



All About...transitions

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Policy, procedures and the practitioner's role in helping children make a stress-free move to a new setting or class.

A Good Start

The emotions that come with change can be successfully handled by children when their new setting has a clear welcoming procedure

By the time children enter statutory education they are likely to have lived through several transitions in family life as well as in educational settings. Research is beginning to confirm what parents and practitioners have long known -that transition is stressful for children, just as it is for adults, and the resulting stress can have a far-reaching impact on children's emotional well-being and academic achievements.

We all know the familiar feelings when contemplating change. Anticipation, excitement and curiosity may well be tempered with anxiety, uncertainty, fear and a sense of bewilderment as we are faced with unfamiliar experiences, people, places or events. What a difference it makes if we have a sense of being eagerly awaited, of knowing that we will be treated with respect and allowed to take some control over what happens to us in our new situation.

Sadly, this isn't the experience of many children as they move from one setting to the next within the Foundation Stage. As adults, we know that some of us seem better at coping with change than others. This ability is likely to be rooted in our childhood experiences, as the children who are best supported through early transitions learn positive ways of coping with change whenever it occurs, at any stage of [their] lives.

Transitions, therefore, carry a big responsibility for early years practitioners. However, if our approach to transition is firmly rooted throughout our practice (rather than something we worry about just before and after change occurs), then we are more likely to be raising emotionally intelligent children who make strong attachments, are resilient and resourceful when faced with change and are able to take risks and embrace new experiences.

Settling in Children who are settling (at any age) do best when:

- **Transition is made a priority.** Managers, head teachers and governing bodies need to show that they are aware of the importance of transition by making it a priority. This will have time and cost implications in enabling practitioners to meet children, carers and other settings, make home visits and transfer information, as well as developing a curriculum and ethos that supports the gradual and supported integration of new children.

All too often, practitioners are impeded in developing good practice by 'top-down' expectations, routines and procedures, and only minimal recognition of the need to support children in transition.



- **They are familiar with the people, places and routines.** We all accept that familiarity is one of the most important factors in a smooth transition, and yet it is all too easy to think that a one-off visit or introductory session meets the need. Explore ways to ensure that children become as familiar as possible with a new setting and its staff.
- **They can make frequent visits to the setting.** Such visits need to amount to more than just the formal 'new admissions' visit or 'open days'.

Children will benefit from frequent, informal drop-in sessions with a parent, carer or familiar adult, that enable them to gain first-hand experience of the new setting at different times of the day. Very young children have most to gain from such visits, but these are still of benefit to older children (and adults).

- **They receive a home visit.** Home visiting can be intrusive and expensive in both staff time and cover. It does need to be approached with sensitivity, but the rewards will definitely be worth the effort. It is a powerful opportunity to allow children (and families) to get to know new staff on their own territory.
- **They have a keyworker.** Children (and their parents or carers) arriving into the buzz and confusion of a new setting need to know they are not on their own. They need to have at least one adult who can act as their personal 'interpreter' while they make sense of this new world. A keyworker system means that each child and their family have a practitioner who is assigned to them, even though they will also be interacting with, and be cared for by, other members of staff throughout their day.

A keyworker has special responsibility for an individual child, although the degree of involvement will depend on various factors, not least of which is the way the setting chooses to organise the system.

Ideally, a keyworker would be responsible for a home visit, would greet the child on arrival and help them separate from their parent or carer, would plan to spend some time with them every day and observe, support, interact with and extend their play as appropriate.

Just as importantly, they would have individual and specific contact with the child's parent or carer on a regular basis -a vital factor in reducing parents' stress and anxiety when leaving a child in a setting. The presence of a keyworker is likely to have far-reaching effects, in that it can support a child in building the secure attachments that are essential not just to their emotional well-being, but also their cognitive development.

- **Their parents are involved and consulted.** A great deal of research supports the belief that we can only do our best for the children in our care if we involve their parents and families. We need to listen to what parents can tell us about their children and accept that as their child's first educator, they have a wealth of knowledge that we would do well to heed.

The work of the Pen Green Centre team, for example, in involving and working with parents and families shows us just what can be achieved in the development and understanding of children's schemas. As long ago as 1987, Professor Tina Bruce was encouraging us to focus more on the 'child-in-the-family/community' and reminding us that it is pointless to try to educate children without taking account of the most significant people and influences in their lives.

We need to be knowledgeable about a child's ethnicity, language and dialect, community



and locality if we are to offer them familiar sights, sounds and experiences that will help them settle.

- **Their parents are supported.** Sending a child to a new setting or class can be scary for parents too! Many parents bringing their children to a setting for the first time may have unhappy memories about education and institutions. It is vital that we put ourselves in their position and look closely at how we can make our settings welcoming and less threatening to new parents so that they, in turn, can give positive messages to their children about their new setting. Involving a parent fully in settling their child can reduce their anxiety greatly while enabling them to get a feel for the setting and how it works.
- **They have an informal, relaxed start to the session.** Leaving a parent or carer is hard when there is a roomful of people watching -and waiting - for the business of the day to begin. Relaxed starts, ideally staggered, are invaluable, as they allow the child and their parent to take their time separating and to choose what the child is ready to engage in. Coming into an active environment with continuous provision (as opposed to carpet-based or registration routines) provides the child and parent with lots of options for handling the separation.
- **Their friendships are acknowledged.** Australian studies of children making transitions from home to kindergarten or school have found that having friends in the same class can markedly help children adjust to the demands of the new setting. Interestingly, the studies suggest that it can also compensate for other factors that might make transition harder, such as being the youngest in the group, speaking English as an additional language or being a boy (Margetts K, 1997). So, ask parents and staff at previous settings about a child's friendships.
- **Their setting is flexible.** The approach to admissions and settling needs to be flexible if it is to address the individual needs of children and families.

Some children will make the transition smoothly, in the first instance, only to become confused, anxious or disappointed when they realise that this is a long-term scenario! Others will need lots of support while they take tiny steps to becoming relaxed and enthusiastic about the setting.

Some families will expect their child to separate readily, while others will expect their child to struggle with change.

Practitioners have to be watchful and attentive to find out what is needed to help a child (and their family) cope with the transition, and then be prepared to act on their findings. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to settling is never, therefore, going to be the best way. Adapt the routines and organisation of the setting so that you can provide a 'settling' policy that really does meet the needs of children, rather than expecting them to 'fit in' with existing timetables and procedures.

- **There is a degree of predictability.** This doesn't mean strict adherence to a rigid timetable, however. The best sort of predictability gives children the certainty that there won't be too many interruptions to their long, sustained play (or engagement in a continuous curriculum) or too many breaks for adult-driven tasks, such as snack times, assemblies and whole-class discussions. (The Continuous Curriculum: Planning for spontaneous play suggests ways to implement this in KS1; see Further Reading.) * They are encouraged to be independent. Children moving from one stage to the next can rehearse new skills in the familiar setting, then gradually try them out in the new one. Those who lack experience or confidence in their physical independence need to know that there will always be someone to help them. Just as important is the opportunity to develop, and



maintain, high levels of intellectual independence.

It is generally accepted now that young children are persistent and powerful thinkers. They have a tremendous inner drive to make sense of their world and their experiences, which also gives them a valuable sense of being in control.

All too often, the transition from one stage to the next denies children the opportunity to take control of what is happening to them. And it is this lack of control which is at the root of the anxiety that we all feel when going through a transition, no matter how excited we might feel about it.

Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage is clear that children need to be able to make choices and initiate tasks and activities for themselves.

Removing opportunities for intellectual independence as children progress into KS1 has many repercussions, not least of which are hidden stress and damage to positive learning dispositions

- **There is a safe place to take risks and make mistakes.** A supportive learning environment that enables children to try things out, take risks and learn from their mistakes is one that is constantly preparing children to handle transition well. Life is full of changes and there will always be risks, but we can do our best to help children make the most of it by providing a safe, yet challenging, place for them to explore and develop their independence and self-reliance.

Reggio Emilia: Learning From Their Peers

- 'Don't be afraid of school because there's nothing to be afraid of, because you get bigger and you like it.'
- 'When there's something to eat that you don't like... you should tell the teacher. Don't throw it under the table.'
- 'Never jump down from the wall on the mountain, because you'll get gravel stuck in your hands.'
- 'When I came into this school I didn't know anybody, so I was scared and I thought "How can I get to know them?" First I made one friend and then together we got to know everybody.'

These are the words of five- and six-year-olds preparing to leave their pre-school in Reggio Emilia, Italy. They are recorded in a book, *Advisories*, written for the incoming three-year-olds about to take their places in the pre-school.

The book is filled with recollections and advice - how to find the toilets, where to hide in the garden, which teacher wears make-up and which one is likely to pinch a roast potato off your plate at lunchtime!

The book is large (all the better to be read by parent and child together), designed like a sticker book, with two pages of adhesive photos in the centre, to peel off and stick in the numbered empty boxes.



There is also a multitude of line drawings by the children. The advice to parents is that they read the book to themselves first 'with eyes and ears open and ready to listen, to share and to smile', and to wallow in the memories of their own childhood. Then 'when the fragrances of your childhood memories have become intense, you are ready to read Advisories to your child. One page a day, so that the school... becomes an interesting world to get to know, a world that your child wants to venture into and become a part of.'

This is a powerful and emotive book, not least because it reminds us that there is no better person to tell us about something new and scary than someone who has just recently been through the experience themselves. These children manage to be neither 'consoling, nor alarming', so that they neither 'frighten nor reassure them too much'.

Perhaps we can't all prepare glossy books to welcome our new arrivals, but we can certainly take on board the idea and motivations behind Advisories and let our Foundation Stage graduates tell it like it is. And we must pay good attention to what they are saying.

Case Study: A Community Affair

Strong links between the school and local childcare providers enable children to settle in quickly at Trinity and St Michael's Church of England Methodist Primary School in the Lancashire village of Croston.

Reception class teacher Mary Driver says, 'The local pre-school and nursery know the children so well and have a wealth of information about them, so by using that you can ensure the children get a good start at school.'

In preparation for the children moving up to reception, Mrs Driver visits both settings to observe the children, discuss their transition profiles and talk to keyworkers.

The children then attend two sessions at the school. The current reception class, in the care of a supply teacher, vacate the room, leaving the incoming children free to explore their future classroom in the company of current childcarers and school reception staff.

The incoming children are also invited to join the reception class for storytime sessions during the last half-hour of the day. While the children settle down for a story, their parents are invited to the school hall, where they can socialise with each other, find out about local initiatives such as adult learning programmes and meet other school staff, such as the school nurse and cook. The first day of school is treated as an open day, with parents allowed to stay as long as they wish. To further ease the settling-in process, the children start school in three groups, organised by age. Group one attends in the mornings for a week, then go full-time and the second group joins for their mornings-only first week.

Croston Pre-school manager Janet Williams believes the children benefit greatly from their links with the school, making the move to reception class 'a natural progression'. She says, 'I can't think of any child where we've had concerns about them moving to school.'

Mrs Driver says, 'The message I'd really like to give other teachers is to make the most of pre-school and nursery staff. They can tell us a lot, and the little things that they tell us about the children are invaluable.'



Practitioners

Sensitivity, awareness, and resources such as diaries and photos are essential tools practitioners can use in transitions

For a successful transition, children need practitioners who: Give them time to become familiar with the idea of moving on, to talk about it, to reflect on what they already know and have learned, to absorb new information, to revisit and remember what went before, to adjust to the changes and to make mistakes without fear of judgement. They know that children need to be allowed time for regression as much as consolidation.

Listen to them to find out: what worries or excites them about a move, how they would like the move to happen and when they are telling us they need help with the little things as well as the big things.

Recognise the importance of attachment and emotional well-being and are able to recognise the needs of an individual child and their family in this respect. They know that children need to be sure of their unconditional care regardless of whether the child and their family conform to the expected norms.

Offer pro-active support, particularly to those who may appear to be coping, and don't wait for a crisis to occur before they respond. Children need practitioners who know that there is often a 'honeymoon' period for children settling in, and that some children will have less obvious ways of showing distress.

Show respect for a child's way of making it work for themselves, by listening to the child and their carers about how they want to handle the separation from each other and adapting settling procedures to make the most of this. They know that children often need transitional objects or particular routines and habits to comfort themselves until ready to go it alone.

Appreciate what the child brings with them and has learned at home or in a previous setting. They know that this is important for the child's self-esteem as much as to set starting points for future learning, and they are not judgemental or obsessed with 'correctness', particularly with regard to physical or self-help skills. They actively seek to make and maintain strong links with home and other settings that the child has attended.

Plan carefully for transition, making sure they gather, read and take notice of all the information passed to them by parents and previous settings. They know that some children will be more vulnerable than others at this time and plan accordingly.

Are creative in their approach to supporting transition, and, for example, ask outgoing children what they think would help the newbies!

Being Creative

To help children settle in:

- Prepare a settling diary for each child to be shared with parents/carers (this is particularly important if parents aren't the ones bringing the child to the setting). Record the length and times of stays, happy moments, times of distress and soothing strategies.
- Provide a cassette tape and recorder and suggest that parents might like to record a reassuring message or nursery rhyme that the child can listen to if they are missing mum or



dad. This could be particularly significant for children whose first language is not spoken by anyone else in the setting.

- Let the children take photos that are relevant to them of their current setting (for new, incoming children) and of their new setting when they visit. Use them for displays, but also put copies into a book that each child can borrow to take home and share with their families.
- Provide children with a little book containing all the names of the children and staff in their new setting.
- Invite all staff in the new setting or class to come and be interviewed by the children before they move. Let them plan the questions in advance by asking them what they want to know about their new teachers (their favourite colour, song or football team). Take photos and make a display/book. Parents will appreciate the information too.
- Prepare a scrapbook for children who are leaving. Add photos, captions, observation notes and examples of work, and present it to the child and their family as a souvenir of their time with you.
- In the first few weeks of the school year, link Year 1 children with the reception children to act as 'buddies' for each other, in the playground, dinner hall and so on. The links can be resumed again the following year to pass on information about the next school year.
- As a group, fill a small suitcase with items from the current setting that children would like to take with them for the first week(s) of their new class. They can return it ceremoniously when they are ready!
- Make cut-outs of empty suitcases with handles and encourage the children to think of things they have learned or achieved while they have been with you (use all six areas of learning). Write these on labels and stick them in their cases to take with them as they continue their learning journey.

If you make the cases sturdy enough they can carry them right through Key Stage 1 and 2!

Foundation Stage Units

One way to address the issue of transition from nursery to reception is to remove it. More and more schools and local authorities are setting up Foundation Stage units/settings where nursery and reception provision might be:

- closely linked
- combined for parts or the day
- completely integrated.

The increased familiarity with staff and the learning environment that this allows inevitably means that transition is not such a hurdle for children and their families. This is particularly true in units where there is complete integration of children from three to five years old.

As children spend a minimum of two years with the same staff, in the same learning environment, there is no break to their progress through the Foundation Stage and practitioners are able to build strong relationships with the children and their families and potentially gain greater insight into their needs.



Home Visiting

Home visits are more successful if they are well organised, so consider the following points when making your plans.

- Guarantee parents'/carers' privacy. Make it clear that they are under no obligation to accept a home visit, and that the purpose of the visit is not to inspect their home. Offer a home visit, rather than sending a formal letter announcing your intention to descend upon them. Respect their wishes if they decline and invite them instead to come to the setting for an informal meeting and information gathering session. Adopting the right manner during the visit is important. Many parents who are initially anxious about a visit often comment positively afterwards.
- Ensure practitioners' safety. Carry out visits in pairs. Impress on managers and head teachers the value of home visits to ensure that they allocate the staff needed to carry out the visits. If you have a keyworker system, ensure that at least one key person takes part in the visit.
- Gather admissions information. It is easier for parents to find information such as doctor's phone numbers while at home, and helpful, and speedier, if you tell them in advance the information that you will need.
- Discuss the setting. Talk about its routines, procedures and approach, stressing the importance of play in learning in the early years. Let parents voice any concerns they may have about the setting.
- Discuss the child's development without appearing judgemental. Let the parents voice any concerns about their child, and reassure them that children's development varies greatly in the early years.

Find out what the child enjoys doing, how they respond to change and challenge, what is likely to upset them and what strategies are beneficial when the child is distressed or challenging.

- Let one practitioner focus on the parent and the other on the child. Bring along a book or toy to share with the child. Often, children want to show you their bedroom or garden - a valuable opportunity for the child to take the lead in the interaction. Leave the book or the toy with them so that they can return it to the setting when they arrive. This can also be a good time to introduce an item that bears the setting/school logo, such as a bookbag or sweatshirt, so that the child can begin to identify themselves as a member of the group.
- Prepare a welcome pack. Include literature for the parent and items like paper, pens and books for the child. Invite existing parents in your setting to produce the materials, as they can address the issues that concerned them when their child was admitted.

Prepare, for example, a question and answer booklet or a video of the setting from a child's point of view. Show the video during the visit, or at the setting if a video player isn't available. If possible, leave a copy of the video with the family until the child is admitted.

- Have an interpreter where necessary. For other language speakers, have an interpreter or ensure there is someone at home who will be able to help.

Note that for many families the visit may be seen as an important social occasion - something worth remembering when offered your third cup of tea!

- Ensure you have plenty of time. Be careful to allocate enough time for each visit so that you can really listen and engage with the parents and family members as they tell you



about the child and share with you their hopes and fears for them.

Prompts for discussion can include:

- important adults in the child's life
- child (and family) interests
- major events in the child's life
- favourite foods
- sleep patterns
- how the child usually shows anxiety or distress
- what helps to soothe and comfort them
- the child's motivations and schema(s)
- how the parent would like to approach the first separation and what they think would most help the child in their first moments apart from the parent.

Discussion about these things will ultimately be more helpful (and reassuring to the parent) than ticking off a list of assessment criteria, for example, pencil control, number awareness and the child's ability to use a knife and fork.


Transition Audit

Review your practice and evaluate your setting's transition policies at all stages from entry level on to Key Stage 1

All Transitions

Do you:

- meet with senior management and all relevant staff well in advance to discuss and evaluate policies for transition and settling? Do management give special consideration to times of transition (for children, parents and staff) and ensure that staff have enough time to prepare?
- organise and support a full home visiting programme?
- allocate sufficient time for preparing staff/parents/children and for staff to access, read and share information?
- plan a programme of formal visits and frequent drop-in sessions?
- share transition plans with parents (and children, where relevant)?
- evaluate correspondence to parents? Is the tone welcoming, the information direct? Does it invite parents to become involved in the process and suggest ways they can help you to help their child?
- allow children (and staff helping them to settle) time for the settling process, to regress a little, to stand and watch others until they are ready to join in, to keep their parent, carer or transitional object with them as long as they want?
- respond sensitively to parent anxieties? Are you aware of why some parents are over-anxious (for example, their child is first or last born, or has health problems, or the family has domestic difficulties)? Are you supportive, but firm, with parents who put their own needs first (due to, for example, work commitments)?

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- plan how to support and enable parents settling their children? Do you offer flexibility at the start of sessions so that parents stay as long as they need, a place for them to go when they first leave very young children for a short while, opportunities for them to meet and chat with other parents going through the same experience?

Home To Setting

Do you:

- offer home visits?
- plan a timetable for home visits, including interpreters and keyworkers?
- prepare welcome packs?
- develop an admission form/home visiting format that allows parents to tell you everything they want you to know about their child?
- use this information to plan the learning environment (for example, responding to children's schemas)?
- use photographs of the child and their family (taken with parental permission) for labels and in welcoming displays?
- offer staggered admissions/transition?
- ask older children to prepare materials and information that they think will be helpful to new children?
- offer flexible/staggered start times and individual settling programmes?
- access and read all incoming information on individual children, highlight those likely to be vulnerable and have special or additional needs, and brief all relevant staff?
- Review each child's settling on a daily basis with parents and key staff?

3: Between Foundation Stage (FS) Settings

As well as the above, do you:

- visit and observe children in their previous setting?
- provide as much information as possible about your setting?
- ensure that children will still have constant access to outdoors and resources necessary for all the areas of learning in the FS curriculum?
- use a staff member as a 'bridging person' who moves between the settings to support children with the move?
- talk with parents about the FS curriculum and how you plan for children's progress across settings?

From Foundation Stage To Year 1

As well as the above, do you provide opportunities:

- for children and parents to visit Year 1 classrooms and relevant staff well in advance of the move?



- for Year 1 staff to spend time observing children at play, the organisation and routines of FS classes, FS staff supporting child-initiated activities?
- for FS practitioners to share the FS profiles with Year 1 staff, and explain how the profiles can help establish starting points for each child?
- for children to raise questions, talk about their concerns, and to have these feelings acknowledged?
- for children to reflect upon and share their achievements with Year 1 staff?
- for children to talk about how they would like to handle the move and incorporate their suggestions?
- to commemorate their 'graduation' from the Foundation Stage, with, for example, a party, assembly or souvenir book?

As Year 1 staff, do you also:

- familiarise yourself with the FS curriculum guidance and materials supporting transition into Key Stage 1?
- read the FS profile on each child ahead of the children's arrival and discuss them with FS staff? Do you discuss ways to make the most of the learning that has already taken place and identify children who are talented or gifted, have additional needs and may initially need a modified FS curriculum (such as, children who are summer-born, very active or have had a disadvantaged time at Foundation Stage)?
- invite parents to an informal session soon after the transition so the children can show off their new class and teacher?



Further Reading and References

- Fabian, Hilary and Dunlop, Aline-Wendy (eds) *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating continuity and progression for children in early education* (RoutledgeFalmer)
 - Fabian, Hilary, *Children Starting School: A Guide to successful transitions and transfers for teachers and assistants* (David Fulton)
 - Dowling, Marion, *Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development* (Paul Chapman Publications)
 - Bruce, Tina, *Early Childhood Education* (Hodder & Stoughton)
 - Whalley, Margy and the Pen Green Family Centre Team, *Working with Parents* (Hodder Arnold)
 - Bayley, Ros, and Featherstone, Sally, *Smooth Transitions: Ensuring continuity in the Foundation Stage* (Featherstone Education)
 - *Where's My Peg? A parent and child guide to the first experiences of school* (Save the Children)
 - *Advisories: Reggio children -Five-and six-year-old children tell incoming three-year-olds about their new pre-school* (available from Sightlines Initiative phone/fax 0191 261 7666, www.sightlines-initiative.com)
 - Kirklees School Effectiveness Service, *The Continuous Curriculum: Planning for spontaneous play (Foundation Stage-Year 1 transition)* (tel: 01484 225793, www.kirklees-ednet.org.uk)
 - *Informations and links to case studies on Foundation Stage Units:* www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/faqs/foundation_stage/1152575/##1156595
 - *A Study of the Transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage One* (DfES/NFER, www.nfer.ac.uk/publications)
- O'Connor, A. *All about... TRANSITIONS Nursery World.*