



Key messages

- It is important that the benefits of having a diverse system of childcare providers outweigh the challenges of coping with the differences between them, which can unsettle children and affect their ability to thrive.
- Where experiences are different but complementary they contribute positively to children's development and learning.
- Children will respond in different ways to changes in their experience.
- Practitioners must work with families to link and support children's learning and development in the different settings that they attend.
- Partnership between providers and other agencies in the local community enhance practice and create consistency and quality in the care and education of all children.
- Effective communication with families, practitioners in other settings and with other professionals is central to ensuring continuity and progression in learning.

What The Wider Context means

The Wider Context highlights the importance of practitioners working with others beyond the setting, to link and support children's learning and development in all the settings that they attend and through all the agencies that work with them and their families.

The diverse system of childcare in England enables families to pick and mix to meet their needs. This can mean that a child moves from one setting to another in the course of a day, a week, a month or a year. For example, the pattern of a baby's week could involve two days with grandparents and three days with a childminder who may also take the baby for a session at a toddler group. Over a year, a child might move from a playgroup to a nursery class or from a children's centre to primary school. The experiences of babies and young children must be coherent and joined up if they are to feel secure and learn well. This means that planning and delivery must provide continuity for children who attend more than one setting.

Here, the term 'context' includes much more than the physical environment. It encompasses the ethos, standards and quality in children's experience within a group as well as a setting's place within the wider community that it serves.

Why The Wider Context is important

Transitions and continuity

While there are benefits in a diverse system of childcare, there is a danger that differences between one situation and another can be so great as to be daunting. This can unsettle children and affect their ability to thrive and learn. Young children's understanding is related to what they have experienced and know. If things are presented in an unfamiliar way or by using terms other than those a child knows they will be confused. It is clear that where experiences are different but complementary they contribute positively to children's development and learning.

Babies and young children are stimulated and excited by novelty. If they experience new things within a context where they feel secure there are optimum opportunities for learning and they will try to make sense of things. Such a sense of security is dependent on good relationships with one or a small number of carers and is most threatened at times of transition when people, as well as places, change. Children and their families may be stressed and get upset at these times. They are reassured where they find that each setting incorporates the same values and that learning continues within a familiar context. Good links between the known setting, the family and the new setting also provide a connecting framework that supports a child's acceptance and joy in moving on to new things.

Capitalising on the expertise and resources within the community also helps children to feel that they belong. For example, a setting might take small groups of children to the local library for story sessions, for a walk to nearby shops, take part in local events or invite visitors into the setting to tell stories or demonstrate skills.

Multi-agency working

It is vital to ensure that everyone is working together to meet the emotional, health and educational needs of children in all the settings that they attend and across all the services that are provided for them, if they are to respond well to differing challenges and opportunities. It will be particularly difficult to achieve stability in situations where there are problems or changes in a family, such as the breakdown of parents' relationship or the death of a grandparent.

Experiencing too much change at once can affect a child's sense of belonging and security and can cause stress. Similarly, when a child has a disability, numerous professionals may be involved and the child is likely to experience differences in personnel and routines. This fragments care, affects the development of attachments and sense of belonging and can lead to difficulties in relating to others. When a child's and family's needs and strengths are known, understood and worked through by settings and the network of local agencies, difference and change can be managed sensitively. This should be approached positively and productively to build on strengths and ensure that the needs of the child and their family are central to the process.

The community

Partnership between childcare providers, other agencies and community groups enhances practice and creates at least a local consensus on qualitative practice for all children. For example, a setting's links with health, social care and ethnic minority achievement service professionals, librarians or artists contribute to realisation of the five outcomes for children identified in *Every Child Matters*. Consistent provision can be particularly challenging to achieve for children with special needs where several agencies may be involved in meeting those child's needs. Integrated working between one setting and another and between settings and local agencies provide the web of connections that ensure continuity and opportunity for all children with special needs.

Effective practice in relation to The Wider Context

Transitions and continuity

- Children will respond in different ways to changes in their experience; some will adjust easily while others may find adjustments difficult and need extra support. The child's needs must come first and you should identify and tune in to the differing needs of individuals and groups.
- Where a child attends more than one setting or is moving from one setting to another, promote cooperation between the child's key workers in each setting. Together they can meet the child's needs by sharing information about the child's learning and development by planning together. You can also make sure that a child who attends two settings on the same day has appropriate learning

and development opportunities in line with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) requirements between the settings, does not repeat experiences and that there is balance across the day as a whole. For example, avoiding two similar outings on the same day, ensuring that there is time to rest as well as to be busy, and building on interests that have been stimulated in one setting, in the other.

- Transitions are eased when settings share and use information about children's learning, achievements and needs to ensure that the learning programme joins up in meaningful ways.
- Foster good relationships and a valuing of difference between children so that new children are welcomed by children who are settled, as well as by practitioners, and are fully included in all aspects of the life of a setting.
- Get to know children before admission to a new setting, by visiting them at home and by arranging pre-admission visits to the setting.
- Involve parents in planning for and helping with transitions. Inform them in advance about what will be happening, consult them about their own and their child's views, value what they say and encourage them to stay while their child settles in to a new setting.
- Find out about any curriculum guidance that applies to children's experience before and after transition such as the literacy and mathematics frameworks. Year 1 teachers and assistants should in turn make sure that they are familiar with the Principles and content of the EYFS.
- At the time of transition to a primary school, ensure that parents know how to select a school and how the transfer will work.
- Extend the principles and practices of the EYFS into Year 1 and beyond.
- Schools should analyse assessment data, gathered on transition from Reception to Year 1, to identify strengths and points for development in provision for the EYFS. Such analyses should provide comparisons of achievement for different groups, for example, by gender, ethnicity or where English is an additional language.
- When children move to Key Stage 1, schools should ensure that age phase and subject coordinators support their colleagues in the EYFS through curriculum guidance that incorporates and builds upon the EYFS and makes effective use of staff and resources.

Multi-agency working

- Effective communication is essential in ensuring that children's needs are met and that there is continuity and progression in their learning. This involves listening to the child, family and other professionals, and being receptive to differences in approach and terminology. This is particularly important where children have special needs, when shared understanding of the requirements and strengths of both the child and their family are especially crucial to the child's well-being and learning.
- Find out what is already provided for babies, children and their families in the locality and tap into this expertise. For example, where several parents have expressed worries about their children's dependence on dummies, invite a health visitor to come to the setting to talk to parents about how to wean children off them.
- Develop a policy for transition, continuity and interagency working. Share the policy with other settings, agencies and community groups so that you can put it into practice most effectively.

The community

- Valuing the local community can be pivotal in encouraging different community groups to work together for the benefit of all. The local community may comprise different racial, cultural or religious groups, all of which can learn and gain from each other. For example, invite members of the community to share in the life of the group, for instance by helping to develop a garden or by talking about their childhood.
- Make sure that all staff get to know the local area and pay attention to equal opportunities best practice in staff recruitment, to encourage applications from a range of candidates who reflect social diversity. Use their particular knowledge in planning for children's learning.

References

Every Child Matters (2003) The Stationery Office, Norwich; available online from: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/publications/

Further resources

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