



Episode Ten

Supporting Parent Transitions:

Empty Nests

With Elizabeth Gillies and Louise Wiles

Welcome to Successful Student Transitions – A Time to Thrive

This podcast series is for you if you are:

- A student leaving full-time education and moving into the world of work
- A student moving to university or some form of higher education
- An educator, parent or counsellor supporting students as they take the next steps in their journey from school/college/sixth form into the world of further education or work.

For many students this represents the first big life transition. It can be an exciting and challenging time.

This podcast series provides strategies that develop self-awareness, understanding and the ability to thrive through times of transition.

This is the full transcript.

You can also access the show notes, resources and worksheets mentioned in the podcast by registering [HERE](#).

About Your Hosts

Elizabeth Gillies

Elizabeth is an Education Psychologist based in London who has worked in schools as a psychologist at the individual, group and systems level for over 30 years.

She has been fortunate to live, work and raise her family in America, Japan, and Australia so, unsurprisingly, she is interested in the challenges and opportunities of transitions.



Elizabeth is a CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) and ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) specialist. She works in schools, on-line and near her home base in South London, incorporating walking with talking therapy in green spaces.

At the crunch points at the beginning and end of the school year, Elizabeth runs workshops for young people, teachers, and parents to help them understand common patterns of transition and how to use this knowledge to help themselves during this time and future changes.

Together with a great group of professionals in London, Elizabeth is growing a multi professional support service called Special Networks and can be found [HERE](#)

Elizabeth is a member of FIGT (Families in Global Transition) and with Louise and another FIGT member, is a co-chair of the FIGT UK affiliate. Link to FIGT. Connect via LinkedIn [HERE](#)

About Louise Wiles

Louise Wiles is a well-being, change and transition consultant, trainer and coach and the parent of two teens.

Alarmed by the recent explosion of well-being challenges amongst children and teens, especially during exam years and through times of change and transition. Louise believes we should be better preparing young people for life beyond school and university so that they can thrive through the natural highs and lows of life.



Louise combines her professional background in organisational psychology (MSc) and coaching, with her expertise as a wellbeing, positive change and strengths practitioner and her personal experience of life on the move, to develop training courses and coaching programmes that help her clients prepare for, and thrive, through the challenge of change and transition.

You can connect with Louise on LinkedIn [HERE](#)

Website [HERE](#) and contact Louise [HERE](#)

Louise is also the author of ***Thriving Abroad: The Definitive Guide to Professional and Personal Relocation Success***

Transcript

Elizabeth Gillies 00:04

Welcome to Successful Student Transitions: A Time to Thrive, this is Podcast 10 about how parents can help. This podcast is aimed at you as parents to help you think and process your young person's transition as they leave school. They might be going off to university, college or even getting a job. Of course, this is a big transition for them, but it is also a time of transition for parents and maybe other family members. It could be your first child to leave home, or maybe even the last. So, in this podcast we are going to be discussing why our young people are facing different stresses and challenges from the ones you might have faced and what you can do to help them to prepare for success in this next stage of their life. And we are also going to be talking about the changing role and purpose of you as a parent as you move towards that empty nest. We are going to share a framework with you that we hope is going to help you manage this change. We'd also like to encourage you to listen to the other podcasts, particularly podcast one and two, where we introduce expected patterns of transition and how to make good endings and beginnings. These could be really helpful for you in your changing role. We hope you find this helpful

And the first thing we really wanted to talk about, why is it difficult? Why does it seem why does this transition, you know, from school, to university? Or work? Why is it particularly difficult for young people nowadays. And I was kind of from a, from a kind of psychological perspective about, you know, there's been a whole kind of range of difficulties facing our young people, and none more important than the mental health challenges that they'd be having, and we know that by 8% of undergraduates in the UK drop out in their first year. So, there's something that's telling us there this is really difficult for them. It's stressful for them. And it's likely to be one of the biggest challenges that they've made on their own. They could be overwhelmed by just the organisation, the time management and maybe academic pressure managing their lives independently. Moving from somewhere that has been, you know, school has been very kind of focused and controlled and school having a connectedness and belonging. And then when they go to university, that's the kind of fracture happens. And that kind of has broken down, hasn't it, Louise, that this transition from one place to another is tricky?

Louise Wiles 02:20

Yeah, yeah.

Elizabeth Gillies 02:24

When you go, you see, like,

Louise Wiles 02:26

So, I think that moves to independent living is a really big factor, probably for many. And I think also recognising that it's a change and with change come ups and downs, highs and lows. And I think what's really important is having realistic expectations about what's coming up. And I think perhaps, what happens is people see University, the next stage, is yeah, hopefully, is going to be really great and positive in the long term, but don't understand that in the short term it can be, there can be times of struggle, as well as great times, good times. And the two come hand in hand with change, that is the

nature of change, and the transition and adjustment period that then results. So as a parent watching, it can be really tough, because one day, you'll have your child saying 'fantastic, went out and had a brilliant night last night met some really nice people.' And then two days later, you may have them on the phone in tears, or sounding really upset because things aren't going so well. Perhaps they're feeling down, homesick, of course, is a big part of it, if they've never left home before, then they are going to miss home. They may not want to admit that. But it will be a part of the experience, probably. And so, there's this kind of mix of a huge opportunity and excitement and newness and novelty, and then challenge and a bit of sadness about what they've left behind. And discomfort. And disorientation really, because it's a new environment that they've got to work their way through and work everything out, as Elizabeth just said.

Elizabeth Gillies 04:14

Absolutely. And it also kind of links in a little bit with some other statistics about going to university in particular, is that, you know, young people don't feel comfortable in asking for help, or actually they don't know where to go for help. So if they are struggling, you know, let's go back to the listen to the podcast about 'asking for help', because that's a really good one. Because if they know that actually asking for help is all right, that's something that might aid in that transition. So that's one of the reasons why this is really, why it's different. And it's different for our kids as well because, there's an idea of a kind of notion called emergent adulthood. And its surrounding kind of the post-industrial Western world. So, it used to be that you were an adult, and that being an adult meant you were married, you had your own house, you maybe had children, you were kind of financially independent. But, you know, we have to acknowledge that that's not necessarily happening today's society here in the UK. You know, often after university, people come back, you know, they're the boomerang generation, they come back to live home again, you know, people aren't getting married till much later, they're not having their kids to later in life, they're maybe taking a bit longer to get on the property ladder, having their own house. So, these old markers about what does it mean to be an adult? it's harder, so does that mean they're not an adult, you know, at a time when we were. So, this idea that you're becoming, you know, you're emerging as an adult is really good. And it's something we might come back to at the end about, well, then if they can't do those things, what can we do to help them be an adult. And nicely in the literature around this, there are three things we can do. One has help them in decision making, from an early age, not on the cusp of when they're going off and leaving school. Don't rush and do things for them, you know help them make decisions for themselves. The second one is help them be independent in a whole range or a whole raft of stuff. There's some nice work around, I don't like this word 'chores', but you know, I would call it contributions, like being helpful around the house, knowing what it's like to be an active participant living with other people, you know, it's your turn to, you know, your job is taking out the rubbish or something. So, it's about being independent, and giving them small responsibilities is a really good thing. And the third thing is being financially independent. But, of course, you know, that's maybe hard when they're at home, it's hard maybe, in today's days, when kids don't actually see money, you know, they just see plastic that they put on something, but you know, they're gonna have to manage their, their kind of finances when they're at work, or when they're at uni. So being able to give them some feel about how much things cost and how much they've got to spend and how much a budget is. I know somebody, when their kids went off to university, they gave them some money, but they gave them more than they needed, because they wanted to save some money. So, it was a, it was an it was a good thing for them to learn about how they would save when they were at university. I

mean, they gave them enough to kind of get by they weren't on a shoestring or anything. So be thinking about decision making, independence and using money wisely is quite a good kind of thing. So, this likely didn't happen to you, when you were kind of, you know, you would be an adult quite quickly, much more quickly than they would. And another reason it's really difficult is that, when you think about generation Z, which is people that were born after the 2000's. This generation is really different. They've got their screens, they've got all that mobile technology, social media, they're the generation that's never going to get lost, because they get everything on a map and they can find everything. But there's a huge pressure on them to live a life that everybody's going to like. And so back to that social comparison, isn't it Louise about, you know, they can't just live their life and, you know, around about, you know, in their local community, they've got these huge groups of people that are kind of, you know, looking at them and what they're doing, and they're all wanting to have a good time, so it's another kind of living in that filtered bubble as they are, it's harder for them.

Louise Wiles 09:20

Yeah, it kind of links to having realistic expectations, I think because, you see, and they see social media, and they see everyone having a good time. And they think everyone's out partying all the time. Perhaps they're not every night, and they feel in some way lacking. So, it's, it's setting expectations that everything you see on social media is not necessarily true, or reporting the real reality of the situation, which actually, rationally they know, but when they're in a new situation where they're perhaps feeling a bit, a bit threatened by the newness of it all, they can forget to apply rationality and rational thinking. And it all becomes quite emotional. And I suppose that's another thing, you might get quite emotional reactions from your teens in their new jobs. And it can feel really heavy as a parent that have to deal with that. But it's helpful to just sit and be there, there's not much you need to do. You just listen, give them the space to express how they're feeling, and then often they'll end the conversation feeling a lot better.

Elizabeth Gillies 10:29

Do you know, I'm really, you know, I'm overjoyed when I see on, you know, secondary school's curriculum, critical thinking skills, because that's what we need, we need kids that can think about, 'oh, everybody's putting that in social media or something like that, but I bet you, that's only half of it' - you know, they need to be able to see things as they are, not as they appear to be. And, of course, we never had all of that issue that they've got with that. And, of course, you know, this transition of them leaving school and going wherever it might be after that. This is not just their transition, it's yours as well, it's likely a family transition, it might be, you know, the first person leaving home, and going and doing something else, or it might be your last, or it might be going off in a gap year, or that transition into work. So, you know, whether it's the first to leave home, or the last, your family's changing, and the transition is everybody's, and this is when people start talking about the 'empty nest, isn't it, Louise, it's about a feeling, I've been through it, right? And can I on the other side of it, but there's often a real feeling of grief or loss, a shifting sense of maybe your purpose as a parent, being that person that was kind of really, you know, an important part of your kid's life. And then, suddenly, you're taking a step back. So, it might be a little bit about missing the person that you were, missing the kind of parent that you were, where that was a really a big role in your life, and then it stops. And while some parents

might want to throw a party to celebrate, you know, the kids have gone. It's that kind of joint emotional difficulty, there's joy in it, but there's sadness in it too. So, empty nests aren't kind of great feeling. They are, they can be great, and also kind of tricky at the same time.

Louise Wiles 12:45

Yeah, and I think that in the first two episodes of this podcast, we talked about a mnemonic, RAFT, which we were using as a mnemonic to support the students through transitions and I think this is quite a helpful one for parents as well. So, the R stands for repair or reconcile. So as your child leaves. And you know, as your relationship is going to change and move to a different footing. There might be some things that together you want to repair, perhaps it's some arguments you've had, some disagreements you've had some reconciliation that you want to discuss together. But you also might want to think back to yourself about your parenting experience. And you know, I know when I look back, there are things that perhaps I wish I'd done differently and now is the kind of time when you can take some time out to think about that, and, and put it to bed really, put it to rest, now is the time to recognise that, yeah, we all have things we would perhaps have liked to have done differently at certain times as parents, but on the whole, I'm quite sure you've been a fantastic parent, you've contributed hugely to the positive experience your kids have had at home. That's the repair. The A is to affirm to yourself what's good. So yes, thinking about what you love about your child, what you're really pleased that they've achieved, that you as a family, you know, have together and will have into the future. So recognising all of that and recognising that family continues. It's just changes in its kind of structure perhaps and, and the things that you do together as a family, but you still are a family. That's not that's not going away anytime soon. So recognising that. Then farewell. Elizabeth mentioned about being sad and the sense of loss perhaps at the end of this stage in your life. You're moving on to the next one, especially if you're in the empty nest phase, and I read a few articles recently about empty nesters and parents and crying lying on the their kids bed in their bedroom crying. And yeah, go and do that, I think it's really important that we embrace that there is a sadness to this, that we are coming to the end of part of a stage in our lives. And we're moving on to something new as well. And hopefully, that's going to be positive too. But yeah, allow yourself to feel sad. Obviously, if that sadness continues for more than a week or two, and you really feel down, and you can't shake it, then perhaps you want to seek professional support. But for most of us, we'll move through that and start to see some of the positives. And so, the positive so that the final T in RAFT, because RAFT, which was developed for international mobility, so it was about thinking destination where you're moving to next. But I think this is really relevant to parents, what do you want next, this next phase of your life, you know, you now have some space, the laundry pile won't be so big, you know, you won't have to do quite so much cooking. So where do you spend your time? Now? What could you do for yourself that you haven't had the time to do? But now you do. What are your interests and your hobbies? Or what new career direction do you want to follow, because you have more time to pursue it, the new opportunities for you that's really important. So, start giving that some thought. And you'll find that that along with the other elements have really help you to process it all and think through to what comes next.

Elizabeth Gillies 16:34

Do you know, this was Louise's idea to kind of think about RAFT in relation to parents, and I've never heard anybody do that before. So, I think it's a really useful kind of strategy to think about, because often young people find this really helpful or schools find this really helpful. So hopefully, for you as

parents will as well, and, and on that last thing, thinking destination, it's often worth thinking of that without thinking about the other things before isn't it and how important it is for your young person to know that you're going to have a life, you know, a good life without them being there. So that, you know, they're not going to be somewhere worried about you, that they can see you getting on and doing stuff is really important. So, I love that idea of RAFT. Yeah. And I had a different framework. And it's another framework that I can often use with, with people, with parents in particular. And it's called the Five R Framework. And of course, we're going to put these in the THINK SHEET in more detail for you and kind of get you to reflect on them. But the first are, and it links into some of the things that Louise has been talking about. But it links into that role. Your role as a parent is changing. And due to time, distance, and your young person growing up and being more independent, hopefully. You might not be that first port of call when there's an issue. You'll be developing your role as a listener, rather than somebody that's going to fix their problems. You know, there are times when there's maybe a crisis that you will need to go in and help out. But a lot of the time, like Louise was saying, you know, if they're phoning up saying, I've lost my keys, or somebody's kind of not speaking to me, or I wasn't invited out, you know, you've got to be in that role of 'Well, that's, that's interesting, oh, that's a bit of a challenge for you what you're going to do about it?' And thinking about the message that that gives them as - you're going to be the person that sorts out, the young person is going to be the person that sorts of age. So, you're the sounding board, rather than the person that fixes things out for them. Because if you did do that, if you say, well, I'll come and find your keys with you. You're not giving them that message of they're resilient, they're going to be able to find the stuff out for themselves. So be thinking about how you're kind of shifting in that role. And it's not an easy one. Because when we see our kids struggle, we want to help, but we have to know that that struggle, and then they're managing through those struggles, as Louise says, and the ups and downs, that's how they're going to build resilience in themselves. The next R is about routines. So, you know, change disrupts any patterns that we've got. So, they'll have to be new routines to be established and I often think about routines about them, maybe going into work or universities, like how often are you going to contact them? You know, sometimes people I've heard people say, 'Oh, don't talk to them for the first five weeks, let them settle down' or 'I have to keep talking to them every day', but find, find a balance for yourself, find something that's going to help them cope with that honeymoon period that we talked about. And then get into that there might be a little dip. So be thinking about that routine, and also be thinking about routines about when they come home from university. Because they're likely be very used to being independent, doing what they like, you know, leaving their room as they would. And so, it might be a little negotiation around that about, how to come back home, it can be challenging you for both of you. The third R is about reactions so transitions in and out, we're gonna have a lot of reactions. So you're young adults, like you, might be have conflicting emotions, they might be excited and anxious, they might be happy and sad. Like you when they go off to wherever they're going, you know, you could have a mixed emotions, but it's about doing that thing about being able to acknowledge the emotion, I know this is hard for you. Maybe even name it, I can see you're anxious, I can see you're worried, you know, I can see that starting a new job, it's going to bring you some challenges. So that naming the emotion is really good. And, just kind of being able to sit with it before you get into problem solving. So, validate it, acknowledge it, validate it, sit with it before you get into that big kind of sorting out well, what are we going to do about it? what are you going to do about it? And remember that anxiety is a contagious emotion. So, we have these things called mirror neurons that automatically pick up and mimic strong emotional signals when we're around other people. So, if you're anxious, they'll pick it up too. So,

remember that kind of idea that before regulation, before you get regulated, before you understand about how to manage your own emotions, you need to be co-regulated by somebody else. So, keeping your emotions in check is good. And don't interview for pain, as I call it. Where you with anybody today? Did you have your lunch? Did you eat dinner with somebody? So, they're gonna pick that up? So less of that, more about - What did you learn today? That was always my thing at university. What did you learn this week? That was really interesting. So, watch your reactions, remember that when they come back sideways talking and listening is really good. And of course, your relationships going, the fourth R is about relationships. We've talked in the previous podcast about relationships are tricky, they're a process, they take time, we lightly know that's going to be the biggest challenge when they're at university. So be talking to them about that friendship frenzy that often happens at the beginning of university, be willing to kind of sit with them on the bench when you know finding friends is hard and encourage them to think about how they made friends before and you know, know that relationships, change, your relationships, we say there's going to change. So, one aspect is about the communication, how well are you listening, before you try and sort out issues for them. So, remember to that, for this time in your young person's life. The important thing for them is they're doing this word, it's called individuating. Like that individuating. So they're growing up to be an individual themselves. So, they're separating from you. So, they might want to come back to you. And that's all right, as well as you kind of saying you're going to be all right out there on your own. Thinking about how you're helping them be independent. And the fifth are, is about reflection. And in other podcasts we've talked about, remember when you've been in other transitions before, this is not your first transition. You've done things you've moved to schools, you know, parents got divorced, the dog died, you know, we've been through other kind of changes before and remember about what helped them. Remember what helped them connect with competence in their lives, and some little bit of joint reflection around that is, you know, would be good, about how you did it, recognising how they've done it before. So, I kind of like those five R's. And I also like RAFT. So, we hope we've given you two frameworks that you can use, you might have one a preference of one over the other, but having a framework to support yourself in this time when you're young persons transitioning.

Louise Wiles 25:21

Brilliant. I think that's really, really helpful. And I've written down as I was listening to that three little phrases, and it was, first one sitting with, I think you said that, sitting with, not jumping in, and giving space for them to express their experience without you judging. I think it is really important. And then also letting go. We've all got to let go a little bit. Elizabeth's done it. I'm in the process. And it can feel really tough,

Elizabeth Gillies 25:55

It can feel tough.

Louise Wiles 25:56

But it's part of parenting, it's part of parenting at some point we have to give them the freedom to move on and to be who they, the wonderful people they're all going to become. Sometimes I reflect when I'm talking to my daughter, and I feel like, oh Louise, you're trying to choreograph stuff. Like as soon as I hear myself, right, time to take a step back. This is not my role anymore, and probably should never have been anyway.

Elizabeth Gillies 26:40

Can I say one other thing about that I kind of like this framework, there's child development, there's parent development. So we start off being a director. So we're directing everything, when they're babies we have to be in charge, you know, feeding, sleeping, changing nappies, doing everything, doing everything. And of course, that brings us, it can make us tired, but as a parent, it gives a lot of fulfilment. And then the next kind of phase is you're a supervisor. When you're supervising things, you're kind of taking a step back, because we're taking them to school, they've got to manage things on their own. We're kind of making sure that things are kind of done and organised, but we're not doing it anymore. And the third phase of parents, and hopefully, it's one that we get to, is when we're a consultant, when our kid comes to us and says, What do you think about this mum? You know, if you were going to do this, how would you do it? I've done this, what other what other kind of advice would you give, so they're the main leader of it. They're in charge. They're in the lead, they're in charge of their life. And you're there as the kind of sounding board. And of course, sometimes things happen and it's not a linear process. Sometimes we can go back into another stage, if there's a bit of a crisis or something happens. But on the whole, what we want to end up, you know, we don't want our kids still in our house when they're 50. We want them to all living their own lives. And so sometimes, you know, it's tough love, we have to do those things. So, this kind of stage when they're leaving home, you're kind of on that phase of going into that consultant role. And it can be a good place to be and a hard place to be at the same time.

Louise Wiles 28:50

Yeah, brilliant. Well, we hope that that has given you some food for thought as parents. And we will probably suggest that go back and listen to the other podcasts, because there's probably relevance in those for you as a parent but also gives you some ideas and resources to use to support your, your children or your teen, your young adults, as well. Okay,

Elizabeth Gillies 29:17

See you next time and thank you for listening.

Resources:

- **Third Culture Kids: Growing up among worlds.** D. Pollock and R Van Reken. Boston Nicholas Brealey Publ. 2009
- **Bernardo, K (2012) Framework: The 5 Rs of Cultural Change.** In Bernardo, K. & Deardorff, D.K. (Eds) Building Cultural Competence: Innovative activities and models. Styles Publishing, LLC.
- **Kate BinghamSmith Grown and Flown.** Missing our kids is also about missing who we used to be. June 2019 <https://grownandflown.com/missing-my-kids/>
- Maggie Wooll. Empty nest syndrome: How to cope when kids fly the coop. BetterUp Jan 2022 <https://www.betterup.com/blog/empty-nest-syndrome>
- Rubenstein C. (2007) Beyond the Mommy Years: How to Live Happily Ever After... After the Kids Leave Home. Grand Central Life & Style.

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