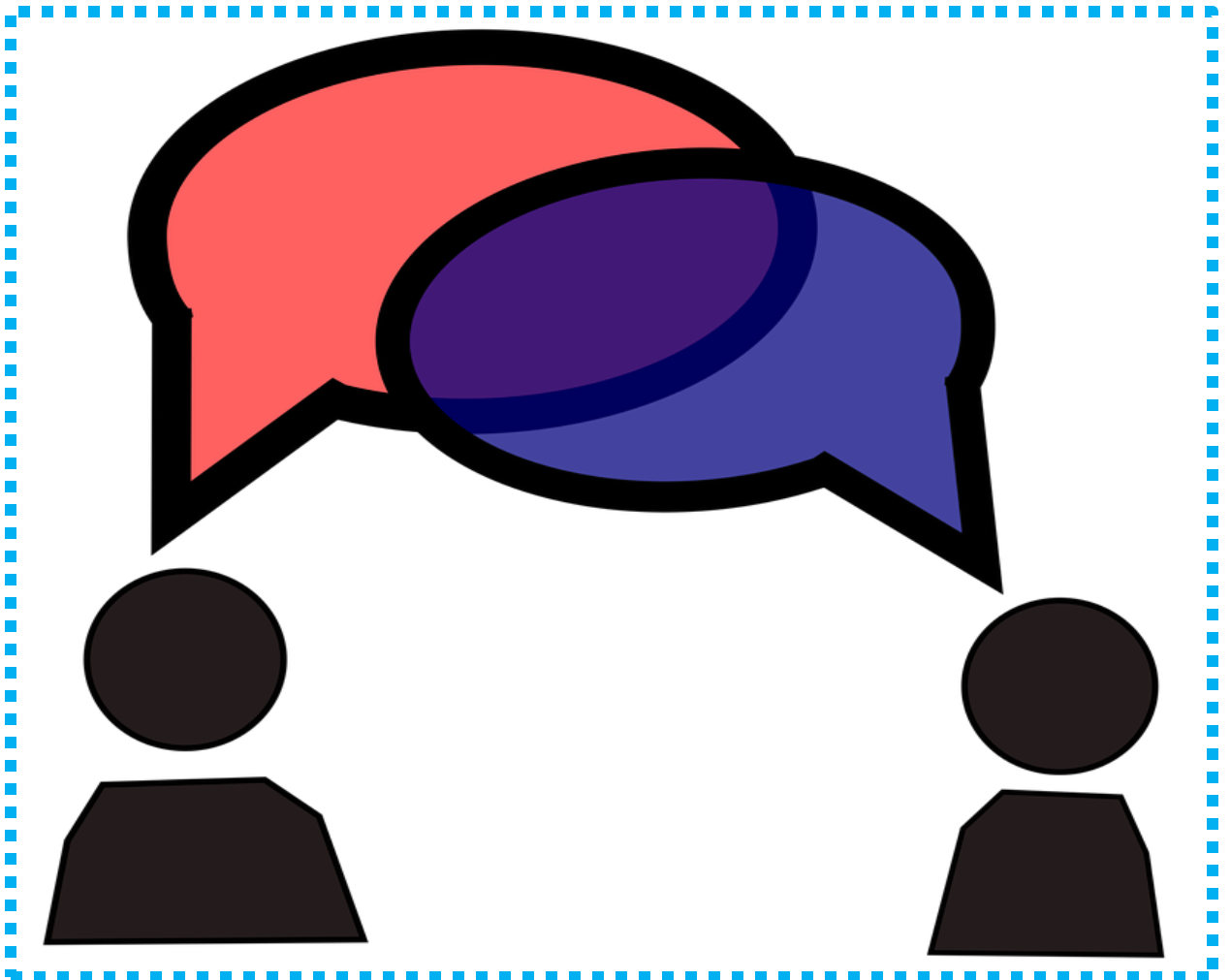


# The Importance of Effective Communication During Periods of Transition



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## A Handbook for Key Workers in Early Years

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# 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, at age three to four years.

For many children, Nursery is their first step away from the comfort and security of their home and family, into the world of education.

This handbook outlines specific areas where practitioners can support both children, parents/carers and other stakeholders by communicating effectively. According to Early Years Matters when parents and people in 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. Adam & Christenson (2000) state that school/family co-operation is main factor that helps improve trust in schools. If parents are made aware of the school's expectations 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?

Transition can be explained as a person or item changing from one state to another.

The purpose of this handbook, is to look specifically at the changes a child will encounter, when starting Nursery for the first time and how effective communication can make the change more manageable for everyone involved.

According to Maslow (1943), a child moves through a pyramid of needs, beginning with basic needs such as needing food, water and sleep for survival, then having their health and safety needs met. These needs are a child's right under the UNRC Section 24. A child will hopefully have had these needs met to a good standard by their parents/carers. Through discussion with parents/carers and any outside agencies involved, it may become apparent, that this is not the case for a variety of reasons, including poverty, poor time management or cultural differences. An example of this is when a child arrives at Nursery every day, not having eaten breakfast. This could be a result of parents/carers being unable to afford food or simply that time constraints mean they do not have time to prepare breakfast before leaving for school. It is in situations such as this that settings need to step in and meet the need, by making sure toast, fruit and water are on offer as soon as the child arrives and for a specified period throughout the day.

The child's biological and physiological needs will continue to be catered for in Nursery. It is a practitioner's responsibility to provide a safe, secure environment in which a child can thrive without fear of harming themselves. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (2023) states that education providers must ensure that their premises, are fit for purpose and suitable for the age of children in their care. Also, providers must comply with health and safety legislation and take steps to ensure the safety of children, staff and anyone else on the premises.

A child will need to become comfortable with the setting and to learn to feel safe within it. The time this takes will depend on the age of the child and their previous experiences of being away from home. In our setting, two weeks is the length of the Nursery induction period. This time is allocated to 'Stay and Play' sessions, where parents/carers can initially stay with their child, before moving on to unaccompanied staggered start sessions, where the child's time in Nursery is gradually increased.

## **The needs of the child**

Maslow (1943) states that following their basic needs of food, water and safety being met, a child's next level of development is the psychological need. The beginnings of this are the friendship, intimacy and family connections they make. Outside of their family circle, Early Years practitioners are likely the next people the child will meet.

The speed at which a good relationship is reached, can depend on the level of attachment the child has to their primary caregiver, as stated by Bowlby (1969).

Building a strong relationship with parents/carers and sharing the information they provide with all key workers will ensure consistency in the strategies used to deal with the attachment issues. Practitioners should make the time to hear the child, as they can feel helpless or disregarded. Spending time playing with the child should be the first step. Conversation may not occur initially but may come later, when they feel more confident. Practitioners should observe the child to find out their interests and could also give them small responsibilities to build their self-esteem. Regularly praise the child, specifying the reason behind the praise and give immediate reward. This will help children to recognise their good behaviour/qualities. Instructions should be simple, with clear routines and expectations.

According to Child Mind Institute, showing a preview of what the day will consist of, by use of a visual timetable, can help a child be confident in what is going to happen. Likewise, a countdown before each transition will help a

child mentally prepare for what is about to happen. For example, 'In 20 minutes, (10 minutes, 5 minutes), it will be time to put on our coats and go out to play'. A timer can be used alongside the verbal reminders, to give a visual approach also. These are strategies which can be used at home as well as in the school environment and can therefore 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. This can be done by making eye contact, calling them by name, or putting a hand on their shoulder. To check they have understood what has been said, you can also ask the child to repeat back the instructions. Remember to praise the child when they listen well and achieve a successful transition.

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



Contained in the 'microsystem' circle are teachers, parents, peers, mentors and healthcare systems, emphasising that these people are all equally important in the development of the child. The above-mentioned people are only some of the parties with which practitioners must effectively communicate, to ensure the best outcomes for a child in their care. The input of all parties forms a good picture of the child's needs and circumstances, similarly to a jigsaw puzzle where each piece adds to the overall picture.

The people mentioned in Bronfenbrenner's 'microsystem' circle are all key to supporting smooth transition and communication between them all should be regular and detailed.

By communicating with parents/carers prior to the child starting Nursery, useful information can be obtained about the child's development in both academic and practical areas. For example, can they dress themselves, zip up their coat? Do they know numbers, shapes, colours? This information can help practitioners plan initial targets for the child to work towards. In our setting, this information is gathered by way of a simple questionnaire, completed jointly by parents/carers and Nursery staff, during the home visit for each child.

# Role of the adult

According to the EYFS (2023) there are four main principles which take priority when working with young children. These are:

Unique child  
Positive relationships  
Enabling environment  
Development and learning

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

When communicating with children, practitioners must consider that each child is unique and develops at their own rate, in their own way. It is therefore necessary to speak to each child at their level, to ensure they have understood.

When communicating with children, it is important to let them take the lead. Section 31 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to rest, play, culture and arts and it is through these areas that a lot of communication can be encouraged. According to Communication, Language and Literacy from Birth to Five (2008), adults should facilitate children's play, rather than direct it, as not only does this give them chance to explore their own ideas but will also encourage them to speak more freely and at greater length, as their chosen theme is of more interest to them than a theme chosen by the adult. There may of course be times when the adult needs to direct, such as tidy up time or when a session comes to an end. 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 about what you are doing.

The language adults use around children has a big effect on how their language develops.

When adults initiate conversations, it is often done with a question. Often these questions only require one or two words in response and the conversation is therefore brief. This problem can be solved by using more open questions, such as 'Who?' Or 'Why?', as this type of question requires a more detailed, lengthy reply. The use of pauses during conversations with children can prove a useful strategy. As adults, pauses in conversation can 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.

## **Methods of communication**

There are various methods of communication that practitioners can use with children.

Some interactions are non-verbal, for example smiling. Gestures can also be used, such as giving a thumbs up signal. It is important to pay attention to body language when communicating – make sure you have eye contact and nod occasionally to show you are still listening.

Then there is verbal communication, which is the main method used. Consider the tone of your voice, the emphasis you put on certain words and the type of language needed.

It is also important to consider cultural and social differences. In some cultures, for instance, it is considered impolite to make eye contact. If in doubt, always check school policies surrounding EAL and inclusion, or speak to the school SENCo, who may be able to assist.

Technology now plays a big part in communication and in order to reach everyone required, it could be advisable to use emails, newsletters or parent communication platforms such as DOJO, to help people stay informed of their child's progress or upcoming school events.

In cases of children with ASD or sensory impairment, there may be a need to use sign language, braille or a Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). The school SENCo will be able to advise on these strategies where required.

# **Partnerships**

## **Working with parents**

Most language learning begins at home. Practitioners should value the knowledge parents have of their child's development.

Some parents/carers may have their own difficulties around speech and language, and this should be handled sensitively.

Consider parents who live apart, fathers who are sometimes not as involved in their child's learning as mothers are and also, parents/carers who speak English as a second language. Any literature circulated may need to be translated into a family's main language for ease of understanding.

## **Working with colleagues**

Practitioners should be professional and supportive, at all times, and should think about how their actions may impact other people. If working relationships are poor, this can affect the efficiency of yourself and your team.

Consideration should be given to colleagues who have communication needs of their own and you should always check their understanding of what has been communicated.

## **Working with outside agencies**

Various outside agencies may attend the setting or contact the setting via telephone or email. These could include Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Autism Advisors, Educational Psychologists or Speech and Language Therapists. If these agencies are involved, there is often a meeting held with parents, teachers, teaching assistants and the SENCo in attendance, where all parties work together to devise an EHC plan for the child. In these circumstances, it is important to communicate in a professional manner and give clear, concise information about the child's needs. Equally important is to listen carefully to the parents/carers and what they consider best for their child.

# Interventions

Below are some interventions and strategies to encourage the development of children's speech and communication.

## When playing alongside children

Carry out an activity alongside the child, commenting on what you are doing. Pause to allow the child to respond or question. Repeat the process of comment/pause several times, giving the child time to think about what they will say.

This process gives the child chance to lead the conversation and the practitioner a chance to introduce new vocabulary through their comments.

## To extend vocabulary

Adults can add words to children's sentences. If a child says, 'It's a train', the adult could say 'It's a long, blue train'.

When introducing a topic needing specific vocabulary, all practitioners in the setting should use the same words in their lesson introductions, giving children as much chance as possible to hear those words. Later in life, when children begin to decode print and sound out words, children who know more words will often make better guesses at what the word says.

When setting up areas of the classroom, prepare laminated lists of words relating to each area and display them on the wall, for children and practitioners to see and use.

### **Group work**

Consider the size of the groups for an activity. If a practitioner is working with a group of 15-20 children, then each child will probably only have chance to speak once during a session lasting around fifteen minutes.

If possible, split the class into as many groups as there are staff. This means groups will be smaller, easier to manage and children will have more opportunity to talk in greater detail and at greater length.

Consider group dynamics. If one child in a group is a confident speaker, they may overshadow less confident pupils, giving them little chance to talk. It would be more appropriate to group children of similar ability together.

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

Co-construct – this is when an adult and a child are both engaged in the learning process. This could be where the adult and child investigate a skill new to them both and where they jointly share thinking, meaning and understanding.

Consider the use of real-life packaging and advertising material in the classroom. This is likely to be something the children will recognise from their home environment and will be eager to talk about.

In all aspects of communication development, it is important that all staff are using the same approaches. It may be that some staff training sessions are arranged, preferably in school time so everyone can attend.

### **Reflective practice**

As with all aspects of teaching, it is essential for practitioners to reflect on the methods they use. If they are not working, a new approach can be introduced at the earliest opportunity, to prevent any delay in children's development.

## Proposed Outcomes

If the setting has done all it can to assist a smooth transition into Nursery, it should be expected that children are happy, feel safe and are confident, independent learners.

Practitioners and parents will have a solid two-way relationship, working together to further the child's development and to make decisions with the child's best interest at heart.

Practitioners will be familiar with the interests of children in the setting and know which resources will spark their interest and encourage good communication.

Practitioners will use formative assessment to decide on next steps for each child, based on observations they have made and assessments they have completed by questioning the children's understanding. The children will meet age related milestones and will be working towards meeting 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.

Parents will be aware of how the EYFS framework is being delivered in the setting. They will know the types of activities being offered to their child and the daily routine of the Nursery setting. Parents/carers will be aware of how they can support children's learning and how the setting will support them if their child has SEND issues. School policies and procedures will have been shared with parents, along with staffing details and information regarding their child's key worker.

Practitioners and parents/carers are working together to provide a holistic approach to the child's learning, ensuring that communication between all parties concerned is effective and accurate.