Children During Transitions:

A Guidance Handbook for Early Years Practitioners

(Source: Welsh Government, 2022)

Contents

Introduction To Transitions Pg 3

Transitions Through The Early Years Pg 4

The Needs of The Child Pg 6

The Role of The Adult Pg 12

Partnerships Pg 16

Interventions Pg 19

Proposed Outcomes Pg 25

References Pg 27

Introduction

This handbook is designed to help us as early years practitioners understand transitional periods in a child's life. We will deep dive into how we can best support and communicate with the children and families, why it is important for children to make these transitions successfully, and how to implement interventions appropriately into our practice.

It is important that we are informed on this particular topic as these experiences lay the foundations of a young child's life. As practitioners, it is essential that we are able to respond to and support children and families to the best of our abilities ensuring that this process is completed smoothly.

Transitions Through The Early Years

Transitions are key processes for young children. They are undeniably crucial in a child's development. While to some children transitioning into an early years setting may be exciting, to others it's often intimidating, confusing, and difficult. Nevertheless, transitions do not just play a role in children's lives, we, as adults are more often than not, transitioning to something new or different **(Dowling, 2010).**

The 3 Types of Transitional Stages

- Horizontal Transitions
- Vertical Transitions
- Education-associated Transitions

Horizontal transitions are when something is happening on a daily/regular basis. This can usually mean a literal movement or change in routine.

Conversely, a **vertical transition** is where a change is more significant, specific, and does not happen regularly. For example, starting in nursery school is a vertical

transition for young children and can often be distressing. These are often viewed as more traditional milestones, throughout the child's life.

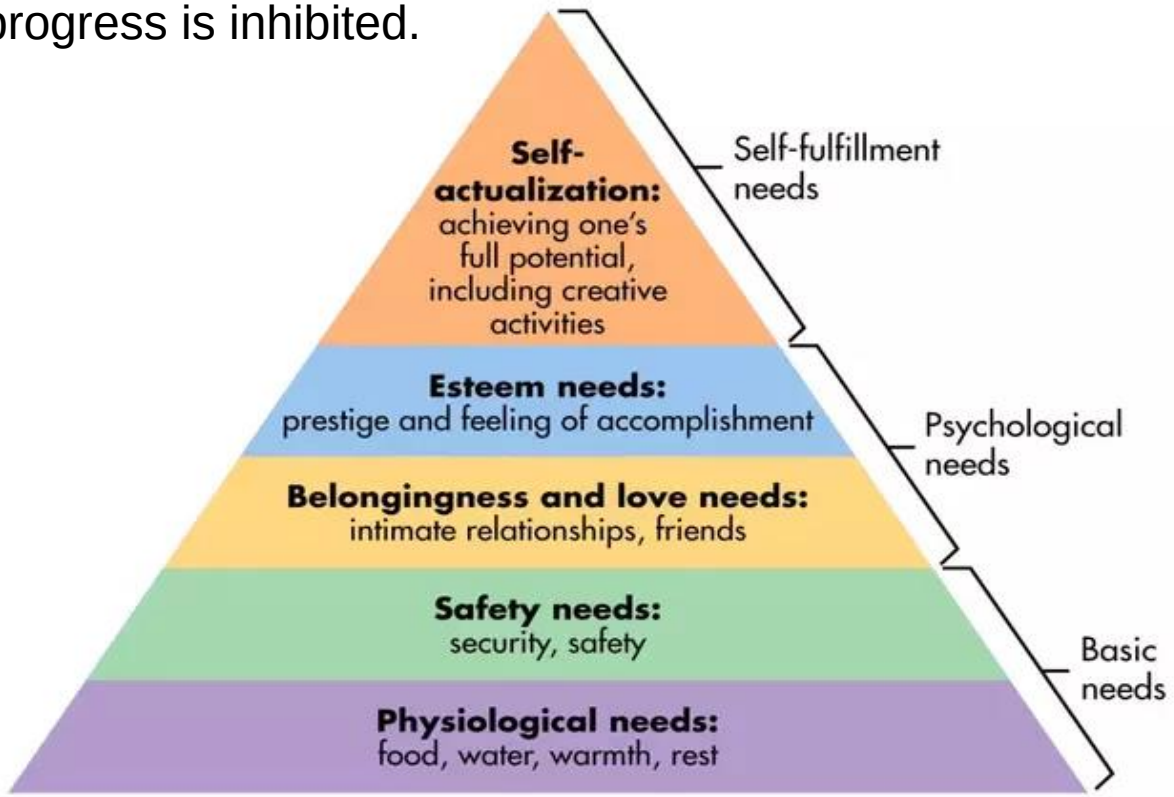
Educational-associated transitions are more significant social changes, rather than formal ones. For example, moving homes, losing a family member, or parental divorce. This type of transitional period can shape children's pathways and experiences. These are often more personal, as not everyone experiences the same educational-associated transitions.

Smoothly navigating transitions is essential to a child's healthy development and overall welfare.

As supported by Woodhead *et al.* (2008), early years transitions research is particularly important in discovering and understanding the rights of young children, as this period of their lives usually includes numerous social, developmental, and educational transitions, each of which have their own impacts on the children's present welfare and long-term consequences.

The Needs of The Child

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) is a theory showing us the needs we must meet during development to successfully grow into the best version of ourselves. In order to do so, children must have their basic needs met. For example, food, water, and a secure and safe setting. Regarding transitions, this theory is of great importance. If these basic needs are not met, the child will not feel safe within any environment, struggle with bond building, battle with self-image and esteem, and will never be able to reach their full potential. Therefore, transitional progress is inhibited.



(Source: McLeod, 2007)

Brain Development

Although our brains are continuously developing throughout our lives, there are scientific studies that show the period between birth to the age of 5 years old is when we are able to accumulate more information than at any other stage in life. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that each child's brain develops at different speeds.

Brain development can be affected by sight, sound, smell, touch, and thoughts - (sensory development). However, the extent of optimal brain development varies on several other attributes (as well as genetics), for example:

- If the mother and child receive the appropriate nutrition requirements throughout pregnancy
- Exposure to others (or lack thereof)
- The environment surrounding the child
- If the mother or child is exposed to harmful chemicals or infections/diseases during pregnancy
- Long-lasting stress on the mother during pregnancy

Over a period of time, we see that studies on children show that if the child is exposed to negligence or

deprivation, there can be a severe impact on brain development. These impacts often hinder how children are able to process information and furthermore, could cause an increased risk for physical and cognitive disorders **(Harvard University, 2022).**

Environmental Impact

Here in Wales, we have a curriculum set in place for all non-maintained settings to encourage play-based, inclusive learning. It tells us that every child is unique and that regardless of ethnicity, religion, disability, or language, it is important that inclusivity is practiced and taught **(Welsh Gov, 2020).**

Tailoring our practice to a child's specific needs can only lead to a positive outcome!

Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development theory (1953), suggests that children best learn through environmental activities and natural instances. It shows us the importance of the environment surrounding the child and how it can impact their overall development. As

well as this, he also emphasizes the significance of peer interaction. This exposes the child to cognitive conflict and enables them to consider another person's point of view. Piaget states that children's thinking is most challenged when in the company of peers. This is because they see other children as on par with themselves allowing them to feel more confident in finding solutions to problematic situations **(Meggitt, 2006)**.

Jean Piaget theorized that there are 4 cognitive developmental stages.

Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development

Stage	Age range	What happens at this stage?
Sensorimotor	0-2 years old	Coordination of senses with motor responses, sensory curiosity about the world. Language used for demands and cataloguing. Object permanence is developed.
Preoperational	2-7 years old	Symbolic thinking, use of proper syntax and grammar to express concepts. Imagination and intuition are strong, but complex abstract thoughts are still difficult. Conservation is developed.
Concrete Operational	7-11 years old	Concepts attached to concrete situations. Time, space, and quantity are understood and can be applied, but not as independent concepts.
Formal Operational	11 years old and older	Theoretical, hypothetical, and counterfactual thinking. Abstract logic and reasoning. Strategy and planning become possible. Concepts learned in one context can be applied to another.

The Psychology Notes Headquarters - https://www.PsychologyNotesHQ.com

(Source: PsychologynotesHQ, 2021)

In this handbook, we are looking at 3 – 4-year-olds (the Preoperational stage based on 2 – 7-year-olds). This stage of cognitive development is where the child is most

inquisitive. Environmental play is encouraged throughout all stages of early years practice as it allows the child to investigate the complexities of their surroundings, enabling them to feel a sense of accomplishment for their discoveries. As suggested by **Wilson (2007)**, free play allows children to test what they are physically capable of, for example:

- How high they can jump
- How fast they can run
- How high they can climb
- Are they able to pick certain items up
- How much weight can they lift
- How far can they throw something

It also provides children the opportunity to build on their self-confidence by testing their bravery. This type of play shapes a child into the person they will eventually become.

Children are born to explore and play, it is only as we get older we start to lose our sense of wonder.

Additional Learning Needs and Disabilities

Just like every other child, children with additional learning needs or disabilities are unique in their own right. Although, these children may need supplementary requirements/preferences to be met, in order for us to provide the highest level of care. It is important as practitioners when planning for our day ahead that we take these requirements into consideration so that we can ensure the inclusion of all class members. Children struggling with verbal communication can often feel more unsettled and anxious when transitioning, it is important that we offer different ways for them to express themselves to us, for instance, emotion or picture cards. It is essential as a setting that you have the appropriate resources for those who suffer from physical impairments, this can include, adapted toilet facilities, hoists, lifts, ramps, and standing frames. It should be a high priority to provide space within your setting to facilitate wheelchair or walker access as if not, there is a greater risk of injury **(Harrow Council, No date)**.

The Role of The adult

Throughout our journey as caregivers, personal involvement is inevitable. As suggested by **Robinson (2008)**, this means that at some point there will be a connection between our professional and personal beliefs. This is why we must encourage positive interactions between children and practitioners as it is critical to a child's overall well-being and learning.

Children flourish when surrounded by positive relationships; it is our responsibility as adults to ensure that we provide them with such.

The Importance of Attachment Theory Throughout The Early Years

Bowlby's Maternal deprivation theory (1951), suggests that children are born pre-programmed with the urge to bond with those who surround them, as this will help them to survive. This attachment is usually indicated towards one main caregiver, for example, the mother or

father, this is called monotopic attachment. This stage usually takes place between 6 months and 3 years of the child's life. If it doesn't happen by the age of 5, it is likely that it never will. If an attachment is not developed or if it is continuously disrupted, it is probable that the child would develop long-term social, cognitive, and emotional difficulties throughout their infancy. This plays a big part in how we assist children during transitions as it is important for us to recognize the children who are struggling to leave their main caregivers for the first time and to respond sensitively to their needs. Furthermore, a healthy, positive relationship between a practitioner and a child can have a substantial impact on their social and emotional well-being, enabling them to feel more secure and confident in their surroundings.

Communication

Communication with both the children and families is key to developing an understanding of the children within our care. Parents and caregivers are children's first examples of how we should communicate, shaping their own communication skills throughout their development. This is only achieved when both home and education are

linked with positive consistent relationships. As practitioners, we are responsible for ensuring a consistent form of communication with families. This could mean, sending out newsletters, parents' evenings, and handovers at the end of the day. Although this may be difficult if there is a large number of children within your care, it is important that every family has a feeling of security in their child's education and well-being. If the parent doesn't feel secure then neither will the child. Additionally, as stated by **The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child article 12 (2019)**, children have the right to express their opinion in situations concerning themselves and must be taken into account by the chief decision-makers. As well as communicating verbally, we must be aware of our body gestures and facial expressions when addressing children, parents, or co-workers. Some people may feel uneasy if you are standing too close, however standing too far away from them may give them the feeling that you are not paying attention to them **(Health and Care Learning Wales, 2019).**

Where there is communication, there is trust and security.

(Source: Clipart Library, No Date)

Leadership

In order for your setting to support children through transitions there must be committed leaders and managers who are knowledgeable about the impacts that positive transitions make in the early years. Being a practitioner can be strenuous, therefore it is vital that all staff feel appreciated. Clear communication between colleges is the key to running a successful setting as it prevents misunderstands and leaves little room for confusion **(Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).**

Partnerships

Local Community

Working within our local communities builds sources of support for our settings, along with a sense of contributing to community life, for example, by educating adults, and evolving community harmony. They can bring specific expertise that can help us overcome difficult barriers when dealing with families in tough situations and by contributing resources, they provide opportunities to enhance our curriculum overall **(Department of Education and Skills, 2015)**.

Multi-Agency

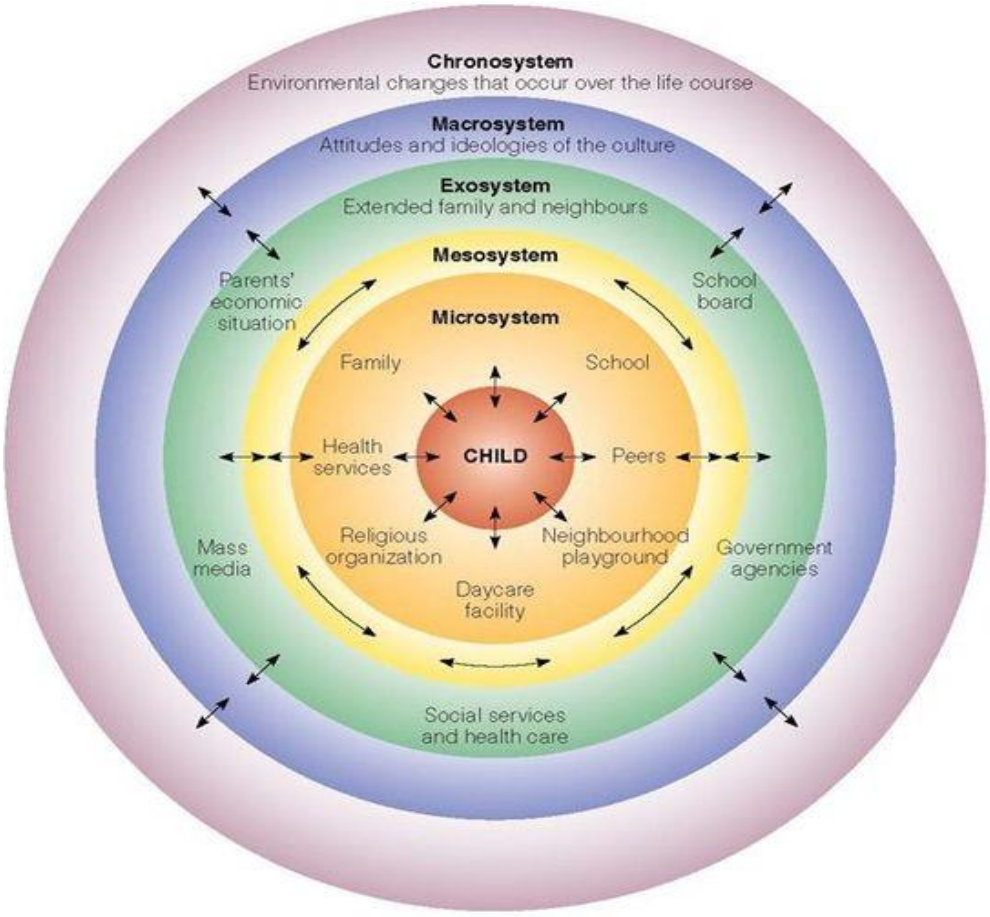
Multi-agency working enables us to provide the best support for those families who are in difficult situations**.** For example, the Neath Port Talbot Early Years Support Team provides a high-quality service that offers support, advice, and strategies to not only early years settings but also to parents/guardians and any other agencies working with children who have or are showing symptoms of additional learning needs **(NPT Council, No Date)**. These examples show just how critical partnerships and

communication is amongst agencies, allowing professionals to be able to understand and detect any dangers that a child may be subjected to, furthermore, ensuring that we take the most efficient action to prevent unsafe situations from occurring. Better access to trained staff, volunteers, and funding leads to better management of resources, and therefore, quality of care. **(Atkinson et al. 2002).**

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) is a type of relationship interconnectivity web, broken up into five different systems, all of which are contained within each other. He named each section, calling them:

- Microsystem (Child, their parents, and friends, etc.)
- Mesosystem (Wider extent of Microsystem)
- Exosystem (Extended family, school policy impact)
- Macrosystem (Society-wide culture, and practices)
- Chronosystem (Natural environmental changes)



(Source: Guy-Evans, 2020)

This model emphasizes the interconnectivity of each of the layers, in their relation to the child's outlook and quality of life. A drastic change to the structure of one layer will in turn impact the others, for example, if the government made a change to a school's curriculum that would then impact the way the school operates, this then leads to the potential disruption of learning for the child. This theory highlights how working with many different partners toward the child's best interests will ensure that we have the best possible foundations in place for a child to transition smoothly.

Interventions

During transitions, we are met with multiple barriers that we have to overcome. Interventions have been put in place in order to assist children through their transitional stages and to support caregivers in undertaking the best approach to those barriers.

Some interventions that we can implement in supporting children through their transition from home to nursery can include:

Home Visits

(Source: NYSUT Research and Educational Services, 2020)

Home visits usually take place a little while before the child starts in a setting, and gives practitioners a great opportunity to introduce themselves to the child and their

family in a more casual setting. It also gives them a chance to see the child interact in their own environment. This allows the practitioner to prepare for each child's personal needs/wants, before moving to a more social, educational setting.

Transitional Object

Transitional objects can be a source of comfort to children who are struggling to leave their main caregivers for the first time. These objects are repeatedly chosen belongings that provide comfort and security for the child. Often they are huggable, soft items such as; teddy bears, blankets, and other soft toys **(BabySparks, 2019).**

(Source: Learning Tree Academy, 2020)

Settling in Sessions

This is when we invite the parent and child to visit the setting for a couple of hours. This enables the practitioner, parent, and child to get to know each other better. It also aids the child to become familiarised with their surroundings before fully attending. Furthermore, potential barriers to a more social setting can also be identified ahead of time.

(Source: Jackson. G. 2022)

Inviting Setting

Having an inviting setting with interesting toys will encourage the child to explore and interact with their surroundings. We must be aware that too much going on, such as colour or messiness will only overwhelm the child.

(Source: Bright Horizons, 2022)

All About Me

All about me activities are designed for us to celebrate each and every child in our care, this includes their unique characteristics, ethnicity, culture, and language. It gives the children the opportunity to create positive relationships with each other **(Pocket of Pre-School, 2022)**.

These activities can include:

- **Painting self-portraits:**

  This activity takes place in your setting during the session. It is best done around a big table where all the children are able to see each other. It supports children to see the beauty in not just their own faces but their peers too. This is created to build self-awareness, confidence, and kindness amongst peers.

- **Me bags:**

  These are little paper bags that have a note attached to them, they are sent home with the children where they have to fill the bag with a few items that are important to them. During circle time the children are able to show what they have chosen to place in their bags. This activity is intended to build the children's confidence, socialisation, and knowledge of one another.

- **All about me letters:**

  These letters are sent home either with the child during the first week of starting at your setting or can be sent out to the family home a little while before the

child attends. They are designed for practitioners to get to know the children's likes, dislikes, favourite food, sport, or activity, as well as if the child suffers from any health issues or disabilities. Doing this facilitates us with the information we need to tailor our practice to every child's needs, supporting a comfortable transition.

Cultivating an inclusive environment promotes social connection, friendship-building, and expressiveness.

Proposed outcomes

As practitioners, we must strive for the best possible outcomes for the children in our care. In this instance, the desired conclusion is for the child to have a positive, smooth transition.

(Source: Bubsy, 2019)

Maria Montessori's theory was developed by observing children in their natural environment. She believed that if you follow and observe the child, they will show us what skills they need to develop **(Daily Montessori, 2021)**. Keeping a record or diary of your observations of the child throughout the process will help you stay informed on how they are progressing. Over time it will be evident if the child has transitioned successfully or

not. If successful, they will show signs of increased independence and will want to actively explore their environment or setting. You will also notice them socialising with other children without any adults in their immediate presence. Overall they will be visibly happier, more confident, and significantly more responsive.

Having poor experiences during the early years of life can have a knock-on long-term effect on whom we become as people. As suggested by **Brooker (2008)**, researchers have discovered that there are many attributes that not only support transitions but are also nurtured and strengthened by them. Unlike overall acquired knowledge these long-term attributes comprise more from experience and self-awareness-based knowledge.

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