



from the director

As you know, even though the snow has barely melted, we have begun thinking about the upcoming summer and fall transitions. Children who will be going to kindergarten next year visited their new schools in February, and my phone begins ringing off the hook in January with parents who hope their children will be attending Nonotuck in the Summer or Fall. Although Nonotuck parents need to begin thinking about their schedules for the Summer and Fall in February, at this point in the year it is too early for us to know or begin talking about when children will transition to their new rooms. However, since these transitions are already on our and your minds, we decided to dedicate this newsletter to the many aspects of transition. Each classroom's author took a somewhat different look at transitions so I would urge parents to read all the articles this month.

The transition process will begin as the Chameleons leave Nonotuck for the transition to kindergarten. Since some Chameleons leave in June, some leave during the Summer and some stay until they begin kindergarten in the Fall, the Chameleons have traditionally held a graduation event in June. As we get a bit closer to this year's date of Friday, June 5, the Chameleons themselves will begin planning for this event. This is just one of the ways that the Chameleon teachers prepare for the transition to kindergarten as the Chameleons themselves instigate conversations about this change throughout the year. As teachers observe these informal discussions increasing, they lead circle time discussions on the topic. As I mentioned, most of the Chameleons visited their new schools in February. Another opportunity for conversation happens when teachers from some of the kindergartens visit the Chameleon Room this month. Books about going to a new school, including some with pictures of actual Northampton schools and classrooms, become increasingly popular. A strategy that a former parent found extremely helpful was to get together with other children and parents who were going to the same school and making a few playdate visits to the new school playground over the Summer. When thinking about transitions in



It's the season—tapping the sugar maple tree on Nonotuck's front lawn

the Chameleon Room, Paul writes about our internal Nonotuck moves and the importance of working together as a team; he then focuses on the upcoming Possum to Chameleon transition.

When teachers and I do begin planning for Summer/Fall transitions, we consider age, readiness, friendships, and parent input. Of course, the most important factor is space availability, which is dependent on when current children are leaving and new children are orienting as well as children's schedules and vacation plans (including the teachers). In their article, the Possum teachers (who will be welcoming Frogs to the Possum Room at the same time as their Possums begin moving to the Chameleon Room) chose to focus on ways each group of children have already begun to acclimate to their new room and how the teachers are already making observations and forming connections with their new group of children.

The Frog teachers address children's and parent's reactions to upcoming transitions and they include a letter to parents and a letter to children. While these letters are written to the current Frogs and their parents I urge you all to read them. Their letter to the current Frogs about the Possum Room is a great template that could be adapted for children moving

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polliwog news

Long before the Polliwogs see themselves as Frogs, their parents have envisioned this next step and the many stages beyond as well! That would be natural for parents, but not so likely for toddlers. We know that toddlers live in the moment and feel most secure with familiarity and predictability. Our young toddler classroom is successful due in part to our understanding of their needs for consistency in familiarity and predictable schedules and routines. At the same time, we are also aware that toddlers benefit from our thoughtful preparation for their upcoming transition to the Frog Room even before their year ends as Polliwogs. We have found that there are several positive ways we can help them all through their transition process.

We are all fortunate that Nonotuck offers a school-wide gradual transition which allows each classroom teacher to help 1 or 2 children at a time acclimate into a fully functioning classroom of experienced children. Teachers can focus on the individual needs of their new younger child(ren) entering while older Frogs demonstrate confidently how the their classroom works. Likewise remaining Polliwogs help incoming Polliwogs acclimate to their new surroundings. Teachers are also more available to the parents of those 1 or 2 children. It's a win-win-win situation for teachers, new younger toddlers, older mentor toddlers/preschoolers, and parents as well. Though it may be more cost-effective to begin all classrooms together on the "first day of school," teachers are fully aware of the ramifications of looking in the eyes of a brand new classroom of new and anxious children. The process at Nonotuck takes weeks to

enter all children into their new classrooms, but it is a worthwhile wait that makes the process far more successful and smooth for all!

Additionally, there are many opportunities that teachers intentionally provide to help Polliwogs gain confidence in new uncharted ways. All year Polliwogs and Frogs share the toddler playground space and time for outdoor play. This time together allows Polliwogs to familiarize themselves with Frog teachers and the children they will work with, until Frogs gradually become Possums and move to the next playground. We begin in the late winter and early spring to combine for Music Time in the Frog Room. We learn from our older Frog peers that we sit in a circle to listen, sing, and dance together—different expectations than during our less structured Polliwog Blanket Time. On another day, some will join for Frog Spanish Time as well. We occasionally will join Frogs in the Community Room or take field trips together. On days when Frog enrollment is low we might ask some Polliwogs if they'd like to spend the morning in the Frog Room. Whenever realistic and feasible we may use the Frog bathroom for diapering or toileting. These are all ways in which our confident Polliwogs can take new steps to broaden their experiences beyond where they are now familiar and comfortable. Polliwogs are now welcoming the challenges with excitement while we teachers are beginning to let go with pride!

Lastly, we feel parents can help teachers introduce the idea of moving to the Frog Room that aligns with their strong need for familiarity and predictability. This can be a very emotional time for parents with much to think about. Changes and moves are difficult and disconcerting for toddlers, and their anxiety will only hinder the process. Rather than verbally 'prepare' a child over time (which is counter-intuitive to a toddler who lives in the present), we suggest a more immediate message with less preparation. We like to think we've prepared them for the move—they just don't know it! Ideally, on the first day of your child's transition, your child enters the Polliwog Room as on any other day. When ready, we will escort your child to the Frog Room with a simple explanation that they can play in the Frog Room for the morning and we will meet later to play outside. They are already seeing this happen in the classroom and usually this is an easy choice. At pick-up



Everyone shares the birthday book with the birthday girl

polliwog news *(continued)*



Polliwogs posing at Smith College Bulb Show field trip

time you will get a genuine reaction of probably excitement or possibly less than excitement. Either response is normal and fine, just more indicative of your child's reaction to trying something new on their own. This is when you can most effectively talk to your child about what they want or need to talk about, because it will be about their present experience not their unknown future experience. The next day drop-off is also usually done in the Polliwog Room, and soon the child is escorted to the Frog Room to stay beyond the outside time to include

lunch in the Frog Room. They may also prefer to nap back in the Polliwog Room. The third day is the official drop off in the Frog Room, and your child has had time to get used to the idea gradually. The Frog teachers may bring your child back to retrieve their nap and cubby belongings, creating their official space in the Frog Room as their part of the process. Usually they don't even look back! Polliwog teachers see them in passing each day (and always at outside time) to stay connected! The four teachers share progress and work to make each transition as individual as each child for the most positive and successful experience all around.

In the Polliwog classroom teachers illustrate the transition process using a bulletin board to exhibit an empty Frog pond with photographs of Polliwogs around the outside waiting to enter! As each Polliwog begins the process, their Polliwog jumps into the Frog pond to visually demonstrate their move. We don't emphasize that each Polliwog will be moving, but in time the idea becomes clearer to those remaining. By then they are ready and waiting to join their familiar friends and leave the younger Polliwog Room. Gradual, smooth, positive, individual, and successful! What more could you ask for?

Steph & Lisa



Nonotuck Spring Gala + Silent Auction

**Saturday, May 16
7-10 pm
Artifacts Building, Florence**

More information coming to you soon!

frog news



Field trip fun at the North Hadley Sugar Shack

This newsletter article was a challenging one to write. We could easily pare our whole philosophy around transitioning children from one class to another down to two sentences:

1. Change happens.
2. Everyone will be fine.

On the other hand, we can fill a book with our thoughts on the subject. After many drafts and revisions, here is our attempt to split the difference between those two options.

We decided that the best way to address this topic is to write two newsletter articles: one that is geared towards parents, and one that addresses the children directly.

PART ONE: For Parents Only...

For starters, let us say that we feel like we are writing this kind of soon. We want to emphasize that we aren't talking about transitions with the children right now. (You will find that we touch on this frequently for many good reasons, which we will get into later.) Parents, however, don't necessarily get the luxury of waiting until change is imminent to think about it, since enrollment contracts for the 2009-2010 school year were due last month! Thinking about the next school year might cause some parents to wonder how we prepare the children for their eventual transition to the Possum Room, and what they can do to help. We have been thinking about this for quite some time, and we would like to share some of our strategies with you.

As teachers, every moment we spend with our children is focused on getting them ready for the next step in their lives. Every day, the Frogs are becoming more self-possessed, socially focused, confident and curious. Each year by the time summer rolls around it is clear that the Frogs are ready for a different environment. As teachers, we can't help but project positive feelings about the Frog's eventual transition to the Possum Room because we believe that it is the right place for a three-year-old Nonotuck citizen to be. When the time comes for the Frogs to move on, we believe that our confidence that they are moving in the right direction helps ease their transition. While we feel that right now it is too soon to specifically discuss the Frogs eventual transition to the Possum Room, we have been planning many activities with an eye towards familiarizing the Frogs with the Possum classroom and teachers. We often sneak into the Possum Room to play on rainy days while the Possums are in the Community Room. We also enjoy playing on the Possum playground with it's big swings, playhouse and challenging yet fun climber. The Frogs have been building connections with the current Possum class and with Possum teachers Sarah and Hannah by combining with them for large group projects (like collecting maple sap from the tree out front) and for small "play dates" where one or two Frogs head down to the Possum Room for morning playtime.

Parents have a tremendous influence on how their child's transition plays out. The biggest thing a parent can do to facilitate a child's move to a new classroom (or really any big change in their life), is to relax and be positive about the upcoming change. Children look to their parents for cues on how to react to new situations. If you are uncomfortable with a situation, your child will be too. If you are having trouble getting comfortable with your child's transition to the Possum Room, please let us help you get to a place where you can approach the situation positively. We would be happy to set up a conference to address any questions or concerns you may have about your child's transition into the Possum Room. We have seen time and time again that parents who are able to take transitions in stride and see these changes in a positive light set their children up for a smoother transition to the next part of their schooling.

frog news *(continued)*

Another important thing that parents can do to help is to keep in mind that our children do not prepare for big events in the same way that adults do. Adults can anticipate change and often try to prepare emotionally for it ahead of time. In our experience, young children cannot prepare for events too far in advance. Cognitively, it is almost impossible for a three-year-old to conceive of being a Possum while they are still a Frog. This is not because they aren't ready to move on. It's because, in their minds, they can't be both at the same time. We have found that once a child has finished being a Frog *then* they can start processing the fact that they have undergone a transition. **Practically speaking, this means that right now is way too soon to start talking in specific terms about a child's eventual transition to the Possum Room.** Remember that a three-year-old's concept of time is very different than an adult's. While we are able to anticipate something that is going to happen five months from now, they are not. These are the same children that make plans for trick-or-treating "tomorrow" *every single day* at the lunch table. Every once in a while in the Frog Room, it comes up in conversation that the children will be Possums, then Chameleons, then Kindergarteners, etc., but we try to discuss things in very general terms. We do not want to risk causing confusion and possibly undue anxiety by discussing individual children moving up to the Possum Room in specific terms at this point in time because, really we *grown-ups* don't even know when it is going to happen yet. Based on past practice, we find that waiting until, at the most, two weeks before a child's transition to the Possum Room is a good amount of time to specifically discuss the subject with them. Having said that, we ask that you wait until then to share the next part of this article with them.



Feeding the goats at the "Animal Village"

PART TWO: For the Frogs Who are About to Become Possums...

Dear (your child's name here),

We are writing you this letter to tell you about becoming a Possum.

Changes happen when people grow older. At Nonotuck, Frogs move on to the Possum Room because they are big kids who are ready for bigger things.

The Possum Room is different than the Frog Room, but it is a good place to be. There are lots of activities in the Possum Room that are fun for three and four year old children. Possums can take care of the Possum pets: a Hermit Crab, many Fish, and plenty of ants who live in an ant farm. The Possum Room has tables and an easel for art projects. They have a sensory table and a light table. They have a comfy sofa for kids and grown-ups, and a bookshelf full of books. The Possum Room has a dress up closet with fancy shoes, costumes and uniforms. They have a play kitchen, and a toy ironing board. They have lots of puzzles and games. In the Possum Room, you will have playtime, snack-time, circle-time, playground time, Community Room time, lunchtime and nap-time, just like in the Frog Room. You will also have plenty of chances to use the bathroom—which is right there in the Possum Room! The Possum teachers, Hannah and Sarah, plan interesting and fun things for children to do. They are there to help children out. At first, it may feel strange to go to the Possum Room every morning instead of the Frog Room. That's OK. Pretty soon, it won't feel strange anymore. You can still say hello to us when you are a Possum. We will still love you and we look forward to being your "Old Teachers." We will look for you over the playground fence!

Good Luck and Lots of Love,
Michelle & Francine

awesome possum news

It's getting to be transition time of year again. Throughout this past school year the Possum teachers have been getting to know the Frogs, and the Chameleon teachers have been getting acquainted with the Possums.

For those of you who are Frog parents, your children have been coming into the Possum Room on rainy days (when the Possums are in the Community Room). The Possums and Frogs have also been sharing space and teachers in the Community Room. The Possum teachers know which of your children are comfortable jumping on the trampoline without assistance, which still need a little help, and what car or push-toy your Frog currently prefers.

Possums, of course, have been spending every day that the weather is good on the playground with the Chameleons and the Chameleon teachers. Many of the children have also had opportunities to explore and participate in the Chameleon Room.

By the time transitions begin in June all of the Possums and Frogs will be very familiar with the space and workings of their next classroom. Children make the actual transition when they are ready, when there is space available in the next classroom, and usually with a friend. The actual process happens much as it did for the child at his/her introduction to Nonotuck: on the first day, the pair of friends are dropped off by their parents into their old classroom. When the classroom that they are entering has settled into its routine for the day, the pair of friends and one of their teachers enter into the morning activities of their new classroom, playing games, doing art projects, eating snack and adjusting to the routines of their new classroom. The following day your child and friend will participate in the morning routine and stay for lunch. On the third day, they are dropped off in their new classroom and are officially a student in the older room.

The Possum teachers would like to take this opportunity to welcome your child from the Frog Room—and wish the former Possums a wonderful year in the Chameleon Room!

Hannah & Sarah



Frog and Possum creating art together



Possum engineers and architects hard at work



Happy Possum friends

cosmic chameleons

There are so many interesting and important aspects of transitioning students into new classrooms that entire studies and volumes could be written on the subject(s)! Certainly a worthy topic for an entire Nonotuck newsletter and beyond! We will gladly contribute some of our own thoughts regarding transitions from our humble Chameleon corner of the Nonotuck schoolhouse! It is important to note that transitions are a group effort involving teamwork between Margery, co-teaching teams, parents and children. In our case we work with Possum teachers, Margery and parents, to manifest a positive, successful transition for each child entering the Chameleon Room. Another interesting point is that it is not only a child(ren) that are transitioning into new classrooms and communal life experiences—we are all transitioning into new classrooms and life experiences! Parents also go through a process of anticipating transitions, getting to know new teachers and classroom cultures, and developing good reciprocal communication with teachers. Teachers transition to a new school year and classroom reality with a different group of unique, original individuals and all of the inherent challenges and rewards! Our ever multi-tasking director deals on some level(s) with everyone's transition throughout the school as she helps orchestrate the mass transition!

I believe that in its totality the process of transitioning a new group into the classroom is one of the most challenging, interesting, important and creative things we do as teachers. The importance of transitions lies in the fact that in the process of the transition we are working on so many crucial goals and essential criteria for a positive classroom and community experience. Goals include firstly making children feel safe and comfortable in the classroom, developing trust, getting to know teachers and new friends (and vice versa), and being able to communicate needs and ideas. We are getting to know children's personalities, unique perspectives, interests, and what they may be looking forward to as well as what they may have concerns/worries about in the beginning of their new classroom experience. We are discovering what may or may not work for drop-off routines, entering playgroups, communicating effectively, and encouraging participation in classroom activities and developing positive friendships. This work starts with the process of transitions and hopefully comes together with a classroom that

unites as a group with each member active, involved, confident and empowered as they participate in and contribute to their own educational destiny, daily explorations, and building of our own community within a community. Transitions are also one of those great "teachable moments" as we enlist Chameleons to help each other integrate into a new classroom experience; in a variety of ways they are learning empathy, community building, social skills and more (existing Chameleons can be really helpful with new Chameleons!)

If we attempt to put the shoe on the other foot and view a transition through the eyes of a transitioning child, it can be instructive as to how to proceed with a given transition. When asked her thoughts about transitions, long-time Chameleon Cara Weil said that "it is most important to get to know other kids." In the end, this is very true and it is in fact what we focus on a lot in the beginning of every school year and transition. We do this by assisting play exchanges, encouraging children to invite each other to play, pairing children up for activities, making sure no one is being left out, and suggesting playdates.

Of course, every child is different so it follows that every transition is different or, put another way, within our three-day Nonotuck transition model (1st day—morning visit; 2nd day—stay for lunch; 3rd day—stay for whole day), flexibility and communication are essential. This means flexibility and communication between the co-teaching teams as well as flexibility and communication between the new teacher(s) guiding the transition and the transitioning child. This is where we get to the concept of involving children in their own transition and communicating with them about the transition as it is unfolding. (We may ask a child if he/she would like to stay for lunch on the first day if things are going really well or we may ask a child if he/she would like to return to the Possum

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River Valley Market
\$100 grocery cards
now available!

5% goes back to Nonotuck
(Big Y and S&S cards also still available!)

chameleon news *(continued)*

Room earlier than normal if it seems like a slower approach would work better.)

Transitions are also the first teamwork project between parents and teachers, involving communication and figuring things out, getting to know each other, and being sensitive to concerns. The varying degrees of this first teamwork project will also be necessarily helpful throughout the school year as parents and teachers communicate concerns, share ideas, and work together for each child to have a successful school year.

So transitions are complex, yet simple. They may be kind of a big deal, but we don't want to make a big deal out of them for the children transitioning. (Although we may begin thinking and strategizing weeks or more in advance, we definitely do not want children stressing every day for weeks on end.) The more positive, easygoing and conscientious we all are regarding the transition process (ours and theirs), the more positive the experience will be for the children at the center of the enterprise. We have been fortunate over the years to experience near universal excitement, teamwork, and a wonderful, positive, approach to the beginning of the Chameleon school year and individual transitions on the part of parents, children and teachers. The immense fun and excitement of starting the odyssey of a new school year filled with unlimited possibilities for learning, adventure, and community begin with the grand opportunity of working together and getting to know each other that transitions provide in abundance!

Thanks & Praise,
Paul & Scott

director's update • *continued from page 1*

to the other rooms and might be especially helpful as a framework to craft a story to help children moving onto kindergarten.

The Polliwog article specifically addresses the upcoming moves from Polliwog to Frog Room but is also quite eloquent about the individual nature of our transitions at Nonotuck. Just as when children initially orient to Nonotuck, we feel it is important to be able to transition the group of children to their new classroom gradually. In this way we are really able to pay attention to the one or two children who are moving up, and to adjust our schedules and routines to ensure that the transition meets their needs.

New children who have not attended Nonotuck this year will also be transitioning to Nonotuck this Summer. Parents and teachers can reinforce to the Nonotuck children who are not moving to their new rooms at the beginning of the Summer that they have the important job of welcoming new children to the classroom. We can point out that they are showing the new children what it's like to be in the room and helping them to learn the ropes. When it is time for a child to leave their current classroom, parents are encouraged to have the child bring in something to mark the occasion—a snack to share or cards for the teachers, for example. These gestures help both the children who are leaving and the children who are staying to understand the process.

Spring Ahead!
Margery Heyl

nonotuck community school board of directors

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