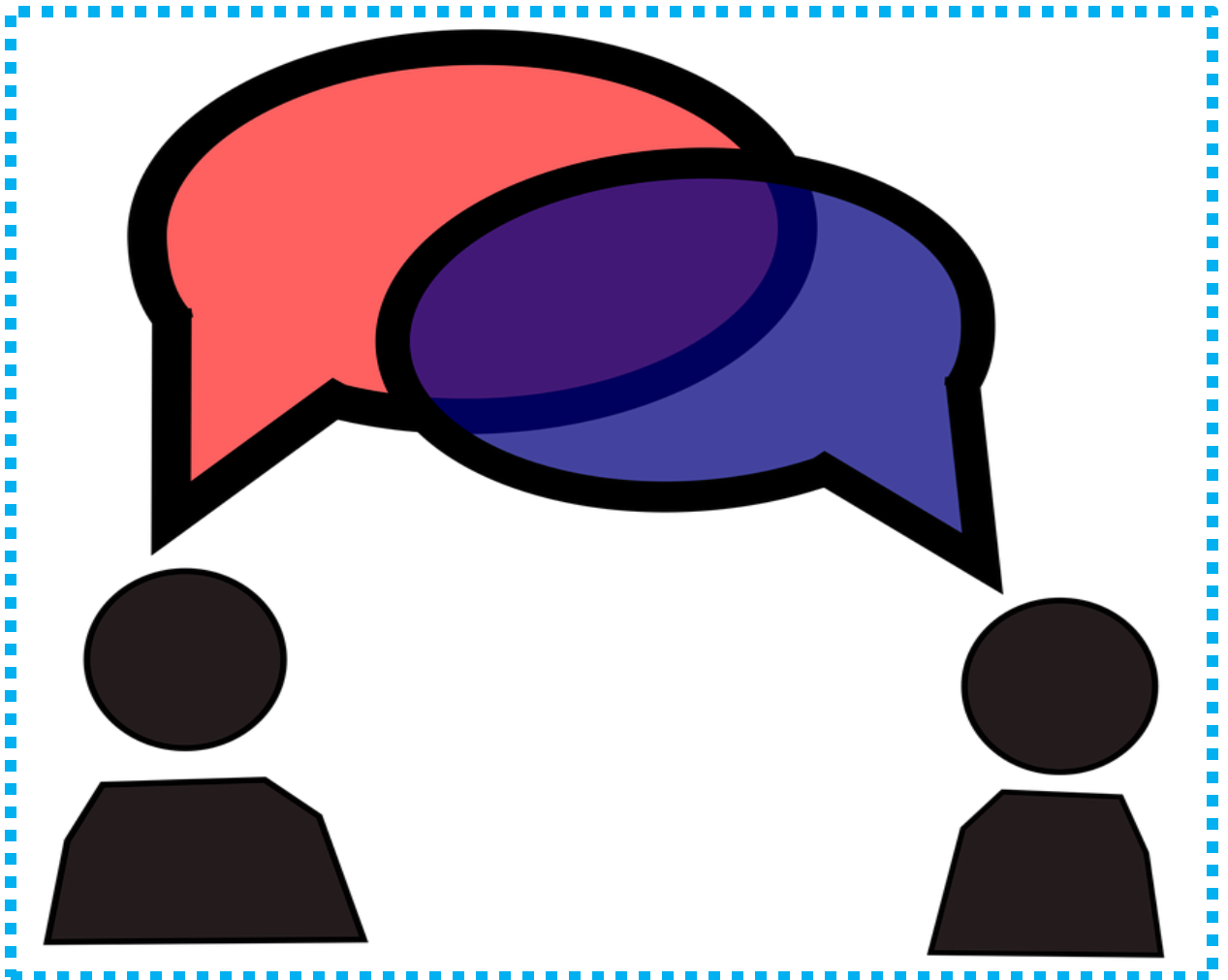


The Importance of Effective Communication During Periods of Transition



Source: https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2016/03/17/04/34/conversation-1262311_960_720.png

A Handbook for Key Workers in Early Years

Contents

Introduction.....1

Transitions.....2-3

Needs of the child.....4-6

Role of the adult.....7-9

Partnerships.....10-11

Interventions.....12-13

Outcomes.....14

References.....15-16

Introduction

This handbook is designed for use by all key workers in the Early Years setting.

The aim of this handbook is to emphasise the importance of effective communication during a child's transition into Nursery education. This handbook will introduce strategies to improve smooth transition.

For many children, Nursery is their first step away from the comfort and security of their home and family, into the world of education. According to Early Years Matters (2023) when parents and the setting work together to meet the needs of the child, their learning is greatly assisted.

If good relationships are made with parents/carers, it also builds trust and can be the start of a stable two-sided approach to the child's education. Memedi (2016) states that school/family co-operation is the main factor that helps improve a good school. If parents are made aware of the school's values and can voice their expectations of the school and its staff, there will hopefully be fewer misunderstandings and concerns moving forward.

It is important to hear the voice of parents/carers right from the start of the induction process, as they are the people who know the child best. When practitioners involve parents/carers in conversations about their child, it gives a good insight into the child's interests, abilities and style of learning. This assists practitioners in developing the child's learning from their own individual starting point.

Transitions – what are they and why are they important?

There are countless definitions of transition. For this handbook, the definition given by Kralik (2006) seems appropriate. Kralik states that people undergo transition when they need to adapt to new circumstances.

The purpose of this handbook, is to explain the changes a child will encounter, when starting Nursery and how effective communication makes the change manageable for everyone involved.

According to Maslow (1943) as cited in Shi and Lin (2021), a child negotiates a pyramid of needs, beginning with basics such as food, water and sleep, followed by health and safety needs. These needs are a child's right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 24 (UNICEF 1989). A child should have these needs met by their parents/carers. However, this may not be the case for a variety of reasons, including poverty, poor time management or cultural differences. For example, if a child arrives at Nursery regularly without breakfast, this could be because parents/carers are unable to afford food or that time constraints mean they cannot prepare breakfast before school. In these situations, settings need to step in and meet need, by providing toast, fruit and water when the child arrives, accessible throughout the day. The child's biological and physiological needs are prioritised in Nursery.

It is a practitioner's responsibility to provide a safe, environment where a child can thrive in security. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (2023) states that education premises must be fit for purpose, for the age of children in their care. In practice this means potentially dangerous areas are gated/locked (eg, kitchen), and children are made aware of forbidden areas, recognising a 'stop' symbol and its meaning. Providers must comply with health and safety legislation and ensure the safety of children, staff and others. Examples of this include regular fire drills, observing COSHH regulations for chemicals and maintaining equipment. Children should meet classroom staff before and during their induction and understand they are there to help and support them. Providing staff photos to families before induction is useful.

Children need to become comfortable with the setting and feel safe within it. The time this takes depends on the child's age and previous experiences of being away from home. The Nursery induction period is two weeks, allocated to 'Stay and Play' sessions, before moving on to unaccompanied staggered start sessions, where the child's time is gradually increased. During this time, children can explore their new environment whilst close to familiar adults, putting both parties at ease with the layout and provision of the setting.

The needs of the child

Maslow (1943) states that once basic needs are met, the next level of development is psychological need. This includes friendships, intimacy and family connections made. Outside the family circle, Early Years practitioners are the next point of contact.

Developing a good relationship depends on the child's attachment to their primary caregiver (Bowlby (1969, 1982, 1988) as cited in (Forgas P. et al 2020) . Bowlby states humans have an innate behavioural attachment system, seeking close proximity to protective humans when in need. Stay & Play sessions, alongside their primary caregiver, may highlight varying degrees of confidence. A responsive and supportive caregiver, provides security for the child, so they may be more ambitious in exploring their new environment. If the caregiver is unreliable, the child may be less confident to deal with a new experience. Practitioners can reassure children that their adult will return and distract them with interaction and play.

A strong relationship with parents/carers and sharing information with key workers will ensure consistency in tackling attachment issues. Practitioners should listen to the child, as they can feel helpless or disregarded. Playing with them should be the first step. Conversation may not be immediate but may come later, when confidence builds. Practitioners discover the child's interests through observation and can give small responsibilities to build their self-esteem.

Regular praise and immediate reward will help children to recognise their good behaviours. Instructions should be simple, with clear routines and expectations.

According to Child Mind Institute (2023), showing a visual preview of what the day will consist of, can prepare a child for what is going to happen. A countdown before each transition will help them mentally prepare for the next task. For example, 'In 20 minutes, (10 minutes, 5 minutes), we will put on coats and go outside'. A timer can be used alongside the verbal reminders, to give a visual approach. These strategies can be used at home and in school, so can be shared with parents/carers if a child is struggling with transition at home.

Obtaining the child's attention is important when preparing for transition. Make eye contact, call them by name, or put a hand on their shoulder. According to James (2021), joint and positive attention reaffirms the words being said and tells the child they are valued and listened to. To check understanding, ask the child to repeat back the instructions. Praise the child when they listen well and transition successfully. James states specific praise helps the child recognise good behaviour and encourages them to repeat that behaviour as it provokes a good response from their caregiver or practitioner.

Another theory on attachment, is that of Bronfenbrenner (1979), whose model can be seen below:



Source: Structural Learning.com

Contained in the 'microsystem' are teachers, parents, peers, mentors and healthcare systems; these people are all equally important in the child's development. These are the initial parties with whom practitioners must communicate, to benefit the child. All parties need input, to establish a child's needs.

These parties are all key to supporting smooth transition. Communication between them should be regular and detailed. This can be achieved verbally or via electronic communication platforms between home and school. Alternatively, an in-person meeting could be arranged e.g., a parents' consultation.

Social media is an effective way of keeping parents abreast of upcoming events. Health providers and spiritual leaders can be visited regularly or contacted via telephone to keep communication flowing.

Through communication at home visits, information can be obtained about the child's academic and practical development. This helps practitioners set targets for the child. In our setting, this information is gathered by joint completion of a questionnaire, by parents/carers and Nursery staff. Lampe (2019) states that meeting a child and their family outside school shows care and consideration, making them more inclined to trust you with their child. When a child sees their parent welcoming you into their home, they will see you as a trustworthy person. Children will then explore more freely, without fear. Delpit (1995,179), as cited in Whyte and Karabon (2016), believes practitioners must connect with the child's family and community to understand the child.

Role of the adult

The EYFS (2023) states there are four principles of priority when working with young children. These are:

- Unique child
- Positive relationships
- Enabling environment
- Development and learning

Under the UNCRC (1989), all decisions made must be in the best interest of the child (Article 3), children's views must be respected (Article 12) and they must be allowed to share their thoughts freely (Article 13).

When communicating with children, practitioners must view each child as unique, developing at their own rate. Speak to children at their level, ensuring they understand. Research shows that positive relationship formation can be affected by children's rate of development (Council on Children and Families n.d.). Relationship skills develop when a child experiences responsive, meaningful interactions with others, as supported by Bowlby (1969), who credits good maternal attachment with strong future relationships. Bowlby's views have been challenged, as most of his theories were based on animal studies. Schaffer and Emerson (1964) believe that children make multiple attachments. Children with additional learning needs can use alternative communication methods. If need is established, parents/carers can explain how their child understands best. If, however, you identify need later, seek advice from the SENCO, and/or health professionals/outside agencies, to ascertain methods that work best with the child. Children with an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), may have funding for extra support staff. These should be employed before transition (Burnham 2016).

Let children take the lead in conversation. Article 31 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to rest, play, culture and arts. Lots of communication can be encouraged through these areas. According to Communication, Language and Literacy from Birth to Five (2008), adults should facilitate children's play, not direct it, allowing them to explore their own ideas. Following their own theme will be of more interest to them, and they will speak more freely, at greater length. The adult will need to direct tasks such as tidy up time or end of session.

During the session however, the role of the adult can be changed, and you can be a participant playing alongside the children. Your actions in this scenario can arouse the children's interest, provoking them to speak or ask questions.

The language used around children has a big effect on language development. When adults initiate conversations, it is often done with questions, requiring brief answers. This can be solved by using more open questions, such as 'Who?' Or 'Why?', as this requires a more detailed, lengthy reply. The use of pauses during conversations with children can prove a useful strategy. As adults, pauses in conversation sometimes seem too long and we feel the need to fill them with conversation. However, children need the extra time to process what they have heard and find the words in their memory, to reply effectively. Plenty of time for conversation should be put aside during transition, to ensure all children have the chance to speak and respond in their own time.

Language and conversation used during transition, helps children express how they feel, or to regulate their emotions. Talking helps them understand that other people may have different opinions and views to them and that is acceptable. When they begin to understand people, they will find it easier to make new friendships (White 2019). Talking through disagreements, or about the way different people approach a task, helps children realise that everyone is different and thinks in a different way.

Methods of communication

There are various methods of communication.

Non-verbal communication, for example smiling and gestures can be used, such as giving a thumbs up signal. Pay attention to body language – maintain eye contact and nod occasionally to show you are still listening.

Verbal communication, is the main method used. Consider your tone, language and the emphasis you put on certain words.

Always consider cultural and social differences. Some cultures consider it impolite to make eye contact. Check school policies surrounding EAL and inclusion or speak to the school SENCo. EAL parents may benefit from visuals to support written information. Continued use of the home language should be encouraged, as this speeds up the process of learning a second language (Bell Foundation 2017). Utilise video messaging or a member of staff who speaks the child's home language.

Technology can assist communication by reaching everyone required. Use emails, newsletters or parent communication platforms such as DOJO, to inform people of their child's progress or upcoming events. Many parents are reluctant to speak in person, due to adverse school experiences of their own, or because of learning difficulties. However, most people are happy to check text messages, emails or social media. Electronic methods save time answering questions at the door, ensuring the safe arrival of the pupils into school.

Children with ASD or sensory impairment, may prefer to use sign language, braille or a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). The SENCo will advise on these strategies, or a Sensory Support Worker may attend (Burnham 2016). Staff should liaise with the Support Worker, to identify ways to assist the child's transition.

Partnerships

Working with parents

Language learning begins at home and practitioners should value the knowledge parents have of their child's development.

Some parents/carers struggle with speech and language, and this should be handled sensitively.

Consider parents who live apart, fathers who are sometimes less involved in their child's learning and parents/carers who speak English as a second language. Any literature circulated could be translated into a family's main language for easy reading. Purchon (2019) advises against jargon when speaking to EAL parents. Abbreviations should be avoided or explained simply. For example, SATS could be explained as 'important tests'.

Working with colleagues

Practitioners should be professional and supportive, considering how their actions impact others. Poor working relationships can affect the efficiency of your team.

According to Cockroft and Atkinson (2015), there are often poor working relationships between Teaching Assistants and their colleagues/employer. There is expectation to undertake work in their own time, complaints that pay does not match the level of responsibility held and that limited training opportunities are offered. These factors can lead to dissatisfaction.

Consideration should be given to colleagues with communication needs. You should always check that they understand instructions.

Working with outside agencies

Various outside agencies may communicate by telephone or email. These could include Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Autism Advisors, Educational Psychologists or Speech and Language Therapists. Where agencies are involved, meetings are held with parents, teachers, teaching assistants and the SENCo, all working together to devise an Education Health Care Plan.

Communication should be professional, clear and concise regarding the child's needs. Listen to parents/carers and what they want for their child. Parents trust practitioners to act *in loco parentis* (Burnham 2016) and both parties should discuss methods to ensure the child's success. This includes sharing ideas to reinforce good achievement and how to manage negative behaviour. Parents/carers can add to their child's assessment, by noting achievements at home and informing the teacher.

Interventions

Below are some interventions and strategies to support transition.

Ask 'who?', 'what?', 'why?' This encourages children to talk about their own experiences and feel that their opinion is valued. This reveals the child's own interests, providing ideas for resources to develop their learning.

When setting up the classroom, prepare laminated lists of words relating to each area and display them for children and practitioners to see and use, thus reinforcing the idea that activities have a specific place, and that print carries meaning.

Consider the size of groups. Smaller groups give scope for longer discussions. Consider group dynamics - if one child is a confident speaker, they may overshadow less confident pupils. It would be better to group children of similar abilities.

Use circle time for children to learn more about each other and themselves, and to build their communication skills by asking questions, listening and responding.

Co-construct – an adult and a child are both engaged in the learning process. They could investigate a new skill together and share thinking, meaning and understanding, through detailed communication.

Use real-life packaging in the home corner. Children will recognise things from their home environment and be eager to talk about them, giving the practitioner ideas about their culture and how this can be celebrated in school.

Arrange open days, when parents/carers can visit school with their child. Children can share what they have learned, giving opportunity for communication. It also involves the parent in their child's school life, enabling them to see what they do at school.

Arrange communication training sessions for staff, preferably in school time so everyone can attend.

Reflective practice

It is essential to reflect on the effectiveness of communication methods used. If they are not working, introduce a new approach swiftly, to prevent delay in children's development.

Proposed Outcomes

If transition is successful, children will be happy, feel safe and be confident, independent learners. They will develop new friendships, show increasing interest in school activities and become familiar with the new routines (Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families 2021)

Practitioners and parents will have a solid two-way relationship, working towards the child's development with their best interests at heart. Tailored communication will enable regular conversations about the child's needs, allowing more intensive support to be offered for those with specific needs (Education Endowment Foundation 2023).

Practitioners will understand children in the setting and know which resources will spark their interest and encourage future learning.

Formative assessment will decide next steps for children, based on observations and assessments completed. Children will meet age related milestones and be working towards the Early Learning Goals as specified in the EYFS framework.

Parents/carers will be confident that their children are safe and cared for by professional practitioners, with a good understanding of their needs. Regular review of any potential barriers to home/school partnerships will be undertaken and provision made as necessary (Wilson 2016).

Parents will understand how the EYFS framework is being delivered and know the activities being offered, along with the daily routine of the Nursery setting. Parents/carers will know how to support children's learning and how the setting will support them if their child has SEND issues. School policies (Safeguarding, Child Protection, Medicines in School, ICT) will have been shared with parents, along with staffing details and key worker information.

Practitioners and parents/carers work together to provide a holistic approach to the child's learning.

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