

# A Look at Children's Adjustment to Early Childhood Programs

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## Abstract

This paper describes a pilot project during which the author visited different early childhood classrooms and used a handheld video camera to record how children adjust to new programs. The objectives were (1) to describe how children adjust to new programs or classes, (2) to sensitize teachers to the issues involved in those adjustments, (3) to collect data using a handheld video camera, and (4) to encourage teachers to view themselves as classroom researchers. Included in the paper are video clips, brief descriptions of selected children, and a discussion of issues raised by the children's behavior in the videos, related research, and implications for practice.

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## Introduction

Young children's lives are more complex now than at any time in our history. On a daily basis, more children are going to early childhood programs than ever before. Some children are spending time in several programs each day. The programs have a variety of designs: Some are "traditional" programs where the same children and adults enter and leave at the same time, creating a stable group of children and adults. In some of those programs, however, children are moved from one classroom to another on their birthdays. In other programs with flexible schedules, children attend on different days and weeks across the semesters. There are also wraparound programs, partnerships between Head Start or prekindergarten programs, and community-based programs where children attend one program in the morning and another the rest of the day.

Moving from home to one of these settings or from one of these settings to another involves adjustments. Children face different adults, peers, room design, location, schedules, expectations, values, ways of interacting, and so on (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ladd & Price, 1987). How children adjust in their first experiences may influence later success or problems in school (Ladd & Price, 1987; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981).

The major objectives of this pilot project were (1) to describe how children adjust to new programs or classes, (2) to sensitize teachers to the issues involved in those adjustments, (3) to collect the data using a handheld video camera, and (4) to encourage teachers to view themselves as classroom researchers.

To prepare, I briefly reviewed studies that had employed naturalistic observation on children's entry into programs as well as studies that used a video camera to collect the data. According to those studies, when children are new to a program, whether they are 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7, they will generally avoid jumping right into play or an activity. They are more likely to stand immobile, fiddle with their clothes, suck their fingers, twist their hair, and investigate from the side in a subdued, nonassertive manner (as we might do at a cocktail party or other event where we don't know anyone). They often appear uncertain as to what behavior is acceptable or how to act in unfamiliar situations (Blatchford, 1983; Feldbaum, Christenson, & O'Neal, 1980; Ladd & Price, 1987; McGrew, 1972).

In general, boys seem to adjust after about a month and begin to orient at first to other boys. Girls seem to take a few weeks longer, and their beginning overtures are to the adults (Feldbaum, Christenson, & O'Neal, 1980). Children may take as long as 3 months before they increase their social approaches and decrease silent observations. Factors such as how stable the peer group is and whether there are familiar children in the group influence children's ability to adjust (Doyle, Connolly, & Rivest, 1980; Ladd, 1990). A child's adjustment is also influenced

by whether the child has had to transfer to a new school or class (Field, 1984). In those cases, children face the task of becoming integrated into a new social setting in which others may have known each other for a long time. These last three factors—the stability of the peer group, whether there are familiar children, and whether the children have changed programs or transferred—are particularly important in relation to flexibly scheduled programs and wraparound programs.

The consensus concerning the use of the video camcorder in research projects is that it is an effective tool for data collection in the classroom. The camera captures classroom dynamics and provides a systematic and permanent record rather than just spontaneous impressions about what teachers remember. Forman (1999) expressed it this way: "The video camera could be treated as a memory machine that would yield a fairly replete and honest record of everyday events." Teachers can have immediate or delayed feedback. According to Wells and Chang-Wells (1992), "the role of reflective analysis of video data in the process of changing conditions for learning hardly needs to be emphasized. Indeed, in our opinion it was evident the video data provided of the children ... was the most significant factor in empowering Thompson [one of the teachers in their collaboration] to become an agent of curriculum change" (p. 127).

## **Project Description**

I spent three days a month, from August through January, in each of four campus-based children's programs. One program was a half-day nursery school program with the same children attending yearly, arriving and departing at the same time. Another housed a half-day nursery school and a day care center, with some children attending both programs. A third program followed the university's quarter system, with children changing their schedule four times a year. The last program followed the semester system but had children change rooms on their birthdays.

My focus was on children who were new to the program, who had changed classrooms, who attended more than one program, or who just appeared to look like new children even though they were not. The teachers and directors identified the new children to me. As I was recording the data, I found the children who looked isolated or apart or behaved like new children even if they were not.

Because children may act differently at various times of the day, as well as across the semester, I observed at different times throughout the day and across the semester, through the beginning of the second semester for periodicity. I took a room scan every 5 to 15 minutes, and between times, I followed the selected children. In centers where I was observing in more than one room, I analyzed the different schedules to see what activities would be going on. I was particularly interested in times when the children had the opportunity to interact freely rather than during teacher-directed activities.

I considered my role to be that of an observer, "a cameraman" if you will, and tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible. The zoom on the camera allowed me to stand in corners, away from the action, and yet capture clearly what was going on. Children generally ignored me. These classrooms receive many visitors and often have student observers, work-study students, and faculty around. After a few visits, some who recognized me said, "Oh, you're here again," but other than that comment paid no attention to me.

Before beginning the project, I met with the teachers and the director to describe what I was planning on doing. Then each parent received a letter (1) describing the project, (2) letting them know that each teacher would receive an unedited tape of all that I recorded, (3) inviting them to review the tapes, (4) informing them that the tapes were for instructional purposes, and (5) informing them that if any part of the tapes were to be published, names would not be used. Parents signed permission slips allowing the videotaping to proceed, and throughout the project and after, no teacher or parent had any problem with what was taped.

I recorded between 2 and 4 hours in each classroom. I reviewed the tapes holistically, as teachers might do. I looked at the new children to see whether they had "new-child" behaviors described in the research. I considered what they were doing in comparison to the other children and teachers. I watched to see whether they became more comfortable over time. I also picked out children who exhibited new-child behavior even though they were no longer new to the programs. Then I prepared tapes of individual children, usually resulting in at least 30 minutes of tape for each child.

## A Look at the Children

The excerpts that I have chosen to include show very brief visual examples—really just a flavor of some of the different ways children adjust to new programs. Only by looking at the whole video, showing the context of all of the action, can one fully appreciate all of the different situations. However, in light of my introductory discussion, I think the clips will be enough to suggest to readers and viewers, particularly those who are not familiar with the literature in this area, how important it is to consciously observe and attend to children who are new to their programs and classrooms.

The clips include a very social child, a child who came late every day, a non-English-speaking child, a child who attended two programs, and a child who still looked new after 9 months. When viewing the clips, you will be able to tell the change in day by the child's different clothing. The accompanying description will help to fill in some of the details.

### Example 1: The Ambassador

The first clip is of a bilingual 3-year-old girl attending a flexibly scheduled campus-based program on the quarter system. You see her on the third day of the semester. She was very social

immediately, quickly inviting another child to join her in looking at both of their paintings. The second scene is 5 months later, at the beginning of the second quarter, and you see her take the hand of a new little girl and bring her to meet other children. She actually did that with two or three other new children as well. Not only did this child not need time for her own adjustment, she seemed to serve as an ambassador for new children. This video suggests a strategy that teachers might use—teaching more children how to help newcomers.

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### Example 2: The Latecomer

The second clip is of a 3-year-old boy who attended a nursery school program in which all the children arrive at 9:00 and depart at 11:30. This little boy arrived at least a half hour late every

morning. During the entire semester through the beginning of the second semester, he had trouble figuring out where to play. In the first scene, he has been at school for about a month. Each morning, he goes to get a book and brings it to one of the teachers. Notice where his eyes are and his facial expression. He is not really looking at the book, but he uses it to give him time to look at what the other children are doing. In the second scene, several weeks later, all the children are engaged in activities, and he is standing immobile except for pulling at his clothes, holding his hands together, and looking around, not knowing where to start—just as the literature describes. Eventually the teacher acknowledges his presence.

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### Example 3: The Immigrant

The third clip is of a 3-year-old Russian boy who speaks no English. He attends a flexibly

scheduled campus-based day care program. Children, though scheduled, arrive and depart at different times of the day, according to their parents' school schedule. As you can see, he

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initially behaves as a newcomer on the playground, standing apart, holding his arms. Though an assistant teacher is there, she does not interact with him at all. In the next scene, the teacher helps him separate from his mother. During the next several months, he spends considerable time observing and copying the other children's behavior, particularly at music time (not shown in this video). By the third section of the clip, he is comfortably playing next to the children, and by December (not in the video), he has offered toys to the other children and is really at home. As noted earlier, the research indicated that boys seem to adjust in about a month (Feldbaum, Christenson, & O'Neal, 1980). This child took longer, perhaps because of language issues or other cultural issues. However, his progress was steady until he no longer behaved like a new child.

#### **Example 4: The Two-Program Child**

In the next clip, you see a 4-year-old girl who attended a morning day care center with a flexible schedule and an afternoon nursery program, one that she had attended as a toddler. Her morning

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behavior, in the first two days shown on the clip, was typical of a new child. You can see her pulling at her clothes, wiggling and turning, and avoiding joining the other children who were engaged in activities with the teacher. Here again, no teacher approached her. In the last scene, you can see a change. She seems to have built some continuity for herself by developing friendships with two children who were also in both programs. Occasionally they would start a picture in the morning without completing it because they were called to do something else. They would say, "Oh, we'll finish that in nursery school." That comment seems to speak to how helpful familiar peers can be (Doyle, Connolly, & Rivest, 1980).

#### **Example 5: The Constant Newcomer**

The last clip is of a 4-year-old girl who had already been in this program—a flexibly scheduled campus-based program on the quarter system—for 3 months. The clip shows her in her second and third quarter. In each of the sections, she is alone, with facial expressions and body movements projecting her lack of comfort. In the third section, she stands immobile for a long time—longer than the clip shows—before the teacher finally comes to take her in hand. As I reviewed this excerpt, I thought of the teacher's role as described by Dalli (2000), which I discuss in the next section.

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### **Issues to Consider**

These video clips raise many issues worthy of consideration. Even in these brief excerpts, it is apparent that children vary considerably in how they approach a new situation—in this case, a new classroom or program. As newcomers, they bring to the teacher the dilemma of deciding whether the child needs more time to make the adjustment or immediate intervention because the child is behaving as a newcomer too long. We can encourage teachers to observe carefully and systematically in order to decide on different strategies to use with a child like the little Russian boy, who adjusted slowly but deliberately, as opposed to the 3-year-old child who came late, or the 4-year-old who still looked new after 6 months.

Dalli (2000) brought out an important point when she wrote, "what the teachers did, in terms of

relating to the new children, had an impact on the kind of relationships that developed between the teachers and the new children. In other words, what teachers did, as well as what teachers did not do, made a difference. At the very least, this finding suggests that teachers need to be self-conscious about how their center policies and theories of practice influence children's learning." We can help children learn about lunch, friends, toilets, and other aspects of the classroom that may be unfamiliar. We can help children develop buddies. Remember the 3-year-old ambassador and the child who found continuity by finding two friends who also attended both programs in the video clips. That clip also brings to mind the important research about the role of peers and how they help some children make smoother adjustments (Doyle, Connolly, & Rivest, 1980; Ladd, 1990).

Katz and McClellan (1991) note, "In our view, the preschool and kindergarten years are the best time to help children establish a positive cycle in their social relations. Teachers and caregivers can provide models of interactive skills, set patterns for class interaction, and provide help to children who are in the process of acquiring and strengthening social understanding and skills" (p. 17). In most of the excerpts, the teachers were slow to approach the children. It appears as though this would be a fruitful area for staff development, particularly related to teaching children how to enter a group (Corsaro, 1985; Katz & McClellan, 1991; Ramsey, 1991). Understanding playmate familiarity (Doyle, Connolly, & Rivest, 1980; Ladd, 1990) would help teachers promote successful adjustment in cases when a few children together attend more than one program. Defining staff roles is particularly important in flexibly scheduled programs. According to Keyes (1988), "[One teacher is assigned] to greet each child as she arrives. It's important to do that for children, particularly when the room is humming with activity.... [A teacher is also] assigned to warn each child about fifteen minutes before his parents are to come to pick him up. This procedure allows a child time to disengage and finish up his activity before his parents come" (p. 78).

## **Reflections on My Objectives**

In terms of meeting my original objectives for this project, I was able to sensitize teachers to how children in the particular programs adapted to the new programs. The teachers, through watching and discussing the videos, became more aware of the adjustment issues. Just becoming conscious of the issues helped them respond more effectively as time went on. The teachers reported the following changes:

"I was better able to differentiate between the lost child and the silent observer."

"I've watched new children adapting to the group with more care and tried to figure out why it seems so easy for some and so hard for others."

"I interacted, modeled, and facilitated social skills earlier amongst newcomers."

"We implemented specific changes in staff training. We look more closely at children who can get lost in the crowd."

"We were more aware of identifying those children in need of social support and worked with those children one on one to give them the support they needed."

I succeeded in collecting data with the handheld video camera and feel that it is an excellent tool for classroom research. As far as skill goes, you really only have to be able to point and shoot. The camera is flexible enough for a teacher to pick up at a moment's notice to videotape an interesting occurrence.

As I moved around the classrooms almost unnoticed, I was able to capture a lot of wonderful action. In addition to the video clips described above, I captured a new 2-year-old child in a mixed-age group who only came a few times a week. He crawled around the children, pausing to observe, doing parallel play—utterly comfortable with himself in the setting. I discovered a child

who spent her time following the adults. She would stand or sit by one of the teachers, sometimes participating in a peripheral way, other times just standing or sitting next to the person. When the teacher stood up to move somewhere else, the child stood up and followed her to the next location. This pattern continued over several of the days I taped in that classroom. Different adults throughout the day carried around another child. In these cases, because the staff had staggered hours, they only realized what was happening when they viewed the videos. There was also a 4-year-old who slowly changed from appearing like a new child to looking like one of the group, but who, in January, was moved to the kindergarten class and reverted back to the original new-child behaviors that she had started with in the fall.

The camera also eliminates the need for extensive note taking, and it gives a good-quality visual and auditory record of what transpired. It provides a piece of action to examine right away or later, allowing immediate or delayed feedback and opportunities for teacher reflection, as Forman (1999) discussed. If used regularly, the children will view it as part of what naturally takes place in the classroom. And as Forman (1999) and Hong and Broderick (2003) note, the 8-mm video camera with the fold-out screen is flexible and versatile and allows for "instant video revisiting."

Videotaping has been recommended more and more in recent years for looking at teaching practice and curriculum, but I believe that looking at children is the first step for teachers, particularly those new to classroom research (Eisner, 2002; Finn, 2002). Graue and Walsh (1998) wrote, "[We] must think of children differently from how we have in the previously dominant research paradigm. Rather than sampling subjects to represent a population, we must be fiercely interested in individuals, particular individuals. The focus of inquiry must become intensely local.... A local context is just that, local, right here, right now. It is a physical and social place, a yard or a park or a classroom" (pp. 8, 9). As Forman and Hall (2005) and Hong and Broderick (2003) have described so effectively in their recent articles, I also think that, in the beginning, looking at children is less intimidating for teachers than looking at themselves. Classroom observations on students' behavior focus the teachers and video camera where it should belong—on what's happening for children. Then as teachers reflect on what the outcomes for children should be, they naturally begin to discuss their own roles.

Finally, in terms of encouraging teachers to become classroom researchers, the teachers' responses were mixed. Teachers felt that they would assist with research, but they could not undertake it on their own because they did not know how and didn't have the time. They felt that they needed more information on how they could combine teaching and classroom research. I believe that the teacher responses were reminiscent of what Avery (1990) wrote: "I thought of research in terms of clinical investigations involving control groups, statistical analyses and absolute findings. Research was something done by high-powered university people far removed from my classroom" (p. 32). For the teachers in this project as well as others in the field, it is important to demystify the term research and show that doing classroom research is really solving problems that they are interested in, using the camera as one tool that is appropriate for some situations. Avery (1990) later reported: "I have since learned of another kind of research: that done by teachers, like myself, who closely examine the teaching and learning processes in our own classrooms, conduct case studies of individual students/groups of students and make discoveries about ourselves and the children we teach" (p. 32).

Some options to encourage teachers to engage in that kind of classroom research would be (1) to provide mentors or partners for the teachers, (2) to enlist aides and parent volunteers to do some of the video taping, (3) to provide sustained professional development for practicing teachers, and (4) as some colleges and universities are doing now, teach classroom research as part of the undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs (Keyes, 2000).

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