

Handbook for Supporting Transitions in Early Years Settings



(image A)

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Introduction

This handbook, designed for early years practitioners, provides practical insights and strategies grounded in established childhood development theories. Tailored for those working with children aged 0-5 years, it highlights the crucial role of effective communication during transitions.

Addressing the profound impact of transitions on academic paths, personalities, and overall development, the guide offers real-world strategies—from building secure attachments to fostering collaboration among key workers. By focusing on well-managed transitions, the handbook aims to create a nurturing environment, contributing to the holistic development of young children and elevating the quality of early years settings.

Empowering practitioners with principles aligned with the highest standards, it promotes the well-being and development of children, advancing the overall quality of early childhood education.

Understanding Transitions

Transitions aren't one-time events but ongoing processes happening over time, involving various people, and including both continuity and change. Especially for children aged 0-5, they need to adapt to new situations, groups, environments, and educators (Yelland and Waghorn, 2023; Dockett, 2018). In educational transitions, like moving to school, individuals, and children take on different roles while navigating through changes. But amongst these changes, some things remain constant, like families continuing to provide support, and relationships and community ties staying intact (Dockett, 2018).

Significance:

Transitions have a significant impact on a child's academic, personality, and developmental aspects. How practitioners respond to these transitions can determine their success and impact, whether positive or negative (Nimo and Small, 2023; March and Moir, 2018). Examples range from significant life changes like moving homes to daily shifts such as transitioning between activities or meals (Pacey, 2016).

Regardless of their size, transitions induce stress for everyone involved, including children, parents, and practitioners. Especially, children may feel anxious and overwhelmed when faced with new environments, like moving from nursery to reception or reception to year 1, navigating unfamiliar environments (Moir and Johnson, 2021).

Hence, as practitioners, it's essential to help children navigate these transitions seamlessly. Doing so not only alleviates stress but also contributes to building their familiarity and resilience to future changes (Parent *et al.*, 2019).

Benefits of Smooth Transitions:

The Welsh Government's (2023) *A quality framework for early childhood play, learning and care in Wales* Framework highlights that successful transitions involve careful, ongoing planning focused on nurturing children's skills for significant life changes. Placing the child at the centre, the process prioritises their well-being. Success depends on recognising individual needs, ensuring both continuity and progression in development (Early *et al.*, 2001). According to the Welsh Government framework (2023), effective transitions enhance the well-being of babies and young children. Collaborative partnership working, especially addressing the needs of vulnerable children, is integral to this process (Birth to 5 Matters, no date; Moir and Johnson, 2021). Additionally, inclusive planning, collaborative partnerships, and supportive consultations contribute to positive family experiences during transitions (Trodd, 2013).

The Needs of the Child

Supporting the Child's Needs in Transitions:

When delving into the needs of a child within an educational setting, it's crucial to prioritise their fundamental needs and interactions over continuous and enhanced provisions (Hayes, 2023). Failing to do so could potentially hinder a child's disposition for learning (Hayes, 2023). A helpful perspective to understand a child's needs in the context of transitions is to apply Maslow's (1943; 1998) hierarchy of needs, focusing on five basic human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation (The Education People, 2021).

Maslow's (1948) needs approach underscores the importance of fulfilling basic human needs for life progress. When considering children and transitions, practitioners should concentrate on key areas to better support the needs of children in early years care and education. Janine Ryan (2023) highlights research indicating that love and a sense of safety profoundly impact young children's cognitive development. A loving and secure base enables children to explore and experience the world with the security of a close significant other, fostering the development of self-esteem, self-awareness, and independence.



Source: Maslow (1943) and Simplypsychology.com

(Image B)

This aligns with Attachment Theory proposed by John Bowlby (1969) and Mary Ainsworth (2015), emphasising the significance of 'Secure Attachment' and the provision of a 'Secure Base' in early years education (Holmes, 2001). Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the focus in early years education should be on providing safety, love, belonging, and self-esteem. Research consistently indicates that children with secure attachments tend to experience enhanced cognitive and behavioural outcomes, while those with insecure attachments may face challenges, including lower cognitive levels and increased behavioural issues (Ding *et al.*, 2014).

Within the context of transitions, ensuring that practitioners can step in to facilitate secure attachments, especially during significant changes like transitioning from home to nurseries or moving from reception to year 1, is crucial for supporting a child's comprehensive development in the early years. As Ryan (2023) emphasises, fostering a positive and secure attachment involves providing children with access to a consistent and sensitive significant other, often referred to as a 'key person,' who offers comfort, support, and love. In this context, the key

person can be the practitioner who facilitates and supports the child's personal, social, and emotional development needs (Garvey, 2018).

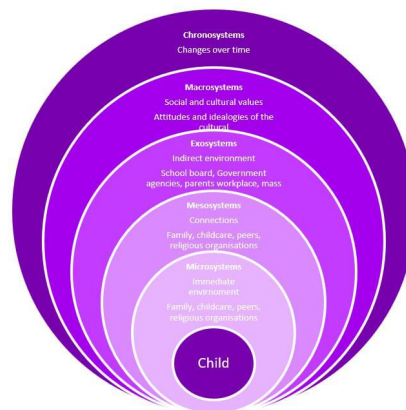
Tricia Johnson (2023) underscores the pivotal role of the key person in establishing special relationships with children and fostering robust partnerships among parents, staff, and professionals. Distinguishing key persons from key workers, she highlights their focus on cultivating unique relationships and building partnerships, not just coordinating services. Johnson (2023) emphasizes the key person's crucial role in instilling trust, especially during periods of anxiety, and acknowledges them as a unique and invaluable figure in a child's life, going beyond a mere substitute for parents or carers (Elfer *et al.*, 2003).

In early years settings, whether a setting manager, leader, or key worker, the key person plays a vital role in nurturing warm relationships with children, ensuring emotional security, and supporting parents. Actively engaged in personal care, the key person requires strong leadership, communicates effectively with stakeholders, and contributes to seamless transitions and holistic care. Despite potential challenges, the role is both a professional commitment and a joyful privilege, necessitating ongoing support (Birth To 5 Matters, no date).

Partnerships and the Ecological Framework in Early Years

Brown-Cornwall (2023) delves into the empowering impact of connectedness on learning, especially for children. In the context of transitioning and the early years development of a child, Bronfenbrenner (1975 and 2005) introduced a bio-ecological systems theory that takes a panoramic view, examining various systems of influence on human development, both direct and indirect.

The framework underscores the complexity of a child's social influences and its profound impact on thought processes, emotional experiences, and preferences. Altering this environment can lead to significant transformations in a child's identity and overall development (Renn, 2003). Brown-Cornwall (2023) further highlights the interconnectedness of parents, teachers, and the child's social environment in fostering development, lifelong learning, and positive communities.



Source: sites.google.com and simplepsychology.org

(Image C)

Bio-ecological Model Framework Illustration:

Here's an illustration based on how the ecological framework fits into a child's life in an early year setting, emphasising the partnerships that aid the child's transition and development:

The Child: At the heart of the ecological framework is the child, representing the unique focal point. Their immediate and indirect interactions with various systems encapsulate their role in this dynamic framework. For practitioners or 'Key Workers,' maintaining this child-centric perspective is beneficial when working with children.

Microsystem: Within the microsystem, practitioners actively engage with the child's immediate surroundings, encompassing family, caregivers, and the school or day-care. Positive interactions within this close circle significantly influence the child's growth, especially in the context of transitions (Nimmo and Small, 2023).

Practitioners can foster open communication with parents and caregivers, create a supportive and encouraging environment within the early years setting, and observe how the child's actions and reactions impact their immediate relationships.

Mesosystem: The mesosystem highlights collaboration and connections between different components of the child's microsystem, such as parents actively participating in early years settings.

Practitioners play a crucial role in facilitating effective communication and cooperation between parents, caregivers, and educators. Ensuring a unified approach that aligns with the child's developmental needs is vital.

Exosystem: External factors in the exosystem, like a parent losing their job, can impact a child's development indirectly.

Practitioners need to be sensitive to external influences, collaborate with support services, and adapt strategies to address changes in the child's extended environment.

Macrosystem: The macrosystem encompasses broader influences like cultural values, national policies, and economic conditions, for instance, the Government, or The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). These elements can shape a child's experiences either positively or negatively.

Practitioners should promote an inclusive environment respecting diverse cultural backgrounds, align practices with national policies, and acknowledge how broader socio-economic factors may impact the child.

Chronosystem: The chronosystem considers patterns of environmental events and transitions over time.

Practitioners play a role in recognizing and acknowledging how a child's experiences change over time, ensuring stability during transitions like moving to a new environment, and modifying strategies to support based on evolving circumstances a child goes through.

Adults in Transition Support: Roles and Collaborations

Facilitating Communication and Responsibilities:

In the intricate process of transitions, the roles of key workers or practitioners are pivotal in ensuring a seamless experience for children (Essex County Council, 2023). This involves actively engaging in transparent communication with parents, caregivers, and colleagues. Practitioners share information, address concerns, and provide regular updates to foster collaboration.

Observation, Assessment, and Supportive Environment:

Key responsibilities encompass regular observation and assessment of a child's behaviour, reactions, and emotions during transitions. This proactive approach allows for early identification of challenges and timely interventions. Creating a supportive environment is crucial, requiring practitioners to design nurturing and inclusive spaces that offer security and comfort, with adequate resources meeting individual needs.

Collaboration with Parents and Key Workers:

Collaboration with parents is paramount, involving them in the transition process, seeking insights, addressing concerns, and incorporating their perspectives into planning. Ensuring collaboration among key workers or designated individuals responsible for specific children is vital for consistency. Active participation in Transition Planning includes preparing children for changes, coordinating with staff, and implementing strategies to ease transitions.

Emotional Support and Documentation:

Recognising and addressing emotional support needs is fundamental during transitions. Practitioners should be attuned to signs of stress or anxiety, providing comfort and reassurance as needed. Keeping accurate documentation of each child's transition process, including observations, assessments, and communication with parents, contributes to monitoring progress and adjusting strategies accordingly.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD):

CPD is crucial for practitioners to stay informed about best practices in transition support, ensuring they are equipped with the latest knowledge and skills. This aligns with the principles outlined by Essex County Council (2023).

The role of adults extends beyond direct instruction to creating a supportive environment, considering the physical surroundings, and structuring routines. Crucially, teaching involves ongoing assessment, considering children's individual needs, interests, and learning dispositions (Ofsted, 2015). This comprehensive perspective emphasises the importance of a flexible and holistic approach, aligning with the principles of effective partnership and the crucial role of the adult in supporting children's transitions and development.

Parental Involvement:

Recognising the paramount importance of collaborating closely with parents, guardians, and families cannot be overstated (Bowlby, 1951; Steele and Steele, 2021). Johnson (2018) underscores the necessity of fostering strong partnerships with parents/carers, valuing their input, and dedicating efforts to genuinely support children's transitions and overall development.

Working Together:

Ute Ward (2023) emphasizes the benefits of close collaboration to support young children's development. The Department for Education (2023) underscores the strength of a respectful partnership as a key element in setting the scene for children to thrive in the early years.

Effective practice, fairness, and consistency in a childcare setting necessitate a collaborative approach among staff members (Ward, 2023). This involves engaging in discussions about various aspects, including positionings, hidden assumptions, underlying beliefs, and values, leading to changes in practice.

Effective communication stands as a crucial foundation for establishing positive relationships and fostering a supportive environment within early years settings (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021; Gov UK, no date).

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Early Years Wales (2020) underscores the importance of creating a nurturing environment within the context of the funded non-maintained curriculum. The curriculum is collaboratively designed to provide children with a strong sense of belonging and pride, celebrating the diverse culture of Wales. The emphasis on high-quality early education aims to establish firm foundations for children's positive experiences in lifelong learning.

Key Elements Supporting a Nurturing Environment (Education Wales, 2022):

Fundamental Right to Play: Recognising play as a fundamental right, allowing engagement in activities supporting holistic development.

Planning and Environment: Encouraging practitioners to use the curriculum as a guide, ensuring optimal use of resources for a supportive learning space.

Linkage to Four Purposes: Aligning closely with the four purposes, fostering ambition, capability, creativity, ethics, and confidence.

Six Areas of Learning and Experience: Emphasising the six areas as the basis for a comprehensive and holistic approach to education.

Janine Ryan (2023) reinforces the importance of an enabling environment, introducing the concept of cultural capital and viewing the learning environment as a significant factor with Loris Malaguzzi stating that there are three teachers of children: adults, other children, and the physical environment—the third teacher (Cited by Cagliari et al., 2016 in Ryan, 2023).

Key Elements of an Enabling Environment According to Ryan (2023):

Resources: Abundant, open-ended objects, including wooden items, stimulate imagination in designated areas.

Manipulation: Facilitate sensory exploration, allowing children to seek connections between what they know and new discoveries.

Choice: Encourage decision-making opportunities, fostering autonomy.

Language: Foster a communication-rich environment throughout the day, allowing ample chances for expression.

Adult Support: Actively engage in children's exploration, tuning into their thinking, and providing support in problem-solving.

By combining the principles of the Early Years Wales curriculum (Education Wales, 2022), which emphasises a nurturing environment, and Janine Ryan's insights into the enabling environment, practitioners can create educational spaces that are supportive and empower children to explore, learn, and develop positively. These approaches collectively contribute to the overall well-being and development of children in their early years.

Interventions: Practical Application

In early years transitions, practitioners play a pivotal role in timely and targeted interventions, identifying and supporting children at risk of unfavourable outcomes. The focus is on preventing and proactively addressing issues, fostering essential skills for adulthood. Recognising that children, especially those with additional learning needs, may require more support than universal services offer, effective early intervention targets these children through selective and indicated approaches. These interventions progressively become more intensive as they shift from universal to targeted strategies (Early Intervention Foundations, 2023).

Practical Examples of Strategies and Interventions:

Home to Nursery/Childminder:

- Establish a transparent settling-in policy, shared with parents to emphasise the significance of a welcoming environment.
- Introduce a welcome pack featuring staff photos to familiarise families with key faces and create a sense of connection.
- Arrange story times or drop-in sessions, promoting interaction between families and practitioners to build a supportive community.
- Seek information on the child's routines for personalised care, incorporating parental insights into daily practices.
- Conduct home visits to learn about the child in their familiar space, strengthening the relationship with the key worker.
- Implement staggered admissions and encourage initial parent involvement for a gradual and smooth transition.
- Incorporate familiar objects from home to provide comfort and establish a sense of security.

ALN Transitions:

- Schedule a pre-start meeting involving parents, relevant professionals, and practitioners to collaboratively plan and understand the child's unique needs.
- Plan necessary training, resources, or adaptations before the child starts to ensure a tailored approach.
- Foster inclusive professional dialogue by involving parents and relevant professionals in the transition process for comprehensive support.

Room-to-Room Transitions:

- Introduce a new key person during settling-in sessions to emphasise continuity and build strong connections.
- Consider the impact on friendships and utilise transitional objects if necessary to address individual emotional needs.

- Gather perspectives from previous practitioners and parents to understand the child's preferences and support a seamless transition.

Moving to Reception Class:

- Designate a transition coordinator to liaise with schools, ensuring effective communication and coordination.
- Arrange visits from schoolteachers to the current provision, fostering connections and collaboration.
- Conduct activities addressing starting school concerns to create a positive anticipation.
- Encourage independence in various aspects, aligning practices between settings for a smoother adjustment.

Reception to Year 1:

- Facilitate visits between Reception and Year 1 children, promoting familiarity and positive relationships.
- Ensure a smooth transition by sharing data and discussing individual needs, incorporating insights from parents and previous key persons.
- Communicate clearly with parents about the transition, addressing any concerns and expectations.
- Plan an open evening to introduce Year 1 teachers, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

Changes within the Family:

- Support children facing family changes by maintaining familiar routines and offering a consistent environment.
- Share age-appropriate stories about transitions or loss, providing a platform for expression and understanding.
- Observe children's behaviour for signs of adjustment, offering targeted support if needed.
- Encourage discussions about emotions during circle time, fostering a supportive peer environment.

Additional Family Transitions:

- Recognise various family transitions like divorce or a new sibling, maintaining sensitivity and understanding.
- Maintain open communication with parents and offer support, providing information on available resources.
- Provide signposting and/or information on advice lines and professional bodies for parental guidance, encouraging a comprehensive support network.

The examples, while not exhaustive, align with established theories and or frameworks, fostering a comprehensive child-centred approach to successful transitions. Embracing a child-centred model prioritises a welcoming environment, the involvement of key workers, and addressing individual needs (Nimmo and Small, 2023; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000).

Positive relationships are cultivated through effective communication and collaboration. Emphasising understanding the child's perspective, involving them in the process, and recognising diverse friendship experiences contributes to a holistic and tailored approach (O'Farrelly *et al.*, 2019). Acknowledging basic needs, incorporating familiarity, and actively supporting relationship building provide a strong foundation for intellectually challenging and smooth transitions, fostering a positive and inclusive environment for children (Maslow, 1971; Carter and Nutbrown, 2016).

Proposed Outcomes

Measuring success in transitions involves keeping an eye on two key areas: emotional well-being and academic achievement. A successful transition isn't just about how smoothly things go; it's also about how happy and settled the child feels emotionally. Additionally, checking academic progress and achievements helps ensure that the transition positively impacts the child's learning journey.

By assessing both emotional well-being and academic accomplishments, we gain a holistic view of the transition's success, fostering a healthy balance between emotional and educational aspects of the child's development.

Bryce Clegg identifies some key barriers to successful transitions in his book - 'Effective transition into year one' (2017), including:

- **Staff Factors:** Staff changes and absences, as well as the engagement of the head/management team, significantly impact progress.
- **Subject Knowledge:** Strong subject knowledge among practitioners and leadership correlates with better progress.
- **Practitioner Challenges:** Limited time and resources, concerns about recognition of children's skills, and unease with a play-based curriculum.
- **Pedagogical Issues:** Unease with observation and intervention, Year One children needing adult support for tasks, and conflicts in implementing changes.
- **Management Conflicts:** Conflicting ideas within senior management about Year One's structure and changes imposed without consultation hinder progress.

These challenges are primarily related to staffing, subject knowledge, practitioner concerns, pedagogy, and management conflicts. Effective training and development are essential for resolving these issues.

Conclusion

This handbook is a comprehensive guide for early years practitioners navigating transitions in early childhood education. Emphasizing communication's pivotal role, it covers the continuous nature of transitions and their profound impact on a child's academic, personality, and developmental aspects. Addressing needs through Maslow's hierarchy and Attachment Theory, especially the key person role, it explores partnerships, the ecological framework, roles, collaborations, a supportive learning environment, and interventions. Success measurement includes emotional well-being and academic achievement, addressing factors, challenges, and conflicts. Overall, it aims to empower practitioners, prioritize children's well-being, and elevate the quality of early childhood education positively and inclusively.

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[Image B] Available at: <https://www.theeducationpeople.org/blog/exploring-pedagogy-introducing-abraham-maslow/> (Accessed on: 10 December 2023).

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