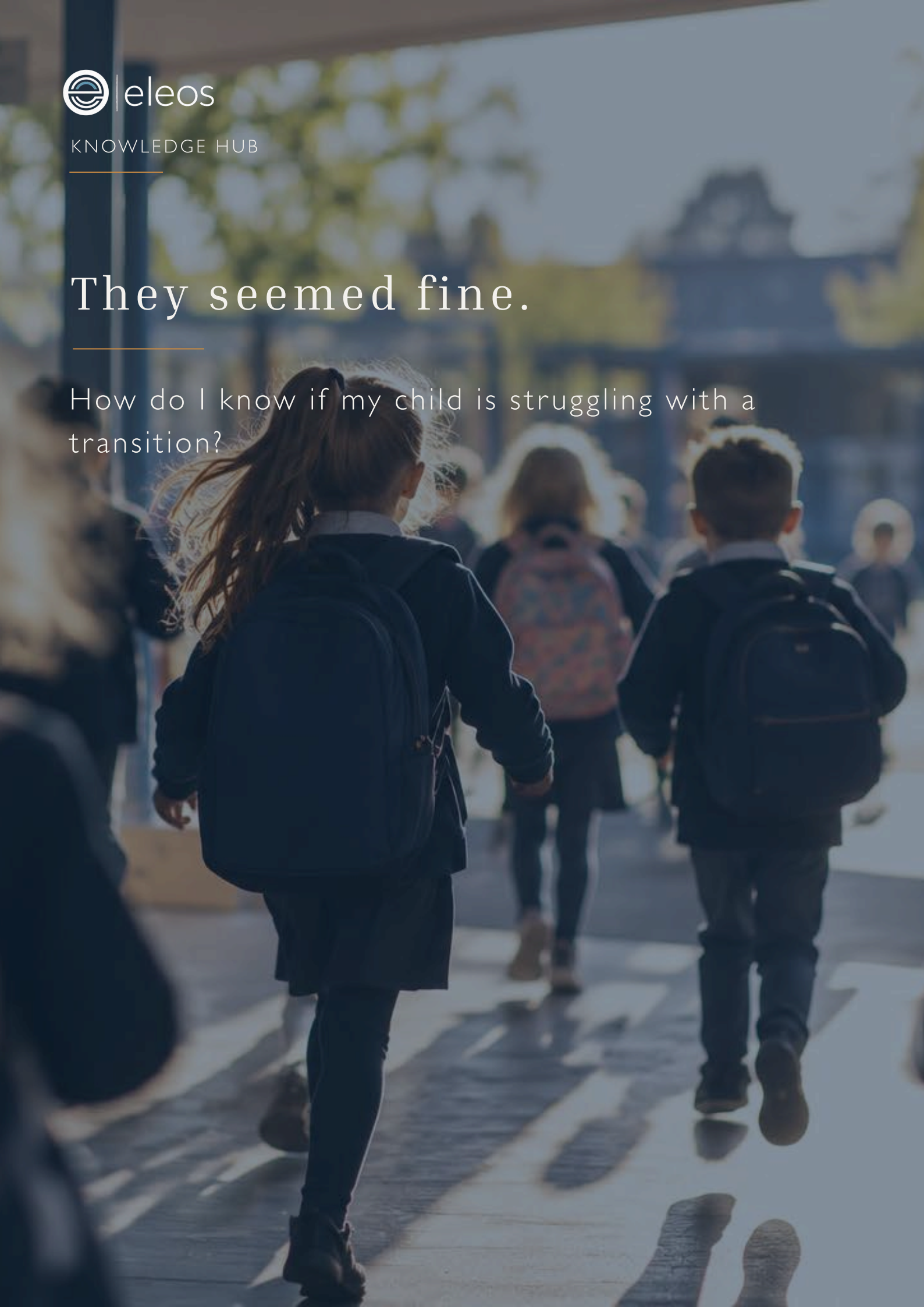
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KNOWLEDGE HUB

They seemed fine.

How do I know if my child is struggling with a transition?



When something changes, it can be difficult to know whether your child needs more time, more support or something different. Sometimes the change is obvious - your child starts a new school, moves class, begins college, returns after an absence or has a new teacher. You expect there might be a settling-in period.

Sometimes what happens next is less clear. They seemed fine for the first week and now they don't want to go. They come home exhausted or irritable. Sunday evenings have become difficult. They are complaining of headaches or feeling sick. They are quieter than usual, sleeping differently or worrying about things that never seemed to bother them before.

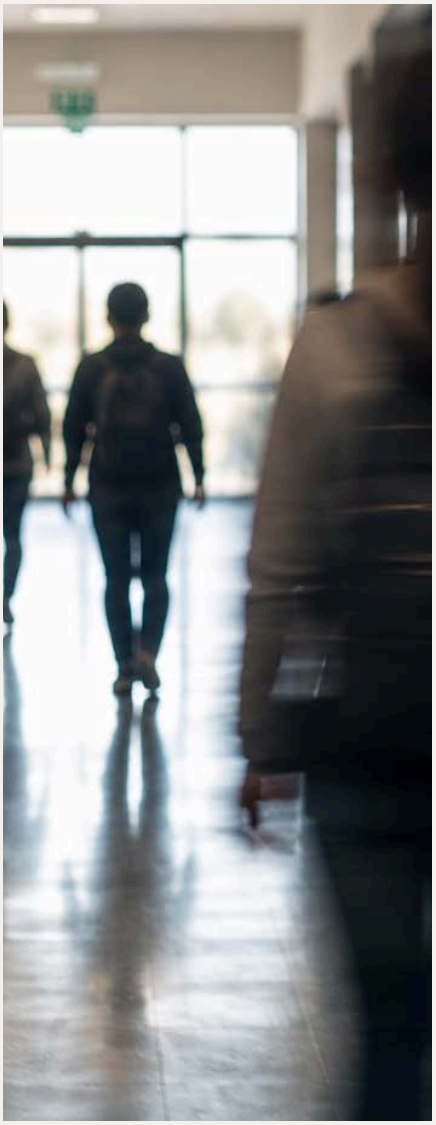
School might tell you they seem fine when they are there, which can leave parents in a difficult position. Do you encourage them through it because transitions take time? Are you missing something important? If you let them stay home, will returning become harder? If you keep pushing them to go, are you making things worse?

There isn't one sign that answers those questions. It's usually more helpful to build a picture of what has changed, when the difficulty appears, which way things are moving and what seems to help.

> *Do you encourage them through it because transitions take time? Are you missing something? If you let them stay home, will returning become harder? If you keep pushing, are you making things worse?*



“I don’t want to go” can mean lots of different things.



When a child says they don't want to go to school, the natural question is often *why?* Unfortunately, “why?” can be surprisingly difficult to answer.

They may not know, or they may know something feels wrong without being able to identify which part. “School” can mean the journey, separating from you, a particular lesson, lunchtime, noise, friendships, getting changed for PE, remembering equipment, being called on in class or simply managing a day that currently requires much more effort than it used to.

Sometimes smaller questions tell us more.
Is there a part of the day you wish you could skip?
When does it start feeling difficult?
Is there a time at school when you feel more comfortable?
Is there anything that makes the day easier?

The aim is not to ask until they produce an explanation; it’s to make the problem small enough to understand. What looks like one problem - *school* - may turn out to contain something much more specific.

What looks like one problem - school - may turn out to contain something much more specific.

"They're fine when they're here" doesn't mean you're imagining it.

One of the most confusing situations for parents is when home and school appear to be seeing two different children.

You see the battle to get out of the house, the tears in the car, the exhaustion afterwards or the change in behaviour at home. School sees somebody attending lessons, talking to friends and getting through the day.

It is tempting to think one of those pictures must be wrong. They can both be accurate.

Children and young people do not always show the impact of something while they are managing it. Some will become visibly distressed at school, while others concentrate on getting through what is required and show the cost later, when they are somewhere more familiar.

That does not necessarily mean they are masking a serious problem, and nor does it mean school is missing something. It means coping and cost are not always the same thing.

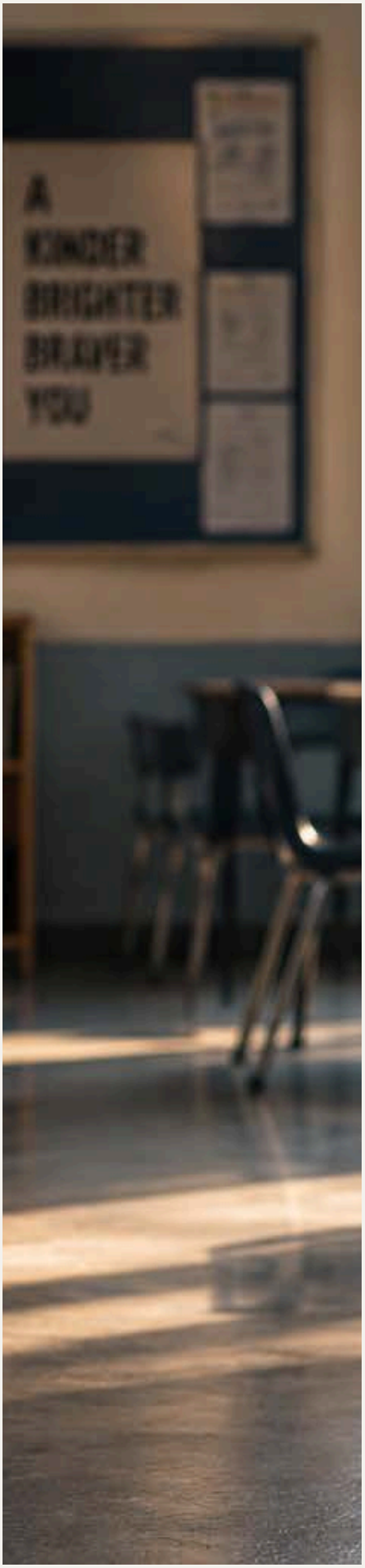
The useful question becomes less *"Are they coping?"* and more *"What does coping currently seem to require from them?"*

Putting home and school observations together can therefore be much more useful than trying to decide whose account is correct.

> ***Putting home and school observations together can be more useful than trying to decide whose account is correct.***



Look at the direction, not just today's difficulty.



Transitions can be messy. A child can have a good day followed by a very difficult one. They may manage for a week and then struggle. A weekend, illness or holiday can temporarily make returning harder again.

One difficult morning does not necessarily tell you very much, but over time a pattern begins to emerge.

Is the new environment becoming more familiar? Are difficult mornings becoming less frequent? Do they recover more quickly after school? Are they beginning to talk about people or parts of the day they enjoy? Are they needing a little less reassurance?

Or is the difficulty growing?

Are more parts of the day becoming hard? Is attendance becoming increasingly difficult? Are worries spreading into evenings and weekends? Are sleep, eating, relationships or things they usually enjoy beginning to change?

You are not looking for a perfectly smooth transition; you're looking for direction of travel. Broadly, are they beginning to find their way, or does managing the transition seem to be requiring more and more from them?

Encouraging them and understanding them can happen together.

When attendance becomes difficult, parents can feel trapped between two uncomfortable options: force them to go or let them stay home. The reality is usually more complicated. Avoiding something difficult can bring immediate relief, which can make doing it next time feel even harder. At the same time, repeatedly pushing a child through something we do not understand is not much of a plan either.

Understanding what is difficult helps us think more clearly about what kind of encouragement is useful. A child who is frightened because they do not know where to go may need something different from a child who is being bullied. Someone overwhelmed by the number of changes in their day may need something different from somebody whose difficulty is separating from home. The expectation may still be that they attend, but how we help them get there can change.

Reassurance works similarly. Parents understandably want to say, "It'll be fine" but sometimes what a child needs is not a promise that nothing difficult will happen, but confidence that the adults around them will help if it does. That might sound more like: "We don't have to work all of this out tonight. Let's figure out which bit is hardest and what might make tomorrow a little easier."

You don't need a diagnosis before something can help.

When a difficulty continues, parents can feel they need to know exactly what is wrong before asking for something to change. You can still tell school what you have noticed without knowing why it is happening; you can still compare what happens at home with what they are seeing there, and you can identify a particular part of the day that seems harder or something that reliably makes it easier. Those observations are useful.

Sometimes a child simply needs longer for the unfamiliar to become familiar, or a relatively small adjustment to make the transition more manageable. At other times, the pattern tells you that more support or further advice is needed. The aim is to understand a little more than you did before and use that understanding to decide what might help next.

What to take from this.

A difficult transition does not automatically mean something is seriously wrong, and appearing to cope does not automatically mean everything feels easy.

1. **Start with what has changed.**
   A transition contains lots of smaller changes in people, places, routines, expectations and independence.

2. **Make the problem smaller.**
   "I don't want to go" may be easier to understand when you explore which part of the day or experience is difficult.

3. **Home and school can both be right.**
   Different adults may see different parts of the same experience.

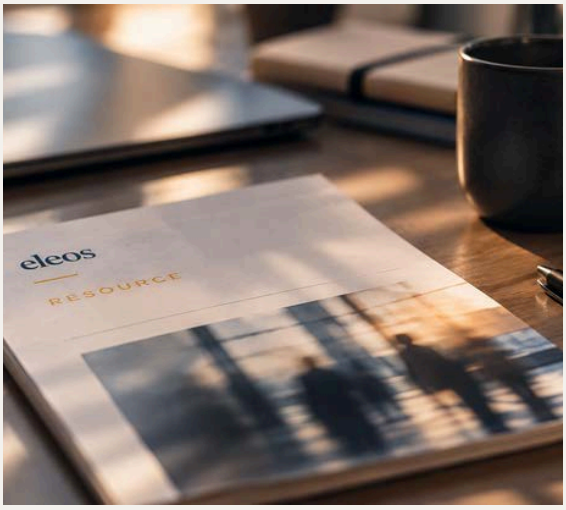
4. **Look at direction rather than individual days.**
   Ask whether things are gradually becoming more familiar and manageable or whether difficulty is increasing and spreading.

5. **Notice what helps.**
   The situations in which things become easier can tell you something important about what was difficult.

You do not need to have everything worked out before speaking to school or asking for help. Sometimes the most useful starting point is simply:
Something has changed. What can we understand about it together?

Explore this topic further.

If this article has raised questions or you would like to go deeper into this topic, you may find the following resources useful.



RESOURCE

Use the thinking.

Something has changed.
Build a clearer picture of what you are noticing, when things are hardest and easier, which way they are moving and what seems to help.



LISTEN

Hear the thinking.

They seemed fine.
Hear the thinking explored through the questions parents often face when a child appears to be struggling with a transition.

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