

A guide to transition in the early years



(Source: Forgotten Diseases Research Foundation, 2021)

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Introduction

This handbook is aimed to help and guide practitioners and key workers aiding children and their families through transition. It will explain what transitions are and the needs of children in their period of transition. It will look at the role an adult holds in children's transition, the importance of effective communication throughout the transition period and what interventions can be implemented to help children and their families have a smooth transition. Throughout the handbook it will explore the work of theorists and how it associates with transition. This handbook will particularly focus on the transition from the children's most known environment, being their home, and making the change to going into an unfamiliar setting and starting school in nursery following on in their journey into reception.

By the end of the handbook practitioners and key workers should have a better understanding on transitions and how they can ensure children and their families can have a smooth and successful transition by considering some of the practical interventions.

What is transition?

Transition is a process. Transitions can be as simple as going from playing to tidying up then moving into a new activity. In an educational perspective it is a journey that children, parents/carers or legal guardians and practitioners and key workers all go on together (Early Years Matters, 2021). Transitions are inevitable in a child's life (Early Education, 2021). Throughout a child's journey through education they will experience many transitions for example, leaving their parents or legal guardians for the first time to go to nursery or to a childminder. Then there is making the change from that setting to starting school and moving on from primary school to secondary school, all big transitions for a child that could be daunting and unnerving. For this reason, it is important transitions are handled smoothly so children can ease into their new setting.

Needs of the child

Edwards and Knight (1994) talk about parents shaping their children by teaching them manners, interacting with them by talking to develop their social skills. At home children have more of a sense of who they are, they have an understanding of the boundaries, what they are allowed to do and also what is expected of them.

Whereas in school, in a new environment the expectations are different and there is a routine. Routine is crucial for a child especially a child with ASD as it provides them with a sense of security and stability if they know what will happen next throughout their day in school. Natalie Higgins and David Gregory (2012) explain how children learn to know what to expect and how they are able to emotionally prepare themselves when they know the routine. However, if there is a change in the routine it is important that practitioners and key workers explain prior there will be a change so children have a chance to process the change and accept it. For example, if the usual routine would be maths then play, however maths will be interrupted by photo day practitioners and key workers need to explain to the children in the morning of the slight change to their routine.

For young children aged three going from their home with familiar faces everyday, to then going into a school environment with different adults and new children could prove to be quite challenging for some children, even their families. Supporting transitions in the Early Years (2008) states the early transitions children go through practitioners and key workers are required to rethink, quite thoroughly, about children's development and their needs and rights. Each child is an individual with different needs, therefore when it comes to a child transitioning it's important to remember that each child may settle into a new environment differently.

Understanding a child is vital for them to settle into a new environment. When a child feels understood it will allow for them to feel safe and secure, it will also help shape strong, trusting, emotional bonds between practitioner or key worker and a child (nct, 2019). Communication is key to building successful relationships with the children

however there are children who are non-verbal who use different means of communication such as PECS (picture exchange communication system) or sign language. Some children may not use another form of communication they may just use their body language or point or guide an adult to what they want; however when a child is in distress they may not be able to communicate this and their body language could be unclear to others. Therefore it is important that practitioners and key workers read a statement, if a child has one, to gain a brief understanding of the child. But to also communicate with parents and legal guardians as they know their child best and can help practitioners and key workers by giving an insight and explaining what certain sounds the child makes may mean. When the relationship between child and practitioner or key worker is built they will also know the child well enough to know and understand what they may be trying to communicate or recognise something is not right.

Observations provide practitioners and key workers with the opportunity to gain an understanding of where a child is at and how they can support the child's needs to progress and develop.

Role of the adult

When thinking of children's needs and how adults, practitioners and key workers, can support them through transitions they can draw their attention to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to 50MINUTES.COM (2015) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a visual representation of the 5 areas of needs.



(Source:ThoughtCo, 2020)

The purpose of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is to fulfill and satisfy the needs in each level, once that has been established individuals are able to progress and move on to the next level. Only once they have reached the top of the pyramid at self-actualization has all an individual's needs been met. To support children's transitions using Maslow's theory it is important practitioners and key workers get children to the top as soon as possible. First they need to meet the children's basic needs, this is the first two levels from the pyramid, physiological needs and safety needs. Once those first two needs are met the children will feel safe, comfortable and relaxed within the new setting allowing them for relationships to be built with the practitioners and also their peers this moves them into the middle portion of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, belongingness and love and also esteem.

Building those positive relationships is vital, this is done through effective communication. It is a part of the adult's role to not only have positive relationships and effective communication with the children but also with the parents or legal guardians. Prior to children starting in nursery it is important for practitioners and key workers to build a positive and professional relationship with parents and legal guardians as transitions can be a stressful time for the children and the families. It's the practitioners and key workers role to ensure the children and adults are coping with the change, helping them through it so it's a smooth and positive experience for all. From having successful, positive transitions early on in a child's life it could help them build up a resilience to transitions in the future. IRIS (2019) states building these relationships with parents allows for practitioners and key workers to keep parents and legal guardians up to date with their child's progression and to support and guide them with their child's development at home.

An article in the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal (Schärer, 2018, p.6) talks about educators finding building relationships easier with some parents than others. The article explains how this particular setting did have an open door policy however the parent took upon this literally resulting in constant phone calls and emails to the practitioners asking for updates on their child. 1.32 in The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge (pg, 15) states 'be aware communication may be inhibited by factors such as cultural backgrounds'. This statement can be related back to what was mentioned from (Schärer, 2018, p.6). Practitioners and key workers have many contributing factors as to why communication with parents and legal guardians may be inhibited, for example their day routine. In an early years setting the environment is quite busy from children playing, exploring, teaching time, lesson prep time, dealing with challenging behaviour, practitioners have a full busy day and may not always have the time throughout the day to communicate with parents or legal guardians due to the demands of their role.

Building these positive relationships with children will allow for practitioners and particularly key workers to form secure attachments with the children. It is key to have these types of relationships with the children, secure attachment shows the child is happy, secure and exploring their environment. HelpGuide (2020) states secure attachment is the bond between child and adult that ensures the child feels

secure, they feel as though they are understood and they are calm enough to be able to experience optimal development in their nervous system. John Bowlby's theory on attachment was developed after he made observations on children who were hospitalized and institutionalized. These were children who had been separated from their parents. Bowlby's findings were that children need to have a close and continuous caregiving relationship, the mother being the main caregiver (Inge Bretherton, 1992). Nick Rose (2019) states Bowlby believed the early experiences of attachment children have with their primary caregiver developed an internal 'working model'. Children use this to help build relationships with secondary attachment figures.

There are different types of attachment which could have an impact on how children deal with transition and new people. Bowlby identified these types of attachment as secure, ambivalent (anxious), avoidant and disorganised (The Wave Clinic, 2020). The effects of secure attachment on children mean they have positive relationships with their peers, tuned into their emotions and can show empathy. They are confident and secure with themselves. These children have built up a resilience they are not afraid of failure and are able to deal with disappointment. Avoidant attachment is when a child learns to believe their needs will not be met, they grow up feeling as though they are unloved and insignificant. They do not know how to express their emotions therefore suppress how they feel and they become independent by distracting themselves from relationships with parents by doing things because their parents are distant, disengaging and possibly neglectful. A child who has avoidant attachment may present themselves as quiet and withdrawn and does not explore like a child who has secure attachment. Jacob Ham (2017) describes ambivalent attachment as children wanting support but rejecting it from their caregiver because they are inconsistent and can be quite harmful or in extreme cases abusive to children. These children become stuck within a cycle of wanting support from their caregiver when they are upset, the caregiver responding by being hurtful towards the child so the run off to only come back to the caregiver because of their attachment and wanting support to be met with the same response. Therefore the child becomes scared and upset and runs away but then again wants the support from their caregiver leaving them in this cycle of attachment needs not being met. The last attachment this handbook will discuss is disorganised attachment.

According to PsychAlive (2021) disorganised attachment in when the caregivers behaviour is seen as unpredictable, they can frighten the child. This could be through abuse, neglect or unresolved trauma. When a caregiver shows this type of behaviour it does not allow for children to feel safe, secure and not getting their needs met. It's important practitioners recognise the different attachment styles as they could have an impact on how a child deals with transitions and how they form relationships with peers and adults in the setting.

Enviroment

The role of the adult is to also provide children with opportunities that allow them to play, explore, develop and grow. Theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Montessori express the need for children to have a rich learning environment. According to The Borgen Project (2016) they talk about the importance of Montessori education and how the classroom helps to build a sense of responsibility in a child. Children learn the value of independence, they help each other, they are capable of making the right decisions and they seek knowledge for themselves. The classrooms are constructed to meet the needs of the children and set up with child-size materials and furniture. Montessori believed in children learning through doing and having ample amounts of free time. By having an environment with toys and equipment made with natural materials children are able from a young age how to handle such resources, they learn the value of them and how to handle them with care when they play. This therefore links into Piaget's theory of the importance of a rich learning environment as his theory suggests when children interact with their surroundings they construct meaning, how they interact within their environments is what creates their learning (Mielonen and Paterson, 2009, p.3).

The environment plays a vital role in a child's transition. Going back to Maslow and his Hierarchy of Needs, the adults need to ensure they are meeting the child's basic needs of feeling safe in the new environment. Only then can that child progress onto the next stage of Maslow's theory and build those relationships with adults and peers.



(Source:ThoughtCo,

2020)

The environment needs to be inviting and stimulating for children to allow them the opportunity to learn and explore and develop as individuals. The environment should

support each child's individual learning through play, this will help support their own decision making. (NurseryWorld, 2008).

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) states children have the right to rest, leisure and to engage in play. Play is a great way to settle a child into a new environment, to become comfortable, happy and move up to the next level in Maslow's theory. According to Supporting Transitions: Using Child Development as a Guide (no date) children manage transitions best when adults provide children with a well-organised environment with clearly defined areas. Children remember where certain toys are kept and associate the areas with where they are allowed to play with them for example, having the building blocks or trains on the carpet, messy play in the creative area, dressing up in the role play area.

There are various theorists who talk about the importance of play and how children learn through play, their interactions with the world and through their own natural growth. P. Smith (2009) states Vygotsky described play as being a main source of development in the early years. Vygotsky looked at the cognitive importance of play, the nature of pretend play and children using their imagination to separate objects from meaning. For example, a child may view a stick and pretend it is a magic wand. Piaget developed a cognitive theory of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is taking new knowledge and fitting it in with the existing knowledge. Accommodation is when new information is presented. For this new information to be truly understood the human brain needs to adapt for it (Sprouts, 2020). This can be linked to bloom and prune. Bloom is the period of growth, more experiences had, more neural pathways are developed. Prune is when the brain takes knowledge we no longer need to attain and makes room for more neural pathways. Through the process of assimilation and accommodation children can achieve a new state of development. Piaget's view was children use assimilation in play, they act out what they already know (Smith, 2009. p,33).

According to National Improvement Hub (2021) research has shown play based approaches support children's individual creativity, resilience and communication development. The play based curriculum in Wales is the Foundation Phase. This document explains the importance of well planned play in order for play to be

efficient for children's learning and development. Well planned play helps children to understand, makesense and think about the world around them (Foundation Phase Play/Active learning, 2008).

Interventions

There are many interventions that can be implemented in order to provide children and families with support to ensure a smooth transition. Interventions such as social stories sent out to all the children attending the setting. Social stories are short stories that can be made for certain children or for as a whole class. They provide children with guidance with when, why, what, who and when situations. A transition social story will explain to children they are going to a new setting with new people, the story can include pictures of the staff to help children recognise them when they meet. For social stories to be effective there needs to be consistency in reading them everyday (S,Tours and L, Dennis 2015).

Arrangements to have the child and their parents/legal guardians visit the setting before they start provides the child with an opportunity to get a feel for the room, they are able to explore, meet the staff and to have a play. Parent/legal guardians also have an opportunity to meet the staff and ask any questions to help them also with the transition. Pre-visits to the setting are a good way to dispel any worries families may have prior to their child starting (Oxfordshire County Council, 2017).

Some children may benefit from a staggered start to ease them into the new setting meaning, then only attend for an hour or so a day and gradually build up to full time.

Visual time tables provide structure to the setting and allow for children to clearly see how their day will plan out. It gives children reassurance and a sense of security when they are able to see what is going to happen next.

The first couple of days and maybe weeks can be quite difficult for not only children settling in but for the parents/ legal guardians as well. So to support them during their child's transition, staff could send out a message telling them their child has settled well and maybe a photo to show them happy playing.

The proposed outcomes for transitions is ensuring children settle into the setting as quickly as possible. Families and children building relationships with practitioners, key workers through effective communication. Ensuring children feel safe secure,comfortable and happy. It is important practitioners and key workers recognise that each child is an individual, some may settle quicker than others. That is why positive relationships are key to ensure children are feeling welcomed and safe.

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