Chapter 6
Students of Families in Transition
Suggestions for Working With Children and Families Experiencing a Separation, Divorce, or Remarriage

- Allow students to talk about their feelings, but do not quiz them about their family situation. Help them express their feelings in acceptable ways.
- Respond to students in a way that shows you are willing to listen and care about them and their family.
- Be alert to changes in behavior or schoolwork and stay in contact with parents about these changes.

- Be sensitive to problems with getting work completed, concentrating in class, or acting out behaviors, as students are sorting through the many psychological, emotional, and physical changes occurring in their lives.
- Encourage noncustodial parents to remain active in their child’s schooling and extracurricular activities.
- Send all communications, such as newsletters or notes, to both parents’ homes, rather than asking the child to communicate information to the noncustodial parent.
- Be as neutral as possible when parents separate and remember that it is not your role to judge either parent.
Suggestions for Working With Children and Families Experiencing a Separation, Divorce, or Remarriage

- Include both parents and stepparents in conferences or meetings; offer separate conference times if parents do not want to meet together.
- Keep both parents informed about the child’s schoolwork, such as projects or long-range assignments that may need to be completed on weekends when a child is visiting the noncustodial parent.
- Make a special effort to involve noncustodial parents in classroom activities by inviting them to volunteer in the classroom or on field trips, have lunch with their child, or attend school functions.
- Use age-appropriate children’s books with the whole group, small groups, or individuals to give children an opportunity to discuss divorce and remarriage and share their responses to the books through art, writing, or other creative expressions. (A list of children’s literature for transitions is given at the end of the chapter in Table 6.3).
- If a student seems to be seriously affected, seek professional help from the school counselor or social worker. Consider organizing a support group, facilitated by the school counselor, with children in the school experiencing a divorce and consult with the counselor about specific classroom problems.

- For schools with limited in-house counseling resources, consider seeking community mental health professionals to volunteer for sessions with both children and parents.
- Propose to your school administrator that your school offer parenting seminars on the effects of divorce and remarriage on children and the emotional support and positive parenting strategies that are effective.
- Propose to your school administrator that your school offer in-service training for teachers to help them better understand some issues of divorce and remarriage relating to school achievement and some ways in which they can better provide support for students and families (Frieman, 1997; 1998; Hodak, 2003; Kramer & Smith, 1998).
Suggestions for Working With Children and Families Dealing With a Death

Children do not respond to grief in the same way as adults, and they may have difficulty in understanding that death is permanent, irreversible, and final. They may not be able to express their emotions or ask for what they need, and they may exhibit unacceptable classroom behaviors (Willis, 2002). However, there are several steps you can take to help the child cope with the loss:

• Keep routines as regular as possible.
• Offer extra nurturing, as adults in the child’s life may be emotionally unavailable.
• Be patient with the child if she regresses in behaviors, such as bed-wetting, or displays aggressive, acting-out behaviors or irrational fears.
• Answer the child’s questions honestly, but also be sensitive to the family’s cultural or religious beliefs about death.
• Assure the child that he did not cause the death and help family members recognize that it is not disrespectful for children to play and have fun, even while the family is grieving.
• Encourage the child to express feelings or remember the loved one through artwork, creative drama, and writing letters to or stories about the person.
• Expect that holidays or the anniversary of the death may be a difficult time for the child; be ready to provide extra support at these times.
• Provide the child with an opportunity to do something in memory of the person who died, such as making a memory book about a grandparent or creating a treasure box for special keepsakes from a deceased sibling.
Suggestions for Working With Children and Families Dealing With a Death

- You may be unsure of how to respond to a family after a death, whether to reach out to the family or respect their privacy by limiting your contacts. It is important to recognize that individuals respond differently to grief and to accept that personal responses will vary widely within and between families. The following general suggestions about how to support a family dealing with a death may be helpful:

- If the family is receptive, schedule a home visit through a personal note or a phone call to the family. Deliver class cards or notes to the family through this family visit. Later visitors might include the school principal, your district/school social worker or parent coordinator, community members, or other teachers who had contact with the family member. However, be sensitive about overwhelming the family with visitors. Always call ahead before the visit to make sure that the family is ready for visitors.

- Recognize that cultural influences have an impact on the grief process. Some cultures historically tend to deny death and suppress their grief, while other cultures may be open and demonstrative in their grief.

- At school functions, arrange for the deceased parent whose presence had been expected to be represented by school staff or a friend.

- At holiday times, avoid assigning projects that require children to create gifts for a deceased family member, such as making Mother’s Day or Father’s Day presents.

- Seek a grief support program for the family or the individual child. Notify parents of the existence of the support program and explain the benefits, but let the parents or a relative follow through.

- Honor the deceased in the school community. Often trees are planted in memory of a loved one, but mental health professionals warn that if the tree dies, this can create further traumatic feelings for children and their families. (Armstrong, 1997; Doran & Hansen, 2006; Haggard, 2005; McEntire, 2003; Willis, 2002)
Some suggestions for classroom teachers of military children

- Include instructional practices that incorporate the military life, such as teaching military time or doing math activities that include counting the number of soldiers in a troop, brigade, or battalion.
- Encourage classroom conversation that helps build relationships and support among military and non-military students. For example, in a geography lesson, have students show on a map where their fathers/mothers are or include information about family deployments in classroom newsletters.
- Initiate more frequent contacts with military parents than the typical parent-teacher conference; for military families who may move or be deployed before the traditional fall or spring conferences, schedule a special conference before they leave (Farrell & Collier, 2010).

- “New families need transition support and communication; in the military, they are used to communication and order.
- Teachers need to know their students well and tune into their emotions. Become aware of deployment and family separation changes.
- Children need support, stability, caring and kindness, similar to children of parents who are separating, divorcing or suffering the death of a parent.
- Use technology through Skype, Google Earth, and e-mail or blog like a working journal. Use deployments to teach geography lessons.”
Suggestions for Working with Students With Parents in Prison

- See children as individuals, rather than the label of “child of a parent in prison.”
- Avoid treating the child as a victim or being overprotective.
- Acknowledge the child’s preferences for sharing information about his parent. Find out what the child has been told from the caregiver.
- Avoid asking about the crime (Newnham, 2002).
- Provide a safe, secure classroom environment, and do not allow any negative peer comments about the child’s parent.
- Provide opportunities for children to tell their stories through artwork or writing.
- Be a good listener, but remember to be nonjudgmental; the child has not committed a crime (Roznowski, 2010).
- Be supportive of the child’s caregiver, but understand that she may not be willing to share information about their family. Work to build a trusting, respectful relationship.
Suggestions for Working with Children in Foster Care

- As a teacher of a child in foster care, you may play a vital role in his or her life. As Coulling (2000) noted,

  It is clear that for a child in foster care to stand any chance of succeeding in the mainstream environment, the nurture and support of caring teaching staff are essential—staff who are able to understand the individual needs of the child and look behind the presenting, sometimes difficult, behavior; who are able to work in conjunction with care[egiv]ers, birth families, and social workers to provide the best possible chance of a long-term, stable school experience. (p. 34)

- Teachers and other school staff should establish a good relationship with the child’s foster care family and social worker and stay in frequent communication.

- Be an advocate for children, making sure they get the necessary emotional and academic support to be successful.

- Because a child in foster care may have had little security or stability in the past, make the classroom a haven of safety, with regular and predictable routines.

- Provide extra support for the child to fit in socially in the classroom, including teaching her how to answer classmates’ personal questions about the child’s life in foster care.

- Be aware of the danger of foster children being ridiculed or bullied by classmates and provide extra attention, if needed, without singling the child out as being different.
Suggestions for Working with Children in Foster Care

- Involve the foster family in the classroom and in school activities, although it is important to realize that if they have several foster children, they may not be able to participate beyond helping the child at home.
- Be sensitive about assignments that relate to families, such as requiring children to bring in baby pictures or create a family tree.
- Share books that include family types other than biological families; include books that show multiracial families. (See the list of children’s literature for transitions at the end of this chapter in Table 6.3.)
- Be a positive role model or mentor for the child or provide opportunities for mentoring from community volunteers such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, or an adopted grandparents program.
- Have high expectations and encourage the child to set goals, including the goal of going to college (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Noble, 1997).
Summary

This chapter has examined some of the many transitions that children may encounter during their school years. Some transitions may be normal and expected, such as the birth of a new baby or the move into a new home, while other, more difficult transitions, such as those occurring when a military parent is deployed or with the death of a parent, can have a major impact on students’ academic success. Teachers who are sensitive to these changes and supportive of students and families during transitions can make the difference as to whether students succeed in their education.