

Transitions: Case studies

Understanding and managing separation anxiety

1. The comfort of a transitional object

- a) Louis is seven months old and he and his mum Bryony have formed strongly dependent attachments as there are no other family members living nearby. Knowing that she has to return to work, Bryony has been coming to the setting once a week for the 'stay and play' afternoon since Louis was four months old. Kath (who will be Louis' key person) has built a warm friendship with Louis and with Mum and they have successfully collaborated over bottle feeding (moving from breast to bottle during the day and using the same type of teat at home and setting), and sharing songs together that make Louis laugh. Bryony still feels upset, however, at the thought of leaving Louis especially at nap time. Kath suggests that Bryony wears her fleece neck warmer each morning and leaves it in the setting as it will smell of his Mum and can be his 'cuddly' whenever he needs it. This helped Bryony to say goodbye feeling more confident that that Louis would be safe and loved while in Kath's care.
- b) Cathy age two was adjusting to having a baby brother and recently showed some pleasure and pride in him. But she was also in need of more attention and cuddles herself. After a small altercation in the home corner, she was observed for the first time deliberately seeking to self-comfort. She searched through the dressing up clothes until she found her own mum's head scarf, put it over her head, and went to curl up in the sofa for approximately ten minutes, before returning to play in the home corner.

2. Sensitively helping parents to understand how their anxiety may affect their child

Leah's mum was due to return to work at short notice after taking nine months parental leave. Settling in sessions had been arranged by the nursery and mum was staying and playing during this period. When arriving at the setting Leah began to cry uncharacteristically and mum struggled to settle her as they entered the baby unit. Mum was on the phone to grandma and verbalising how worried she was about the process.

The staff were welcoming and led Leah and mum to a quiet space with lots to look at. After a short period in mum's arms Leah calmed and was alert as ever to her new surroundings, and listened intently to mum and the key person's conversation. As the sessions continued Leah explored and was inquisitive around the other children. Mum had been very worried about Leah starting nursery as she had been very reluctant to have her out of her sight, but felt comfortable as the setting had been recommended to her. Mum had open-ended opportunities to talk with the team during the weeks of settling in sessions and Leah had done really well. She had been engrossed in the activities on offer when mum went for a coffee with the manager for an hour on the final session, although she kept checking in with key person for a cuddle during that time.

On the morning of Leah's first full session without mum she became very emotional during the handover time and understandably mum did too. The staff member took Leah and mum left the baby unit with a senior member of staff who offered mum words of compassion. Mum explained that she had been in tears in the car on the phone to grandma on the way to the setting. The senior explained that mum's feelings were completely normal and that Leah was so well attuned to her mum that seeing her mum upset probably led to her mimicking her behaviour and crying and being anxious. Mum explained that she hadn't thought of that and would really think about what Leah would pick up on.

From then on, Leah's mum kept the journeys to nursery full of singing and fun, and Leah entered the setting each day full of joy and smiles. Mum commented via the communication log how thankful she was for the advice and how positive the experience had been when both herself and Leah had been made to feel comfortable.

Transition from home to childminder

Taniyah is ten months old and today she is staying at her childminders alone. She isn't really 'alone' because her childminder and two other children are there. But for Taniyah, being without her parent -- the person she depends on for feeling safe, secure and nurtured -- makes her feel abandoned and under threat. Until now, Taniyah has learned that if she needs feeding, changing or holding, the familiar sound, smell, sight and touch of her parent means that her needs will soon be met. But in this strange situation with an unknown person, she cannot be sure that this will happen. Also, she has no way of understanding why this is happening or any control over the situation. This prompts the stress response of fight or flight and Taniyah uses the only tools she has in her power -- she cries loudly to try and make her parent return and she struggles to try and get back to them.

Fortunately for Taniyah, her childminder has spent time with her parent over the previous two weeks so knows that she likes to hold her 'blankie' and listen to soothing music when she's upset. Mum made a playlist of the tunes they often play at home and had given the childminder photos of the family and their cat, which she made into a book. Most importantly, the childminder had learned how Taniyah likes to be held and so was able to gently rock her when mum left, talking softly to her and reassuring her that mum is coming back and she would see the cat when she goes home. This gradual settling-in process meant that there were aspects of this new situation and person that Taniyah came to recognise. She was fascinated by the other children and had previously enjoyed crawling on the grass in the garden. Knowing this meant that as Taniyah gradually grew calmer, her childminder could sit with her on her lap on the grass while she watched the other children play, while clinging tightly to 'blankie'.

When mum returned a few hours later, she too had clearly been upset at the separation. The childminder immediately put Taniyah in mum's arms and told her honestly but kindly how she had missed her, been upset at first but had been able to gradually relax a little and had even accepted a drink and piece of banana when she saw the other children having their snack. Before they left for home, the childminder thanked mum for all the advice she had given her as this had helped her to support Taniyah when she wasn't there. Over the next month, Taniyah and her childminder gradually got to know each other well and Taniyah became more confident as she explored the environment and played with the other children. Childminder and mum continued to share information every day to create as much continuity as possible between their homes.

Transition from home to pre-school – the role of the key person

Kendis began pre-school at 38 months. He had been cared for primarily in his home by his dad and sometimes his maternal grandma when dad was required at work for a shift during the day. Kendis' mum returned to work full time when he was four months old and his dad, who is a firefighter, was able to care for him during the day.

Once the application had been made to pre-school, Kendis' family were sent a booklet with some photos of the setting including the whole pre-school team with their names and some fun facts about them. The pre-school encouraged the family to use the booklet to talk about the setting prior to Kendis' first visit. He was able to see a photo of Kaye, who was to be his Key Person before he actually met her, so he knew she had orange hair and liked football (just like his dad).

Kaye was talked about at home like a family friend and dad was pleased to meet her on his first visit to the setting. At home time Kendis was able to talk all about what he had done at pre-school and how Kaye had helped him at the snack bar and with a model he had made out of a cereal box.

Transition between settings – the role of the key person

Talisha and her Key Person Tammy were invited to visit Talisha's new pre-school together. Her new Pre-School worker Sue had visited her at her current setting and even been to visit her at home. Talisha and Tammy had been sent information from the new setting and had enjoyed looking at the pictures. They were both excited to visit together.

Sue spent time talking to Talisha during her initial visits and had learned from Tammy that her favourite thing to do at nursery was to role play -- especially as a vet. The new pre-school offered a staggered start and only had three or four newcomers at the same time. This ensured that the setting could use the valuable information they had already gained to make these initial sessions so positive. Talisha was delighted to arrive at pre-school and see a vet role-play area. She went straight over to it, leading both Tammy and Sue with her and engaged straight away in role play with them a small group of other pre-school children.

Transition to school - the importance of understanding and supporting individual children's needs – not expecting conformity

1. Allowing time and space

Sam, aged three, was due to start at the early years unit of his local primary school, where nursery and reception age children were totally integrated. At the home visit mum expressed concern that Sam was still not toilet trained and had been referred to a specialist for health issues. He was also extremely shy and very distressed when apart from mum. She had concerns about his development and was worried he wasn't ready for nursery yet. Staff suggested mum and Sam come for a few visits and each time he played happily outside as long as mum was close by. He refused to go inside but mum was happy to stay with him in the garden and it was agreed she would bring him a few mornings a week and staff would monitor the situation.

A referral was begun with regular monitoring of development and ASD was being considered. Regular visits continued throughout his nursery year with mum increasing the amount of time they stayed in the garden. Staff reviewed and monitored progress daily with mum, who became a relaxed and willing volunteer, playing with other children in the garden, while Sam gradually grew in confidence. Slowly he began to engage with staff and sometimes venture indoors. There was also gradual improvement in his health and he became more confident using the toilet. As there was no change to staff or environment when the time came to enter reception class, Sam arrived on the first morning back, waved good bye to his mum, and happily settled in, a confident happy little boy.

A year later Sam transferred to Y1 confidently, making good academic progress and with no further sign of the behavioural or emotional issues present at age three³. His mother attributed his wellbeing to the flexibility of the school's settling policy that allowed him the time and space for his health issues to be resolved with no pressure to 'fit into' a procedural routine that would have caused them both unnecessary stress and probably long-term emotional issues.

2. Valuing children's and families' cultures and languages

Jakub, aged three and a half, moved to the UK from Poland with his dad and mum when his dad's company relocated to the UK. They left their wider family behind in Poland. Jakub had previously been cared for by his mum when she wasn't at work and by his grandma and grandad who lived with them. When she arrived in the UK, Jakub's mum started a university course. The university gave her details of the nursery as Jakub would need some care during the day.

The Nursery application forms were very comprehensive and the staff quickly understood that Jakub and the family had only recently moved from Poland. So they contacted mum and dad first via email in both English and Polish to ask for some more information around Jakub's understanding and use

of English. They also asked for some information about their lives in Poland and now the UK that they could draw on.

Mum and dad were both thrilled by this contact, and shared so much information including common vocabulary that Jakub might use while he was acquiring more English vocabulary. The staff used this to help Jakub navigate his way around nursery during his early weeks in the setting.

When Jakub began his settling-in sessions, the nursery had already placed his photo next to the Polish flag. He recognised himself alongside others at the setting who were also of Polish heritage. At nursery there were children from ten different countries. Their family histories were respected and their cultural heritages valued as a valuable resource. For lunch on his first day Jakub and the rest of his cohort enjoyed Sernik (Polish Cheesecake) for dessert. Jakub couldn't wait to tell his dad about it at home time.

3. Being willing to change a school routine to support an individual's transition process

Latoya was excited about her move to "Big School". She had really enjoyed her visits to meet her teacher with her mum and Auntie Dee the childminder.

Latoya had always been a fussy eater and mealtimes at the childminder could be tricky and emotional, especially if Latoya was encouraged to try new things in front of her friends the other children the childminder cared for.

This information was shared with the school and they decided to hold some additional mealtime sessions in small friendship groups in the school lunch hall with just the new children present to ensure a calm and welcoming atmosphere for introducing them to school mealtimes.

Latoya struggled at the first lunch session but with some encouragement tried and did enjoy the food served to her by the school cook. The school offered several of these sessions over a period of three weeks, gradually increasing the occupancy of the lunch hall until in the final session most of the new reception cohort was together with the rest of the infant block of the school. Latoya and her friends really enjoyed this experience and with mealtime apprehension gone, September's new school year went from strength to strength.

4. Understanding that children's behaviour on transition communicates their feelings

John started nursery when he was six months and settled well. He attended for 50 hours per week until he was nearly five. He was a confident, outgoing child with good development in all areas of learning and was excited about the challenge of 'big school'. He attended taster sessions with mum, dad, and his key person from the setting. And he enjoyed the time his new teacher spent in his nursery.

John finished nursery the week before he started school. During the first week of school, John's parents called nursery in distress as the John they knew had disappeared and been replaced by an angry, upset, disruptive young boy. After the school's and parents' best efforts to settle John, and even with his nursery key person attending school twice weekly (when he did appear more settled)

John's parents sought advice from their GP. The local support team and LA SEND became involved and John had some play therapy with a trained professional. He was found to be showing symptoms associated with grief, attributed to his loss of nursery. He had spent so much time in the four years of his life at the setting, with people he cared for and who cared for him, safe in the knowledge that his every need would be met Suddenly he was in an environment of unknowns. He couldn't process this change and even though he knew how to ask for support, he became overwhelmed before being able to call on skills he had previously used when needed.

Transition from Reception to Year 1

1. Supporting potentially vulnerable children

In one school, teachers had identified three Reception children as potentially vulnerable during the transition to Year 1. They felt that these children would benefit from more opportunities than the rest of their peers to become familiar with their new classroom and new teacher. After the Y1 teacher had visited them in Reception a few times, she took them along to the Year 1 class and asked them to do a 'special job' for her, helping all the other Reception children get ready for their move into her class. She gave them each a camera and said they could take photos of what they thought would be interesting for the other Reception children. The three children then went back to their Reception class and showed their photos and told their peers all about the Year 1 class and what they had seen. This special job gave these children a reason to go back and forward to the Year 1 class whenever they wanted to 'investigate' more. It increased their confidence and they were seen as the children to go to 'whenever we want to know more about year 1'.

2. Providing continuity of experience

a) **Between Reception and Year 1** In this two-form primary school the two Year 1 teachers wanted to adapt their learning environment to reflect the environments in the EYFS. To begin with, they sought to move their classrooms – currently separated by the two Year 2 classrooms – so they were alongside each other and both had access to the outdoors. Their headteacher agreed to make these changes for the start of the September term. The Year 1 teachers then observed in the Reception classes to see how they set up their continuous provision and how the children accessed it. This gave them ideas about how to arrange furniture and the core resources they wanted to order for the start of the new school year. In the summer holiday they took all of their tables and chairs outside into the corridor. They looked at the plan they had drawn up, showing the areas they wanted to include in the new layout. They created the areas using open-shelf cupboards and made sure there was an easy route through to the outdoor area. They wanted two carpet areas – one for story, singing, and whole class activity, the other for construction and model building which wouldn't need to be put away. Having arranged the indoors they thought about how to organise the outdoor equipment and realised they should have asked for a covered area -- so went straight back to the headteacher. The Year 1 teachers knew that once the children arrived things would get moved around and improved, but they were confident that initially children would recognise the environments as places where they would play and learn and have fun.

b) For a vulnerable child

Caroline had been adopted for two months, after having been in foster care for a year and a half. She arrived in her new Year 1 class towards the end of the spring term and took a long while to readjust and not feel anxious with either the new teacher or her new peers. Gradually she made friends with a couple of the children on 'her' table and talked about them at home. She returned to school after the Easter holidays more readily but on arrival in the classroom found it was 'school policy' to move all the children round every term so they were sitting with someone new ("In order to learn to socialise" the teacher said). She was so distraught that mum had to come and take her home and the school had to reassure both Caroline and mum that she would be with the friends she had made again the next day.

3. Child-centred pedagogy in a mixed Reception/Year 1 class

In this small village school children were in a mixed Reception/Year 1 class. The teacher was determined to have a pedagogy that was similar for both year groups, with play as a core element of the children's learning day. She was an experienced Reception teacher so set up her environments both indoors and out as she had in her previous school. There was continuous provision both indoors and outdoors and areas for both adult-led learning and child-initiated learning to take place. It was important to the teacher that the children could mix for different activities, whatever their age, as she was confident that all the children benefitted from learning alongside others with different ability.

She planned a learning day that had as few interruptions in the timetable as possible. Although the school required her to teach a daily phonics lesson, this took place just before lunch so children's free-flow play and independent learning wasn't interrupted by whole class time,

playtime or assemblies. Her timetable detailed planning for herself and her TA. The children knew what adult-initiated activities they had to do and that as long as these were done, they could initiate their own learning. Each day they could see if they were involved in an adult-led activity from a chart on the wall. The children moved freely and independently between their activities without needing to ask the teacher 'what next?' and the teacher and TA moved freely from teaching an adult-led session, to observing and supporting the children's independent activity.

The Importance of Ensuring Head Teacher Support for Appropriate Play-Based Pedagogy in the EYFS and Year 1

In this large three-form entry primary school, the EY/KS1 coordinator wanted to persuade the newly appointed headteacher about the value of play – especially in KS1. The coordinator suggested the headteacher visit a local nursery school to see how independent the children were in their learning and the different ways in which staff supported and enhanced their learning.

After this visit, the coordinator suggested the headteacher visit one of the Reception classes and observe play in the outdoor area. The headteacher had no experience in the early years and so the coordinator suggested he look especially for children's levels of independence and involvement, and the language they used. This gave the headteacher a focus for the observation rather than not being sure what to look at or look for. The coordinator and the headteacher then discussed what they had seen.

Following further joint observations in the Reception class, the coordinator took the headteacher into her Year 1 class where the same thing was planned. The Coordinator was able to show the headteacher self-initiated play both indoors and out. This time, she suggested he looked especially for the children's concentration and persistence, their creativity and use of imagination, and the consolidation of learning that must have been introduced by an adult. This visit helped the headteacher to see play as more than 'having fun' and also helped him be more focused when he undertook observations in the EYFS and KS1 classrooms. The headteacher's view of play was altered to such an extent that he insisted his senior leadership team underwent the same induction.