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The Handbook for Early Years Practitioners:

A Guide for Transitions

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

~ William Butler Yeats

(Source: Medium, 2020)

Contents

Introduction to the Handbook pg. 2

What are Transitions? pg. 3

The Needs of the Child pg. 4

The Role of the Adult pg. 6

Partnerships pg. 9

Interventions pg. 11

Proposed Outcomes pg. 12

Reference List pg. 14

Introduction

As Early Years Practitioners play a fundamental part in supporting children through imperative transitions, it is crucial that practitioners are equipped with in-depth knowledge and understanding of child development, and adept with skills that enable childcare professionals to provide a smooth, and positive transition experience for children entering the education setting (The Welsh Government, 2018 and Ferguson, 2020). As emphasised by Alexander (2010) and Dewey (1933), the quality embedded into teaching and the environment of the setting is significant for the successful holistic development of the child. His Majesty's Government (2004) support the emphasis on quality education through the declaration of The Children Act 2004, whose purpose states that a child-centred approach is at the pinnacle of practice. It is therefore salient that there are correct and defining policies in place to ensure a positive transition experience for the child into the new environment.

How to use this handbook

This handbook has been produced for Early Years Practitioners to successfully support children from ages 3 through the transition from home life to starting full-time education, providing practitioners with fundamental knowledge of child development supported by key theorists, some of which underpin current curriculum and practice. Additionally, the approaches and interventions stated may be utilised in other stages of transitions. The golden thread emphasised throughout the handbook will focus on the imperativeness of consistent and effective communication between the parties encompassing the child during the transition period.

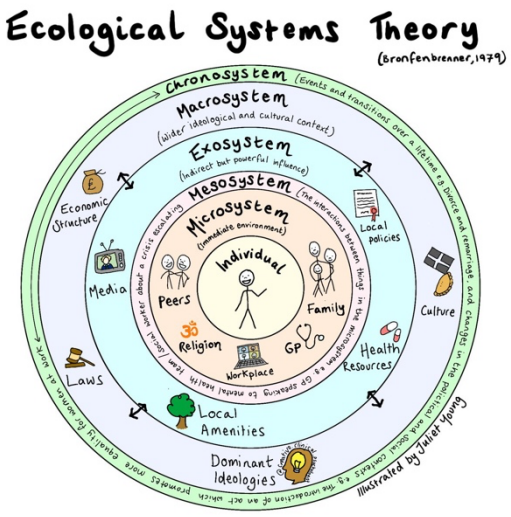
This handbook is comprised of 6 key components on aspects that will enable practitioners to successfully support children through the transition process:

- What is meant by the term **'transitions'**
- **The needs of the child** that are necessary to consider for a positive transition
- How **the role of the adult** can facilitate a smooth and comfortable transition
- The value of effective **partnerships**
- Practical **interventions** that practitioners can incorporate to encourage a positive transition
- **Proposed outcomes** of a successful transition

(Source: Coy, 2015)

What are transitions?

Birth to 5 Matters (2021) and the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) define transition as a period of change from one significant stage to another, and children will experience many transitions throughout their childhood which will continue into adulthood. Transitions from one setting to another must be seen as a journey involving not only the individual child, but also the parents, carers, and practitioners to ensure continuity throughout the transition (PACEY, 2016). According to Härkönen (2008) who interlinks Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory specifically to transition, it is vital that the microsystem of the individual (which includes parents, siblings, practitioners, and friends), communicate effectively and consistently ensuring a positive transition process for the child, as the microsystem has the most influence on the child by virtue of daily interaction.



(Source: Young, 2021)

Types of transitions

Children will experience a multitude of transitions as they develop. Not only will children be destined to sustain vertical transitions, which are key and significant changes from one stage to another, moreover, children will also encounter horizontal transitions which consist of less significant, routine transitions that occur on a daily basis (Vogler, *et al.* 2008).

- Horizontal transitions: (Johansson, 2007)

- Different parent dropping them off/ picking them up from school
- Going to after-school clubs, i.e. swimming, gymnastics
- Sleeping at a grandparents' house

- Vertical transitions: (PACEY, 2016)

- Arrival of a new sibling
- Separation of parents/ carers
- Moving to a different house/ school
- Loss/ bereavement

Consider the individual

Throughout the course of the transition, it is vital that the needs of the individual child and the family are appraised in a versatile manner (The Welsh Government, 2017).

The Welsh Government continue by maintaining that in order to facilitate a positive transition, practitioners must:

Be supportive and inclusive of circumstances – practitioners must understand that support and involvement will differ for every individual child and that families ought to be supported during every circumstance without judgement

Stage not age – practitioners must have detailed knowledge of child development and understand that every child adjusts in their own way

The Needs of the Child

"Play is indeed the child's work, and the means whereby he grows and develops"

~ Isaacs (1929, quoted in Murray, 2021, p.1235)

Isaacs maintains her theory that children must be central to every decision concerning their learning and development in order for the child to successfully develop holistically (Murray, 2021). The child's interests currently form the foundation of the curriculum and planning strategies for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales, the Welsh Government (2014), therefore highlights the importance of a child-centred education on children's cognitive and academic development. The Department of Education (2010) support this by stating that a child as either a…

- **'being'** humans in their own right, actively establishing their childhood)
- **'becoming'** budding adults, lacking skills and experiences)

… suggests that these attributes imbricate and that children should be considered as both **being** and **becoming** therefore further developing their agency.

What will the child need?

For children, change can be frightening especially when they must part from their primary carer in order to embark on a new environment. It is therefore of utmost importance that practitioners ensure that the child is comfortable, happy and that their specific needs are met in a sensitive manner during the process of transition. Practitioners must develop the environment that will build on **familiarity**, **consistency**, and **stimulation**.

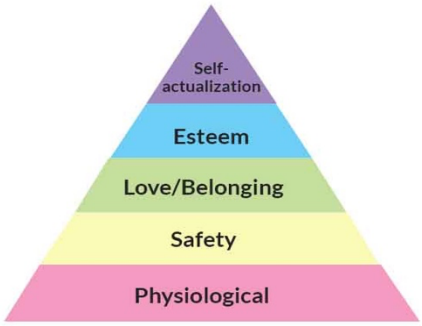
- **Transitional object** – i.e. a blanket or toy that would comfort the child during the transitional period, where, according to Winnicot, the child would obtain a sense of self and identity whilst being soothed by the concept of their home, a **familiar** environment (Litt, C. J., 1986).
- **Avoid fluctuation** – Not only is it crucial to provide an enriching environment, it is also salient that the environment is not continually modified. As a result of an ever-changing environment, the transition process would be detrimental as the children will be unable to settle and explore due to the consistent modification of the classroom and its commodities. Children require **consistency** in both environment and practitioner behaviour in order to thrive (Brock, Curby, and Cannel-Cordier, 2018).
- **Stimulating environment** – Brain development begins shortly after conception and progresses throughout life. Development is highly affected by the senses, i.e. sound,

(Source: Kub, no date)

touch, vision, smell, and thoughts, therefore it is essential that the practitioner creates an environment that will enhance the child's development through sensorial and **stimulating** experiences as brain growth and development depends on the degree of richness of the environment. On the contrary in the absence of new experiences, the child's brain may possibly begin to prune, which leads to pathways beginning to fade and cut off. (Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 2018). Froebel, who established the first preschool, suggests the importance of a natural environment to a child's natural development, with amassed access to nature advancing holistic development -a Froebelian holistic perspective- (Watts, 2021).

Why is play important?

Play is a fundamental right and an essential element of child development - Article 31 of the UNCRC (Children's Commissioner for Wales, no date and Murray, 2018). Smidt (2011) maintains that play is divergent for every child, regardless of whether playing is to meet a specific need, to solve a problem, or to convey an emotion. The Welsh Government (2015) and The Welsh Assembly Government (2002) agree that every aspect learnt from free play is beneficial to the child, as play has contributed significantly to the evolutionary survival of humans. Furthermore, providing a natural environment for children to interact with promotes knowledge of the world around them, as supported by theorists Montessori (Ozgen, 2023) and Piaget (Bormanaki and Khoshhal, 2017). Ozgen (2023) and Bormanaki and Khoshhal (2017) argue that practitioners must provide a significant amount of time for children to engage and play freely in order to appropriately and accurately observe to detect areas of weakness or areas of required support. Playing ensures that children develop appropriate and necessary skills, such as problem-solving through verbal and non-verbal communication, dexterity and muscle growth, and a myriad of social skills such as sharing, taking turns, and increasing feelings of empathy and compassion (Sutton-Smith, 1997). According to Kumar, *et al.* (2022), there are a multitude of emotional-behavioural benefits such as the reduction of fear and irritability, but moreover a significant increase in feelings of joy, self-esteem, and mastery that are not based on the loss of esteem of others. These experiences adhere to the criteria of the psychological needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see pyramid model below), and for children to therefore achieve self-actualisation, it is crucial that practitioners ensure that their basic and psychological needs are met (TES, 2019).



(Source: My Tutor Source, 2022)

The Role of the Adult

"No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship"

~ Dr. James P. Comer, 2021

(Source: VectorStock, no date)

In order for practitioners to successfully facilitate a smooth transition it is indispensable that…

- Practitioners form **relationships** built on compassion and respect
- Practitioners and carers **interact** responsibly and effectively to share necessary information about the child
- Practitioners create a nurturing and stimulating **environment** for the children

You may be a child's secure attachment…

Pioneer theorist in attachment theory, Bowlby argues that children can form secure attachments not only to their primary caregivers or parents but to you, their teacher, this is supported by MacKay, et al. (2010) who suggest the effects of the quality of practitioner interaction with children on children's academic progress.

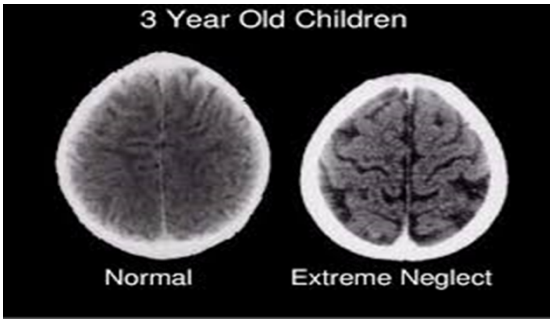
What is secure attachment?

- When the primary carer/ practitioner is…
  - Responsive to child's needs
  - Sensitive
  - Consistent (reaction and environment)
- Therefore the child is…
  - Happy and secure
  - Exploring new experiences
  - Communicating (verbal and non-verbal)

(Source: Learning Theories, 2023)

Potential behaviours of securely attached children include an increase in confidence whilst socialising, interacting, forming relationships built on inclusion, and exploring new opportunities. Therefore, not only is a secure attachment crucial in terms of academic development, in addition it is vital for children's holistic development (Schore, 2003 and Bruce, 2001).

Forming a secure attachment to a practitioner can be monumental for children who have built long-term insecure attachments to their primary caregiver. A study by the National Centre for Biotechnology Information that was published in 2013 maintains that fortunately, a secure attachment with a secondary caregiver can indeed reverse the neglectful effects on the child's brain as a result of a prior insecure attachment (Stronach, Toth, Rogosch and Cicchetti, 2013).
~ See the scan below that indicates the effect of insecure attachment on a child's brain ~



(Source: Perry and Pollard, 1997)

How can I put this into practice?

Practitioners can facilitate a smooth transition by…

- Successfully forming a **secure attachment** bond with the child by spending time getting to know the child and discovering their likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses that may need possible early intervention.
- Being **consistent** with responses and approaches
    - crucial as it may be detrimental to forming a secure bond with the child, as they may become additionally unsettled and withdrawn from others, as suggested by Bowlby (Van Rosmalen, Van der Horst, and Van der Veer, 2016).
- Providing a stable and consistent **environment** when forming secure attachments, as the environment must cater to the child's needs whilst also ensuring new opportunities and experiences to explore.
    - An ever-changing environment may be unsettling to a child who is encountering a transition (Bornstein, Putnick and Esposito, 2017).
- **Communicating** effectively with the child's parents in order to become aware of the child's background, ability, any health conditions or concerns, and the specific circumstances of the child's family.
    - As maintained by Bronfenbrenner, effective communication between the microsystem on the child is crucial for a successful transition (Härkönen, 2008).
- Sharing **information** concerning transitions using varied approaches (The Welsh Government, 2017)

- this may consist of; face-to-face meetings with parents, newsletters including information on the setting and staff in order to be inclusive of parents with additional needs, stay-and-play sessions and half-day visits in order for the child to become familiar with the setting beforehand.

- Welcoming families with respect and **inclusivity**
  - Practitioners must strive to be unbiased and refrain from initial judgments (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010).

(Source: Burning Bright, 2016)

Partnerships

Consistent and effective communication obtains a foremost component in partnerships. As argued by Froebel's Principles, nurseries and school settings must have persistent communication with children's parents, families and wider communities in order to facilitate a smoother, more comfortable transition (Lilley 1967). The Welsh Government (2016) support this by ensuring that productive communication by engaged parents and families who are assured to be involved with their child's education can facilitate stable and respectful connections.

(Source: Nolfi, 2016)

Potential barriers

Practitioners must be aware of barriers that may intervene with communication and connections, and be prepared to efficiently and respectfully overcome these hurdles whilst keeping the child's safety and development in mind at all times. Some potential barriers may include…

- Past **negative experiences** with practitioners
  - May cause parents to become resistant and begin to avoid engagement.
- Parents with **additional learning needs** that may affect communication between the setting and home.
  - Child's specific academic and emotional needs may not be met during the transition process.
  - Crucial information sharing may not be understood.
- **Safeguarding concerns** about the child
  - Parents may become uncomfortable conversing with practitioners and avoid engagement completely.

Why do I need to work with multi-agencies?

Moreover, practitioners and setting staff working together along collaborating with a myriad of necessary agencies ensure that the child's needs are met accordingly, as practitioners can observe and understand when further interventions are required for the benefit of the child's holistic development (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010).

Here are some examples as to when it would be necessary to form collaborations:

- Child whose speech is unclear, delayed, and not developing **(MacDonald & Carroll, 1992).**
    - Collaborating with a speech and language therapist and receiving specialist resources to assist learning in the classroom.
- Child refuses to partake and engage in lessons **(Mercieca, 2009).**
    - Informing parents on the situation and acknowledging that an incident prior may have had an effect on the child, and as a result, is unsettled in school.
    - Connecting with an education psychologist if the situation becomes long-term and has affected the child's academic and holistic progress.
- Child has raised something with you that has cause for concern **(Woods, *et al.,* 2011).**
    - Communicating your concerns with the safeguarding officer at your setting.
    - Keeping records of concerns of the child on My Concern, therefore social services will intervene if concerns meet the threshold.

Positive partnerships between school settings and parents have been shown to benefit children's well-being and cognitive development which influences their holistic development. Bronfenbrenner further maintains how the child's microsystem – those that have close relationships with the child – also the exosystem – the wider community – are involved heavily in elements of the child's development (Ashiabi and O'Neal, 2015). Practitioners must strive to maintain the connection between every element and influence in a child's life therefore to successfully facilitate a comfortable transition, whilst attaining fundamental and imperative knowledge on the child to further support their holistic development.

(Source: Meetric, 2021)

Interventions

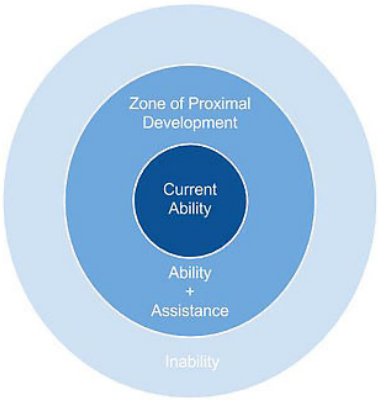
Children's experiences during infancy and early years have a lasting impact on the development of the brain. Although genes provide a basic blueprint, it's the experiences provided to the child that bestow the foundation for future learning and behaviour (Harvard University, 2016).

How can I put this into practice?

In order for practitioners to acquire appropriate and necessary interventions for children, it is crucial that there is planned time for suitable observation, which according to Thornton and Brunton (2010) must be correctly documented when discussing the Reggio Emilia Approach. Thornton and Brunton persist by suggesting that in order for practitioners to carry out an observation, children must be given time to play freely and discover new experiences, therefore, the practitioner can obtain knowledge and understanding of a specific child. For example, many schools and nursery settings have begun using 1-page profiles for children, which simply includes a summary of the child; including likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses and how they would like to be supported. This method can support practitioners with the correct and precise information needed in order to provide a more child-centred approach to their learning and development (Sanderson, Smith and Wilson, no date).

(Source: TES, no date)

A Practitioner must intervene sensitively to support children to expand their knowledge further whilst also facilitating a child-centred approach to learning (Lindon, 2010). Lindon maintains this by applying Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development ~see diagram on the right~ as it is discussed that adults are indeed the guide for children that sustains their exploring and learning within their current ability. The Zone of Proximal Development is where the practitioner will facilitate and be the scaffold to the child's learning. However, the practitioner must first observe the individual child to understand their current ability and acquire the appropriate interventions necessary for development that are within the child's interests, therefore, inability becomes ability (Lindon, 2010).

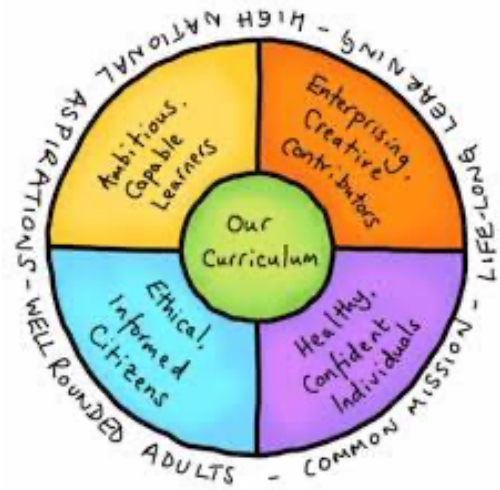


(Source: Chapman and Company, 2018)

Proposed Outcomes

The current Foundation Phase practice in Wales, with its **Four Core Purposes** (The Welsh Government, 2020), consists of the comprehension that children are to be…

- Ambitious, capable learners
- Enterprising, creative contributors
- Ethical informed citizens
- Healthy, confident individuals as valued members of society



(Source: Portfield School Harverfordwest, 2019)

"Schools should develop in every child a sense of personal and cultural identity that is receptive and respectful towards others"

~ The Welsh Government (2018).

An array of educational models from around the world have influenced the new Welsh Curriculum, with shared principles and approaches to learning. There are a multitude of similarities between each educational model, such as…

- The Foundation Phase, Wales **(The Welsh Government, 2018).**
  - Obtains the significant importance of play on children's emotional and behavioural development, which contributes to future academic progress.
  - Developing children's self-esteem and self-worth, along with support in providing feelings of belongingness and love, which we can associate with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the pinnacle, which is self-actualisation.
- The Reggio Emilia Approach **(Thornton and Brunton, 2010).**
  - Practitioners and children learn from each other whilst engaging in rich and stimulating environments. This sustains a Montessori approach to child-centred education, by providing a real and natural environment.
- Te Whariki **(Lee, *et al*., 2013).**
  - Children's education and development are recognised holistically.
  - Children develop through free play, exploring, and engaging with exciting environments.
  - Importance of educating and incorporating the child's culture into their learning.

What does a successful transition look like?

By creating a safe and nurturing environment, developing secure and compassionate relationships, and proposing appropriate and necessary interventions that will benefit the development of the child transitioning from nursery to full-time education.

The child will be …

- Happy and confident when engaging with the environment.
- Able to develop secure and inclusive bonds with peers and practitioners.
- Curious when approaching new experiences.
- Able to adjust to slight changes in routine throughout the day.

Parents & carers should…

- Feel welcomed and comfortable when communicating with practitioners and setting staff.
- Be included in their child's development and assist with learning at home where possible.
- Have clear information about the new setting that they will be able to understand and be comfortable with.

(Source: Blue Ring Media, no date)

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