

A Handbook for Practitioners



(Source: Coventry City Council, 2020)

Transitions in Early Years: The Importance of Effective Communication

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INTRODUCTION & RATIONALE

The purpose of this handbook

This handbook focusses on the transition phase for a child/baby leaving home and starting nursery for the first time. It is designed for keyworkers in Early Year's settings to promote understanding of the importance of effective communication to influence the child's learning and development throughout the process. It provides important information regarding the child's development, while underpinning some key theoretical research behind today's practice. This handbook is to encourage and enable key workers to deliver best practice when working with children going through transition, ensuring a positive outcome: a happy, settled and engaged child/baby, enjoying nursery.

What is transition and why is it important in early years?

Early Years Matters (2021) suggests transitions are significant experiences in a child's life which effects their development. Although they come with uncertainty and unfamiliarity, these changes provide new and exciting opportunities for children to flourish and grow, for example: having a new sibling or moving home. According to Rhondda Cynon Taf (no date), transitions can also be varied from starting nursery for the first time to changing classes throughout school as they progress. The transition stage bridges from first visits until they have become a happy settled child, with a basic understanding of different expectations, routines, and rules.

Belfast Education and Library Board (2011) and the Department of Publications (2019), suggests transitions can be a stressful and challenging time for everyone involved. It is therefore crucial that keyworkers have clarity on their responsibilities, including effective partnerships and communication with parents and caregivers. Communication influences effective interventions creating space for a smooth transition and a positive experience, while supporting the child in developing strength to cope with the alterations in their routine. This encourages the building of self-confidence and gaining appropriate expectations and growth in their personal independence.

According to Dunlop and Hillary (2007), positive transitions between phases in a child's life is essential to influencing their success in the future; academically, emotionally, and socially. Welsh Gov (2015) suggests it is important to consider that children going through this phase are from varied backgrounds, are unique with individual qualities, abilities, and experiences. For many children, they may be leaving their primary care giver for the first time. According to Brooker (2008), when referring to Bowlby's (1978) theory; the role of attachment and the impact of separation on a child's emotional health is considered. Brooker suggests thoughtful attention must be illustrated during transition, being aware of the needs of the child and the impact of separation. Early Years Matters (2021) encourages the importance of ensuring practitioners are getting the transition process right by first understanding and empathising with the child and not taking for granted the 'big' change that is taking place for them.

THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD

To be seen and heard

According to Taylor, Bond, and Woods (2013), and UNICEF (no date), in Article 12 of the UNCRC; children are experts in their own daily lives and therefore listening to their voices and understanding their desires and needs is vital. It is encouraged that as practitioners we analyse and reflect on the diversity of each child's lived experiences. This can shape a practitioner's understanding of a child and ensure they are having access to their rights. During transition this standard of care could support a child immensely because if the practitioner has sought to listen and understand the child's world, they can plan accordingly to ensure a smooth transition; the foundation phase framework supports this (Welsh Gov, 2015). The image below might show a positive outcome of a practitioner having listened and understood the needs of the child during transition. The teddy could have been the key to coping and settling, resulting in a new friendship:



(Source: Baby & Child, 2019)

Theoretical Frameworks:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – Understanding the stages towards reaching self-actualisation

According to Lundqvist, Westling and Sijehag (2019), children must be provided with opportunities that allow them to consistently progress and experience personal accomplishment throughout their early years. While considering Maslow's theory, they discuss the proposed 5 stages which must be followed in a specific order to ensure children reach the final goal: self-actualisation. The UNCRC also refers to these areas when considering a child reaching their full potential (UNICEF, no date).

Physiological - firstly, it is considered that a child's basic needs must be met, providing them with healthy, nutritious food and water, shelter and clothing, sleep, and rest (Article 2).

Safety – secondly, ensuring the child feels protected and secure, generally void of anxiety and fear in daily life experiences (Article 8, 19)

Love & belonging – thirdly, it is vital the child feels they belong and are loved, creating healthy relationships, knowing they are appreciated and respected (Article 15).

Esteem – fourthly, ensuring the child feels acknowledged, cherished, and valued (Article 12, 13, 14).

Self-Actualisation – when a keyworker is safeguarding the interests of the child during transition fulfilling their needs in order, excellent outcomes are produced, they achieve their full potential, reaching goals, and feeling confident in who they are because they have a positive foundation at the start of their life (Well-being of Future Generations Wales Act 2015) and (Department of Publications, 2020).

(Source: Martel, 2021)



Since Maslow proposed that there is an order, he suggests then that before a child can sense safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation within their new settings, they must be aware of their physiological needs being met first; it is crucial keyworkers enable this during the transition process for the child to move on to stage 2: feeling safe. Planning a home visit to meet the child in their 'comfortzone' and inviting them for some settling in sessions will enable them to learn the child's preferred foods and what they find comfort in, allow them to meet staff and learn their new environment, for example, where to hang their coat and where to go to the toilet (Kirklees Council, 2019).

Play

According to the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2008) play and first-hand experiences is an indispensable element that helps the child to critically analyse the world around them. It develops their skills and influences creativity. In agreement with Froebel's theory, he believed that play inspires, accelerates, strengthens, and enhances learning both indoors/outdoors; it must be valued and encouraged through transition. It gives the child focus, opportunity, and ownership of their new setting (Tovey, 2020). According to Unicef (no date), article 31 of the UNCRC, children also have a right to play, it has positive benefits in all areas of development and during transition could reduce fear by enabling joy.



(Source: Nursery World, 2019)

THE ROLE OF THE ADULT

Building a positive relationship with the child – Understanding attachment & Separation

According to Wilson-Ali, Barratt-Pugh and Knaus (2019), John Bowlby's (1978) attachment theory was created to demonstrate the reaction of an infant to the temporary absence of their mother, as the primary caregiver. Bowlby suggested that people are designed and from birth able to develop attachments, keeping close to primary attachment figures. He proposed that babies engage in attachment behaviours to remain in that proximity such as: crying, smiling, following, and clinging. Bowlby recommended that a secondary attachment figure could offer a sense of security if the primary attachment figure is temporarily unavailable. This suggests that the key worker in the nursery can become the child's secondary attachment figure (PACEY, 2016).

According to Bowlby (2007) to grow into healthy adults both emotionally and socially, it is vital that children are influenced by quality time and attention from a primary or secondary attachment figure that they trust. Separation from the child's primary care giver can create a sense of danger and fear as they consider their helplessness to be rescued by them and this can be traumatic for a young child, resulting in lasting and detrimental effects, particularly to their mental health and well-being. PACEY (2016) suggests it is essential that the keyworker allows a positive and safe attachment bond to form and grow, providing security in the absence of their primary caregiver. Bowlby (2007) suggests that when the attachment is firmly established, the quality of that child's attachment bond could become their example for shaping their future relationships, therefore, the keyworker must engage in attentive listening while learning to understand the desires and needs of the child. This relationship reduces stress and anxiety during transition for both primary caregivers and the child.

When considering the possibility of the traumatic effects of separation and the importance of attachment in early years, Perry (2002) discusses timing as being a contributor to neglect. He proposes that the needs of children change at varied levels of development and so what is considered neglect at one time is not at another stage. During transition from home to nursery for example, a keyworker may allow a child their comfort toy and it may be a strategy to build trust with the keyworker and help the child to settle, however, when they are fully settled and established, the practitioner may encourage the child to keep it safe in their bag. It is vital that the practitioner responsible is ensuring the child's attachment needs are being met because neglect has a detrimental effect on the child's overall and neurological development. Perry argues, it is important to appreciate timing as a critical factor when considering the topic of neglect and this must be avoided. Babies for example, do not have the language to vocalise their needs. According to Scharer (2018), being attentive to the child's cues is vital and learning to understand them influences positive attachment relationships.

Effective communication while working together in partnerships

According to the Children's Workforce Development Council (no date), excellent communication skills when working with everyone involved in the transition phase, influences trust. It is crucial to creating and retaining healthy, professional relationships. It involves intentional listening, questioning, understanding, and responding while considering each child, family, and any further partnerships as individual and unique. All the while it is important to navigate communication in varied ways, not merely talking one to one, but considering tone of voice, body language and empathy. This enables the primary caregiver to sense safety when leaving their child, because they are included in decisions that involve them and their views and opinions are respected with sincere understanding. They suggest effective communication encourages everyone to engage while consistently improving the lives of everyone involved. The Department of Publications (2019) also supports this.

According to ACF (no date), it is the keyworkers responsibility to become aware of a child's developmental level to ensure they provide appropriate support for them throughout the transition process. Changes in a child's life are unavoidable and the adult's role is to ensure these changes are positive experiences that will encourage growth and progression. The Department of Publications (2019) suggest key workers must engage and collaborate with other staff, the parent/caregivers, any other professional contributors, for example: health visitors/social workers and, most importantly, including the individual child (UNICEF, no date). ACF argues that collaboration means important information regarding the child's individual needs and desires are both learned and understood, for example, characteristics, behaviours, feelings and ensuring varied strategies are in place. Thomas (2019) suggests communication is vital and encouraging a positive professional relationship with everyone involved supports effective teamwork and a positive transition for the child, so they feel happy, safe, and secure. It is crucial to remember data protection throughout this stage and consider integrity, security, and confidentiality when personal details are shared (Data Protection Act 2018).

Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017) discuss Bronfenbrenner's ecology theory, and the bioecological model of development: Bronfenbrenner paid interest to how situations and circumstances change and how this can bring implications for the individuals residing and developing within them. He studied the interrelations between the growing person and the change of circumstance in which development is rooted, for example, the influence of development on changes within the child's family, friendships, and communities and furthermore, the wider social and cultural environment in which they are progressing.



(Source: impact of special needs, no date)

Creating a Nurturing Environment that is inclusive and fun

Woo (2005) describes Bronfenbrenner's argument that children grow through varied relationship interactions including loved ones, school environment, the wider community, and the world. He considers diversity and the unique child while prioritising the relationship between child and primary caregiver, suggesting it impacts achievement levels. Providing opportunities for parents/caregivers to be involved in the process of transition is fundamental to creating a nurturing and inclusive environment of acceptance and belonging for everyone involved, because if primary caregivers are invested, they have great influence over the child's development (Welsh Gov, 2015) and (Unicef, no date); taking time to get to know the child's caregivers and family is vital, observing and noting their likes, dislikes, hopes, fears and understanding their situations, cultures, religions, and abilities. This provides insight to their ideas of fun which influences the planning and can impact a smooth transition through play. Modelling playfulness is important too. According to Tassoni (2013) play is essential for development and children love and enjoy playfulness from the adults around them. If the keyworker is engaged in play too, the child will find enjoyment within their company.

According to the Department of Publications (2019) the transition phase for the child leaving home and starting nursery for the first time means they are leaving their 'comfort zone' to face an unfamiliar environment. It will vary as to how they cope depending on individuality; however, they may build confidence if the transition phase allows gradual changes, for example, home visits and settling in days. It is important during this time to acknowledge that even babies with little or no language can express their needs and are able to contribute to matters surrounding them, for example, what they like to play with, what snacks they like to eat, if they want to go outdoors. According to PACEY (2016), taking time and care to observe the baby enables the keyworker to discover what they enjoy and how they are settling into the new environment. Communicating with the primary caregivers allows insight to create opportunities for the baby to enjoy, for example they may love water play or painting, therefore it can be planned and managed effectively while supporting their development throughout transition.



(Source: Early Years Matter, 2021)

INTERVENTIONS

According to Oxfordshire County Council (2017), gaining a positive transitional outcome for the child entering the nursery requires commitment to continued communication links. It is fundamental that there is a collective approach ensuring the routines in place for successful transition are accommodating, adaptable and consider the individual child's needs. Considering the transitions policy for the setting is essential. Children will develop at their own pace and will need time to adjust and settle with support from their keyworkers (PACEY, 2016). Some of these interventions may include:

Visiting the Setting & Home Visits

The Department of Documents (no date) suggests that if the child along with their caregivers can visit the nursery before starting, it helps them to become familiar with the setting and some of the routines and expectations. They also allow important information regarding the child to be communicated with the key worker involved and enables the families participating to ask any questions and share their concerns within the safety of their own homes, reducing anxiety. These visits influence the future planning of activities to ensure the child is settling well, by acknowledgment of their culture, family, and unique diversity. This makes the transition process smooth because the child will see a reflection of themselves throughout their setting. An 'All About Me' booklet might be beneficial during this stage to record information involving the child.



(Source: twinkl, no date)

According to Tassoni (2013) it is likely there will be several visits with a primary focus on the child building a relationship with the key worker. These visits also allow the primary caregivers to be involved in the transitional process, getting to know the key worker too and working through each step with their child. For example, visit 1 might include the caregiver and child playing with the key worker together; visit 2 might involve the primary care giver observing the play in proximity and as the visits continue, the primary caregiver takes another gradual step back.

A Happy Box

According to Enfield Council (2020), a happiness box is something tangible that can be encouraged to be made at home to bring into the setting when the child starts their settling in days. It is a box that can have items of comfort from home that the child can access in times of sadness or anxiety throughout the transition process, for example, photos, teddy's, a blanket, dummy, and favourite story. It influences happiness and calm by bringing their home comforts to a place that is unfamiliar to them.

Key worker

Pacey (2016) suggests that establishing a connection with a key worker prior to the child starting nursery is important. Firstly, it demonstrates to the primary caregivers that there is a point of contact they can communicate with regarding their thoughts and concerns. Providing the child with a key worker also influences the concept of Bowlby's attachment theory, agreeing with the need for secure relationships. This bond ensures the child feels safe in the absence of their primary caregivers. It is important to note that creating this bond influences whether a child will enjoy being at nursery or not. Observing how the child responds to the key worker during transition is vital because if they are finding it hard to settle, it could be that they are not establishing a secure attachment with the key worker: does the child intentionally look for them? Do they show positive emotion, for example smiling on arrival when they see them? Are they happy playing with the key worker? Furthermore, considering a substitute key worker that the child is familiar with is also important because if at any point their main key worker is unavailable then the child can find comfort in the substitute.

(Source: Parenta, 2015)



PROPOSED OUTCOMES

Happiness is Everything!

According to Datler, *et al.* (2012) a child's opening response to transition is one of distress and discomfort portrayed through varied behaviour changes such as anger, irritability, sadness, and discontent. However, as the initial months unfold, and trust in growing, they start to express enjoyment and happiness adapting to their new setting and routine. They begin to explore and investigate in play and find interest in joining in. However significant the diversity of the transition process, varied characteristics, and behaviours, they will eventually adapt, demonstrating positive moods such as laughing, smiling, positive tone of voice and joyful body language while engaging more independently.

Government legislation now reinforces 4-core purposes for every child to aspire to:

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

(Curriculum and Assessment Act 2021).

The Foundation Phase Framework (2015) has influenced this through outlining the fundamental need for children to play, encouraging them to make their own choices, problem solve and take risks, engaging in curiosity. This links to Piaget and Vygotsky's opinion of children being active agents, engaging in their environments, creating circumstances for their own development (Vogler, Crivello, Woodhead 2008). This encourages the child's confidence, mindfulness of their importance, knowing their voices are heard and respected. The keyworkers aim throughout transition is to ensure the child's happiness is the overall outcome, settled, and thriving in nursery as they play.

(Source: iStock, no date)



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