

An Early Years Practitioners Handbook: A Guide to Transitions



(Source: Filimonova, G. (2020), Google Search)

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Introduction

Aims

This Early Years handbook aims to support practitioners throughout transitions that children encounter in their lives. This handbook will cover topics such as transitions throughout children's lives, the role of the adult, the needs of the child, different learning environments, partnership working as well as practical interventions used to help ease a child's transition and looking at theorists that are relevant to transitions in children's lives.

What is a Transition?

All children will experience multiple transitions throughout their lives. Scottish Social Services Council (No Date) defines transitions as “A time or a process of change, and it is natural that change almost always brings uncertainty”.

Mentally Healthy Schools (2018) talk about the importance of children being able to communicate their concerns during a transition period. However, this might only be the case for some children. Older children could talk to someone about their worries or struggles. In contrast, a younger child or a child with additional learning needs (ALN) might not be able to achieve this, which could negatively impact the children's education. This means that any key adult, including early years workers, should know how they can identify the signs of a child struggling with a transition and how they can best support children through these challenging times.

Children will experience a wide range of transitions throughout their lives, some of which will be daily regular occurrences, for example, having playtime then having to come back into the classroom to learn or having lunch or a snack then going outdoors for playtime. However, they will also experience more complex transitions, such as transitioning from nursery to reception, where they will begin full-time school (Trying Together, 2023).

Transitions can be highly stressful for children, so they must be supported by key adults in their lives throughout any transition. These key people are practitioners, parents, carers or a multi-agency team if they are involved with the child and their family. This is because the key adults can make the transition as smooth and straightforward as possible; this can help the child build resilience and set out foundations for a successful future of learning (PACEY, 2014).

The Role of the Adult

Children will form strong relationships with significant adults as they learn and develop. These people are usually the mother or someone that the child spends a lot of time with during the day, for example, a practitioner. This is also referred to as a primary caregiver or a key person. Strong relationships are essential for all children, especially when experiencing transitions (Birth to 5 Matter, 2021a).

A fundamental transition in a child's life is starting Nursery or Daycare. This transition can be highly daunting and stressful for children because it is a new environment, and they do not know any primary caregivers in the setting. Until this point in a child's life, their primary carer has been a parent or a close family member. As a part of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Social Theory, this puts parents and immediate family members in the Microsystem of the Theory. The parents and key workers must support the child through the transition and create that essential bond with the child. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Social Theory is based on the child being at the centre of the model, and the environment in which the child is exposed can affect their overall learning and development (The Education People, 2021).

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory states the importance of a healthy and secure relationship with a primary caregiver towards a child's development during the first few years. This allows children to have a person they know they can always come to if they need support or to feel safe, but it also allows them to have the confidence to go and explore the environment. Suppose a child does not have a secure attachment to a primary caregiver. In that case, it can mean the child will feel insecure and unsafe within the environment and will not be willing to explore the world and environment around them. This is known as an insecure attachment. Bowlby's theory talks about four different types of attachment, one being a secure attachment and three being an insecure attachment (Sprouts, 2018).

Birth to 5 Matters (2021b) talks about how key workers should spend as much time getting to know the children attending the setting, including their parents/carers. This allows the setting to be aware of the likes and dislikes, whether there are any additional needs, and whether the setting should be familiar with any triggers. Also, include information such as how the child can be best supported. Settings can request information like this, often called a one-page profile. This information can help create a nurturing, inclusive environment where children are more likely to settle into the environment, especially if their parents are happy, too.

Whilst a child is going through a transition, a suitable environment must be provided to help support the child throughout. Transitions can be very stressful for children, meaning they might not cope and struggle to regulate their emotions. Some childcare settings recommend having what is called 'Communication Friendly Spaces'. These often have other names, too, such as a 'Zen Den' or a 'Cwtch corner'. These spaces allow and encourage the children to engage with others, enable communication, and support their emotional well-being. Providing suitable environments where children feel loved, secure, and relaxed can help promote critical development and well-being (Communication Friendly Spaces, 2018).

Research has shown that parents/carers working collaboratively during a child's transition period are more likely to have better outcomes overall. For instance, they are supporting a child with their transition into school for a new year or a transition of starting nursery or full-time school. If a child is starting nursery for the first time, this would be when the setting asks for a one-page profile of the child. A transitional period is stressful for the child and the parent, as seeing their child upset and leaving somewhere new can be highly unsettling (Yi Hang Lau, E & Power, T. G, 2018).

The Needs of the Child

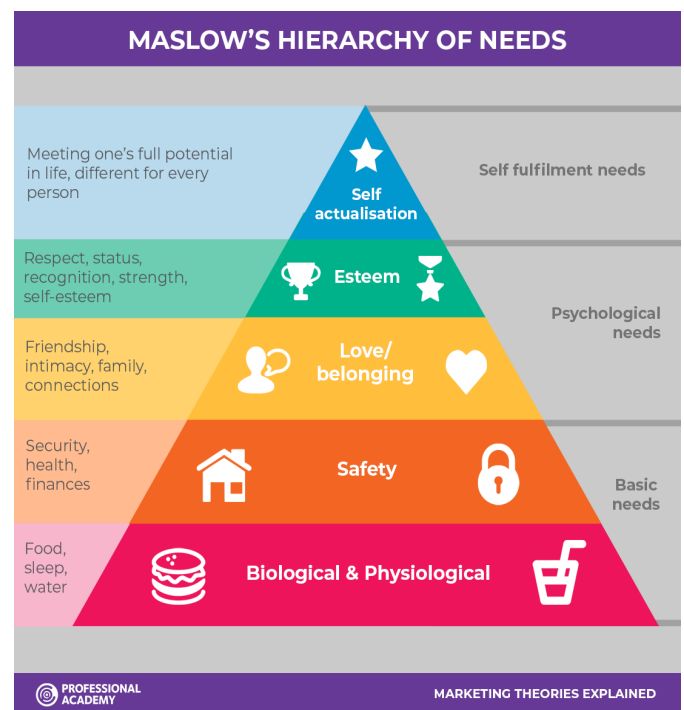
Throughout the early years, children and young people's needs are at the centre of it all. The needs of the child are paramount and should always come first. No child will approach a transition the same as another, meaning all children will need different support. A child starting daycare for the first time may find it daunting as they do not know anyone within the setting. Also, the child may feel abandoned as their parents leave them somewhere new. To try and avoid this, settings offer taster sessions where the child will attend for two hours for a couple of days to get used to the setting and the practitioners; this way, when it comes to the child starting, they are somewhat used to the setting and key workers.

Mackay *et al.*, 2010 discuss the importance of sturdy relationships between children and their key workers and their effects on the child's development. Their relationships were examined to assess their academic motivation and overall development. The evidence concluded that the primary attachment between both is vital towards a child's development. Mackay *et al.*, 2010 state, 'Emotional bonds to parents broaden to peer and teacher relationships and also to the school setting, affecting academic progress'.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory based on the children and what is needed to grow and thrive. This is a five-tier model where individuals should be motivated to achieve their needs in a specific order successfully.

Viewing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs allows the viewer to better understand the needs of children and the developmental stages within. Early years educators must be aware of this as it is a theory that underpins frameworks and transitions within the early years.

For children to successfully meet their highest potential, they should be encouraged to explore the world around them and learn that mistakes are acceptable and everyone makes them; this will allow the child to develop their resilience. For a child who is loved and has good self-esteem, it will mean that they feel confident during activity and do not feel the need to move from one to the other because they don't understand. This will mean that their psychological needs have been met. Once a child can feel and be all of these, this means that they have achieved self-fulfilment and that they can meet their own needs (Berkeley Well-Being Institute, 2023).



Professional Academy (2020)
Marketing Theories - Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

There are four types of attachment:

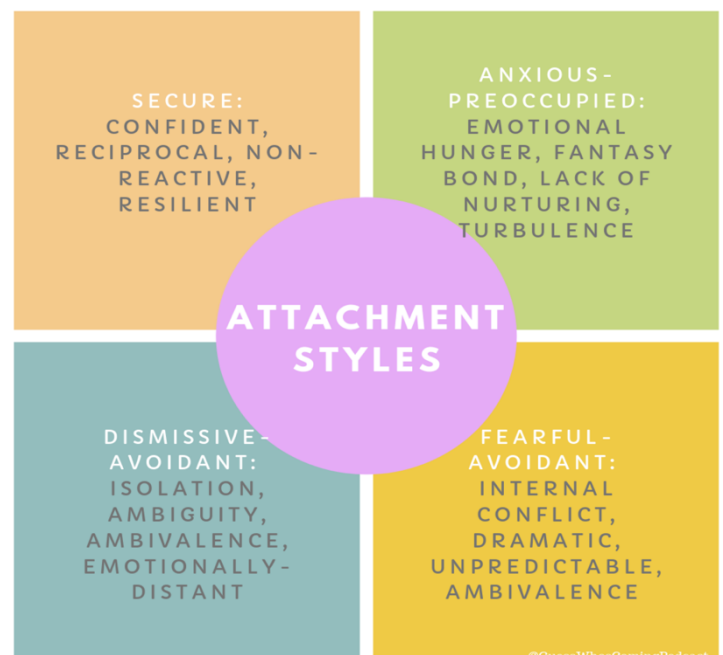
Secure – the parent is responsive, consistent with parenting, and meets the child's needs, resulting in the child feeling happy, confident, and exploring environments.

Ambivalent/Anxious – the parent is inconsistent with parenting, anxious, angry, and insecure. This results in the child feeling anxious, unsure, uncertain, and unable to rely on the parent to meet their needs.

Avoidant – the type of parent disengaged or too busy to make time for their child, withdrawn or neglectful. The child will not ask for help or explore the surroundings, and they may be withdrawn and lack motivation and self-esteem. The child believes that their needs will not be met.

Disorganised – the parent is fearful, anxious, extreme, abusive, or abused. This means that the child is picking up on the behaviours of the parent and becomes despondent, unresponsive, depressed, anxious and has no available strategies for their needs being met (Mr Bain, 2023).

The quality of attachment a child has to an adult can later affect the child's development and social and emotional outcomes. A child's attachment can depend on the adult they are with, i.e. parents, teachers, or carers. If the child is to receive regular positive emotional and social care, a secure attachment will form, allowing the child to have their needs successfully met. However, a child may still develop an attachment to a parent/carer who may be abusive, and this would be a Avoidant attachment. This means that the child is not being given the quality attachment that they require for their needs to be met, which also influences their development and social and emotional attachments in the future (National Library of Medicine, 2004).



(Source: Korab (2021) Attachment Theory Explained.

Serve and Return

Serve and return interactions are back-and-forth responses between an infant and an adult.

How serve and return works
A baby can 'serve' by babbling, smiling or even crying. The caregiver then 'returns' by responding to the infant.

What are the benefits of this type of interaction for my baby?

Language Development
Through the back and forth interactions, the baby is learning how to have a conversation between two people.

Attachment
The one-on-one interaction with the caregiver will help build a strong attachment between the caregiver and infant.

Brain Development
Synaptic connections in the brain will be reinforced by the repetition in the interactions between the caregiver and infant. Starting serve and return interactions early helps to begin forming a strong foundation of neural pathways.

 Better Brains for Babies

Serve and return interactions between a carer and a child can massively impact brain development and secure and loving relationships between a child and their parent and carers. This is a sustained interaction between the child and the parent/ carer or key worker, a served and returned interaction allowing for healthy and vital brain development. An example is when an infant starts babbling, so the adult would respond by repeating what the infant babbled or expanding by encouraging other sounds or words. By an adult taking part in the 'serve; and 'return', children can learn and develop their communication and language skills (Better Brains for Babies, 2019).

Experiences are essential for learning and brain development. Children learn through different experiences.

John Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory suggests that children learning through play and experiences should be a 'guiding light' in education. Learning through experiences is where education combines theoretical learning - sitting down and learning with learning experiences - taking part in hands-on learning (Structural Learning, 2023).

Everyday life experiences shape a child's brain development throughout the early years. By the age of a child, they have billions of connections in their brain, and through experiences, these connections grow and develop. However, if life experiences are being had, the connections weaken and disconnect – called 'synaptic pruning'.

UK Trauma Council (2020) talk about the impact of minimal or adverse life experiences on the brain. For example, Suppose a child experiences neglect or trauma within the first six months. In that case, it can have a massive impact on psychological, emotional, and social development, resulting in lifelong implications; even if a child later in life experiences a loving and secure relationship, the previous damage is long-lasting and may be permanent.

Source: Better Brains for Babies (2019)
Serve and Return Interactions.

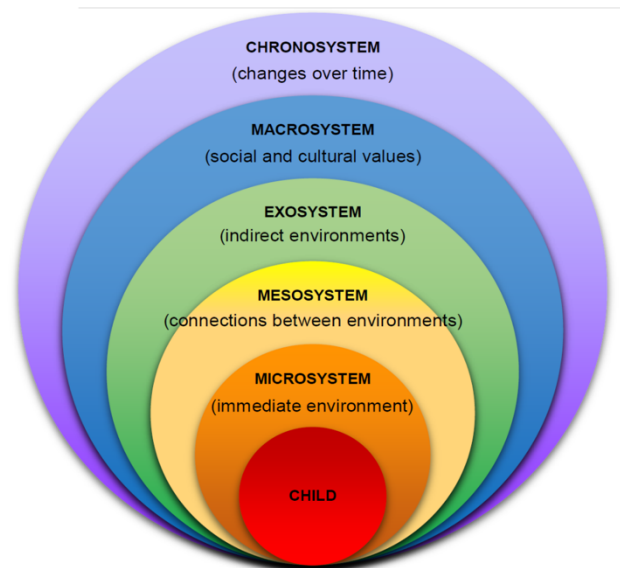
Partnership Working

Partnership working in all settings is vital for children and their development, as it allows children to develop to their highest ability no matter their background. The relationship between parents/carers and practitioners begins when they enrol the child in the setting. Effective communication is a crucial part of transitions. Settings should do all they can to break down barriers between parents/carers and the setting, ensuring it is continually inclusive (GOV.UK, No Date).

Partnership working involves people from external agencies working alongside practitioners, as well as the parents and carers of the child. For partnership working to be successful, agreements are made between the setting and agencies regarding confidentiality and data sharing of the information that will be passed on. External agencies involved would be teachers, social workers, speech and language therapists, Additional Learning Needs Co-Ordinator (ALNCO), health visitors, Family Information Services (FIS) and more if needed (Early Years Matters, 2023).

The Ecological Theory, created by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, places the child in the model's centre and looks at their development throughout a complex system. Their environment and social surroundings heavily influence the child's development.

The Microsystem is their immediate environment, meaning this would be the social interaction and environment the child is in most, for example, at home with their parents, siblings, and grandparents. The Mesosystem is an environment that includes a relationship between the Microsystem and a more comprehensive environment. This would consist of a childcare setting creating a partnership with the parents and carers of the child (Sprouts Learning, 2021).



Source: Ecological Theory (Pressbooks, 2022)

Interventions

Before a child starts in a Childcare setting, parents and the child should be invited for a walk around or a settling-in session; this can benefit the transition period. This allows the child and their parents to view the setting, the resources and the facilities and meet the staff within the setting. This allows the staff to learn about the child, their needs, and how they can be best supported from their first day attending the setting. Sometimes, staff within the setting need to be mindful that this transition might be more upsetting for the parent, so support should also be given to the parent (Croner-I, 2017).

Some settings provide their parents with a 'Home School Link Book'. This is where notes regarding the children can be put; this book is passed back and forth between the setting and the parents and carers of the child. It allows for communication between settings and parents if the handover at the end of the day is quick or if the child's key worker has gone home. Any messages will be in the book, and the parents will be able to see and communicate back. A home school link book promotes communication and relationships between parents and the setting by supporting learning and development, achievements and behavioural problems.

Proposed Outcomes

All children should be able to experience positive transitions in their life. This will enable growth and development and allow children to maximise the benefits of their education. Successful transitions are essential for children as well as their parents.

Once a transition for a child has been successful, they will be enjoying and playing in the environment, participating in the activities set for the day, visibly happy, and showing attachments to the key workers within the setting through communication and play. For example, the handover should be with a key worker who knows the child and their needs well, allowing the transition to be the same or similar daily. This means the child's confidence should grow and develop instead of regressing. This will assure the key workers that the transition has been successful and the child is settled. (Teach Early Years, No Date).

Robinson (2011) mentions how reflection upon transitions can allow practitioners to examine varied connections between behaviour and emotional well-being. This can be analysed as not all children's processes change the same, and their responses can depend on how they have experienced the change and previous changes. Home life for a child impacts a child's experiences in a setting, but the experiences in the setting also influence the child's life at home. This then becomes the support for positives and experiences in life.

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