


ARTICLE



## Talking about School Transition (TaST): an emotional centred intervention to support children over primary-secondary school transition

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### ABSTRACT

Transitions are an unavoidable part of life, often conceptualised as ‘make it or break it periods’. They are important for personal growth and learning but can also be damaging in terms of our psychological wellbeing. Primary-secondary school transition is no exception and can heavily draw on children’s ability to cope. However, support for children that pays attention to their feelings about the transfer is often lacking. Very few interventions focus on developing children’s emotional resilience. There are also problems with the sustainability of such interventions. Thus, the present emotional-centred intervention, *Talking about School Transition (TaST)*, aims to narrow this gap. The evaluation of the intervention is ongoing and will be reported in a separate publication. Following an introduction of the limitations in supporting children’s emotional well-being over primary-secondary school transition within schools, this paper provides details of the TaST intervention, including a brief description of the lessons’ content. Attention is given to the design of the TaST intervention and how preliminary research, in combination with psychological theory and existing research, have informed the intervention content. The proposed research has short-term implications for present participating Year 6 children’s adjustment and provides professionals working in schools with the knowledge and resources necessary to deliver TaST. In addition to this, the research has long-term implications for the field in highlighting the importance of supporting children’s emotional well-being over this period.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Primary-secondary school transition; emotional well-being; intervention

## Background

The number of children experiencing clinically significant mental health difficulties is increasing rapidly, especially long-term mental health conditions (Pitchforth et al., 2019), as are government initiatives emphasising the need for prevention and early intervention (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education [DfH & DfED], 2017). One in ten children and young

people, which equates to approximately three in every school classroom, have a diagnosed mental health disorder (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Yet, access, support and treatment of mental health problems can vary considerably, resulting in 70% of children not receiving appropriate mental health support (Rees, Bradshaw, Goswami, & Keung, 2010). Children with mental health problems are more likely to experience problems in the short-term, such as increased educational disruption, which can account for up to 45% of dips in academic progression (Galton, Gray, & Ruddock, 1999). As they grow older, mental health problems developed in childhood can damage life changes and lead to further negative experiences, especially if symptoms are left undiagnosed and unmanaged (Murphey & Fonagy, 2012).

Transition, although an inevitable and unavoidable part of life, can be an opportunity for growth and learning, but also a period of heightened risk for the development of mental health complaints (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). Primary-secondary school transition, which is associated with simultaneous organisational, social, environmental and academic changes, is no exception and has long been recognised as a significant time for eleven-year-old children (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016) and the biggest discontinuity faced in formal education (Vaz, 2010). At this time, children need to adjust emotionally and socially, and become accustomed to new ways of learning as well as new environments (Rice et al., 2015). When navigated unsuccessfully, this can have ongoing short and long-term academic, emotional and social implications for children (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010).

However, it was not until 2007 that primary-secondary school transition became a mandatory area examined in UK OFSTED inspections, where secondary schools were required to complete *The Self Evaluation Form* to specify their transition arrangements. This policy change not only reflected research at the time, which found the extent to which primary and secondary schools raised transition issues with their children to be variable across schools (Ofsted, 2007), but also reflects the growing attention this period has received in schools, research and policy. Nonetheless, since then, Government reports are still reporting primary-secondary transition as a period 'not handled well' (Ofsted, 2015, March, p. 65) where the quality of transition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 is 'much too variable' (Ofsted, 2015, September, p. 21) and arrangements for transfer as a result 'weak in over a quarter of the schools visited' (Ofsted, 2014, p. 21). Evan's et al.'s (2010) review, which was conducted by the National Foundation for Education Research, found 21% of transfer children to report their primary school to not prepare them for secondary school. It is perhaps not surprising then that 15% of the sample reported not settling well into their new school.

While at face value there appears to be considerable school transition research, especially in the past ten years, as shown by Symonds' (2015) review, programmes to support children's emotions are minimal. Instead, most research

in this area tends to look at dips in educational attainment, with many intervention programmes focussing more on the practicalities of the transition and preparing children for the new ways of learning. What is often neglected is the fact that emotional well-being is directly linked with children's academic functioning (Vassilopoulos, Diakogiorgi, Brouzos, Moberly, & Chasioti, 2018).

Transition arrangements in many schools are often neglected or left until the summer term just before children make the transition. This is often because of more pressing academic and procedural demands such as national assessments, heavy staff workloads and difficulty finding space within the overcrowded curriculum (McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2003). This reactive as opposed to preventative approach to emotional centred school transition support is largely inconsistent with Coleman's (1974) *Focal Theory of Change*, which emphasises the importance of gradual developmental change when negotiating multiple discontinuities. This approach can have both long- and short-term implications when considering primary-secondary school transition. In the short-term, leaving primary-secondary school transition provisions until the summer term can lead to a build-up of heightened anxiety and rush immediately prior to the transfer (Bagnall, Skipper, & Fox, 2019). In the long-term, poor primary-secondary school transition can heavily shape children's school attendance and engagement, psychosocial well-being and academic attainment (Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton, & Rice, 2013).

Furthermore, amongst the limited number of emotional-centred transition interventions administered within schools to support primary-secondary school, most are associated with challenges or methodological constraints. Significantly more school-based transition research is conducted in the United States (US) (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2018b). This has limited implications for provision in the United Kingdom (UK), especially given that children transition schools at a later age in America, and as a result of being older more likely to find school transition easier (Irvin & Richardson, 2002). Many evaluations of interventions are also small scale (Green, 1997), vague with regards to reporting participant numbers (Coffey, 2013), or employ biased participant selection (Evangelou et al., 2008) which limits conclusions that can be drawn. Longitudinal research is also limited (Riglin, Frederickson, Shelton & Rice, 2013), and instead researchers often employ single snap shot designs where data is collected before or immediately following the transition, which does not reflect the complexity of this period (Ashton, 2008). This limits the implications that can be drawn.

An additional challenge in this area is the approach taken. Interventions imposed on schools with little consultation, as opposed to those that adopt bottom-up or co-creation designs, can impede an intervention's sustainability (Stormshak et al., 2016), especially when considering schools' limited time and financial resources (Trotman, Tucker, & Martyn, 2015). Similarly, programmes that are targeted at particular children (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012) as opposed

to universal designs can be difficult for school buy-in, as educators must prioritize and effectively implement evidence-based approaches that produce multiple benefits for most, if not all children (Bennett, 2017). Moreover, over-reliance on external providers as opposed to teachers as implementers can be an additional barrier and impede progress (Diedrichs et al., 2015). This is not to mention that parents are reported to feel more comfortable when emotional centred interventions are delivered by teachers (99.2%), as opposed to outsiders (87.4%) (Barrett & Turner, 2001). As a result, developing emotional centred interventions that can be delivered by teachers is consistently highlighted as a priority in governmental reforms (DfH & DfED, 2017), in addition to academic research (Fairburn & Patel, 2014).

Despite consistent evidence of primary-secondary school transition being a period of vulnerability for eleven-year-old children, but also given that transition periods have been consistently highlighted as effective points to introduce and deliver intervention programmes (Newman & Blackburn, 2002), there is a lack of emotional centred interventions in this area (van Rens et al., 2018b). McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow's (2003) survey study found 45% of parents to report their children needing help talking about their feelings in preparation for the transfer, 14% asserting that greater communication and explanations between teacher and child could help alleviate this anxiety. Therefore, as discussed below in the present TaST intervention, and supported empirically (Newman & Blackburn, 2002), the beneficial impact of insight but also support from families should not be neglected, and instead utilised in the transition process and support programmes. In sum, maintaining healthy and positive well-being pre, during and post navigation of key life changes, such as primary-secondary school transition, is paramount. This is not only for children's short-term adjustment (Symonds & Galton, 2014) but also long-term functioning, as successful navigation of transition establishes the foundations for future and lifelong well-being (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, & Walters, 2005). Thus, the above findings that many children are not receiving sufficient emotional centred support over primary-secondary school transition is concerning and highlights the need to support children's emotional well-being prior and during the transition period in order to nurture their long term well-being (Stratham & Chase, 2010).

### ***Talking about School Transition (TaST) intervention***

Negotiating multiple changes or 'stressors' within a relatively short period of time can have a negative impact on children's ability to cope, especially if concerns are not addressed at significant time points by well-equipped supportive figures (Eccles et al., 1993). While some interventions have been developed to counter the negative outcomes students commonly experience at secondary school transition, as discussed above, they are limited in foci

(minimal in addressing children's emotional well-being), number, and sustainability. Thus, the present emotional centred-intervention, which is called *Talking about School Transition (TaST)*, aims to provide teacher led emotional centred support over primary-secondary school transition within the school environment. The evaluation of the intervention is ongoing and will be reported in a separate publication. This paper aims to provide professionals working in schools with the knowledge and resources necessary to deliver TaST, as well as literature to demonstrate how the intervention is theoretically informed and evidence-based.

## **Key components**

### **Universal-class based design**

As outlined in the government's recent paper *The Green Paper: Transforming children and young people's mental health provision* (2018) the school has a 'frontline role' in supporting children's mental health and well-being (DfH & DfE, 2018, p. 9). This recognition is understandable, as children spend a substantial amount of their day at school, which is availability for educational practitioners to recognise and respond to children's emotional and social needs (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Moreover, the school environment can also be non-stigmatising by both parents and children, meaning that mental health support offered within the school is often portrayed as more acceptable, less threatening and stigmatising, than external services (Vaz, Parsons, Falkmer, Passmore, & Falkmer, 2014).

Evidence suggests that when well-designed and supported (Coffey, 2013), school-centred interventions can help children suffering from mental health problems (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017) and represent a promising approach in nurturing children's short-term adjustment and long-term resilience (Tanyu, 2007). Thus, in line with inclusive education policies (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), the TaST intervention has been developed to be delivered on a universal, whole-class basis, which avoids stigmatisation inherent in more targeted approaches. The uptake and scalability of interventions within classroom settings can be linked not only to the extent to which they are relevant and meaningful for students' real-life experiences, but also whether they can be easily incorporated into the already crowded school curriculum. Therefore, the five week TaST intervention is designed to be easily integrated into the Year 6 children's Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum.

### **Teacher-led**

Teachers have: greater rapport and influence among students, more extensive expertise in behaviour management, are better equipped to meet the specific learning needs of their classes (Low, Van Ryzin, Brown, Smith, & Haggerty, 2014), and are also favoured by parents as deliverers (Barrett & Turner, 2001). Thus, it is

almost indisputable that teachers are natural deliverers of classroom-based research interventions. When teachers deliver small-scale or pilot interventions, they are also more ecologically valid and representative of long-term intervention success and scalability, as it will be teachers delivering these interventions in the long-term (Diedrichs et al., 2015). As a result, teacher-led school-based interventions are consistently highlighted as a priority for mental health reform (Fairburn & Patel, 2014).

Informed by the above literature, the TaST intervention has been designed to be delivered by Year 6 class teachers. Teachers are given guided lesson plans, Powerpoint lesson slides and workbooks for their class. For the schools that were delivering the intervention, I also met with each teacher to go through these materials as research has shown that teachers deliver intervention programmes with less adherence than researchers, potentially because teachers are uninformed of the theory behind programmes and reasons why certain elements need to be covered (Goncy, Sutherland, Farrell, Sullivan, & Doyle, 2015). Nonetheless, when interventions are delivered effectively by teachers, who feel confident delivering programmes, student responsiveness and programme effectiveness is greater than when programmes are delivered by researchers (Humphrey, Lendrum, & Wigelsworth, 2013).

### ***Emotional-centred foci***

Support interventions to improve children's emotional well-being prior to primary-secondary school transition are minimal both in schools (Hammond, 2016) and research (van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & van den Brink, 2018a). Thus, the present five week-emotional centred school-centred support TaST intervention aims to narrow this research gap. The intervention foci and structure is in line with *Resilience Theory*, particularly Gilligan's (2000) five background concepts that underpin the concept: a) reducing stockpile of problems, b) pathways and turning points in development, c) having a sense of a secure base, d) self-esteem and e) self-efficacy, as resilience has been shown to be directly related to children's adjustment over primary-secondary school transition (Newman & Blackburn, 2002). For example, in line with a) and b) the intervention includes a variety of spoken and written individual, group, and class-based activities for the children to recognise the different challenges they will face over the transition period and reposition the move as a linear progression. For example, in *lesson 1* the children participate in a *progression activity* where they reflect on a transition they have experienced in the past (by writing down in their transition booklet what was easy and difficult during this time, how they felt, how they overcame obstacles and what they learnt) to prepare them for their future transition to secondary school. Activities such as this aim to improve the children's emotional resilience and coping strategies in preparation for the transfer, by drawing on children's internal resources, incorporated in d) and e) of Gilligan's (2000) model.

In line with c) of Gilligan's (2000) model, the children are also encouraged to draw on the support they receive from parents, peers and teachers, who have been shown to provide the most salient sources of support over adolescence and primary-secondary school transition (Coffey, 2013). In fact, as outlined in Jindal-Snape et al.'s (2018) review, factors external to the school, such as 'having a secure base' (outlined in item three of Gilligan's five resilience background concepts (Gilligan, 2000) at home through strong parent-child support relationships can be more predictive of adjustment outcomes than factors within the school and internal factors, such as self-esteem (West, Sweeting, & Young, 2010).

### ***Preliminary research***

The TaST intervention has been informed by a thorough literature review, in addition to three preliminary research studies. Findings from these studies and how they map onto the design of the TaST intervention are discussed below.

### ***What are students', parents' and teachers' experiences of primary-secondary school transition and how do they feel it can be improved?***

To explore transfer students', parents' and teachers' current experiences in the lead up to and over the transition period, and how they feel it could be improved, Year 7 students and parents, and Year 6 and 7 teachers participated in focus groups. See Bagnall et al. (2019) for further details. Key findings are outlined below.

- (1) Parents, children and teachers together shape primary-secondary school transition experiences, and to improve this time for all, communication needs to improve across all these groups, so all are on the same page (*see homework activity, lesson 3*).
- (2) Making friends was a significant concern for students before, during, and after the transition period, but misunderstood by parents and teachers. Schools could assist in transition by focussing on supporting students to manage changes in their peer relationships (*see co-pilot (others) activity, lesson 3*).
- (3) Students generally found it easier to seek support from teachers at primary school. Helping Year 7 children to develop strategies to build supportive relationships with secondary school teachers is therefore important (*see teacher class-based activity, lesson 3*).
- (4) Concerns were expressed amongst transfer students about the dangers of too much transition exposure, and students expressed the need for primary-secondary school transition provisions to establish a balance between exposure and consistency. In other words, transfer students need a degree of insight into what secondary school will be like and how to navigate differing standards, but this exposure should follow



a clear continuum with a limit, as children also need consistency during this apprehensive period (*modelled through the intervention structure, e.g. individual activities for more sensitive topics to give the children ownership over their exposure, such as the life transitions worksheet, lesson 1*).

### ***What can we learn from cross-cultural insight into US transition provisions?***

As previously discussed, much of the literature on transition has been conducted in the US and there is a wealth of transition support in American schools, which we may be able to draw on in the UK. To shed light on this gap, case study research was also conducted in California in the US, where some children can make a previous transition to Junior High school at age 12 or Middle school at age 11 (which is synonymous to the age in which children transition to secondary school in the UK). Therefore, using ethnographic classroom observations, student focus groups and staff and parent interviews, differences in transition preparations were examined. For more information, see Bagnall, Fox, and Skipper ([in preparation](#)).

- (1) Schools in America employ school counsellors to provide specialised and targeted school transition emotional centred support for children, but also their parents, within the school setting. This is in line with recent UK school mental health reforms, regarding the need to support children's mental health within the school environment (DfEd & DfH, 2017). This support was also focussed on portraying school transition as an educational progression, as opposed to a loss, which directly contrasts with how secondary school transfer is discussed in the UK (Bagnall et al., 2019) (*see primary school progression activity, lesson 1*).
- (2) Students favoured a school transition prior to High school transfer as they felt it provided them with transition exposure (*see challenges and solutions worksheet, lesson 2 and co-pilot (self) activity, lesson 3*).

### ***What can we learn about transition from special schools?***

We have a limited understanding of children's emotional experiences in the lead up and over primary-secondary school transition, and how this part of their well-being is supported (Evans et al., 2010). Understanding how children with pre-existing emotional difficulties cope with the added apprehensions and anxieties that come with primary-secondary school transition and how they are supported, has useful implications for emotional-centred transition provisions that can be employed in mainstream schools to support children who face similar concerns, but often express them at a lesser degree (Bloyce & Frederickson, 2012). To do this a longitudinal exploratory-explanatory case study (using ethnographic observations, student photo-elicitation focus groups, adult one-to-one interviews, document analysis and



survey data collection) was conducted within one special primary school (specialising in supporting children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) to examine their transition provisions. For more information see [Bagnall, Fox, and Skipper \(in preparation\)](#). Overall it was found that:

- (1) Subject to the children's special educational needs there was a clear sense of uncertainty regarding when to initiate transfer support, and at what level, in order to establish a balance between consistency and exposure but not at the expense of children's short or long term adjustment at either primary or secondary school (*modelled through the intervention structure*).
- (2) When children were not included in school transition decisions (often due to fears of upsetting or unsettling the child) or transition preparations were absent, children discussed feeling voiceless, uncertain and unprepared about their futures (*see co-pilot (self) activity, lesson 1 and CATS activities, lesson 4 and 5*).
- (3) Too much hands-on child centred support at primary school and children's reliance on this was shown to lull them into a false sense of security that they will receive equivalent levels of support in their new secondary school, which was not often the case (*see challenges and solutions worksheet and school timetable activity, lesson 2*).
- (4) In line with Study 2, within the special school, transition support team counsellors were employed to provide the children with specialised support, which considered the children's pre-existing transition experiences. This specialised support may have also contributed to the children's more open attitudes towards mental health (*see worry box activity, lesson 1 and 5*).
- (5) In comparison to the findings from the mainstream schools discussed in the two studies above, the children, in addition to their parents and teachers, at the present special school, placed greater emphasis on the importance of children feeling safe and a sense of belonging at secondary school which was shown to override all other concerns (*see challenges and solutions worksheet, lesson 2*).

### ***Overview of the Talking about School Transition (TaST) intervention***

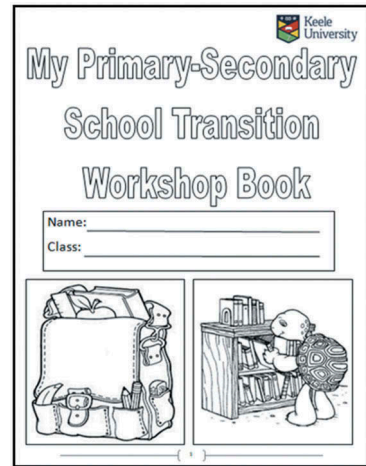
A transition programme has been described empirically as a set of activities, strategies or resources to smooth the passage of students from primary to secondary school by a) reducing student trepidation, and b) expediting the feeling of belonging in the new environment (Ganeson, 2006). The TaST intervention incorporates both a) and b), as focus is placed on improving Year 6 children's appraisals, coping skills and emotional resilience towards the transition prior to the move, in addition to providing students

with strategies to build a sense of belonging and feel confident once at secondary school.

### **Intervention outline**

Each of the five intervention lessons last approximately one hour, which is considered an optimal length for children of this developmental age (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998), and is delivered on a weekly basis. The lessons have three main foci:

- (1) Helping children to position the transition as a progression as opposed to a loss
- (2) Building children's coping skills and resilience
- (3) Emphasising the importance of social support, how this may change at secondary school, and how to access it.



*Transition workbook*

Incorporated in each session are a variety of individual, group and class-based activities which aim to improve children's spoken and written emotional expression in preparation for the move. Each session has a lesson plan script, accompanying PowerPoint presentation slides and each child works from a transition workbook. Other components of the sessions, such as questioning and answering whole class activities can be tailored according to the needs and responses from the class. Furthermore, there is an element of flexibility in the final two weeks of the intervention, as in week four and five, Boulton's (2014) CATZ (cross-aged teaching) teaching techniques are used (see below). Table 1 shows a breakdown of the foci and activities in each intervention lesson.

### **Lesson one: progression vs. loss**

Previous research has shown that within UK primary schools, primary-secondary school transition is often portrayed as a sad parting (Bagnall et al., 2019), as opposed to a progression, or step-up. Moreover, children who miss primary school report greater transition problems (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). In line with these findings, in addition to Study 2's findings regarding the importance of presenting transition as an educational continuation, the focus of this lesson is

**Table 1.** Overview of Lesson Plans.

Lesson	Outline	Activities
Lesson One: Progression vs. Loss	Focus on positioning moving on to secondary school as a progression, or step-up, as opposed to a loss and sad parting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition introduction</li> <li>• Continuum activity</li> <li>• Primary-school progression activity</li> <li>• Life transitions worksheet</li> <li>• Worry Box and the colour of secondary school activity</li> </ul>
Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience	Focus on the different changes transfer children will face on entry to secondary school and helps children to develop coping strategies to overcome difficulties that they may face.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World café group activity</li> <li>• Dolphin/Shark group activity</li> <li>• Challenges and Solutions Worksheet</li> <li>• School Timetable Activity</li> </ul>
Lesson Three: Social support	Children are encouraged to reflect and draw on peers, teachers and parents/guardians as supportive figures as they approach primary-secondary school transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-pilot activity-self</li> <li>• Co-pilot activity-others</li> <li>• Puzzle activity</li> <li>• Accessing support from teachers activity</li> </ul>
Lesson Four: CATZ consolidation of learning	Learning consolidation of the past three lessons using cross-aged teaching as an alternative to teacher-led instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homework activity</li> <li>• CATZ Introduction and summation of individual five top tips</li> <li>• CATZ Finalise top tips</li> <li>• CATZ main activity</li> </ul>
Lesson Five: CATZ presenting learning	Presenting learning and consolidation of learning acquired from the past four lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task re-introduction and presentation preparation time</li> <li>• Show and tell presentation session in a Year 5 classroom</li> <li>• Worry box address</li> </ul>

positioning primary-secondary school transition as a progression, as opposed to a loss.

Children in this lesson are encouraged to position moving to secondary school as a new chapter by reflecting on their time at primary school. To do this on the *primary school progression worksheet* the children are asked to jot down their biggest achievement and fondest memory at primary school and how this will prepare them for secondary school, in addition to anything they will miss about primary school and what change they are most looking forward to. Research has shown that failure to talk or translate anxieties into language can inhibit coping strategies (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), thus these two questions were ordered this way purposefully, embedding principals of catharsis by providing an opportunity for children to acknowledge how they feel regarding leaving primary school but then immediately looking to the new opportunities they will gain at secondary school.

## School Transition

Moving from primary to secondary school can be both an exciting and sad time, as children are not only looking forward to the new opportunities at secondary school, but also say goodbye to primary school. Reflect on your time at primary school by answering the following questions. Think about how your primary school experiences can help you prepare for your next progression to secondary school.

1) Jot down your biggest achievement at primary school

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2) Summarise your fondest memory at primary school

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3) Are you going to miss anything and if so what are you going to miss?

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4) What change are you most looking forward to?

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5) Reflecting on question 1 and 2, what have you learnt at primary school, which will help you with your transition to secondary school?

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As shown in *Study 2* but also previous research (Irvin & Richardson, 2002), children who have been exposed to previous transition experiences find primary-secondary school transition easier, often as they have developed coping skills and resilience from these experiences to use as templates in the future (Adeyemo, 2005). Interventions that are linked to children's real-life lived experiences also help children to provide meaning to future events (Goncy et al., 2015) and this has been shown in the context of primary-secondary school transition (Hammond, 2016). In line with this, towards the end of the lesson, children complete the *life transitions worksheet* where they are encouraged to reflect on a previous transition that they have made and how the skills learnt from this life event can aid their transition to secondary school.

The two activities above are in line with Hallinan and Hallinan's (1992) 'transfer paradox', which presents the transition as both a step up and a step down (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992). In other words, in order to gain a secondary student's level of autonomy and maturity, transfer children must be willing to give up the support, familiarity and protection of their primary school.

### ***Lesson two: coping strategies and resilience***

This lesson focuses on the academic, emotional, social and practical changes transfer children face on entry to secondary school and helps children to develop and draw on coping strategies and resilience to overcome these difficulties. To do this, a world café format is used, each group of children jotting down similarities and differences they expect to face across primary-secondary school transition, adding and building to each other's ideas, which aligns with a constructive phenomenological approach (Anderson, 2011). Children have been shown to perceive seeking support from peers as one of the most helpful ways of coping with problems (Coffey, 2013). Moreover, over primary-secondary school transition, parents and teachers are shown to hold differing attitudes and concerns than children (Evangelou et al., 2008). Thus, this activity provides space for Year 6 children to discuss primary-secondary school transition with likeminded peers.

Children's mental health and well-being is dependent on their feelings of control and this is no exception over primary-secondary school transition (Jordan, McRorie, & Ewing, 2010). In this lesson the children engage in the *dolphin/shark group activity* to develop awareness of their thoughts and how this affects their behaviour and feelings, which aligns with Fredrickson's (2001) *Broaden and Build Framework*. This theory outlines the significance of




### Lesson Two: Coping strategies and resilience

**You have a new teacher**


What would be the shark thought and what would be the dolphin shark

1. What if the teacher doesn't like me, the work is harder and I can't do it
2. May teach a new, exciting learning style I find easier.

positive  
thoughts  
(dolphin  
thoughts)



negative  
thoughts  
(shark  
thoughts)



positive thoughts in lessening the hold of negative emotions to promote positive behaviour.

In line with Newman and Blackburn's (2002) resilience strategy which outlines the importance of not eliminating risk, but instead providing children with the resources to build coping skills to effectively manage risk, the children then have time to practically address anxieties that they may have relating to primary-secondary school transition. They do this on the *challenges and solutions worksheet* by jotting down transition challenges they may face and then writing down a solution to each.

### Lesson three: social support

Parents/guardians (Hanewald, 2013), peers (Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010) and teachers (Coffey, 2013) are significant support figures for children over primary-secondary school transition. However, school transition is also marked by peer and student-teacher relationship instability (Weller, 2007). To address this, in this lesson, the children are encouraged to reflect and draw on peers, teachers and parents/guardians as supportive figures as they approach primary-secondary school transition.

In the first part of the lesson the children complete the *co-pilot (self) activity* to write a personal pledge on how they can get themselves ready for secondary school, which models notions of mindfulness, especially written emotional expression (Brody & Park, 2004). Slater and McKeown's (2004) primary-secondary school transition peer counselling intervention found peer support learnt through the programme to be a source of containment and holding when difficulties were faced during the transition. In line with these findings, in the present intervention the children complete the *co-pilot (other) activity* to write a support pledge for their partner on how they can be there for them over the transition period. Children with good peer support over primary-secondary school transition period are shown to settle into secondary school better (Ashton, 2008). However, in the lead up to primary-secondary school transition, primary school friendships can become strained (Weller, 2007). Therefore this activity aims to minimise this.

Children who perceive parents to be available, open to communication and more importantly involved in their school life, show better adjustment over primary-secondary school transition (Pratt & George, 2005). However, although parents and students often share similar worries over the transition period

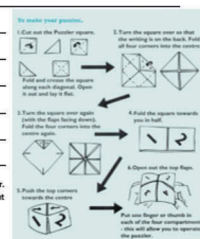
## School Transition

Before moving to secondary school it is common to have many questions about what school life will be like as a year seven student. Now is your chance to gain answers to these questions from experienced others who have successfully transitioned from primary to secondary school.

Get down eight questions to ask your parents/guardians/older siblings/teachers  
E.g. What did you like to do in primary school?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_

Now copy your questions onto your puzzle.  
Then, following the instructions on the right of this page start making it.



(Keay, Lang, & Frederickson, 2015), concerns are rarely shared which can cause both stakeholders to feel alone and unsupported (Bagnall, Skipper, & Fox, 2019). Therefore, encouraging open communication and discussion channels between parents and children can help both stakeholders (Keay et al., 2015). The *puzzle activity* is designed to do this, which is guided by the child, in line with findings from *Study One* regarding the need for sensitive transfer exposure.

In order to gain a level of autonomy and socially reflective maturity of being a secondary school student, transfer children must be willing to develop independence and organisational capabilities (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992). The *home-work puzzle activity* helps the children to develop these skills within a supportive and familiar primary school environment as the children will need to ask and write down in their transition book their parents/guardians answers to their puzzle questions and bring these answers to the next transition lesson.

While support from primary school teachers can help students prepare for primary-secondary school transition (Hopwood, Hay, & Dymont, 2016), support from secondary school teachers can help children settle into their new environment (Coffey, 2013). However, research has shown that children generally find seeking support from teachers easier at primary school which can impede the latter (Wit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011). Towards the end of the lesson the children then engage in a class-based activity to help them manage realistic expectations regarding changes in teacher relationships when they move to secondary school and strategies to access support.

#### **Lesson four: CATZ consolidation of learning**

In the final two weeks, to consolidate learning from the structured activities and discussion sessions incorporated in the last three sessions, and as an alternative to teacher-led instruction, the children will engage in Boulton's (2014) cross-aged teaching (CATZ) approach. Cross-aged teaching is a new technique where older students teach and pass on their knowledge to younger students. In order to teach younger children effectively, older children must firstly master their own learning, and then teaching reinforces this knowledge, as children are required to rework and make links with their existing understanding (Boulton, 2014).

CATZ has been shown to be effective in helping children to manage appraisals towards a range of social and emotional

### **School Transition**

#### **Primary-Secondary School Transition Top Tips**

Using CATS we are going to practice the things we have learnt over the past two weeks by helping prepare year five children for their transition to Secondary school next year. We are going to do this by creating a poster, leaflet, poem or even a story to show the importance of our top tips.

##### **Five top Tips:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

##### **Planning Space:**



factors (Boulton & Boulton, 2017). Aligning with the CATZ model in this lesson the children are asked to reflect on their learning from the past three weeks and think of five primary-secondary school top tips to prepare Year 5 children for the transfer next year. Creative approaches have been shown to enhance children and young people's emotional development and social skills (Galton, 2010b), and, aligning with this, the children are asked to illustrate their tips using a medium of their choice.

### ***Lesson five: CATZ consolidation of learning***

Building on Lesson Four the children continue engaging in activities guided by Boulton's (2014) cross-aged teaching (CATZ) approach. During this lesson the children finalise their top tips and then showcase them to a Year 5 class. This models Fredrickson's (2004) Broaden-and Build framework as the children will need to draw on their inner resources and use positive emotion and behaviour (in this case delivering their top tips) to discuss a sensitive topic (primary-school transition). As discussed above, by enabling Year 6 children do this within a safe, supportive primary school environment (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008), this provides assurance and the chance for the children to 'test out' their coping skills in preparation for the transfer.

Note: please contact the author if you would like access to the intervention resources.

### **Discussion**

In sum, primary-secondary school transition is a critical period for eleven-year olds, that can have short-and long-term implications on their adjustment if children do not receive sufficient support (West et al., 2010) or if the move exceeds the child's coping capabilities (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016). While some interventions have been developed to improve students' academic and social functioning over primary-secondary school transition, emotional centred support provisions are sparse, and face practical constraints at the school level and empirical limitations (van Rens et al., 2018b). Therefore, by designing a five-week emotional resilience intervention that builds on recommendations emphasising the importance of supporting children's emotional wellbeing over primary-secondary school transition, the present intervention has scope to bridge empirical gaps, in addition to immediate practical implications for professionals working in schools.

In research, transition periods, such as primary-secondary school transition, have long been recognised as 'times of threat' (Newman & Blackburn, 2002, p. 17) but also 'windows of opportunity' (Rice et al., 2015, p. 9) for students to grow and learn. In order to support children during this time and develop best practice guidelines, it is paramount that evidence from previous research is



drawn on to refine the content and delivery of transition support interventions, as shown in the present TaST intervention (Cox, Bamford, & Lau, 2015). When incorporated through easy to follow intervention lesson plans, worksheets and Powerpoint slides, using a non-resource-intensive approach, as shown in the TaST intervention, these guidelines have immediate implications in providing professionals working within schools with the knowledge and resources to help children to cope with this transition (Waters et al., 2013).

Since the publication of the *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper* (2018), which has raised the importance of supporting children's mental health within the school environment (DfH & DfE, 2018), there has been more attention placed on the need to do this over transition periods, such as primary-secondary school transition (van Rens et al., 2018b). Drawing on this, the present intervention has made preliminary progress in demonstrating the viability of carrying out this work in practice as the emotional-centred transition lessons are designed to be easily incorporated into the PSHE curriculum. Interventions that are linked to school curricula improve not only uptake of interventions but are also more meaningful for students (Diedrichs et al., 2015).

However, there are of course challenges in implementing all of the proposals outlined in the Green Paper including any new interventions. Some of these relate to school systems and cultures as acknowledged by Trotman et al. (2015), who outline that the most effective school-based interventions not only require the involvement of external professionals, but also internal support within the school environment. For example, when pastoral policies and practices are supported by school managers and governors, in addition to being embraced by teaching staff and subsequently embedded into the school culture, interventions are shown to be more effective.

However, competing management priorities and increased pressure to redirect both human and financial resources, can often mean pastoral care support school interventions, such as the TaST intervention, are introduced when there is insufficient time put aside to deliver the intervention effectively. This is often subject to curriculum pressures and the demands of meeting performance targets (Jeffery & Troman, 2012) which can bring about reduced emphasis on children's emotional needs (Tucker, 2013). Lack of resources can also be a key constraint, which can add to the marginalisation of pastoral support within schools (Trotman et al., 2015).

The current TaST intervention is delivered by teachers over the duration of a school term, which builds on the short-comings of previous 'one-off' mental health workshops delivered by external facilitators and thus overcomes some of the shortcomings of previous intervention studies in terms of the project's sustainability, scalability (Diedrichs et al., 2015) and engagement (Goncy et al., 2014). The present TaST intervention also requires minimal resources, teachers in both intervention and control schools (and more widely) given the intervention materials

and guidance following the project to deliver the intervention in subsequent years.

However, there is more that needs to be done to embed the intervention into the school culture. For example, while the present TaST intervention is methodologically sound and theoretically supported, as with all school-based interventions, it is another matter trying to incorporate it within the school environment. Thus, as acknowledge by Trotman et al. (2015) examples of emerging practice should be read as just that, work that can have short term implications, but requires constant evaluation to bring about long-term change. Therefore, the present TaST intervention has immediate implications for year six children's adjustment who are participating in the intervention condition, but also preliminary long-term implications for the field and policy in elucidating the importance of supporting children's emotional wellbeing over this period.

The TaST intervention has also been developed to not just focus on supporting the development of a child's 'inner resources' but also how they can draw on the support of others. However, taking a social-ecological approach, it must be recognised that any such intervention needs to be implemented alongside changes to other parts of the 'system', with the child at the centre. This includes the role of peers, parents, teachers, the wider school system and processes, and the community. Thus, it should be recognised that the TaST intervention needs to be implemented as part of a whole school approach.

It is also important to acknowledge that tensions do exist for parents, teachers, and children, in addressing school transition. For transfer students, establishing a balance between exposure to primary-secondary school transfer changes and consistency in support is paramount during this period. For parents who are often negotiating similar social, emotional and procedural changes to their children, alongside feelings of loss inherent in saying goodbye to their child's primary school and in some ways their child's period of childhood (Zeedyk et al., 2003), providing this balance of emotional support can be difficult, and obtaining emotional support within the school setting can be incredibly useful.

As discussed above, schools face many tensions when considering the implementation of school-based interventions and primary-secondary school transition is no exception. One such tension teachers face is negotiating relationships with transfer students and parents, which can be complex, too much and too little support being equally problematic for adjustment. This means that school transition needs to be approached carefully and sensitively, with all parties perhaps benefiting from an understanding of the tensions that exist.

In sum, teacher-led school-based emotional centred interventions have been argued as a priority for mental health reform (Fairburn & Patel, 2014), yet efforts to do this over primary-secondary school transition are minimal. This absence is despite students' needs to access timely and sensitive emotional centred support in the lead up to this period (Rens et al., 2017). In part, this may be subject to a mismatch between children's concerns regarding secondary school and the

repertoire of skills they can draw on to address them (Rens et al., 2017); the greater this mismatch the more support children need (Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Therefore, the TaST intervention recognises the importance of supporting children's emotional resilience and coping skills before critical events, such as primary-secondary school transition, to promote long-term adjustment.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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