



Transitions in the Early Years

A Handbook for Practitioners

November 2023

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Introduction

Starting school can be an exciting time, but this change can also cause anxiety for children and their parents/carers.

This handbook has been written for practitioners in Nursery settings and Reception classes to provide clear guidance in supporting all children through transitions of setting.

This guidance encourages strong staff and parent relationships before children start the setting by having clear information to support parents through the change and to support all children, including children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), or children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's). However, the theories and guidance will be useful to support any transition that the children will experience throughout their life in school, e.g., moving between classrooms and within the daily routines. This emphasises the importance of a successful and smooth transition.

Highly knowledgeable Early Years Practitioners provide children with high-quality learning experiences and fulfil the role of co-adventurer. Gray and MacBlain (2015) suggest practitioners should not only see the children as they are today and right now but as unique individuals in the beginning stages of the rest of their lives.

Throughout this guidance, the term 'parent' has been used as a shorthand to include mothers, fathers, carers, foster carers, adopted parents, stepparents, and grandparents.

This guidance is to support all children; including ALN, English as an additional language (EAL) and any child who requires additional support.

What are transitions?

Transitions are changes that all children experience from early childhood.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2023, a) transitions passings of time from one place to another.

The first transition humans experience is when babies stop routing and are weaned, they progress physically from sitting, standing, crawling, and walking or progressing from wearing nappies to being toilet trained.

Transitions can also be emotional, such as the arrival of a new sibling, experiencing parental separation, bereavement or entering care (CLA (Children who are Looked After).

Some children may experience more than one transition at a time; even before school starts, the child may have already been to another carer for breakfast.

Then there are the physical transitions, which may include a new home or care setting; for some children, it could be moving from one activity to another.

A transition within education usually means moving from one stage, school, or environment to another. Moving to a 'big school' is a huge change for children. It is not just a physical change of settings but works and looks different. Children will need to create new attachments and relationships with staff.

According to Walton, A and Goddard, G (2012, p. 143) transition from early years to a primary school is major, but effective communication between staff, parents and external agencies can ensure the transition can be effective and a positive experience.

Positive transitions are important for all children's emotional well-being, so planning for this transition is important. The key is to support before and during the event of transition, and extra consideration for children with ALN or those who have ACE's will need additional enhanced transition arrangements.



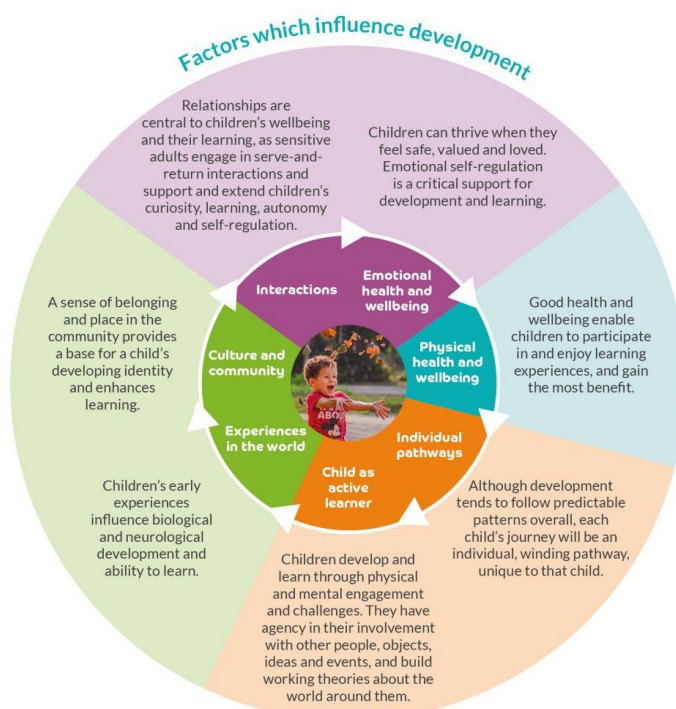
What is Communication?

Communication is a two-way exchange of information, knowledge, feelings, or ideas according to the Oxford Dictionary (2023, b).

We are all unique!

Children are individuals; they are all unique, developing in different ways and rates, the factors in their lives and experiences that have shaped them, Birth to 5 Matters (no date, a). Fisher (2008) cited in Walton and Goddard (2012) stated “Only when you see the world through a child’s eyes do, we truly understand just what is involved in making adjustments from one setting to the next”.

Practitioners need to have a good understanding of the needs of a child, their brain development, emotionally, socially, physically, and so on, to support them through the transition. Ensuring effective communication is kept with parents. Early years practitioners will need to be flexible, sensitive, and supportive to ensure a smooth transition is achieved.



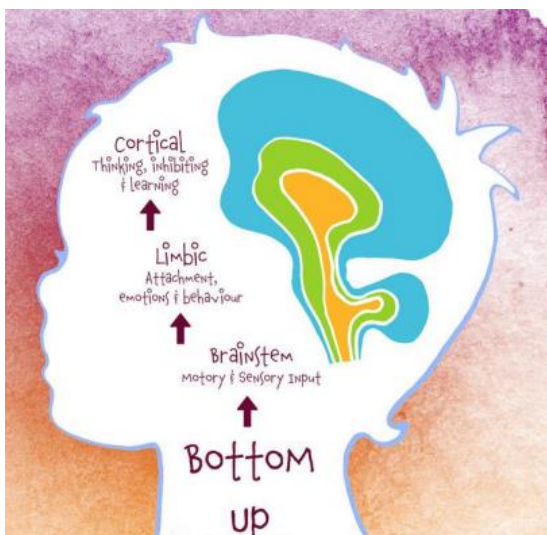
Reed and Walker (2015) support encouraging understanding and communicating during transitions, ensuring they are smooth, as no one likes change. Checking that all involved are prepared, have the confidence and are given the individual support they need.

The Needs of the Child

Children's brain development begins shortly after conception and continues developing through life. Every child's brain develops at a different speed and can be affected by one of the five senses: sound, touch, vision, smells, and thoughts.

From birth babies know to put things in their mouth adults respond with a way of ensuring the baby is safe and provide safe learning experiences.

During the early years, the brain goes through the most important phase of development, all three parts of the brain – instinctual, emotional, and cognitive are coming online and connect. Practitioners have the unique opportunity to positively shape the brains of children in the setting.



Ruth Stephens. (2020) Bottom-up Brain.

The instinctual brain sits close to the brain stem and controls our bodily functions and other responses to what happens around us, especially danger!

This area of the “brain needs food, warmth sleep, routine and people to feel safe...and secure.”
(Garvey and Zeedyk. 2017, p. 37).

When the brainstem/instinctual brain does not feel safe and secure, the brain's response is to respond to threat, our brains choose the response: fight, flight, or freeze, this is reflected in the shown behaviours.

The limbic brain is where emotions and memories sit, the building of self-esteem and identity.

The cortex/cortical is the thinking and cognitive part of the brain, this is where individuals make sense of their world and adults can communicate to children throughout their experiences to develop their understanding (Garvey and Zeedyk. 2017).

To enable practitioners to care for a child, especially as they are all individual and unique, so are their needs. The key is to understand the holistic development of a child, with an emphasis on getting to know the child, their home life, their interests, and their likes and dislikes.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is a five-tier model based on human needs in a triangle shape. Focusing on the bottom of the triangle, where needs must be fulfilled before layering up the triangle. This is important in transition because if a child does not feel safe and secure, and their physiological needs are not met, they are unlikely to progress up the triangle, unable to form relationships, build self-esteem or develop as independent learners.



Source – Simply Psychology (2023)

Understanding this model and the individual child's need will enable staff to provide each child with stability and familiarity, as suggested by Walton and Goddard. (2012, pg. 85) as well as ensuring children feel that they belong.

Setting up a key worker system, influenced by Bowlby's (1969) Attachment theory to create an attachment with a child to develop close relationships supporting safety and belonging in line with Maslow's theory (Aubrey & Riley, 2017).

When children feel accepted, the brain will be released from the instinctual brain and be able to move to the limbic system, where the child will form better self-esteem and identity.

Why should practitioners be aware of attachment?

Attachments are formed early on, from birth with parents and how the parents respond to the child depends on the child's development, this will influence the child's attachment style. Schore states (2005) "Attachment is the main mechanism for the regulation of relationships." cited in Howard et al. (2017, p. 46)

How children experience relationships with parents and other influencers throughout their lives will have an impact on their attachments. Interactions between a child and an adult are called 'serve and return,' built on eye contact, words, physical contact like a hug creates positive neural connections in the brain (Harvard University, 2021).

Ainsworth (1979, p. 88-89) identifies four attachment styles:

Secure Attachment, Children can show distress but are more likely to have a higher self-esteem as the parents are responsive, sensitive and consistent.

Insecure Attachments

Ambivalent Attachment (Anxious), parents may be inconsistent with sensitivity and not meet all needs of the child. The child is likely to have lower self-esteem and depend on a practitioner.

Avoidant attachment, parents tend not to engage, they are distant, less sensitive and not meet all the child's needs, resulting in the child having low self-esteem and appears withdrawn, tend not to explore, quiet and clingy.

Disorganised attachment, parents can be passive, extreme and frightening. Resulting in the child can be confused, not having a strategy for asking for help to meet their needs.

Howard et al. (2017, p. 46) children who have insecure attachment, experience a higher level of cortisol which are stress levels in the brain, resulting in the instinctual brain to be triggered and respond with flight, fight or freeze.

Bowlby's Attachment theory suggests that children who experience a form of negative separation, can express with behaviour, which reinforces the importance of

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System theory and the importance of secure relationships within the microsystem as a foundation. (Cited in Aubrey and Riley, 2016, p.119)

Consistency, Familiarity and Routines

Garvey and Zeedyk (2017) express the importance of routine and familiarity with the positive effect it makes on the instinctual brain of feeling safe and secure. Montessori supports this theory with the importance of repetition, as it develops new connections in the brain, cited in Constable (2012, p. 3). This can provide familiarity by organising regular visits in the unfamiliar environment slowly and often.

Observing children in the setting prior to the transition can help the child as particular interests can be observed, incorporating the voice of the child. Article 12 of the Rights of the Child, “every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.” (UNICEF 2023), activities can then be created in the unfamiliar setting to provide an activity that is of interest.

Providing time to reflect on these opportunities and observations, can help develop the next visit.

To ensure a predictable and comforting environment providing a routine will help reassure children and provides them with confidence.

The Role of the Adult

Positive and Supportive role model

Bandura's theory interpreted by Aubrey and Riley (2016, p. 119) humans learn from watching other behaviours and listening to others.

Adults can show being a good role model by showing respect, curiosity, using the correct language and showing kindness and compassion to others, especially considering safeguarding.

Birth to 5 Matters (no date. a) support the theory of children within their development are actively growing as they see and communicate with others.

Within transition the adult's role is to be a co-regulator, supporting the feelings and behaviour the child may meet.

Using PACE (Playful, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy) staff should stay calm and allow time to think and respond to behaviour and/or situations that may occur. In return this allows children to feel understood and allow time for their brain to think.



Dan Hughes – PACE (n.d. Resilience Project, NHS)

Effective communication and relationship

During the transition, a child's world will be changing. It is important that families, the setting and external providers work together, putting into practise effective communication, to ensure the child is at the centre.

Gray & MacBlain (2015, p. 123) suggests the wider environment can influence child development and wellbeing. Similarly, to Bandura's theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model (1977) is based on the people and environment around the child having an impact.

The model places the child in the middle of an ecological system and names each of the layers that surround it.



The Microsystem is the immediate environment, home and the setting. Long-term relationships and where the child would be happy, active, and confident within the setting.

The Mesosystem includes the extended family, school, nursery, community and forming connections.

The Exosystem – is the external environment, which indirectly affects child development i.e. parents' work.

Macrosystem is the larger cultural and religion.

Ensuring there are positive role models and effective communication between parents and the setting, has a profound influence on the development of a child within the Microsystem and Mesosystem suggests how important these role models are.

Aubrey and Riley (2016) support the effects of effective communication between staff and parents, saying children's achievements would increase by supporting transition and ensuring that the child's individual needs are met. Parents know their children better than anyone; they can be a great resource to practitioners, bringing attention to interests, likes and dislikes.

Work together in Partnership (with parents, families and communities).

The importance of communication with parents is to be flexible and mindful of adapting to different situations, especially where English is a second language, or the parent may have a specific learning need. (Pacey. 2015)

Using Bronfenbrenner's model to understand what a child may have experienced already, usually, it would be parents, family, siblings and some children encountering social services care, health, or medical care. The child may also attend wider community groups, such as worship and childcare settings.

Froebel's Principles, community, parents and families should have a close connection with the child's school. This can be created through effective communication and empower a smooth transition visit with children and parents, getting to know them.

"If we do not work closely with parents, we put all the responsibility of making the connections onto the child and that is not fair!" Tina Bruce (2020, p. 114).

Getting to know the parents' likes and skill sets will not only help the setting but allow the child to feel their family belongs and a sense of pride by inviting parents in to help garden, build or even listen to readers.

Ensuring there is effective communication between other agencies is beneficial not only for the staff but the child and their family, particularly about safeguarding, or providing extra family support that is needed.

Team around the Child meetings (TAC) can be organised where members from multi agencies would join in the main interest of the child, where if the child have ALN, all who are involved can make the next steps together to make the transition smoother.

Interventions

Be Creative

To support children's emotions through transitions many interventions may be needed, to support the process of change. Communication and building links between the parent and the setting before the child starts can be the key to a successful transition and experience.



Twinkl (2023)



Pinterest, (n.d. a)

Take **photos** of the setting and pictures of the staff. - welcome pack. Each family to be provided with an electronic video/photos of the setting and a video of the class teacher.

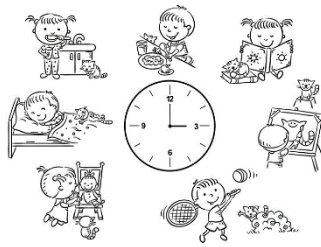
This allows the parents and child to have more information and feel welcomed and a better sense of belonging.

Settling in sessions. The move to Reception from Nursery is huge, therefore building the relationships is important. It is a good idea to start the transition with the unfamiliar staff meeting the children in the Nursery setting or if not at the nursery at home. This offers the children a sense of security as there are fewer staff and physical changes, reducing the stress levels on the incidental brain and allowing the child to be more relaxed.



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After the children have met the unfamiliar staff in their comfortable setting, the next stage would be to come to the 'big school' with the staff they are familiar with.



Pinterest (n.d. b)

Familiarity Prepare a daily routine – Visual timetable.

Providing children with pictures of activities, familiarity and a routine, can help an anxious child to feel safe and secure.

If there is a known adult change, or an upset in the routine prior to a day starting. Informing the parents, so they can prepare their child or allow a transitional object to be prepared if needed.

Transitional object. Winnicott (1953) An item to provide a child with an extended connection to the parent, provides the child with independence. The transitional object should not be taken from the child or changed unless the child asks and over time when the child loses the need for the object. Cited in Changing Minds (2019).



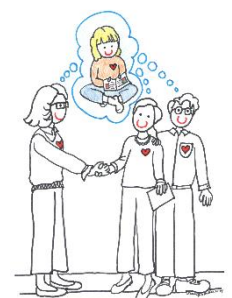
MyCute Graphics (n.d.)



Dreamline. (n.d)

Family photos for display for the child's first day, parents could provide the staff with family photos, to make a home wall. This can allow the children to see themselves already in the room, allowing them to feel they belong.

Feedback to parents is a great way to strengthen the links between the setting and home. Reinforcing the sense of belonging for the child and developing the attachment.



Confident Parents Confident Kids (2014)

Importance of play

Vygotsky (1962) believed that children need plenty of play opportunities, allowing them to be active in exploring their social environments and be involved in their development.

Throughout play, practitioners can observe and provide scaffolding to the child's play for them to gain enriched and extended learning opportunities. (Garhart Mooney, 2013)

Froebel (1782-1852) believed that children need to be close to nature and not characterised learning into subjects but self-led play and discovery. Cited in Constable, K (2012)



Source – Pinterest

Steiner, comparable to Montessori, encourages giving children space and time to interact with peers and take in the world around them, providing time for repetition and the use of familiar activities. He advocated self-led play whilst allowing for exploring their senses and taking risks, Gray and MacBlain (2015).

Vygotsky (1962) believed the importance of language and how knowledgeable adults can create a unique and inclusive plan based on observations will help child development cited in Gray and MacBlain (2015, p. 101).

'Sustained Shared Thinking' supports Vygotsky's theory from interactions between children and practitioners, are particularly important especially where two individuals work together to solve an intellectual problem.

Curriculum

In Wales, the mandatory act sets 4 purposes for the curriculum, designed to help all children and young people become:

Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives.

Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work.

Ethically, informed citizen of Wales and the world.

Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society. (Welsh Government 2020)

Montessori encourages the thought that every child is an individual, and that matching a child's learning environment to their developmental needs will support development. Cited in Constable, K. (2012)

The Welsh Curriculum considers each child individually, and the pace of learning and progression is individual, moving away from learning milestones of age to stage, what the child can do and how they can be supported, Welsh Government (2020)

Adults "need to remain mindful of the variety of ways learners may progress at different points in the learning journey, and over different lengths of time." Welsh Government (2020).

Making observations can provide an adult with the individual child's development, therefore providing the ability to add to the child's learning journey. Vygotsky strongly believed in observations as the key to forming a good curriculum plan, like Montessori and Piaget, cited in Garhart Mooney (2013)

The Welsh Curriculum Framework emphasises the health and wellbeing of children and the importance of providing them with a voice, knowledge and understanding of feelings, emotions, likes, dislikes, and circumstances throughout the child's development. Also, supporting empathy, care and respect for others. (Welsh Government. 2021)

Proposed Outcomes

Creating a positive transitional experience for children that was managed well will enhance their wellbeing, learning and development. Recognising that all children can be vulnerable during change, particularly those with additional needs or a child in care.

Planning for these children will need additional, flexible support. All children must be prepared for change to enable effective inclusion and experience of a positive transition Dunlop cited in Reed & Walker (2015, p. 144).

Parents should feel the experience of the transition was managed well, that they were well informed, they felt confident to approach staff with any worries or questions and feel included in their child's learning (PACEY. 2013, p. 2).

Planning alongside appropriate preparation, understanding and communication, children are more likely to feel secure and settle into their new environment more easily.

Creating a successful a transition, where the child may come across as 'settled' which could look like, a child who is happy, confident, emotionally happy within the setting, showing this by seeking out awe and wonder with activities or socially with peers. The child may also show they are able to rely on the staff for providing a safe, caring and thoughtful activities that bring awe and wonder to the child's day.

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