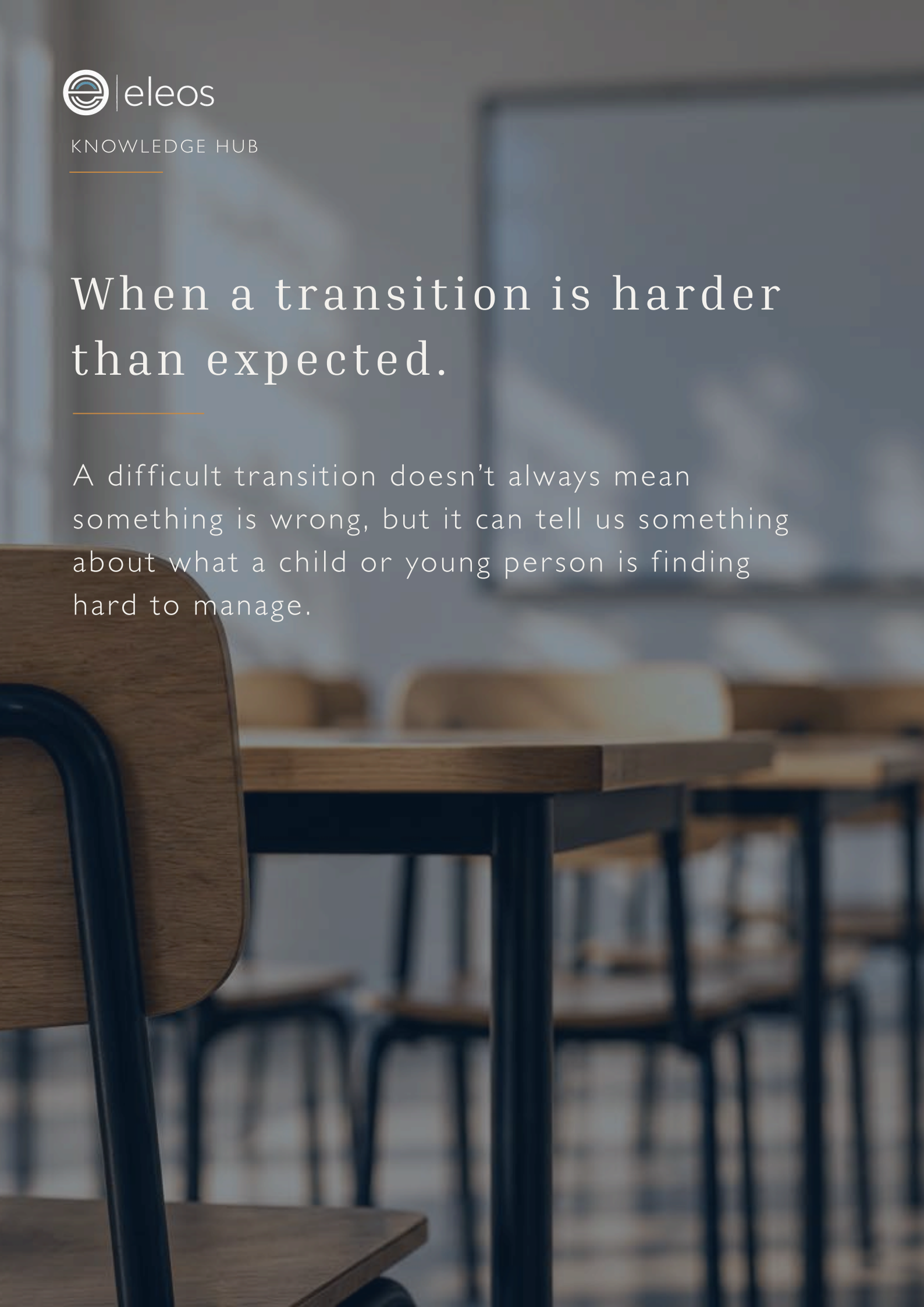


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KNOWLEDGE HUB

When a transition is harder than expected.

A difficult transition doesn't always mean something is wrong, but it can tell us something about what a child or young person is finding hard to manage.

Transitions are built into education. Starting nursery or school, moving into a new class or year group, changing teacher, timetable or site. Moving from primary to secondary education, starting college, returning after a long absence or moving between mainstream and specialist provision. Most involve changes that adults can anticipate: different people, different places, different routines and different expectations. What is harder to predict is how those changes will feel to an individual child or young person.

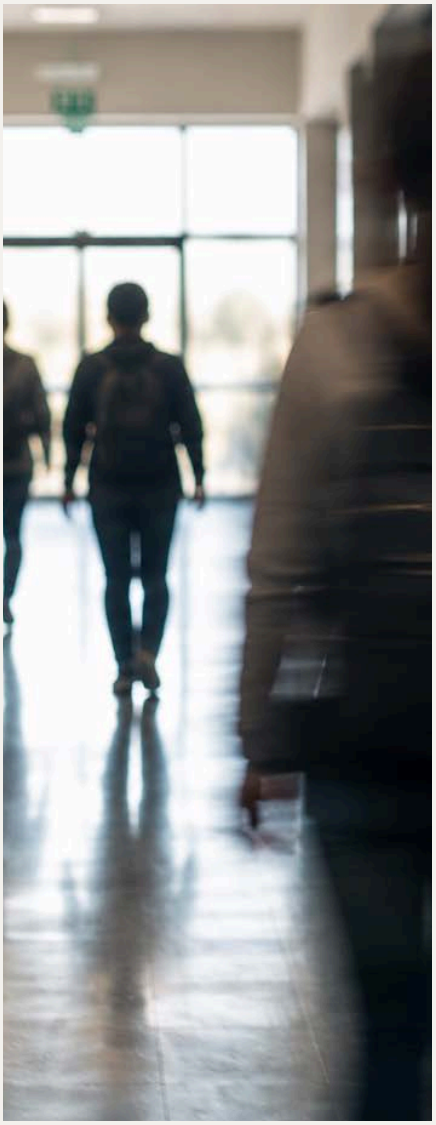
Someone who appeared ready for the move may suddenly become reluctant to attend. A child who managed well in their previous class may become unsettled. Someone who seems completely fine during the school day may fall apart when they get home. Concentration, sleep, behaviour, friendships or confidence may change.

When that happens, it is understandable to want to know what the behaviour means. Are they anxious? Is something happening with peers? Are they struggling academically? Is the placement wrong? Are they simply taking longer to settle?
Sometimes we need to know, but a useful place to begin is often a little simpler: ***What has become harder for this child or young person to manage?***

Transitions are built into education. Most involve changes that adults can anticipate - what's harder to predict is how those changes will feel to a child or young person.



A transition changes more than one thing.



Adults tend to give transitions a single name: *starting secondary school, moving class, returning after absence.*

The child experiences all the smaller changes inside it - the route into the building is different, or the person who used to know how they liked things done is no longer there. They have to remember where equipment belongs, when they are allowed to speak, what happens at lunchtime, which expectations are written down and which ones everybody else seems simply to know.

For an older student, there may be a more complicated timetable, several teachers, increased independent study, unfamiliar peers and more responsibility for remembering what needs to happen next. None of those things necessarily looks significant on its own, but together they can make an ordinary day require considerably more effort.

Familiarity usually reduces some of that demand - we stop consciously thinking about where to go, what comes next and how things work. Until that happens, more attention is being used simply to navigate the environment and this is why a transition can be difficult without being wrong.

The useful question is not simply whether the child is finding it hard, but what the transition is currently asking them to manage that was previously more familiar, predictable or supported.

> *The child or young person experiences all the small changes within a transition. Together they can make an ordinary day require much more effort.*

What you see may only be one part of the picture.

Sometimes school sees a child who appears settled while home sees something completely different. They participate in lessons, they speak to friends, and nothing obvious happens during the day. Then they get home and become tearful, angry, exhausted or withdrawn.

It can be tempting to decide that one version must be more accurate. If they were genuinely struggling, surely somebody at school would see it. Or, if home is seeing such a significant change, perhaps school has missed something.

Both accounts can be true.

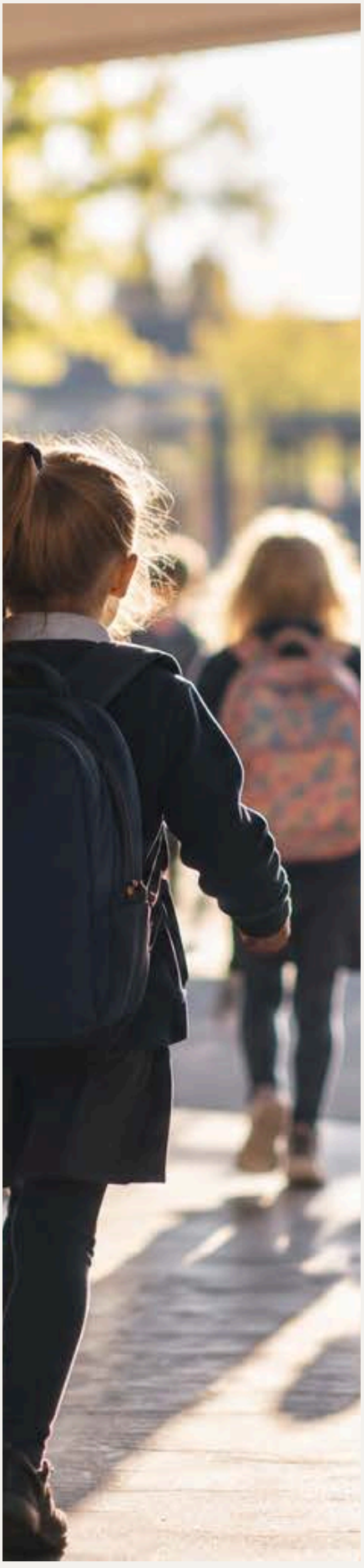
Children and young people do not necessarily respond to demand at the point at which it occurs. Some become visibly distressed, others become quieter or more compliant. Some concentrate hard on managing through the day and show the cost when they reach somewhere that feels safer or requires less from them. The reverse can happen too. Home may see little difficulty while something at school is becoming increasingly hard.

This is why coping does not always tell us what coping is costing. Rather than asking which adult has the "right" picture, it is often more useful to put the different parts together. What happens before school? During the day? At transitions within the day? Afterwards? On Sunday evening? At the end of the week? The pattern can tell us more than any single moment.

> *Children and young people don't necessarily respond to demand at the point it occurs - that's why coping doesn't always tell us what coping is costing.*



Look for direction, not a perfect day.



Transitions rarely settle in a straight line. A good Monday can be followed by a terrible Tuesday and a child can manage a new routine for several days and then suddenly refuse. Something that seemed settled can become difficult again after illness, a holiday or another change.

A difficult day therefore tells us relatively little on its own. What matters more is direction.

Over time, is the unfamiliar becoming more familiar? Is recovery getting quicker? Is the child beginning to manage more independently? Are the difficult periods becoming less frequent or intense? Are relationships forming? Is there more predictability in the day?

Or is the opposite happening?

Are difficulties spreading into more parts of the day? Is attendance becoming harder? Is recovery taking longer? Are sleep, behaviour or relationships changing? Is the child having to put increasing effort, or needing more support, simply to maintain the same level of functioning?

Adaptation does not mean the absence of difficulty. It means that, broadly, the person is beginning to find their way. Looking at direction helps us avoid both overreacting to every difficult day and waiting too long because there are still occasional good ones.

The same transition doesn't ask the same thing of every child.

A transition may be ordinary within an education system and still be particularly demanding for an individual.

One child may quickly learn a new timetable but find unfamiliar relationships difficult. Another may enjoy meeting new people but struggle with increased independence. Someone else may cope with each change separately but become overwhelmed by the number happening at once.

Previous experience matters too. So does what else is happening in the child's life, what support they had before the transition and whether useful knowledge has travelled with them. This is particularly important when a child has been well understood in one setting. Sometimes support appears effortless because adults already know the small things that help: how to prepare them for change, how they communicate when overwhelmed, when to give more information and when to give less, which routines make the day manageable.

When the child moves, that understanding can disappear while the child remains the same. Transitions therefore involve learning in both directions. The child is learning the new environment, and the environment is learning the child.

Support is not always about adding something new. Sometimes it is about identifying what previously made things manageable and making sure useful understanding is not lost during the move.

What to take from this.

Difficulty during a transition does not automatically mean the transition is failing. But changes in behaviour, attendance, confidence, relationships or functioning can provide useful information about what the child is being asked to manage.

1. **Look underneath the behaviour.**
   Instead of beginning with "Why are they doing this?", ask "What has become harder for them to manage?"

2. **Remember how much changes inside a transition.**
   What adults describe as one move can contain dozens of changes in people, routines, expectations, relationships and independence.

3. **Put different perspectives together.**
   School and home may see different parts of the same experience. Neither has to be wrong.

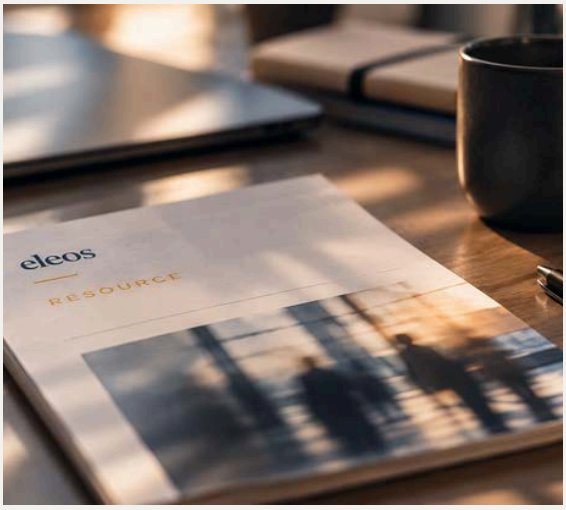
4. **Look at the pattern and direction.**
   Individual difficult days matter less than whether things are gradually becoming more familiar and manageable, or increasingly difficult.

5. **Preserve what already helps.**
   When a child moves between people or settings, useful understanding should move with them wherever possible.

A successful transition is not necessarily one in which there is no difficulty. It is one in which, over time, the unfamiliar begins to become familiar and the child or young person becomes increasingly able to find their way.

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.

When a transition isn't settling.
Build a clearer picture of what has changed, when difficulty occurs, which way things are moving and what appears to help.



LISTEN

Hear the thinking.

When a transition is harder than expected.
Hear the thinking explored through the everyday patterns educators may notice when a child or young person is finding a transition difficult.

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