Most of us, and especially children, appreciate some level of “sameness” in our lives. That doesn’t mean that we don’t appreciate the new and the novel, but we’d like more sameness than change.

—Bright Horizons Family Solutions (2017)

As described in Chapter 3, families go through normal transitions that include marriage, the birth of children, and the children growing up and leaving home. Although cultural or socioeconomic influences may cause the timing of these events to vary, these transitions are a normal part of family life. What happens, though, when a family experiences an unexpected change such as a divorce or a death in the family? Do these family transitions require any special knowledge or skills on your part as a teacher? Consider the following questions that relate to changes that families and children may experience:

- How can I help a new student who has moved from another school to be successful?
- What kind of support does a student need when her parents separate and divorce? Does the transition into a blended family create any special issues for students?
- What should my response be to a student who has lost a sibling, parent, grandparent, or other significant family member?
- How can I work effectively with military families, who are often in transition owing to deployments or moves?
- How does having a parent in prison affect students’ ability to learn and be successful at school?
• How can I help children in foster care feel secure in my classroom, even though their family may be temporary?

All these questions address difficult transitions that families and children may experience and that may affect the child’s learning. This chapter will explore both normal family transitions and those changes that are unexpected and difficult for families. The chapter then offers suggestions as to how teachers and schools can respond to the changes.

### FAMILY LIFE CYCLE: NORMAL TRANSITIONS

She took a step and didn't want to take any more, but she did.
—Markus Zusak (2005)

Think about your life from birth to the present. What significant transitions have occurred in your life, such as the birth of a younger sibling, a family move, the death of a grandparent, or a family divorce or remarriage? Using a timeline format, create a chronicle of your life with labels for these significant transitions. How many transitions have you experienced? Reflect on these transitions: Were some more difficult than others? Your experiences can better help you understand the students you’ll have in your classroom and the changes they experience in their family life.

Children like routine; they thrive on consistency. However, today’s students undergo a significant number of transitions. A stay-at-home parent entering the workforce or changing jobs, the family moving to a new area, children changing schools, older siblings leaving home, or the death of a grandparent are just a few of the normal life events that may occur in a family. (A life event is a significant experience that has an impact on a person’s psychological condition.) Although change is inevitable, even changes that are positive and desired, such as the birth of a new baby, can cause stress for children and have an impact on student learning (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

One of the primary reasons why transitions are difficult for children appears to be the way a change affects the quality of parenting and the relationship between children and their parents or caregivers. If a transition causes the family to be under stress, then parenting abilities may suffer, leading to negative outcomes for the children. However, if families are able to maintain strong relationships and the adults have good parenting skills during the transition, then children appear protected from the risks associated with the change (De Vaus & Gray, 2003). For example, if parents prepare siblings for the arrival of a new baby and continue to meet the older sibling’s emotional and physical needs, children tend to adjust more easily to the change in their family. Conversely, if a parent's new job requires a family move, the move may have a negative impact on a child if the new job is demanding, with long hours affecting the quality of parenting. Transitions do not affect all children the same way because children are different in resilience and adaptation to change, but one common factor in whether a transition has a major impact on children appears to be how the adult family members handle the transition and the quality of parenting during the transition (De Vaus & Gray, 2003).
Divorce and a 5-Year-Old

It was a busy morning in Ms. Tamika Grey’s kindergarten classroom. The children were working in their literacy stations on a variety of tasks while she worked with small groups on beginning reading skills. At the reading table, she helped Javier, Emma, and James write a sentence about the pictures they had drawn. Javier and James were both concentrating as they “stretched out” the words and tried to write the sounds they heard. Emma, however, seemed to be a million miles away. “Emma,” Tamika said gently, “what would you like to write about your picture?” Emma shrugged her shoulders and then scooted her chair closer to Tamika’s and continued to look at her paper without writing anything. Tamika noticed that Emma had gotten clingier in the last month, and she wondered if it had anything to do with the changes that had happened at home.

At the fall parent–teacher conferences, Emma’s mother, father, and new stepmother had all come for her appointment. Tamika hadn’t realized that Emma’s father had remarried, and she wished that she had scheduled separate conferences for the parents because Lori Chandler, Emma’s mother, looked uncomfortable and tense during the conference. She remained briefly afterward and quickly told Tamika that Emma’s father had recently remarried and the children were not adjusting to the change well. Lori’s eyes had filled with tears as she asked Tamika to let her know if Emma was having any problems with her schoolwork and then quickly left.

Tamika wasn’t sure how to handle the situation now. Emma was having more problems at school, both socially and academically. Tamika did not believe that she had learning problems, but she just seemed unable to concentrate or focus on anything, and her work was often unfinished. She also did not want to play with her classmates at recess but instead wanted to stand close to Tamika or whatever teacher or aide was on recess duty. Tamika knew that she should share this information with Emma’s parents, but she hated to add to the stress that Mrs. Chandler seemed to be feeling. Mr. Chandler obviously cared about his children, and his new wife had seemed interested in Emma’s schoolwork at the conference, but Tamika didn’t know whether she should notify both parents and ask them to come in again or just contact Emma’s mom. She made a mental note to talk to the school counselor about the situation and get her advice. At the beginning of the year, the counselor had started a support group for children whose families had experienced a divorce, and she had recently expanded it to include monthly parent meetings at night. Maybe it would help Emma to be a part of that group. Meanwhile, Tamika put her arm around Emma’s shoulders and said brightly, “Let’s see if we can think of something to say about that great picture you’ve drawn!”

MOVING

How lucky I am to have something that makes saying good-bye so hard.

—The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh (Milne, 1926)

One normal family transition that deserves special attention from teachers is a family move. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2010) reported that between 1998 and 2007, approximately 70% of students changed schools 2 times or less and about 18% changed schools 3 times before high school, and approximately 13% of students changed...
schools 4 or more times. This number may be higher for children from low-income families. In urban schools, as many as 20% of students may change schools during the year (Weissbourd, 2009). Many students move during the early childhood and elementary school years, and research has generally shown that a move can have a negative effect on student learning. Studies have found that students who experience a move have lower test scores and grades and a higher chance of being held back, and they are more likely to receive special education services—especially students who had changed schools 4 or more times by sixth grade were about a year behind their classmates (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2016). Possible explanations for these negative outcomes are the loss of social relationships with both community and peers as well as a lack of continuity from one school curriculum to another. Other reasons are that a move may be accompanied by a negative life event, such as a divorce or a parent losing a job, or that families that move tend to be lower in socioeconomic status (SES) than nonmoving families. However, one study found that even children who lived with both biological parents and were from a high-income family tended to have a decline in test scores if they moved. Moving appears to be difficult for all children (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1990; Hartman, 2006; Pribesh & Downey, 1999).

Schools and teachers can ease the transition to a new school by being sensitive to new students’ needs and creating a welcoming atmosphere. Moffett Elementary School in Los Angeles, California, which serves a large Latino/a population and receives 4 to 10 new students each month, provides extra help and attention to these transfer students, connects them with counselors, assigns them a student ambassador or friend to help them find their way, and works to involve new families in school. Other suggestions for schools include keeping good records on students and offering transportation assistance to homeless students or those who move only a short distance to keep them from having to change schools at least until the end of the school year (Hartman, 2006).

For classroom teachers, it is important to provide extra support and attention until the student has adjusted to the classroom routine and demands and to help the student develop new friendships in the classroom to replace those that were lost in the move. School records may not arrive quickly, so you should conduct informal assessments as soon as possible to determine the student’s abilities, such as reading level, and curriculum concepts that the student may have been exposed to at the last school attended.

Sharing books with the class about children who move to a new school can open discussions about the difficulties a move creates in a student’s life. Talking in class groups where classmates who have moved in the past share their experiences with new students helps build an environment of bonding and empathy. Children’s books about family transitions, such as Daly’s (2012) Where’s Jamela? (moving), Edwards’s (2004) Papa’s Latkes (death of a parent), Pelton’s (2004) When Dad’s
Be a Reflective Teacher

Each section that follows on family transitions will contain several scenarios or classroom vignettes that readers can analyze for actions they could take as teachers. Reflection and critical thinking about constructive and sensitive dialogue and/or actions should be transformed into talking points or plans that would work in the classroom and/or with parents. Readers can work with partners to develop reflective and constructive dialogues. Give it a try!

Scenarios Relating to Family Mobility

- Terry, a second-grade teacher, works in a district that has high student turnover in the grade school. The economy of the local area is mainly agricultural based; migrant families stay only 3 or 4 months at one school before moving on. Children enter classrooms with varying levels of academic skills. Terry fears students who transfer into her class might feel like outsiders and nervous about fitting into the class. What talking points, or plans, might Terry develop?

- A new student arrives in Sally’s fifth-grade classroom in January. The district is a high socioeconomic district with a stable school population. The students have known each other since preschool. Sally’s intention is to send a note, call, or e-mail the family to welcome them to the district. How might she proceed to contact the family when school records from the previous school have not arrived yet?

CHARACTERISTICS OF DIFFICULT FAMILY TRANSITIONS

Our cities have become unaffordable to our poorest families, and this problem is leaving a deep and jagged scar on our next generation.

—Matthew Desmond (2016)
Although a birth of a new baby or a move may be a planned, expected transition, some transitions are unexpected, or nonnormative, such as a young parent dying of cancer or a mother of grown children finding out that she’s pregnant. Obviously, nonnormative transitions, or changes in a person’s life that do not occur at the physically, socially, or culturally expected time in the normal life cycle, are more difficult for families to handle, and teachers need to be sensitive to the family stress created by both normal and nonnormative transitions. Another example is eviction. Approximately 21.3 million American renters spent at least 30% of their income on rent in 2014 (Vasel, 2016). This was largely due to an insufficient supply of affordable housing coupled with decreasing household incomes. It is estimated that 2.7 million renters have faced eviction in the United States, and this number will continue to rise with increasing housing prices (Kinney, 2016). Eviction laws vary from state to state, with some states providing tenants with up to 60 days’ notice, while in others tenants may receive only 5 days’ notice; regardless, the social–emotional impact takes a toll. Once a family is evicted, it becomes harder for them to qualify for housing programs because of accrued rental debt, which means an extended period of homelessness and an increase in residential mobility. Besides the loss of stability and most of their possessions, families with their children must make do in unhealthy conditions with little resources to treat illnesses that occur. As a result, children may go through long periods out of school and hop from school to school, increasing gaps in knowledge as they go.

Certain characteristics can make transitions more difficult for families. These include the following:

- **Timing.** The transition lasts too long or the timing is off. Examples include a teenage pregnancy, a parent remarrying too quickly after a divorce, or a parent suffering a long battle with cancer. There is more social support for transitions that occur at the normal time, as in a baby shower that precedes the planned birth of a baby. This may explain why, in one study, children rated the birth of a new sibling as a low stressor compared to a parent’s divorce (Bagdi & Pfister, 2006).

- **Control.** Transitions are more difficult if the family members have no control over them, as when a spouse walks out on a family or the family has to move owing to the relocation of the family breadwinner’s workplace. A less stressful transition would occur if the primary wage earner chose to leave a job and take a better one and if the move was based on a family decision.

- **Rite of passage.** Transitions are easier on families if there is a ritual or ceremony to mark the transition, such as a graduation ceremony that signals the move from childhood to adulthood, a wedding that celebrates the beginning of a new family, or even a funeral that marks the ending of a person’s life. Transitions that have no ritual, such as a separation or divorce, may be more stressful for a family.
• **Warning.** Transitions that occur without warning are often difficult for families to cope with, such as a family member being killed in an accident. Having time to prepare for the transition, such as the months leading up to the birth of a baby, knowing the baby's gender, and even having a planned date for a delivery, can ease the stress of the transition.

• **Status loss.** Transitions that involve a loss of status, role, identity, or self-respect can be difficult for family members. For example, the loss of a job, a divorce that requires the family to move into a smaller home, or children leaving home causing a stay-at-home mother to feel a loss of identity as a mom can all be more difficult than a transition that involves a gain in status, such as a job promotion or a move into a larger home in a good neighborhood.

All these characteristics of transitions can add stress to a family, and the more of these that are seen in a family, the more likely it is that the family would be struggling to be well functioning. Offering parent education programs or newsletter tips on how to minimize the impact of these characteristics can be helpful to families. For example, one mother described how she tried to give her children more control during the transition of a remarriage and move to help them adjust:

When we moved from our apartment into my husband's home after we got married, we did have to talk about it a lot because they really loved [the apartment]. One thing we did was give them pieces of paper, and they wrote down different things like “my bed” or “my chair” and then they put those papers where they wanted their stuff to go. It was really cute to see them “set up” their rooms before moving day, and then when they came back over, everything was where they had asked for it to go. (N. Cody, personal communication, February 5, 2011)

**Activity 6.1**

Think back to the timeline you created at the beginning of the chapter. Choose the three most significant transitions you've experienced thus far in your life. Using the list of characteristics of difficult transitions just presented, reflect on your three transitions in timing, control, rite of passage, warning, and status loss. Did you find these characteristics to be true of your transitions? What made your transitions easier or more difficult? Finally, reflect on actions that your teachers took or didn't take during these transitions. What was helpful? What do you wish your teachers might have done to better support you or your family during the transitions? What does this mean to you as a teacher?
Suggestions for Working With Students in Difficult Family Transitions

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, children depend on consistency and routine. The following specific suggestions for teachers may be helpful:

- Stick to classroom routines as much as possible, and if there is to be an out of the ordinary event, give advanced warning if possible.
- Be prepared to answer a wide variety of questions. Often, the classroom is a safe place for children; therefore, you are a trusted individual to talk to while they process transitions.
- Have some grieving time. With transitions, something is easily forgotten or left behind. Give time to talk about what is missed, and allow mourning for their change.
- Give time to adjust. This means possible tears and tantrums if a student’s home life is out of their control.

Scenarios Relating to Difficult Family Transitions

- Alina, a second-grade student who has finally settled into the classroom after arriving 2 months ago, announces that she is moving again. You know from her records that this will be the third move in this school year. What steps can you take to help Alina be ready for her new school and ensure that she does not fall behind even further?
- For the third day in a row, you notice that Jorin, your fourth grader, has come to school late, tired, hungry, and in the same clothes. At recess time, he tearfully confesses that his family got kicked out of their apartment because he was fighting with his sister, and he has no idea where his stuff is. How can you comfort him and his family? Do you know where to find outside support to help get his family back on their feet? Have you established a positive enough relationship with the family to offer assistance?

STUDENTS IN FAMILIES UNDERGOING SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE

The children of divorce are handed a really big job.

—Elizabeth Marquardt (2006)

One difficult transition that many children experience is the separation and divorce of their parents. As noted in Chapters 1 and 4, a significant number of children will
experience a separation and/or divorce of their parents. Fewer than half (46%) of U.S. children under 18 are living in a home with two married parents in their first marriage (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Although research suggests that children and adolescents who go through the family transition of separation and divorce have more academic, social, and emotional difficulties than students who live with two biological parents, there is marked individual variability in how students adjust to the change. While some adapt well, others experience short- and long-term negative effects. The difference seems to be related to the number and nature of the negative life events, such as a family divorce that they undergo, as well as the resources and supports that they have to help them adapt to the changes. Students who have greater accumulations of negative family transitions have more academic, behavioral, and emotional problems than those who experience few negative life events. If a parent also has emotional problems, such as depression, and becomes self-absorbed or withdrawn, then students may exhibit acting-out behaviors as well as develop emotional problems. However, effective parenting practices and strong emotional support can reduce these negative effects (Doyle, Wolchik, Dawson-McClure, & Sandler, 2003; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Wood, Repetti, & Roesch, 2004). One mother said the following:

It has taken every ounce of God-given courage I have to acknowledge the kids’ feelings and comfort them and to delicately answer their questions about why. I absolutely believe that they do not need to hear my adult feelings. I don’t think they would know how to process them, so it wouldn’t be fair to share them. So, in some ways, I get strength to get through the day just by being their mom and vowing that I will not subject them to that. I am honest in terms of telling them that “yes, I am sad, also,” but I always follow up with a strong, “but we will be okay. Daddy will always be your daddy and I will always be your mommy. I will not leave. We will always be a family and will help and support and love each other.” Sometimes, I have to literally bite my tongue, and I usually have to pause and choose my words with loving discernment because there are days when my adult feelings of anger, resentment, and sadness are my prevailing thoughts; but by keeping theirs and my routines the same, and by being open to talking about things without bitterness, they are seeing every day that my reassurances aren’t just empty words. I am noticing their comfort in that. (S. Osdieck, personal communication, April 18, 2007)

When parents are able to maintain a sense of security and provide emotional support for children, the negative effects of this difficult transition can be reduced.

Current Research on Divorce

However much parents attempt to ameliorate the negative effects of divorce on their child, research indicates these effects can be particularly devastating for all parties involved:
• **Falling academic achievement.** Amato’s (2001) most recent meta-analysis found that the negative effect of divorce was stronger for academic achievement of children in primary school compared with children in secondary school.

• **Emerging literacy.** Current research seems to conclude that divorce has a negative effect on preschool-age children’s emerging literacy. Other stressors in the family such as parental depression and parents’ struggling health have negative effects on children's emerging literacy (Fagan, 2011), further supporting the idea that divorce may have a negative effect on preschoolers’ literacy.

• **Child development.** It has been shown that divorce is likely to have negative effects on preschool-age children; however, additional findings suggest that several partnerships over a short period of time are disruptive to child development outcomes (Fagan, 2013).

• **Loss of health coverage.** The fact that approximately 1 million divorces occur in the United States every year indicates that roughly 115,000 women lose private health insurance annually in the months following divorce. Roughly 65,000 of these women become uninsured. The loss is not just a temporary disruption to women's health insurance coverage; rather, women’s overall rates of health insurance coverage remain depressed for more than 2 years after divorce (Lavelle & Smock, 2012, p. 426).

• **Communication with children.** Family communication particularly for noncustodial parents definitely suffers when a divorce occurs. School news about school–family events may not reach both parents, and celebratory moving up or graduation programs may not be attended by both parents after a divorce, particularly if the divorce was contentious. Noncustodial parents express a loss of knowledge about the life of their child and a marked lack of communication (Rodriguez, 2014).

Teachers can make a huge difference to students when their parents are going through a divorce. In addition, school nurses and counselors should be notified when a student is experiencing a family separation or divorce to look out for student signs of depression, post-traumatic stress, or suicidal thoughts and actions.

Prepare a dialogue that simulates reporting to a school nurse your concerns about a child whose parents are separated and considering divorce. This information was reported to you by the mother of the child in confidence, but she expressed concerns since her husband is contesting the divorce and becoming verbally abusive to her and the child, who is 6 years old.
Scenarios Relating to Divorce

- Holidays can be particularly depressing and sad for children whose parents are newly divorced. Long-standing family traditions may be disrupted, relatives may avoid connecting with the family, and children may miss celebrating with one or the other parent because of rigid visitation schedules. Prepare a teacher dialogue that is sensitive to the sadness and loss a child of divorce may feel with an approaching holiday. Remember to accentuate the positive aspects of holiday gatherings and maybe include your own disappointment about family issues. End on a positive, upbeat note.

- Two confrontational newly divorced young parents of a second grader have both demanded to be a part of the parent–teacher conference coming up in November. Your school has adopted an innovative approach: parent–teacher–student conferences are enacted. In planning for the conference, based on the conversations with both parents on the telephone, they each indicated they would be okay if the other parent was there if “they behaved themselves.” You wondered how that could be interpreted, yet a RED FLAG definitely appeared on the horizon after those two conversations. How could you preplan for this conference? Who might you notify about the possible parental confrontation? It is early in the school year, and you don’t want to alienate any parents. What about the child attending? Should you establish “ground rules,” and when?

- Although experts in the area of parental divorce highly recommend that parents stay focused on their child’s feelings, not theirs, many use children as a conduit for communication with the warring ex-spouse. This is never acceptable, and the emotional turmoil it creates for children may be scarring for life. Consider this scenario: During recess break, one of your students comes to sit next to you on the bench, unwilling to engage with other students during play. You start talking and discover that his parents have been sending terse and hurtful messages back and forth to each other using your student as a conduit. Your student seems lethargic and depressed and starts to cry, asking you if he has to stay with both parents. As the teacher, what actions should you take at this point? How might this discovery affect your appraisal of the boy’s parents? Should it?

When parents remarry and create blended families, children experience another difficult transition, which is demonstrated by this 11-year-old:

As for my blended family, we’re going on our second year, and it's been really rough. I haven’t made it any easier, I must admit, but there is so much going on inside my head that it is really hard for me to reverse roles and put myself in my stepparent’s shoes. . . . We’d been pretty much running wild and having a good old time for close to a year, and now we were suddenly told we had to conform to rules set forth by our parents along with their
new significant others. Did this go over well? NO—I don’t THINK so. We were all convinced that the changing of the rules were due to the new wicked stepparents. We didn’t like it one bit. We decided to stick together and rebel. (Goebel, 2001, p. 14)

As noted in Chapter 4, students who transition from a single-parent family to a blended family have to adapt to new rules, roles, and boundaries as well as the possible instant addition of new family members, such as stepsiblings, stepgrandparents, and other members of the extended family of the new parent. The transition may be more challenging for children if it has the characteristics of difficult transitions listed earlier, such as occurring too quickly after parents’ separation and divorce; the child having no choice or input into the parents’ decision to remarry; and the child feeling a loss of status, such as having to share his bedroom with a new stepsibling. However, with time to adjust to the changes and the opportunity to be involved in decisions, as well as attention from parents throughout the process, children may also be able to readily adjust to the new blended family. One mother describes her family’s experience of becoming a blended family:

So when we decided to get married, [the children’s] response seemed very natural—like “Ok, neat, so what’s for lunch?” We had a very casual wedding, and our only attendants were the children. We tried very hard to involve them as much as possible and to make them feel that it was “our wedding,” rather than their mom’s wedding. The other thing that really helped a lot was how supportive their dad, my ex-husband, was of it. He recognized that the wedding was very important for them to be involved in (agreed to change our parenting plan so that the kids could be with us longer to attend everything), and he always had positive responses for the kids whenever they talked about it, which I think helped them feel safe and comfortable no matter where they were. (N. Cody, personal communication, February 5, 2011)

Suggestions for Working With Students in Families Undergoing Separation, Divorce, or Remarriage

Teachers and schools can also provide support for students from families experiencing a separation, divorce, or remarriage by helping children deal with their feelings and encouraging all parents to stay involved with their child’s schooling (Frieman, 1997). The following specific suggestions for teachers may be helpful:

- 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 ask 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.

• 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.

• 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).
DEATH OF A PARENT OR FAMILY MEMBER

One spring, Grandmother became thin as smoke. She didn’t make tortillas; she was too tired. She said, “It’s almost time for the butterflies to leave. Come with me to the Magic Circle, and we’ll say goodbye.”

—Barbara Joosse (2001)

The death of a parent or both parents in the life of a child is an exceptionally traumatic event. One out of every 20 children 15 or younger will lose one or both parents (Owens, 2008); that is approximately 1.5 million children. Children who have lost a parent may suffer from anxiety, depression, anger, and sleep disorders such as nightmares and may exhibit behavior problems such as aggression or acting out. Children may also have physical symptoms. For example, after her father died unexpectedly, one 12-year-old student developed eczema, a skin disorder, and a nervous habit of repeatedly scratching her scalp, which led to partial hair loss. Younger children may not be able to express their emotions about a parent’s death or be able to explain why they are angry or sad. In addition, they may feel that their behavior in some way contributed to the death of their parent. Students may withdraw into themselves, have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork, and avoid it out of frustration (Schlozman, 2003; Willis, 2002; Worden, Davies, & McCowen, 1999).

The death of a sibling is also traumatic for children and occurs more frequently than many teachers realize. As noted in the characteristics of difficult transitions, a death that is unexpected or occurs without warning is especially hard, and accidents are the leading cause of death of children younger than 14 (in the United States)—motor vehicle crashes, drowning, and suffocation being the leading types of accidents. In 2015, there were 38,300 deaths due to motor vehicle accidents (Newsweek, 2016). The Children’s Defense Fund (2014) reported that every day in America, 21 children or teens die from accidents, and 65 babies die before their first birthday. Second to accidents, the most common cause of death of children is cancer, such as leukemia or brain cancer.

When a child loses a sibling, the survivor’s guilt may compound the horrendous feelings of sadness and depression (Doran & Hansen, 2006). Besides guilt and sadness, children may also feel anger, fear, hopelessness, rejection, self-doubt, anxiety, worry, and impaired cognitive functioning or poor school performance. They may have a preoccupation with thoughts about death and be unable to concentrate. Children who lose a sibling may also have physiological symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, skin rashes, allergies, and bed-wetting. While dealing with their own grief, parents may also be incompetent to provide the support that surviving siblings need (Birenbaum, 2000). Children’s emotional well-being during this stressful time can benefit from grief counseling or intervention from a doctor (Kid’s Health, 2007).

Families may respond differently to the death of a child in the family, depending on cultural and religious beliefs, as well as different coping mechanisms. One study of Mexican American families after the death of a child found that parents sought support from their extended family network and their church, and that families participated in
rituals such as celebrating the Day of the Dead (a Mexican holiday typically celebrated on November 2) and attending church masses as a way to connect with the deceased and honor their memory. Many parents used storytelling, keepsakes, and pictures to maintain a sense of the child’s presence (Doran & Hansen, 2006). Family responses to grief may vary widely. Some families may not want to talk about their deceased child, while others may find it therapeutic. For example, one parent said, “Our closest friends are fine, they’ll bring up [child’s name], but a lot of people . . . won’t sort of bring up the topic . . . and that’s what I think we need. Other people might not need that but we need to include him” (Hynson, Aroni, Bauld, & Sawyer, 2006, p. 807).

The death of a relative, especially a grandparent who may have been actively involved in raising a child, can leave a huge void in the life of a student. As noted in Chapter 4, a significant number of children (5.8 million) are being raised by their grandparents (AARP, 2017), and the death of the grandparent can have the same impact as the death of a parent. However, even when a grandparent is not actually raising a child, the death represents a significant loss in the child’s life. In the normal life cycle process, especially with parents delaying having children until later in life, elementary-age children may face the loss of one or more grandparents.

Suggestions for Working With Students and the Death of a Parent or Family Member

It is important that you remember that grief is a process that takes time. Kübler-Ross (1969) identified stages of grief that people may experience after a death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, she later wrote that these stages “were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages. . . . There is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives” (Kübler-Ross & Kesler, 2005, p. 7). 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 creating artwork, doing a creative drama, and writing letters to or creating 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.

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).

Scenarios Relating to the Death of a Parent or Family Member

• A first-grade student is in a horrific car accident in which her parents were both killed. She is currently living with her relatives but still attends the same district and remains in the same classroom. As she is preparing to return after
several weeks of absence, her teacher, Jonathan, is concerned about setting a feeling of community and support for the student. What steps should he take to prepare the class and set the right tone for her return?

- A fifth-grade student, Ted, had been chronically ill throughout the fall of the school year and passed away over the winter holiday break. His parents made the teacher, Suzanne, aware of his leukemia condition during the summer but insisted he attend school as much as possible when he felt well enough. Ted was mostly absent from class the month of December, and his parents notified Suzanne he had died in the hospital on December 27. The student was a popular child who went through the elementary school from kindergarten with many students in the class. In what ways might the class and school honor Ted?

## STUDENTS WITH PARENTS IN THE MILITARY

Children and youth in military families tend to have higher rates of mental health problems than those in the general population, and those mental health problems are especially pronounced during a parent’s deployment. Parental deployment negatively affects children’s school performance, and can lead to poor functioning including sadness and depression and adverse behaviors, such as lashing out in anger and disrespecting authority figures.

—National Center for Children in Poverty (2016, p. 1)

Being part of a military family involves frequent transitions, and it can, ultimately, include losing a parent in war. Many teachers are unaware of the challenges faced by military families affected by deployment—career military, guard members, or even reservists (Allen & Staley, 2007). Mobility is an accepted way of life for military families; they spend an average of 3 years at a military installation before reassignment, and children may transition from school to school from 6 to 9 times from kindergarten through high school (Titus, 2007). One study found that 15% of students in military families had moved at least 11 times during their school years. These students reported moving as their most stressful experience along with being separated from a parent or parents (Bell et al., 2007). Children of military personnel are often called resilient by principals and counselors, as they have to endure frequent school changes, long parental separations, missing friends, and forming new friendships (Hardy, 2006). However, this does not mean that these students and families don't need support, even if they are only in your classroom for a short time. As one teacher said, “Even when the parent comes in and says we’ll only be here for four months, we always say, ‘We are glad to have you for whatever time you are here.’ That’s what our school is about” (Farrell & Collier, 2010, p. 14). Another teacher said this:

They’ve already been to four schools and they are in fourth grade. They already have a certain opinion of what school is, whether they’ve had a good experience or a bad one. Then, how do you get them involved? They may be moving again in six months or a year. . . . Even though it’s only one year of the child’s life, you make it important. (Blum, 2005, p. 14)
Research has shown that second to families, schools are the most important stabilizing force in students’ lives, and that is especially true for military families.

Districts bordering military bases tend to be sensitized to the needs of military children, while the staff in other schools may not even be aware that a child has a family member currently in the military (Hardy, 2006). By opening lines of communication with military families, you can better understand their situational needs and attempt to keep them in the academic loop. If you are a teacher of military children, it is important that you become an emotional anchor for the children to help build coping skills and that you strive to create a caring, stress-free classroom where regular school routines reinforce a feeling of security for children and their military families (Allen & Staley, 2007). It is also important to become more educated about military life and its effects on children.

Media coverage can definitely have a negative effect on children of deployed parents. In the best of times, their world involves constant changes, pressure to remain “normal,” and interrupted school years. Media coverage may exacerbate the feelings of stress, anxiety, and fearfulness for students who do not know where their military parent is located. Through this tumult, teachers may notice behavior changes consisting of the following characteristics:

- There can be changes in school performance.
- Anger issues can develop.
- Children may worry, hide emotions, and disrespect parents and authority figures.
- Feeling a sense of loss is common.
- Symptoms consistent with depression may result.

**Suggestions for Working With Students With Parents in the Military**

- 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 nonmilitary students. For example, in a geography lesson, have students show on a map where their fathers or 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).

It is important for schools and teachers to be proactive about working with military families through family-friendly policies and practices, such as having an orientation process set in place for new military students, as well as making sure that all school personnel understand the fundamentals of military life and incorporate that understanding in their teaching (Farrell & Collier, 2010). If you are informed of a child in your classroom with a parent on active duty, you should connect with resource personnel such as the school psychologist or counselor, who may be able to provide advice, counseling, and support. One example of a support group for children of deployed parents is the Kit Kat Club (Keeping in Touch, Kids and Troops) at Ringgold Elementary School in Clarksville, Tennessee. This group was organized by the school psychologist, and the children sent e-mails, photos of school activities (even report cards), and letters to the parents overseas (Hardy, 2006, p. 12). In Killeen, Texas, the school counselor taught a “worrying” unit for military children, helping them cope with constant anxiety about their parent. The unit helped children identify what was out of their control or “worries you have to let go.” Children constructed a “worry doll” to comfort them when they found themselves getting anxious (Hardy, 2006).

Teachers can help all students in their class by teaching mindfulness to their students. This can particularly help military students because it not only allows them to be more in tune with their emotions but also helps to teach them how to express their emotions in healthy ways. Breathing techniques, meditation, and writing activities can all be beneficial and help students in military families understand their emotions better and express them in ways that are beneficial to their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

There are also many great texts that teachers can provide as resources to students; use as read-alouds; and even incorporate into bigger, authentic social projects for students. Some examples of these texts are as follows:

• *Brave Like Me* by Barbara Kerley (2016)
• *The Impossible Patriotism Project* by Linda Skeers (2009)
• *Joining Forces with Glory* by Lisa Mallen (2011)
• *Operation Yes* by Sara Lewis Holmes (2009)
• *Our Heroes’ Tree* by Stephanie Pickup and Marlene Lee (2013)
• *Soldier Mom* by Alice Mead (2009)
The parent or family member left at home also needs special consideration and patience. Living with uncertainty and anxiety about their loved one is part of the commitment to the military way of life. You should strive to remain in contact with the child's caregivers through phone calls, personal notes, and visits, and you should invite them to the classroom for school events and volunteer activities or simply to spend time with their children (Allen & Staley, 2007). You should also inform the parent about a child's behavioral changes that may have been brought on by the transition. Be aware that the remaining parent may be called away if the military parent is injured and that grandparents or other relatives may have to assume the parental role temporarily (Hardy, 2006).

Establishing a military support group for parents and other family members at school, in conjunction with the children's group, might be beneficial (Allen & Staley, 2007). You can also share helpful information, such as websites for military families. Table 6.1 lists some examples.

Table 6.1  Websites for Military Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Website Address</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue Star Families</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bluestarfam.org">http://www.bluestarfam.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camaraderie Foundation</td>
<td><a href="http://www.camaraderiefoundation.com/about">http://www.camaraderiefoundation.com/about</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Child Education Coalition</td>
<td><a href="http://www.militarychild.org">http://www.militarychild.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mic3.net">http://www.mic3.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military OneSource</td>
<td><a href="http://www.militaryonesource.mil">http://www.militaryonesource.mil</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Guard Family Program</td>
<td><a href="https://www.jointservicessupport.org/FP">https://www.jointservicessupport.org/FP</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Military Family Association</td>
<td><a href="http://www.militaryfamily.org">http://www.militaryfamily.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Military Spouse Network</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nationalmilitaryspousenetwork.org">http://www.nationalmilitaryspousenetwork.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Shower</td>
<td><a href="http://operationshower.org">http://operationshower.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Military Kids</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ourmilitarykids.org">www.ourmilitarykids.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Online Achievement Resources, a program for military families and the school districts that serve them</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uni.edu/ctlm/content/soar-info">http://www.uni.edu/ctlm/content/soar-info</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration</td>
<td><a href="http://www.samhsa.gov">http://www.samhsa.gov</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor.com for U.S. Military Families</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tutor.com/military">http://www.tutor.com/military</a></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Parents who are deployed may choose to remain active partners in the education of their children, and with today’s technology, that is possible. Students can communicate with the absent parent through letters, phone calls, e-mail, and blogs; they may use a webcam; and they may supplement their personal communications with class newsletters, videotapes of school events, class-generated webpages, class or individual photographs, artwork samples, or other classroom artifacts. Be sure to get permission from the child’s primary caregiver before sending items to the deployed parent (Allen & Staley, 2007).

Some students are in dual-military families, or families in which both parents are in the military. These students face increased hardships as there become times when deployments for the parents coincide or overlap. At these times, the student may suddenly have to live with a family friend or other family member and may even have to temporarily move out of the area for this to happen. This makes communication even more important for the teacher, as their main communication may not be with the child’s parents whom they are used to communicating with. New relationships must be formed.

When the deployed parent returns from active duty, it is a reason to celebrate, but return dates can be subject to change, which creates a great disappointment for children and their families. When parents do arrive home, the family will have another transition to adjust to: the addition of a new family member. In the parent’s absence, new routines and roles were established, and it may take a while for families to function effectively again. Deployed parents may also feel disconnected from their child’s school, and you can establish a feeling of school connectedness by inviting returning parents to have lunch at school with their child, share their experiences with the class, or attend family night events. However, it is important to give returning parents time to adjust to being home again before approaching them with requests for school engagement.

For some students, their military parent or family member may not return home. Since 2003, more than 4,488 U.S. soldiers have died in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and there have been more than 2,349 deaths in Afghanistan’s Operation Enduring Freedom, leaving military children to grieve the loss of a parent, sibling, or other significant family member (Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, 2014). Although many of the suggestions in the preceding section may be implemented with military families, the death of a family member in war is somewhat different and may need special attention. For example, when people die in service to their country, children are often told that they should be proud of their family member. Although the sentiment is admirable, it is important to recognize that children may have a variety of feelings, such as anger or intense pain, and that telling them how they “should” feel may not help them in their grief process (Children’s Grief Education Association, 2006). One resource for families who have lost a loved one in a war is the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), which provides comprehensive services free of charge to grieving military families (TAPS, 2007).

After the initial post-deployment phase for military families, another phase of the military’s cycle begins, often called “dwell time.” While pre-deployment, the deployment, and post-deployment all include their own stressors and hardships, it is crucial
for teachers to understand that there are still stressors during the dwell time, which can seem to be a more “normal” time for military families. During this time in which the military member is home, and their schedule is as normal as possible, the student’s needs do not lessen as they are faced with ongoing fears such as wondering when their loved one will have to leave again.

On a wider scope, school district personnel should develop intervention plans to assist military families at several levels. School crisis teams, consisting of an administrator, counselor, and school psychologist, can work to meet the needs of individual families (Allen & Staley, 2007). The crisis team can also provide training for teachers on strategies to use when working with children from military families.

Lisa, the wife of a career U.S. Air Force officer, noted, “Strengths of military families include resilience, respect for authority, global experiences and perspectives, and a high value placed on education.” She stated that issues facing military families include the following:

- Children moved every 2 to 4 years: They may be going to or coming from overseas schools, or there may be a discrepancy in kindergarten age requirement among school districts.
- A change of schools includes record transfers, graduation requirements, and a lack of connection with extracurricular activities.
- The quality of schools and teachers directly impacts the quality of life for military families. Families need regular communication, personal contact, and feedback.
- During a time of deployment and separation, school is the most important element of stability for military families. The most important thing is strong home-school connections.

She mentioned some things teachers should consider:

- 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 in to their emotions. They should be 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.

We have written *Bono’s Antarctic Adventures*. Dad took the school mascot, Bono, a stuffed monkey, all over with him on his travels. We wrote a narrative from the perspective of his travels. We know of another dad who writes on a blog from the perspectives of the emperor penguins viewing the military personnel. (Lisa S., 2011, personal communication)
Scenarios Relating to Military Families

- A new kindergarten student, whose father is deployed in Afghanistan, enters your classroom in March of the school year. Jack was registered in school by his mother, who is currently separated from Jack’s father. Jack is a friendly, rambunctious child who wears T-shirts with military logos and insignias on them and talks about killing and mayhem to other children while on the playground and at lunch. Parents of children in your class have e-mailed and called to express concern about Jack’s influence on their children, especially the boys in the class. You have spoken to Jack about his topics for discussion, and he replied those are the topics his father talks about. In discussing this with his mother, she indicated that she cannot control his discussions with his father, and that is one of the reasons why she separated from him. What are your next steps as a teacher?

- Suddenly, a fourth grader in your class turns introspective, starts fights, criticizes other students, and is surly when confronted about his actions. Thinking back, you remember Randy brought up in class that his dad is in the special forces, and he was deployed to outside Syria to help fight the terrorist threat. You overheard Randy say to another boy that he knows the “gross things” terrorists do to people they catch. What might be your next steps as a teacher?

- A second-grade student in your class, whose mother is deployed to Qatar, approaches you crying after a small-group activity. After you calm her down, she explains that the other students she was working with were asking her questions such as “Aren’t you afraid your mom is going to get shot and die?” and “Has your mom killed people?” What are your next steps as a teacher in regard to both this student and others in your class?

- A tenth-grade student in your history class, whose father is deployed to Iraq, begins talking about her father’s deployment during class time. She boasts about how much of a hero he is and how he is defending our freedom while away from his family. It is clear she is very proud. Another student in the class then begins commenting about how meaningless and stupid the war is. What are your next steps as a teacher?

STUDENTS WITH PARENTS IN PRISON

When my mother was sentenced, I felt that I was sentenced. She was sentenced to prison—to be away from her kids and family. I was sentenced as a child, to be without my mother.

—Antoinette (quoted in Bernstein, 2005, p. 122)
Another difficult transition for children occurs when a parent is sentenced to jail and taken from the home. It is estimated that nearly 2 million children in the United States have at least one parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison. In 2016, one in seven children living in poverty had an incarcerated parent; 11.4% of African American children had an incarcerated parent, 3.5% of Hispanic children had an incarcerated parent, and only 1.8% of non-Hispanic white children had an incarcerated parent (Department of Corrections, 2017).

“Children carry a lot of the burden around with them” (Bilchik, Seymour, & Kreisher, 2001, p. 108) when they feel guilt over a parent's imprisonment, according to Dr. Justin Skiba, coordinator of the Treatment for Residents With Incarcerated Parents Program (TRIP) in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Children mourn the absence of their parent and may develop emotional and behavioral difficulties, including withdrawal, aggression, and anxiety. Furthermore, risks of poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and drug or alcohol abuse exist for these children. In addition, children of incarcerated parents are 6 times more likely to enter the criminal justice system themselves (Bilchik et al., 2001); they are extremely vulnerable. Young children may be clingier and regress in behaviors, such as returning to thumb sucking or having bathroom accidents, and they may develop sleeping or eating problems. They may startle easily, and teachers may see violent themes in their drawings, storytelling, and play (Roznowski, 2010). If children witnessed the arrest of their parent, their feelings of loss, helplessness, and trauma may be intensified, leading many to exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Family & Corrections Network, 2009a). The extent to which children are affected by their parent's imprisonment will depend on factors such as their age, the strength of their relationship with their parent, their presence at the arrest, and the length of the parent's sentence (Roznowski, 2010).

Prison visits are one way that children can remain connected with their parents, but these visits are often a humiliating process because of the procedures children must endure to visit an inmate. For example, children visiting parents in prison may be allowed to visit only once or twice a month, often traveling a distance of 100 miles or more from their home for a visit. Public transportation typically does not exist for prisons, prohibiting some children from being able to visit. In some cases, the parent may be transferred to a distant facility, making visitation even more difficult. Forty-three percent of parents in federal prisons live more than 500 miles from their children (Family & Corrections Network, 2009a). Prison visits may be as long as 4 hours, but the children may not be allowed to have any type of physical contact with the parent, and the visit may be inexplicably cut short (often for head counts). Children may also have to endure body searches and close checks of their personal belongings. These prison visits can be filled with emotions, including guilt on the part of the parent (Mansour, 2003).

Some correctional facilities are beginning to use technology for prison visits. For example, in Florida, two prisons allow children and their mothers to have visits through videoconferencing in the “Reading Family Ties: Face to Face” program (Hoffman, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010). If you have a child in your classroom who has an incarcerated parent, it’s important to be in contact with the child’s caregiver to know about prison visits, and you should be sensitive to the child’s emotional state—depression, anger, or withdrawal—when she returns from a visit.
Children who have a parent in prison may live with the remaining parent, a grandparent, or other family member, or they may be in foster care. These caregivers often have numerous challenges, such as the stigma and shame from an incarcerated family member, financial difficulties, and a lack of resources and support in raising the children. These caregivers may need guidance about what is best for the children, information about services available to them, and respite care or some relief from caring for the children (Family & Corrections Network, 2003b). For example, offering an after-school program with homework help can be a support for these caregivers.

How do children of incarcerated parents feel about their family situation? What needs do they have? Children often have many questions and need a safe place to express their emotions and get reassurance for their fears. One study of 12- to 18-year-olds with a parent or family member in prison found that students’ greatest needs were to know what was happening to their parent or family member and to be kept informed about everything that was happening. Being kept up to date helped them make decisions about what to tell others about their family. Their next most pressing concern was confidentiality. Students did not want their classmates to know that they had a family member in prison because of their fear of being labeled (Newnham, 2002). For younger children, their most pressing questions for their parent are as follows: Where are you? Why are you there? When are you coming home? and Are you okay? If they are not able to talk with their parent, the caregiver may have to be the one to answer those questions (Family & Corrections Network, 2003a). Caregivers may need help in knowing how to answer these questions honestly but in a developmentally appropriate way. In 2003, the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership created the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights based on interviews and experiences of children. The eight rights include the following:

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent’s arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent’s absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I face my parent’s incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because of my parent’s incarceration.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents, 2005).

Suggestions for 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.

One example of supports provided to children and families of an incarcerated parent by the Cambridge Community Partnerships for Children, working with the Cambridge, Massachusetts, school system, are literacy bags that teachers make and send home for parents or caregivers to use with children. The bags contain children's books, such as *Mama Loves Me From Away* (Brisson, 2004) or *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2002) or homemade books that are specific to the child's situation, age level, and emotional maturity.

The bags also contain a list of resources for families and children, such as the Bill of Rights or pamphlets with helpful suggestions on how to talk to children about their parent and materials for the child to write letters to the parent or create artwork. Some parents may not want to use the bag with their children if the children have not been told their parent is in prison, so it is best to meet with the parent or caregiver about the bag before sending it home.

Once the incarcerated parent is released, there are new challenges for the family in the transition from life with the parent being away to life with the parent returning to the home. For the newly released parent, opportunities for employment are extremely limited and public assistance will be denied (42% of incarcerated mothers relied on public assistance before being incarcerated); in addition, finding housing is challenging (public housing is off limits; Children's Defense Fund, 2005). Children who have been living with relatives or in foster care for an extended time may have difficulty adjusting to a parent who is more like a stranger. The newly released parent may also avoid being involved in any school activities because of the embarrassing stigma of prison time.

Parent education programs have been developed to help ease the transition and strengthen parenting skills for the returning family member (Bushfield, 2004). One example is the “Books Without Barriers” parent education program for incarcerated parents, developed through a collaboration of the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon, with the local sheriff’s department. This program
teaches inmates about the importance of shared reading with their child. Parents learn about brain development, the benefits of early reading, and ways to choose appropriate books for children. The culminating activity is a videotaping session where parents read aloud a favorite story on a videotape, which is then sent to the child (Arnold & Colburn, 2006). Another program designed to strengthen family ties is the “Girl Scouts Beyond Bars” program in which incarcerated mothers meet together and plan activities for visits with their daughters, and the girls have meetings together in the community with supportive peers. Research has found that the participating girls had a decrease in behavioral problems at school and improved grades, and were less angry, sad, or worried they would lose their mothers. Their relationships with their mothers were strengthened (Hoffman et al., 2010). Another example of a successful parent education program is the North Idaho Correctional Institution’s “boot camp” parenting education program, which includes four modules:

1. Normal child development—birth through adolescence
2. Fathering issues and concepts (criticality of fathers in the lives of children, unique roles of fathers)
3. Communication and effective discipline
4. Home literacy (reading, creating a home-learning environment)

Interviews with the 32 participants serving convictions for drug or burglary crimes showed the success of the program. As one father reflected, “My outlook on life is different. For once in my life, I really want to change, not because I have to, but because I want to. I want to be a part of my children’s lives” (Bushfield, 2004, p. 113). Research on prison parenting programs suggests that parents who participate are less likely to return to prison and more likely to have a successful reentry into the family (Family & Corrections Network, 2009a).

**Scenarios Relating to Students With Parents in Prison**

- Mark’s mother is in the local jail for selling drugs, so he lives with his father. His father also has a drug and alcohol problem, but he has not been arrested. Mark deeply loves his mother, and during class, he is always drawing pictures for her, captioning them with a story about their happy days together. Mark’s father has been taking him and his two siblings to visit his mom in prison every Saturday, but lately he has been too intoxicated to take them. This increases Mark’s feelings of helplessness and depression when he cannot see his mother, and he is acting out in school. The father’s actions have been reported to the Department of Child Services, but he seems to clean up his act every time they make a home visit. With so little parental support for Mark, what are some actions the school could take to help him over this hurdle?
American culture makes some questionable choices when developing television programs, such as glorifying prison life, making heroes of gang members, and picturing violence as the answer to solving conflict. As a teacher in a tough urban school, Rob knows that several of his first graders have parents in prison or who are gang members. As a teacher, Rob also strongly believes in making curriculum relevant to the everyday lives of his students. During discussions, various students mention gang colors and symbols or violence that led to someone being arrested. Rob wants to honor their life experiences, but he feels he should take the high road by introducing more positive life options to students. How should he proceed? What discussion points might Rob consider bringing up?

### STUDENTS IN FOSTER CARE

There are no unwanted children. Just unfound families.

—Anonymous (Foster and Adoptive Family Services Blog, 2017)

As noted in Chapter 4, when a parent is incarcerated or dies and no one is available to care for the family’s children, foster care may be the only option. Children may also be placed in foster care because of parental neglect or abuse. Foster care is a temporary placement of children with families outside their home, and it is not intended to be a permanent state. The goal of foster care is the reunification of families, or if that alternative is not available or in the best interest of children, to find a new permanent home that is stable, safe, and nurturing. Although the goal is to find a permanent home as quickly as possible, reuniting children with their birth parents or permanent placement with a relative or adoptive family may take years (National Foster Parent Association, 2016).

The United States has a long history of families taking in children who need a home, but this hasn’t always been done with the best intentions. In early American foster care, children were often indentured servants or became slave laborers for the family. It wasn’t until the early 1900s that foster parents were supervised and records kept. Social agencies began working with natural families to reunite them with their children, and foster parents became part of the professional teams formed to find safe, healthy, permanent homes for foster children (National Foster Parent Association, 2016).

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reported that 427,910 children in the United States were in foster care in 2015 (Children’s Bureau, 2017). The average age of a child entering foster care was 6.3 years, and the average length of stay was 13.5 months. The majority of children in foster care were placed in nonrelative homes; only about 30% of children were placed with relatives (see Figure 6.1). As noted in Chapter 4, the goal of the foster care system is to reunite children with their families, and this does occur for the majority of children who leave foster care. However, not all children will return to their families once they are placed in the foster care system. Some children are adopted—the majority by their foster parents. Figure 6.2 shows the outcomes for children who exited the foster care system in 2006 and 2015.
To be in foster care is to be in a life in transition, which for many children does not lead to a positive outcome. Children who stay in foster care for years may be moved from one community to another with little notice (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007). They may also be separated from siblings. The average child in foster care moves to three different families while in foster care (Krinsky, 2006). Many of the characteristics of difficult transitions listed earlier in the chapter can be found in the foster child’s life. For example, foster children have little control over their placements or moves from one home to another. Being placed in foster care may occur without warning, such as when a parent’s arrest in the middle of the night in a drug raid causes the children to be put in protective custody. No rite of passage marks the transition from one family to another, and although foster care may provide a safe, healthy home for the child, being a “foster child” entails a sense of loss of status from being a child living with his biological family.

Children in foster care, or “looked after children,” often do more poorly in school than those in permanent homes, and many do not succeed educationally (Coulling, 2000; Martin & Jackson, 2002). Because they may have attended school only sporadically before being placed in foster care or have been in families where education was not a priority, foster children tend to be behind academically. Even after being placed...
in foster care, children may frequently be late to school because of appointments or be absent because of moves between schools in the middle of a term (Martin & Jackson, 2002). These children may also have had to focus on taking care of themselves and younger siblings and have little energy left for schoolwork. Children placed in foster care may also have emotional and behavioral issues and may blame themselves for being removed from the home. They may lack in social skills and use aggression as a way to solve problems (Noble, 1997). All these issues present special challenges to teachers and call for extra effort to help children in foster care succeed.

Although children in foster care are often viewed negatively because of the difficulties they may present to a teacher, it is important to look at the potential of the foster child and have high expectations. One way to do that is to listen to the “voices” of former foster care children who have succeeded. Although little research exists about successful ex-foster children, one such study (Martin & Jackson, 2002) examined the opinions of high achievers who had lived for at least a year in residential or foster care. When asked what could be done to improve the opportunities for children in foster care, nearly all stressed the importance of being treated like other people or not wanting to stand out and of having a sense of a normal life with typical childhood activities like sports or scouting. The need for encouragement, support, and an active interest in the child’s education from everyone, including caregivers, social workers, and teachers,
was also vital. These high-achieving former foster children also reported feeling discrimination or stereotyping, a sense of shame or stigma as a result of their foster care status, and described feeling “set up to fail.” More than half of those surveyed said that their foster homes lacked basic necessities for a child's success in school, like books or a quiet place to study. A few stated that their teachers did not expect them to be intelligent or succeed, and that teachers should help children realize their full potential, expect success, and encourage them to attend college someday.

In another study of successful “looked after children,” the researcher found that being successful in school had little to do with the children's academic abilities and was more related to the support they received from their foster caregivers and teachers (Coulling, 2000). In an era of educational agendas such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and Race to the Top, it is important for teachers to expend the extra effort needed to help children in foster care reach their full potential.

### Suggestions for Working With Students in Foster Care

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

> 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 caregivers, birth families, and social workers to provide the best possible chance of a long-term, stable school experience. (p. 34)

Some suggestions for how to work effectively with children and families of foster care include the following:

- 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.
• 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.
• 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).

Scenarios Relating to Students in Foster Care

• Ben’s foster caregiver, Ms. Adams, has visited his classroom as a volunteer several times. It is clear she cares deeply for Ben and wants to support his well-being as a foster child. (Ben was removed from a physically abusive father who put him in the hospital with his injuries.) Ms. Adams, when she volunteers in the classroom, tends to sit next to Ben, only work with him, and monitors students who approach him. She follows him outside during recess and plays games with him. Jenny, the teacher, is very sensitive to the trauma Ben has suffered yet notices the overattention Ms. Adams showers on Ben. As a sixth-grade teacher, Jenny recognizes that emerging adolescents need autonomy and to maintain a sense of decision-making. From all signs, Ben appears to be rebounding from the trauma, but she is concerned about the smothering of Ms. Adams. What might Jenny discuss with Ms. Adams? Should Jenny get Ben involved? Why or why not?

• Ray, a second-grade student, was taken out of the family setting based on substantiated sexual abuse by his uncle, who cohabitated in the home. However, Ray’s birth mother has attempted to make contact with Ray through the school by approaching him on the playground through the fence or when he exits the bus in the morning to enter school. The foster parents have a court-ordered restraint placed on the mother, since it was found she is cohabitating with the uncle and did nothing to prevent the abuse. Ray often starts crying when he sees his mother and is very emotional in the school setting. What steps should the school take to end this dilemma?
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.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Reread the In the Classroom case study presented at the beginning of the chapter, and reflect on these questions:

1. What characteristics of transitions have affected Emma and her family in a positive or negative way?

2. What should Tamika do that will be supportive of Emma, her parents, and her new stepmother? To whom should she communicate her concerns, and what would be the best communication method?

3. What strategies could Tamika use in her classroom to help Emma adjust to the transitions of divorce and remarriage?

CR-TECH CONNECTIONS

CR-Tech Connections: Moving can be hard on the whole family and is most often hardest on children. Sesame Street has found a way to support children with this app:

- The Big Moving Adventure—This app is free for iPad, iPhone, and Android. Children create a character or friend to help with the moving process. This includes expressing feelings, packing, saying goodbye, exploring the new house, and making friends. There is even a parent section full of tips. It is also great for children who have family in the military.

CR-Tech Connections: Having parents who separate and divorce is a tough transition for children. Here is a smartphone app to help them:

- Parenting Apart—Developed by Christina McGhee, a divorce coach and parent educator, this app helps parents answer questions about divorce.
The death of a parent or family member may be one of the most difficult things we have to help our students work through. *Sesame Street* offers a series of videos around grief and the loss of a family member:

- “About Uncle Jack”
- “Give Your Heart a Little Time”
- “Expressing Emotions”
- “You Can Talk to Me”
- “The Memory Box”

http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/topics/grief

- **The Mourning Cloak: Helping Children, Teens and Young Adults Cope With Death and Grief**—This site is available for older children.


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<th>CR-Tech Connections:</th>
<th>Constant moving is the way of life for children of military families. There is also the constant worry about those family members serving away in other countries.</th>
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<td><strong>Military.com</strong>—This free app for iPad, iPhone, and Android connects military families to other military families, service members, and veterans. In addition, it provides members with information on benefits, discounts, mentors, scholarships, stories of military life, and more.</td>
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<th>CR-Tech Connections:</th>
<th><strong>PrisonTalk: Prison Information and Family Support Community</strong>—This is an online forum that was designed to address concerns and issues that prisoners and their families in similar circumstances may have. There are over 50,000 topics, and those wanting to create an account can receive a quarterly online newsletter.</th>
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<td><a href="http://www.prisonlink.com">http://www.prisonlink.com</a></td>
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<th>CR-Tech Connections:</th>
<th>Foster care for children is a life of constant change and uncertainty.</th>
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<td><strong>AboutOne Family Organizer</strong>—Free for Android, iPad, and iPhone, this app is an extremely secure digital filing cabinet. It provides users with the digital means to manage household information and memories with note taking, scanning, and snapshot abilities. Included are a contact list, calendar, and a place to store documents and videos, too.</td>
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*Image source:* © iStockphoto.com/bubaone.
WEBSITES


A trusted nonprofit resource, this website offers support for children of divorce. It is meant as a resource for parents to support their children while going through all steps of the divorce process. The site also includes supports for parents and links to other support services.


This site for patients and families facing life-threatening illnesses has links relating to children and death, including articles on how to talk to children about death and available bereavement camps for kids.


This website offers support and resources to family and children of military personnel. There are also valuable links for mental health concerns and links for school administrators to best support new and existing students of military families.


This website offers support for foster families, including a forum for discussions with other foster parents and social workers, the Foster Child and Foster Parent Bill of Rights, and an extensive list of websites relating to foster parenting.

National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu

This website provides support for families of the incarcerated and has resources, research, and advocacy information, including the Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated Project. Of particular use to teachers and caregivers is the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library, which includes helpful articles for parents and caregivers.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

Visit the student study site at https://study.sagepub.com/grant4e for additional study tools that will help you accomplish your coursework goals in an easy-to-use learning environment.