



**Guidance
by the sector,
for the sector**

High quality transitions

High quality early years experiences provide a firm foundation on which young children build future social, emotional, cultural, linguistic and cognitive strengths. Key to effective transitions is sensitive, thoughtful continuity of practice between home and all the settings that will make up the child's learning journey.

All settings need to aim for seamless transitions in relation to expectations, entitlements, opportunities, contribution and participation. Any discontinuity between the familiar and the unfamiliar can be a challenge for young children and can mean they do not thrive as well as they might.

Transition is often thought of as a move to what is coming next: from home to nursery, from nursery to Reception class. These are known as 'vertical' transitions. But there are equally frequent transitions across the same day: from home to child-minder, child-minder to nursery and so on. In addition some children experienced 'blended' transitions when they move on certain days, for example, from their nursery to a specialist service such as a speech therapy clinic and back again. All of these transitions ask a lot of children, requiring them to adapt to different situations, to different people and to differing expectations.(1)

The experiences of transition in their earliest years will impact on children's feelings about transitions in the future (2). The whole of early childhood can be seen as laying the foundations for how children feel and manage what is to come, and the transitions that life will demand.

The importance of feeling 'known'

Young children making a move from feeling known to feeling unknown may experience anxiety and insecurity (3). Intimate attachments are the hub around which a child's life revolves and it is from these intimate attachments that each child draws the strength and confidence to become an individual in their own right. The bonds of attachment develop from birth with a baby's instinctive need for safety, security and protection and they develop through reciprocal, warm interactions with their primary caregivers. (4)

Some babies learn that when they signal distress, a responsive caregiver will soothe the distress and offer that security and protection. These children, when faced with transition to a new setting, carry with them that feeling of being nurtured and cared for – and cared about. They have that special sense that, although they are separated, they are still 'held in mind' by their parent(s) and wider family (5).

But this is not the case for all babies or young children. Children who do not have strong attachments to parents or carers and those who are of a temperament to be anxious and unhappy in the face of the unfamiliar are vulnerable to feeling 'unattached'. Transitions then become traumatic, leading to feelings of being abandoned and unloved (6). Such children are unlikely to be ready to learn or make positive relationships straight away and

practitioners need patience and warmth in order to build children's confidence and acceptance in this new place.

Transition for children who are new to English is also challenging as they adjust to the linguistic and cultural demands of their new setting. Early years practitioners need to draw on bilingual children's home languages and explicitly encourage the use of mother tongue in the setting in order to build on children's cognitive and cultural experiences at home (7).

Early years practitioners need to offer all children a secure base from which they support children's tentative exploration of new environments, watching over them and joining in their play and being ready to comfort them and soothe them when they need reassurance (8).

All transitions will be more effective if practitioners welcome and respect what children bring with them from home by way of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills. When practitioners draw on the life experiences that children possess they demonstrate an understanding that these prior experiences, including the languages they bring with them, are the foundations for future learning and development. Children's interests, their fascinations and their funds of knowledge are important connections to their wider communities and offer practitioners starting points for planning environments, experiences and opportunities that will help children feel secure, engaged and respected. (9, 10)

Children particularly vulnerable to transitions

Transitions often bring together more than one change in children's lives. As they move on, children have to manage new environments, new adults, new children all whilst missing the support of the most familiar adults in their lives. For some children, transitions can expose underlying fears and anxieties. For others, transitions can mean one change too many for them to manage positively.(11)

Children who are in foster care or who are adopted, those who have recently arrived in this country or who have left their home to go into a refuge in the middle of the night will already have faced considerable disruption and discontinuity. Children who are youngest in their age group (often referred to as 'summer borns' in Reception classes), and children born prematurely who find themselves in an age group ahead of their due date, may also be disadvantaged because of their relative immaturity and inappropriate expectations.

There are also children who face short term upheaval: a house move that means starting a new school or setting and making new friends; separation from a loved family member through illness or death; or a stay in hospital. All such experiences can leave children unsettled, anxious and vulnerable for brief or much longer periods of time.

Practitioners who respond sensitively to the needs of children, view planning for transition as something that can be differentiated, just like planning for learning. The more vulnerable the child, the more time they will probably need to readjust to what is new and can appear threatening. So a vulnerable child might make more visits to their new setting or class, or they may be helped to make a transition by the presence of a Key Person or classroom assistant who moves with them and on whom they can rely for security and emotional support (12).

Transition and relationships

The Key Person

Building strong relationships and 'linkages' (13) are at the heart of supporting children during transitions. The shared aim of all those involved should be to enable children to settle and thrive through developing a sense of wellbeing and belonging within their new setting.

Successful transitions rely on the time and energy given to building strong relationships between children's current setting – including the home - and the setting to which children are moving. The Key Person is crucial in achieving this. The Key Person Approach offers the opportunity to create a 'triangle of trust' between the child, the home and the setting, helping to reduce the impact of transition on all involved and helping positive relationships to flourish (14).

Parents

The starting point in working with parents during transitions is to acknowledge parents' knowledge of their own child. Parents will nearly always share their pride and joy in their children, which then forms the basis of positive parent-practitioner relationships in the future.

But times of transition can be stressful for parents also. Feelings of uncertainty can overwhelm them and they may experience feelings of loss as their child grows up and seems to move away from them. Children's expectations of transitions are largely influenced by what adults around them say and feel and so Key Persons need to spend considerable time ensuring that parents learn as much as is possible about where their child is moving to, what the transition process will involve and the support their child will receive (15).

Parents need to know they are respected in this process and will be offered opportunities to contribute to their child's transition. They may need reassurance that there will be opportunities to ask questions and to tell the Key Person how they and their child are feeling. Some children appear confident in the setting but resort to thumb-sucking or bedwetting once in the security of the home environment. Some children may tell their parent they are anxious (especially if the parent is) yet behave with confidence in the setting.

Open communication about the process involved, and regular opportunities for parents to express how they are feeling and how they think their children are feeling, can support practitioners in planning transition processes relevant to the needs of the child and parents (16). Different children need different approaches to transition dependent on their age, their disposition and their confidence in the opportunities ahead.

Friendships

It is well known that the support of friends and friendship groups helps protect children from the impact of transition (17). Settings can help children's confidence and their feelings of familiarity by taking account of friends and friendship groups when planning groups or classes in the new setting. Parents often have knowledge of friendship and family networks outside of school or setting that can positively support this planning.

Many children become anxious about making new relationships however, whether those are with other children or with the adults with whom they will spend their time. Vulnerable

children can take a long time to become attached to new people, adults in particular, and then take time to 'let go' of that attachment before forming new ones in a different setting. Others become attached too quickly, revealing a strong desire to be loved, and sometimes overwhelming other children and caring adults (18).

Opportunities for professional dialogue

Practitioners who have already come to know children and their families over time will be well placed to share their knowledge about those children and families with the practitioners in the child's new setting. Current practitioners will be familiar with individual children, their dispositions, characters, how they like to learn and any particular interests they have shown (19).

When parents choose a number of settings for their child, practitioners from each setting need to make time to share the child's development, their learning records and any other relevant information which will help to ensure continuity between settings for the child and their parent(s) (20).

In some schools and settings, children will have had contact with practitioners from other professional backgrounds. The perspective of all these colleagues is invaluable in coming to an understanding of individual children and their needs and help to ensure continuity of support as well as experiences.

Transition is a process not an event

An effective transition policy acknowledges the time that readjustments take. It involves plans for visits over time, so that all those involved have opportunity to readjust, to get to know each other well and to be at ease with the changes to come (21).

Adjusting to significant changes can raise anxieties in both children and their parents. These anxieties will not be allayed in a one-off visit to the new setting or classroom. There are too many new things to learn about and to remember, too many things to think about and to process, for a one-off visit to be sufficient. A one-off event can sometimes create further anxieties because some query remains unresolved or some detail is not remembered accurately, or the child or parent have not had time to see or ask about things that are concerning them.

Parental relationships

Schools and settings can build close, lasting relationships with parents if the first meetings with staff are respectful and two-way communication is established where parents are listened to as well as receiving information (22). Parental feelings about transition are varied and the more they are consulted and involved in their child's forthcoming move the more positive it is likely to be(23).

Parents are helped by receiving information about any new setting as early as possible so they can begin to make the readjustments they need, as well as preparing their children in positive ways. Meetings are useful but sometimes exclude those that are less assertive or

who do not speak English well enough to be confident in asking questions (24). Varied opportunities need to be planned so that all parents have the chance they need to receive information and to ask questions. Parents of children who are vulnerable particularly welcome being given additional time and attention in order to share their own concerns and questions as well as those they believe their children to have (25).

Transitions are made more workable for children, parents and practitioners if admissions are staggered. When only a few new children begin in a setting or class at a time, then any distress or concerns can be dealt with sensitively and promptly because the Key Person has time to devote to each child and each parent.

For all children, and parents, at every transition in the early years and beyond, repeated opportunities for relaxed contact with and visits to the new setting over a sustained period of time will support a positive move.

The transition from home to an early childhood setting

Home visits

Home visits are a very positive way of establishing relationships between home and any new early childhood setting. Parents and children are likely to be more at ease, confident and comfortable in their own familiar environment where the visiting practitioners are welcomed as guests. In addition, parents and children are likely to share more information and practitioners are more likely to learn more about the child, if parents and children are relaxed by being at home (26).

It is helpful if practitioners do not arrive with a long list of questions to ask the parent and, in doing so, dominate the conversation. Home visits are a time for parents and children to share what is important to them, and so any gathering of information can wait until parents and children have said everything they want to say. Home visits provide families, where English is not the first language, with an important opportunity to talk about home language use, in order for practitioners to build on children's linguistic experiences when they enter the setting. When practitioners adopt a listening role in this way, it establishes a reciprocal relationship which will underpin the quality of that relationship throughout the child's time in their setting (27).

Visits to a new setting

Practitioners can prepare for transitions to be positive for children by first visiting them in their current setting. In this way, children are seen in familiar surroundings, engaged in some of their favourite activities and playing alongside familiar children, all of which allow the visiting practitioner to learn more about the child and what he or she currently likes to do and can do.

In time the child's current Key Person, or the parent, can accompany the child to their new setting. This visit will have been carefully prepared, with books and photographs of what the environment is like and photographs of the key staff that the child will meet. It is important that the visit is seen from the child's perspective and that practitioners respond to what is interesting or concerning the child, rather than simply making him or her join in pre-planned activities.

Following this initial visit there need to be repeated opportunities for contact with and visits to the new setting over a sustained period of time, for both parents and children. It is not possible to take note of everything on one visit, and it is crucial that children and their parents have the opportunity to return to ask the questions that have arisen subsequently.

Babies and toddlers

Babies and toddlers are extremely vulnerable to changes in the circle of close adults that they depend on for their welfare. It is, therefore, essential that parents and Key Persons have the opportunity to form trusting relationships, allowing children to sense their warm contact (28).

Any changes in the child's circle of support needs to be kept to a minimum and introduced gradually. Effective transitions for children from birth to age three focus on change that is gradual. Allowing time for the child to gradually process the idea of change in their mind and adapt themselves to a new situation.

On being left in a new setting the baby may experience separation for the first time. For the baby that has relied on their attachment figure for comfort and protection this is incomprehensible and potentially threatening. Lacking the language to express their feelings this experience can cause real distress for babies, a distress that may well be being experienced by the parent(s) also (29). The main aim of early childhood settings is to alleviate the feelings of anxiety and distress of the child, by helping them make a new relationship with the Key Person, while gradually separating from their parent(s). Separation from a parent needs to be handled with particular sensitivity and only when it is in the best interests of the child.

Babies can rely on familiar and sensory objects to provide continuity between home and setting. Transitional objects such as photos or toys, familiar musical sounds or songs, cooking or perfume smells can all be helpful. Practitioners can acknowledge the importance of these transitional objects by letting children give them up only when they are ready (30).

Dealing with the stress of others on a regular basis is demanding. Settings can support those with a Key Person role by offering regular supervision and support (31). It can also be valuable to identify two Key Persons for any one group, so that the two practitioners support each other and so one familiar practitioner is always present and available to both the child and their parent(s) (32).

Transition to school

Transitions to school can be smoother for children if teachers visit their feeder settings to meet their new children, to familiarise themselves with the experiences the children will have had and to see the children in familiar surroundings where they can show their confidence and competences. This is a particular challenge for schools that receive children from a number of settings, but are vital in helping teachers plan appropriately for the emotional, cultural, linguistic, social and learning needs of each child.

For children making the transition to school there can be expectations that they will take this transition in their stride. For many this will be the case. But pressure is sometimes put on

children by well-meaning adults who talk about moving on to 'big school' and what will be expected there and this can create insecurities rather than anticipation.

Initial visits to a new classroom can be overwhelming and many children focus on the size of buildings, where the toilets are and having to cope in the playground. Some of the most stressful times are not experienced in the classroom but at lunchtime and whole school times such as assembly. Many schools make successful alternative arrangements for their new intake to ensure they remain in smaller groups, in smaller spaces, until they feel more confident and secure (33).

In the transition to Key Stage 1 it is particularly valuable if children and their parents know which teacher their children will move onto in their new class, as far in advance as possible. This also makes planning for transition between the Reception teacher and the Year 1 teacher more successful. There is little point being visited by the current Year 1 teacher or sharing information about children, if that teacher is moved to Year 4 in the new school year (34).

Transition from the EYFS to KS1

As children move from the EYFS into KS1 they continue to need continuity of experience (35,36). The ways in which they learn successfully in their Reception class need to be continued into Year 1. This does not mean that **what** they will learn will be the same, but **how** they learn should be very similar and familiar.

In KS1 children's learning experiences should remain a balance between learning led by teachers and learning led by the children. Sometimes children will learn most when left to experiment and play in their own ways; sometimes they will respond to guidance and suggestions from a skilled adult supporting their play; sometimes they will respond to a challenge set by their teacher; sometimes they need to be taught something directly. The flexible balance between these different ways of learning enables teachers to be sensitive to the needs of children as they mature (37).

Play remains a vital way in which KS1 children continue to learn skills, strategies and attitudes that adult-led learning does not teach (38). Children are motivated to learn through their own self-directed activity. They take more risks, learn to turn mistakes into positive learning opportunities, negotiate with others and use their initiative to solve problems and challenges they have set themselves. These are life skills that need to be developed and strengthened as children move on through their educational journey (39).

Transition is a whole school issue. In order for transition to KS1 to build on the best of the EYFS, head teachers and senior leaders need to be sufficiently knowledgeable about child development and curriculum development at this age, to support their staff in planning a learning day that is developmentally appropriate.

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