

Transitions in the Early Years

A practical guide to supporting transitions between early years settings and into Key Stage One

by Sue Allingham

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Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB.

Tel: 020 7738 5454

www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

© MA Education Ltd 2011. Revised edition 2015

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ISBN 978-1-907241-19-2



Preface



Feeling relaxed



Feeling comfortable

This book has been reviewed and revised to reflect policy developments since it was first written in 2011.

In England we are familiar with peaks and troughs with policy that affect Early Years. In the three years since the first edition of this book, we have been through a peak with guidance and policy being produced and reviewed sometimes almost simultaneously. An example of the changes that English practitioners have includes:

- The 2012 Revised Early Years Foundation Stage: which came in two parts – the Statutory Requirements (DFE-00023-2012) and the – non statutory – ‘Development Matters’ in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) www.early-education.org.uk.
- The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile: this was revised to reflect the now seven areas of learning.

- The Two Year Old Progress Check: (www.ncb.org.uk/ey/peertopeersupport) – this forms part of the 2012 revision.
- Early years outcomes: A non-statutory guide for practitioners and inspectors to help inform understanding of child development through the early years. Published in September 2013 by DfE, this document is effectively a slimmed down version of ‘Development Matters’.
- The extension of funded spaces for two-year-olds.
- Two-year-olds in schools.
- At the time of writing, the 2014 revision of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, March 2014) is in place, which informs all the work we currently do.

- Two revisions to the Ofsted Evaluation schedule. The most recent being – August 2014 (Reference number 120086).
- The concentration on data and progress – particularly for the most disadvantaged children. The ‘closing the gap’ agenda.
- The ‘school readiness’ agenda.
- Free school meals for all.
- Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years Statutory guidance for organisations who work with and support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (DfE, July 2014).
- The proposal to reintroduce ‘baseline assessment’.

This is just a key sample of issues that have arisen recently and I have chosen them because they are likely to have an effect on the way children experience provision and how practitioners view what they do. This will impact on transitions.

It seems that it is only in England that the last three years have brought so much change, as reference to the Early Years sites of the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish will show. There has been little change in these countries.

Fundamental principles

None of these recent documents change the fundamental principles of the themes in this book. In fact, it might be said that it is even more important to hold onto these principles as we move towards future changes. This is because the policy changes detailed here have potential to undermine the way that practitioners interact with children, families and even each other. How this is so will become clear from the next section.

A fundamental underpinning for adults and children to cope with so much change is to hold on to principles of consistency and wellbeing. This book gives strategies to develop these.

I have mentioned the Ofsted criteria. In the first edition of this book I didn’t mention Ofsted. I must emphasise that good practice is not driven by Ofsted requirements, but they are an influence that cannot be ignored. The focus of inspections has moved towards reviewing the progress made by individual children and there is a danger of narrowing practice to focus on ‘measurable’, more

‘formal’ learning and testing. There does however, remain a section in the evaluation criteria that must be regarded as the most important in order that children can make good progress:

The contribution of the early years provision to children’s well-being

1. Inspectors must evaluate and report on:
 - the effectiveness of care practices in helping children feel emotionally secure and ensuring children are physically and emotionally healthy.

Criteria

2. When evaluating children’s well-being, inspectors must consider the extent to which:

practice ensures all children, especially very young children and those in need of additional support, are forming appropriate bonds and secure emotional attachments with carers

care practices ensure children are happy and enjoy what they are doing, learn to behave well and play cooperatively, develop independence, explore their surroundings and use their imagination, and talk and play with adults and each other

practitioners support children to develop an understanding of the importance of physical exercise and a healthy diet, and to manage their own hygiene and personal needs

children are emotionally prepared for their transition within the setting, into other early years settings, and into maintained nursery provision and/or reception class.

The strategies in this book – if used reflectively – will clearly underpin this criteria and result in at least a ‘good’ judgement.

It is worth noting here that for those working in the Foundation Stage in schools that the separate Ofsted judgement for the Early Years will be reinstated to the whole school inspection and will be broadly similar to the criteria used in non-maintained settings.

However, Brooker (2008) states:

As the Early Years Foundation Stage is launched in England, children's daily lives will be regulated by Ofsted from shortly after their birth until they are 18 or older. Far from continuity, this provision could see them shift from daycare to pre-school and from nursery to reception class; from foundation stage unit to primary school, from primary to secondary, and from secondary to tertiary college. How many transitions is that? More importantly, are all these transitions planned and supported, or are some abrupt and scary? And what impact do they have on children's development and learning, their identity formation and their social competence? (Brooker, 2008, page 4)

Brooker also led research into "practitioners' experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage" (DfE, 2010, page 1).

One of the principal findings of this research report was that, though "practitioners broadly welcome improvements to continuity in the guidance", it was found that:

For many children, the move from nursery into reception class and from reception to year one, involve significantly different experiences of ratios, routines, environments and pedagogy. (DfE, 2010, page 2)

The report identifies that:

The majority of children living in England begin to attend group care settings long before they are three years old, and many experiences several settings in one week. (DfE, 2010, page 11)

A dictionary definition of 'transition' is:

Change or passage from one state or stage to another; The period of time during which something changes from one state or stage to another; a *linking passage* between two divisions in a composition; bridge. (Collins English Dictionary, 2007).

I have italicised the word change as it is key to understanding the issues that arise at times of transition between settings, in varying degrees, for all children. The phrase "a linking passage" is also helpful to keep in mind as, for the children, transition is both a link and a passage – this is why there needs to be a focus on both continuity and progression at these times. Running a thesaurus search on the word 'change' through the computer brings up the words: alter, modify, vary, transform, revolutionise, adjust, and amend. When you consider the number of settings very young children may move through, sometimes daily, this change in setting must be balanced against the fact that they have very little life experience to help them to modify, adjust or amend their thinking and behaviour when faced with new situations. Brooker writes



Year one children learning independently



Independent creativity in year one

Elfer and Dearnley's aim was to create a series of training sessions that would help staff to reflect on their own feelings at key times, thus giving them a greater insight and understanding of how the children in their care might be feeling. The key times that they chose to ask delegates to reflect upon included these four which are important for the theme of transition:

- Staying at nursery for the first time alone
- Attachment and the key person role
- Children's behaviour at nursery
- Team functioning.

It was recognised that unless team members could identify their own feelings, understand these feelings, and in turn express them, they would be unable to effectively support the children in their care.

This chapter opened with asking you to consider times or situations in which you either feel comfortable or uncomfortable, and what the reasons for this are. Now would be a good time to do this in light of what you have read so far as this might have changed your thinking.

Attachment

Elfer and Dearnley noted that:

Senior management must be committed if the organisational structures are to support reflective practice in a systematic and ongoing way. It needs to be recognised that resources have to be allocated for the time and facilitation for staff to think about and process the individual feelings evoked by their emotional work with the children. This involves an attitudinal shift too, seeing reflective practice as an entitlement of staff, both legitimate and necessary, if changes in professional practice are to be facilitated and sustained. (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007, page 278)

For example, the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (2007) states that effective practitioners are those who "Review, challenge and improve their own pedagogy through critical and informed reflection" (Moyles, 2007, page 57). But it is more than this, as Drummond points out:

If the curriculum is infested with values, so too must be those who plan, implement and evaluate it. These conclusions are not confined to pre-school contexts... Understanding children implies understanding ourselves. (Drummond, 2000, page 103)

It is "understanding ourselves" that is important but at the same time difficult to achieve. It could be at this point that issues around attachment are brought to the fore. Adults in the key person role who may have had difficult childhoods or relationships themselves could find themselves in a difficult position with a child in their key group if they allow their own emotions to take hold. Equally, parents who may have had issues in their own childhood may find difficulties allowing another person to bond with their child. This is where the sense of "adulthood" must come into play. Team meetings where staff can feel comfortable to share their feelings with each other without being judged will enable the team to support children through transitions without their own feelings getting in the way. This kind of frank discussion will also enable the team to empathise with parents more.

How we speak to people

Part of making everyone feel comfortable at times of transition is how everyone speaks to each other, and whether people actually listen to what is said. Children particularly pick up on whether the adults around them are on friendly terms or not. This kind of thing may well mean making an extra effort on the part of the staff to make sure that every family is given time for friendly conversation.

This scenario from Brooker's work on starting school is a salutary lesson:

The All Saints' ethos is one which overtly welcomes parents as individuals and includes them as partner-educators. Teachers are enjoined to 'ensure that the school's "Open Door" policy is fully implemented, that parents are made to feel important and welcome visitors, and that they are listened to, and their views receive a positive response'. But teachers are humans with their own personal history and ideology, so this is not as easy as it sounds.

While Mrs Goode aimed, as she said, to 'work with' families in the ways they taught their children at home, in the majority of cases no dialogue existed from which she could learn what was going on at home. So even this inclusive and non-judgemental approach did not enable her to work with parents whose practices differed from her own. Becky's (the teaching assistant) wholehearted endorsement of the school's pedagogy (and her less sympathetic stance towards parents) would not admit diverse views about teaching and learning. Mrs Khan (the bilingual teaching assistant) as we saw was torn between faith in the traditions in which she was raised, loyalty to her employers, and a generous affection for all the All Saints' families, whatever their background.