An Early Years Practitioners Handbook:

A guide to Childhood Transitions

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Introduction

The purpose of this handbook is to support and guide early years practitioners in providing a smooth and positive transition experience for children entering a childcare setting for the first time. It will cover the needs of the child, the role of the adult, partnerships, environment, interventions, and proposed outcomes.
It will also look at some of the theories connected with transitions in early years.

What is transition?

According to Early Years Matters (2020) transition is a change in situation or environment that has a definite effect on development. They are milestone events for a child; therefore, it is important to get it right. Transition has been described as an ongoing journey rather than a destination.

Babies and children will go through several transitions in their first few years of life, then going forward into adulthood. Some will be small, for example in their everyday routines, others big, like moving house or a new sibling, and sometimes they experience more than one at the same time. All of which could have a significant effect on how they develop and who they become as a person, if the transition does not end with the best outcome. A transition can be exciting or scary, filled with trepidation or confidence, or a combination of emotions. Therefore, it is in the best interests of practitioners to effectively work and communicate with parents/carers and provide understanding and support for the child to successfully transition. Vogler (2008) refers to the two types of transition as horizontal and vertical, horizontal having the least impact and the latter being major changes.

This handbook aims to provide guidance on how best a practitioner can facilitate their role professionally and be committed to the needs of the child in their care, along with respecting the parents. The importance of well managed and planned transitions is emphasised by good practice. A practitioner should be aware that each child may adjust in their own way and time, to consider family circumstances and be inclusive. (Welsh Government 2017a).

The Role of the Adult

For a practitioner to be fully supportive and facilitate effective transitions in the early years setting, they need to be conscious of the knowledge and skills required for success to be achieved.

“Bowlby proposed that attachment is an innate device intended to protect the immature offspring of a species by attracting adults who will ensure their survival” (Powell and Smith 2018, p.82), therefore children, and in particular babies, need to form strong bonds with primary caregivers. Children thrive when their needs are met by key people that they know, respect and trust, also by having a key person who knows and understands them. This will support their personal, emotional, and social development, which is why a key person’s role is important. (Pacey 2022)

All settings in Wales that care for children in a childminder or day care setting under the age of 12 years are required to register and meet the regulations of the National Minimum Standards that are relevant to their setting practice. It is the responsibility of the registered person or in some settings a designated staff member to comply with these regulations and have policies and procedures in place. (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2016)

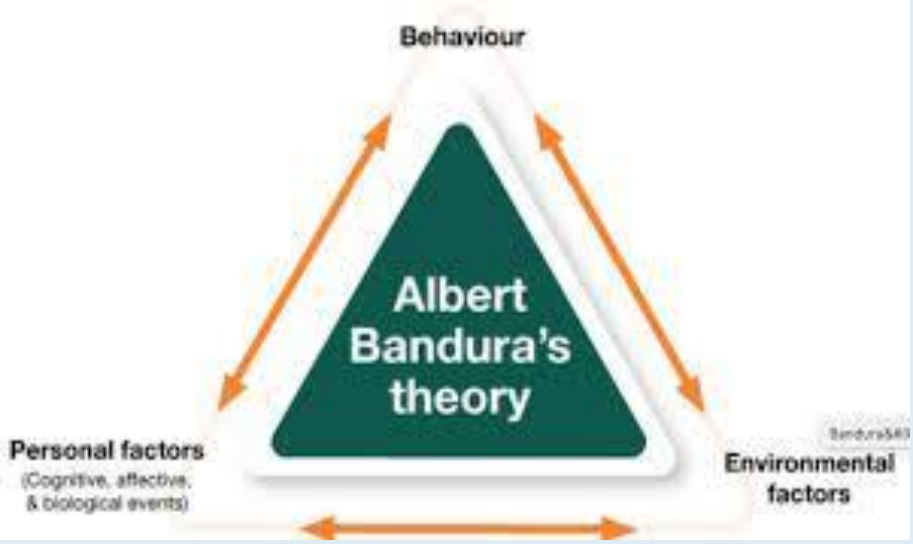
The standards that are key for ensuring a smooth transition for each child and their family include:

Wales National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Assessment - Standard 3 and Meeting Individual Needs - Standard 4 - states that “all children have their needs and preferences identified and their parents know how these will be met” and “each child’s individual needs, including and any special educational needs and disabilities, are planned and provided for”
Wales National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Working in Partnership with Parents - Standard 6 – states that “parents are kept fully involved in and informed about, their child’s activities, achievement and progress”
Wales National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Nurture and Wellbeing – Standard 8 – states that “Children feel secure, happy and comfortable with their carers and in their environment, and their rights are respected” (CIW, 2016)

Therefore, a practitioner is required to gather as much information about a child as possible to have a clear picture of them and for plans to be made ready for the child before they start. By working with the parents, they also feel valued and well informed about their child and that the proper care is provided. In Standard 8, there is an emphasis on the importance of the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) that a practitioner needs to be aware of, along with ensuring children feel secure, happy, and content.

Role-Modelling

Trodd (2013) explains that if we relate to Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy, and act as a good role-model a child's experience of transitions can be supported and successful, which in turn promote a capacity to reach goals and develop a resilience for subsequent transitions. If a child observes positive transitions from others they associate with and experience stories of transitions, this will help them to understand that their own transitions are a part of life. For a child to develop holistic sense of self-belief and a feeling of well-being in successful transitions they need social and emotional support and to acquire self-awareness, ideas and relevant vocabulary that will enable them to do so. This is equally important in the role of the parent and the practitioner.



(source: Educational Technology 2020)

The Needs of the Child

Winnicott's theory (1964) signifies the importance of the role of the mother, or primary care giver, similar to Bowlby, it is a matter of survival. He recognised that a baby is vulnerable and totally dependent and needs a nurturing, supportive and loving environment to thrive. Whoever the care giver is, the care should be the same.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is a five-tier pyramid model defining the needs of a human. At the base are physiological needs; food, water, sleep, shelter, next are needs of safety; health, security, resources, then love and belonging, before esteem and finally self-actualization. This model can be split into two further parts; deficiency and growth needs, the first four sections being deficiency and the top growth, these can affect motivation, whether the needs have been fulfilled or not. His theory suggests if basic needs are not met in the right order, a person is unable to achieve their full potential and be the best they can be. (Simply Psychology, 2018)
This is relevant in the transition into a new setting because if a child is not feeling safe, secure, and happy, they may refuse to eat, drink or sleep, therefore not meeting their basic needs and as a result may struggle to build relationships, develop their sense of self-esteem, or grow into independent learners.

(source: simply psychology.org 2022)

However, as Lindon (2012) suggests, to be an effective practitioner, a more holistic approach is required, where the whole child should be kept in mind due to the possibility of more complex circumstances within a child's start to life before they join a setting. If, for example, a child is fostered or adopted and has experienced neglect or deprivation, this may have an impact on how they behave and their outlook on the world around them may differ.

In the Pikler approach, practices were developed to ensure that every child had a strong relationship with one practitioner, experiencing quality interactions and affection for positive developmental outcomes. Along with basic caregiving needs being met, structure and predictability, were valuable opportunities to learn through unrushed one-to-one and responsive interactions resulting in shared attention and rich communication with their caregiver and these prime times are considered to be of great benefit for shared enjoyment, intimacy, and cooperation. As a result, children learn language, manipulative skills and develop their capacity for self-regulation and independence (The Education Hub, 2020).

When transitioning from home, and their mother, to their first childcare setting, it is important for practitioners to create an environment that is built on routine, familiarity, and consistency. To incorporate their individual interests and needs a practitioner needs to observe the child. A few visits to the setting prior to starting will give this opportunity, some parents may require prior notice due to their commitments. The visits can be a short stay to begin with, building up to longer times, with a parent sitting in for reassurance, then gradually leaving. This can be especially beneficial for a child that has not been left in the care of any other adults until this time and could depend on their age and stage of development as to how they respond and settle. Some children will transition from visits to permanent attendance easily, others will find it difficult. (Smidt 2007)
Separation anxiety is common between the ages of six months to three years and is a normal part of a young child's development. It is a sign that they are starting to realise how dependent they are on the key people that care for them. (NHS 2022)

Article 12 of the UNCRC "respect for the views of the child" (UNICEF, 2019) states that every child must have their views and feelings taken seriously. Article 13 and Article 31 highlight the right to freedom of expression and that children have a right to relax, play and join in a wide range of activities.
Play is an important part of a successful transition and can be initiated by an adult or the child, Piaget (1951), Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1974) all played pivotal roles in the shaping of educational practices. (Powell and Smith, 2018)

> "Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling. It constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child. At this age play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant" (Froebel in Lilley 1967:84) (Tovey, 2020).

According to Bowlby's theory of attachment, the key figure is the secure base from which babies and young children feel confident to explore their surroundings, knowing someone is available when they feel hungry, tired, distressed, or uncomfortable. Children that have secure attachments are more inclined to see themselves as a loveable person and to be helpful and responsible. (PACEY, 2014)

Partnerships

Working in close partnership with parents, families and community.
Froebel argued that any nursery or school should be in 'close and living relationship' with people's lives' (Froebel in Lilley 1967:168)
Tovey, 2020)

Working in partnership is a key part of being committed to a child's development and by establishing strong relationships with everyone involved in a child's life it will ensure a clear plan and smooth transition. The partnerships involved may include parents, family, keyworker, and a multi-agency team. A child may attend more than one setting or go to a Grandparent some days and a Childminder on others.
If they all work in partnership the child remains at the core.

This is highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model, The Ecological Theory of Child Development.

During transition, the child is at the centre, there are five more rings around the child, these comprise of:

The Microsystem - the child's immediate surroundings; family, siblings, and friends

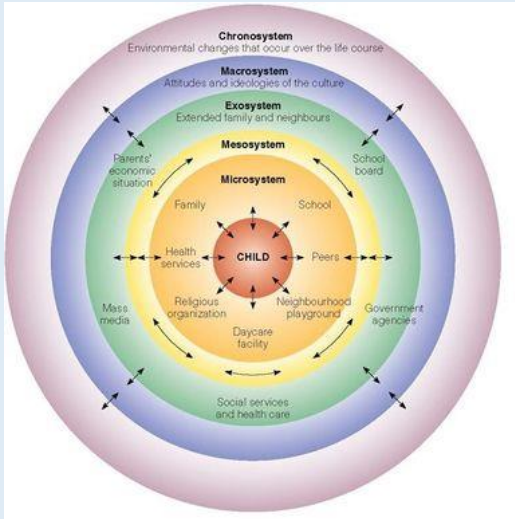
The Mesosystem, relationships and interactions involved in the microsystem

The Exosystem, indirect social organisations; parents work, Neighbourhoods

The Macrosystem – Cultural values, laws and government resources

The Cronosystem – Changes that occur over time both on a personal and cultural level.

Reflecting on his background, Bronfenbrenner likened these systems as nested, each within the next, much like a set of Matryoshka (Russian) dolls. (Haynes *et al., 2017)*



(Source: simply psychology.org 2020)

Interventions

This section of the handbook will look at interventions that support babies and children through their transition into their first childcare setting.
For this to be as successful as possible procedures can be put in place and steps taken to ensure that the child feels valued, safe, and secure. This can be achieved through professionalism, commitment and high-quality childcare provided by the practitioner and with good communication with the child's family.

According to Montessori, it is important for a setting to be welcoming, calm, inclusive, consistent, and organised (Aubrey and Riley 2019)

Settings can be influenced by the methods used not just within their own country, but from around the world. The Te Whāriki curriculum from New Zealand is a framework that has shaped their distinct holistic approach to early learning since 1996. Te Whāriki is Māori for woven mat and can be visualised as development and learning interweaving to symbolise the foundational principles, goals, and strands. The framework expresses the vision that all children grow to be confident and competent learners, with a strong sense of identity, culture, and language. There is an emphasis on the shared future, bicultural foundation and multiculture of the country. With the support of adults who have their best interests at heart and know them well, the curriculum encourages all children to learn in their own way. The underpinning concept enables and supports diversity, and the vision is expressed in various ways as early learning settings work with parents, whanau (family) and communities to implement and design a programme of development and learning that supports each child's individual learning pathway and reflects local priorities. (Ministry of Education 2017)

Wales National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Information - Standard 1 – states that parents have all the information they need to make an informed decision about the childcare they require.
All registered settings must compile a Statement of Purpose. The aim is to provide parents with accurate and sufficient information, including ratios, staffing, hours of business, range of needs for children and ages of children. This can be provided in writing and orally. (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2016).

Along with performing observations and taking written information about the child from their initial visits to the setting, there are several other settling-in procedures that can take place:

- The practitioner can carry out a home visit, in this way, it can be beneficial to observe the child in their own home, where both the child and parent feel relaxed and comfortable.

- An ‘All about Me’ form can be given to the parent to complete; this can be kept in the child’s records for reflection and a beneficial way for the setting to learn about the child’s home routine, any special requirements or additional needs, preferred foods and drinks, dislikes or fears, sleep pattern, favourite songs, books and activities, siblings and pets, and general temperament.
- A settling-in period can be put into place for an agreed amount of time for all parties to have time to decide that the setting is right for them.
- It could be suggested that the baby or young child bring something familiar from home, either a comforter or special toy, a blanket or item of clothing that smells of their mother, an older child may like to bring photos of their parents, siblings, or pets. All these can help a transition go positively and help the child feel happy in the new environment.
- It is good practice to be mindful of how the parents may be feeling, this could be their first experience of a childcare setting too and they might be feeling anxious about leaving their child or guilty about returning to work, therefore getting to know them is just as important as building a relationship with the child.
- The child may attend more than one setting, they could go to a Grandparent for example, which can have an impact on their transition.
- The other children currently attending the setting should be accounted for when a new child starts, they may become unsettled and need some extra comfort and encouragement to welcome the new addition.

(Pacey 2014)

Proposed Outcomes

When a child is happy, content and settled the transition has been a success. Evidence of this will be observed by the child's overall well-being, they will play independently, and depending on their stage of development, with peers, have a strong relationship with their practitioner and over their time in the setting develop and blossom. In turn this experience will prepare the child for further transitions, for example, starting school.
In The New Curriculum for Wales, The Professor Graham Donaldson report identifies that there should be a focus on four purposes, they should be designed so that children become:

- Ambitious capable learners
- Enterprising, creative contributors
- Ethical, informed citizens
- Healthy confident individuals.

As each child is individual and has their own personality, each transition will be different and should be planned accordingly. To ensure good practice and a proposed outcome that is as successful as possible, children and their parents should receive practical and emotional support, learning and developmental guidance, continuity of care to enhance well-being and inclusion.
(Welsh Government 2018)

(Source: Welsh Gov, 2018)