging behavior has been adapted by *TYC* editors from Anne M. Butler and Michaelene M. Ostrosky’s “Reducing Challenging Behaviors during Transitions: Strategies for Early Childhood Educators to Share with Parents,” in the September 2018 issue of *Young Children*.

This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation standard and topic areas

STANDARD 1: RELATIONSHIPS

- 1A: Building Positive Relationships between Teachers and Families
 - 1F: Promoting Self-Regulation
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