

Supporting Children with Autism During Transition



(Source: Dewis Cymru ,2020)

A Practitioners Guide

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Introduction

The purpose of this handbook is to give early years practitioners guidance to be able to support children with autism during their transition from nursery to reception.

Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017) claims that without adequate support transitions in education for children with additional learning needs are sometimes strenuous.

This handbook will cover areas such as effective communication with the child and their family. Suitable interventions will be discussed and an indication on the expected outcomes will be noted. Throughout the handbook you should notice an emphasis on communication, this is because, as Marks (2013) claims, transitions are strengthened when there is effective communication between professionals and families.

What is a transition?

Allingham (2011) describes the term transition as being a transformation that affects the routine of the child and occasionally the adult too. Crutchley (2015) agrees, specifying a transition within education to be a change in setting, class, or year group, with the impact of transitions on children with additional learning needs (ALN) being negative. Hanbury (2012) states that transitions are a stress inducing time for children with autism, and as such the changes need to be managed carefully.

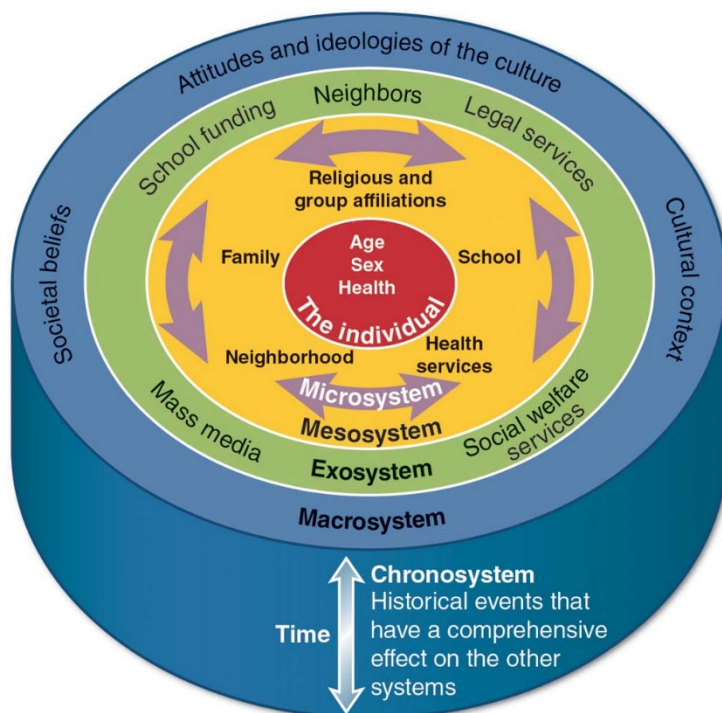
The Role of the Adult

When thinking about the role the adult plays during transitions, child development theories can be applied.

Bronfenbrenner

Haye, Otoole and Halpenny (2017) state that the role of the early year's practitioner is important in the development of children. It is claimed that within the community, the social, economic, and political environment that children are exposed to play an influential part in their development.

Bronfenbrenner developed a bioecological model of development, consisting of different layers, with the child placed in the centre.



(Source: Leadership and Education ,2018)

The microsystem is the layer nearest the child and consists of parts of the environment that have a direct influence on the child's development, such as, family, school, peers, and neighbours.

The mesosystem is the second layer, and it is here that Bronfenbrenner claims that the relationships and interactions between two microsystems play a role in the development of the child.

The exosystem is where environments that the child is not in direct contact with can have an indirect effect on their development.

The macrosystem is the fourth level of Bronfenbrenner's theory and it relates to the wider cultural influences on the child.

The chronosystem relates to timing and events, such as transitions, that the child encounters throughout their life, and how experiences of these events can influence further events (Aubrey and Riley 2022).

The Parent

It is important to consider the parents role in transitions and how important it is to maintain excellent communication between home and school (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny 2017). This is related to the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's theory and his acknowledgement of the impact good interrelations can have on a child's development. Ricciardi (2013) similarly states that information between school and parent should be shared and claims that having two-way communication is important. Allen (2013) maintains that the development of relationships between parents and school should start early. Ward (2013) expresses how parents know the most about their child, and so to have a trusting relationship with effective communication is key in gaining access to this knowledge. Which in turn will help you to be able to understand the child and help them during their transition.

The Key Worker

The Welsh Government (2021) recommends that for a child to reach their full potential it is imperative that the adults who have the most vital roles in their life take onus in enabling the individual to achieve their best.

Therefore, as a practitioner in the early years sector, it is important to realise the role that you play in supporting successful transitions and what knowledge and skills are required of you.

It is essential to understand that you have a responsibility for the safeguarding of children within your care and that having knowledge on the rights of the child as laid out in the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children) and the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) is essential in ensuring the voices of children with and without disabilities are heard. By listening to the voice of the child, a person-centred approach to their education can be taken. Jean Piaget and similarly Froebel were advocates for a child-centred approach to learning and development (Pound 2005).

Bowlby's theory of attachment

Pound (2005) summarised Bowlby's attachment theory as the preferred closeness a child takes to an adult or adults. This closeness, which both the adult and child play a part in, instils a sense of security in the child and when detachment occurs, feelings of anxiousness and being frightened are prominent. This behaviour is not only seen in children, but throughout life. The seeking of reassurance from loved ones is often seen during challenging times. Bowlby theorised that attachments experienced during early life are influential on the formation of relationships later.

Rose and Rogers (2012) express that for a child to feel safe, they need to form a secure attachment to a key person. Only when this has happened will the child feel comfortable venturing to and from the environment, for example, from home to school and seeking refuge in a safe space during times of distress. This is important in children with autism, as having that safe space to retreat to during an episode of sensory overload is vital for their wellbeing.

Attunement can also help to develop secure attachments. Being able to empathetically respond to a child, especially in a time of distress, can create interactional synchrony. Autistic children may have trouble communicating their feelings and so as their key worker, being able to tune in to their emotions is a crucial way to understand when they need additional support (Rose and Rogers 2012).

Smidt (2010) notes that to be able to understand a child, the child must be observed. It is only through watching a child that their interests and needs can be deciphered, and it is then that the key worker can use this observation to plan activities that will be of interest to the child or respond to their needs. By recording observations, you as the key worker can construct a plan to enhance and enrich the child's learning and document evidence in their developmental progress. Paffard (2010) explains Piaget's work on schemas, defining a schema as being a repeated pattern of behaviour. This pattern of behaviour is thought to influence the child's learning. The Autistic Society (2022) include having interests that are highly focussed as a trait of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). When the child is observed these interests or schemas can be recognised and harnessed to provide an interesting and stimulating environment in which they feel safe, known and where their learning can thrive.

The Needs of the Child

Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC) state that every decision made concerning a child must have the child's best interests and concerns at the forefront (UNICEF 2009). By treating each child as an individual, you are respecting this right. Additionally, article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) states that measures should be taken to ensure that children with disabilities can express their views and feelings regarding matters that affect them and that their best interests are of primary concern (United Nations). Welsh Government (2021) aims to ensure a person-centred practice, regarding the involvement and support for children, parents and young people. Taking in to account the rights as laid out in the UNCRPD. By communicating effectively with parents and children regarding what is expected of their education and what individual needs are required for the full potential of the child to be reached, you will be respecting the rights of the child as outlined above.

Willis (2009) claims that most children with additional learning needs are afraid of changes to routine, people, and settings. As such the recommendation is made that the child and their family are invited to view their new classroom and meet their key worker prior to the new school year. However, Bronfenbrenner believed that it is in the child's best interests for keyworkers to get to know the child and their family in their own environment, as this is where a true representation of the nature of the child can be seen (Aubrey 2022). Taking this into account, arranging a home visit may be beneficial in building a solid foundation to form a good relationship with.

Both recommendations are a good opportunity for you to engage with the child, finding out about the likes and dislikes they may have and discussing with the family any challenges that may be prevalent, such as toileting, eating, or being within a group. However, Arnold (2018) suggests against initiating a conversation about the child's diagnosis, but to ask open questions to find out what they like, what method of communication is preferred and to find out about the whole family. Conversing in this way creates positivity, building confidence between the parent and yourself. Dunhill (2010) states how communicating poorly with children can have a detrimental effect

on their ability to have their needs and wishes understood, which subsequently results in frustration and them not being able to reach their full potential. Martin (2018) explains how effective communication is important in building trustworthy relationships between you, the key worker, and the child as well as their parents.



Above is an image of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is a major influential theory in education and consists of a pyramid broken into five stages. The first stage concerning the basic physiological needs, such as food, water, air, and sleep. The second stage is to do with the requirement to feel safe and secure and the third stage leads to a sense of belonging, love, and affection. The fourth stage is about accomplishment, self-esteem and sense of self-worth and the final stage being self-actualisation where full potential has been reached (Gray and MacBlain 2012). The UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children) article 6 states that every child has the right to develop to their full potential (UNICEF 2009). In an educational setting, as a key worker, you can ensure that the child has access to snacks and drinks when they should require them, by doing so you are ensuring the first stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs is being met. Only when this is fulfilled can the child progress to the next stage of feeling safe. Children, especially those with autism, like a sense of routine, and this can contribute to them feeling secure in a setting. Willis (2009) suggests that children with autism like knowing what is expected of them and their schedule, recommending that the use of a visual

timetable may be beneficial along with verbal reminders about what will be next to happen. Often children with autism can become overwhelmed and can experience meltdowns and shutdowns. It is important to allow them time and space to overcome the overwhelming feelings they are having. By providing a quiet, dark space for the child to be in, a sense of safety and security may be felt (Autism Society 2022). When the child acknowledges that there is safe space for them, the second stage of the pyramid of hierarchy is likely to be fulfilled. Ricciardi (2013) claims that a sense of belonging and security can be felt by the child through the wearing of a uniform. Acceptance by peers can also have an impact on the child's sense of belonging, which in turn can affect their self-esteem. Building a good relationship with yourself and the making of friends, can help to fulfil the penultimate level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, resulting in the child being all they can be and reaching self-actualisation.

Whilst engaging with the child it is important to think about the method of communication to use. A child with autism may be verbal or non-verbal, have difficulty interpreting body language and tone and intonation of your voice. It is important to understand the differences in social communication that the child may have compared to their mainstream peers. Building on this skill of communication can give them the tool to interact with a greater number of people, building their self-confidence (Autistic Society, 2022). Quintero (2011) claims that children with disabilities who find communicating difficult, can find the process of transitioning to school harder than their peers, making it apparent that a focus on strengthening communication can help the child to transition.

As well as the vertical transition of starting in reception class, attention should also be paid to ensuring that horizontal transitions, such as arriving at school, lunchtime, play time and visiting the toilet happen at the same time and occur in a consistent pattern. For the child to have this predictability in routine helps them to structure their day, feeling personally secure and maintaining a sense of connection to the working of the class (Willis 2009).

Interventions

Welcome packs

By issuing welcome packs and inviting parents to express concerns and ask questions, in an open and honest manner, shows the commitment of the school in supporting children through the transition, building trust and a strong relationship from the start (Allen 2013).

Home visits

A home visit is an opportunity to form a good relationship with both the child and the parent. It is a chance for you to informally discuss the transition in a relaxed environment where the parents can share information regarding their child in confidence. It is also an opportunity to get an idea of the child's likes and dislikes so that you can prepare provisions for the start of the term (Allingham 2011).

Bringing a familiar object to school

Paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott recognised the significance of transitional objects to help children cope with separation. Allowing the child to bring a favourite toy or familiar object to school can act as a comforting link between family and school. (Pound 2005)

Reward charts and incentives

Skinner believed that rewarding good behaviour through positive reinforcers can encourage and strengthen a behaviour. He also believed that discouraging certain behaviours through negative reinforcers, or punishment was effective. However, he recognised that constant appraisal may lead to the value of praise diminishing and

recommends that once a behaviour is established that the frequency of the rewards given should reduce (Gray and MacBlain 2012). Gray and MacBlain (2012) states that Skinner's techniques continue to be used as interventions for children with autism. Similarly, the Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) approach, is used in children with autism to reinforce appropriate behaviours. The focus is on rewarding behaviours that are desired and ignoring those behaviours that are unwanted. It is claimed that behaviours that are disruptive have been reduced using this approach before they have become established. Lovaas, who developed the ABA approach recommends implementation occurs in children before they turn 5 years of age (Gray and MacBlain 2012). However, Pound (2005) critiques behaviourism, claiming that it does not consider the emotional motives behind the behaviour and that by rewarding or punishing in this way, no consideration is taken for the mind and soul of the human.

Home-school books.

A home-school book is a way of sharing information between the home and the school. It can include details of the day, be them achievements or struggles and can also include pictures of activities that have been undertaken. It is encouraged that parents/carers read the book daily and add their own notes for school to read (Whalley 2001).

Peer Educating

As mentioned previously in the guide, Bronfenbrenner expresses the affect that peer relationships can have on child development. An autistic child transitioning in a mainstream school may have difficulties being understood by their peers, being wrongly labelled, and judged, resulting in difficulty forming good peer relationships. The National Autism Team, funded by the Welsh Government have a website aimed at improving the lives of autistic people. Within their website are various resources, including information designed for use in primary schools aimed to educate pupils about autism, increasing understanding and giving advice on ways to respond to the individual needs of the child (Autism Wales 2020). Hanbury (2012) expresses the

importance in gaining permission from the autistic child and their family before initiating any training, as this is accounting for the individual rights of the child as laid out in article 12 of the UNCRC.

Desired Outcomes

The Welsh government (2021) have set out four purposes of the curriculum in Wales. These being,

- 1) The learner is healthy and confident.
- 2) The learner is ambitious and capable.
- 3) The learner is an ethical and informed member of society.
- 4) The learner contributes in an enterprising and creative way.

Fabian and Dunlop (2007) believe that supporting emotional wellbeing during transitions is important as it encourages the formation of relationships, through the child being confident and capable. Effective communication and positivity are desired outcomes that will enable the child to feel happy and secure in their unfamiliar environment. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) subsequently claim that this contributes to the child being an ambitious learner. As Maslow depicted in his hierarchy of needs, the child's development is reliant on their emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging. Brooker (2008) agrees arguing that belonging and wellbeing are an important outcome when evaluating the goals of transitions. Confidence is noted as being another feature in a successful transition, which can be seen in forms of the child's willingness to approach you as a key worker as well as other staff members, their ability to make new friends and their approach to future transitions (Brooker 2008).

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