

## **Transitions and settling in**



**A guide to help you think about how you can support the transitions and settling in processes that the children in your care experience**

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**Supporting members to provide the highest standards of care and learning for children**

**This practice guidance has been developed for all professionals including childminders, nursery workers and nannies.**

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## **1. Introduction**

In this practice guide, we'll be exploring the different types of transitions that children go through, as well as how you can help children settle in well to your childcare setting.

When young children or babies first start coming to your childcare setting, it may be the first time they have been away from their parents, but even if they are used to being left with other people, they will be getting used to a larger group of people and a new environment.

These new experiences coupled with the parents' feelings about going back to work, or leaving their children in a new place, can be a stressful time in a family's life. Creating a feeling of trust in you and your setting, as well as a positive, gradual settling-in period will help with the transition.

## **2. Transitions**

There are many types of transitions in a child's life. Big transitions such as moving house or starting childcare for the first time, and smaller ones during the day such as moving from an activity to snack or meal time. Transitions can be stressful for children and adults, and helping children cope with them and make them as smooth as possible will help their future resilience to change.

### **Think positive**

Talk about up and coming change and transitions in a positive and exciting way, and acknowledge and help children express their feelings and emotions about the change. Also, think of ways to help children celebrate memories of their current situation as well as look forward to the future. Use story time as an opportunity to explore transitions.

Transition is a journey and a process, which happens gradually, not just a one-off moment.

**Think about** the way the situations overlap, not just abrupt endings and beginnings. For example, moving from an activity to meal or snack time involves getting the table ready, which the children could be involved in as part of the transition process.

### Plan extra time

Development Matters (p38) one of the non-statutory guidance documents which supports the EYFS in England suggests you “plan extra time for helping children in transition, such as when they move from one setting to another or between different groups in the same setting”.

Allow time for the gradual building up of secure and trusting relationships between you, the child, and their parents. Once these are in place the child will feel more confident exploring, playing, learning the rules of your setting, and getting the most of the experience on offer.

**Think about** the different types of transition that the children in your setting could go through. For example: moving home, breakdown of parental relationship, moving on to pre-school or primary school, moving rooms in nursery, or the birth of a new sibling.

**Think about** the transitions in your day. For example, moving from play to snack time, from the park back into the car, drop off and pick up times. How can you make those smoother and easier?

### 3. Secure attachments

Building a secure attachment or making the most of an existing attachment between adult and child is important for a smooth transition. John Bowlby, in his book Attachment and Loss, said that children who have a secure attachment are more likely to,

“approach the world with confidence and, when faced with potentially alarming situations, is likely to tackle them effectively, or to seek help.”

Bowlby’s concepts are known as attachment theory.

According to Bowlby, children with secure attachments are also more likely to be responsive, helpful, and model themselves as a potentially loveable person. The attachment figure is the secure base from which the small child or infant feels like they can explore and is available when they are uncomfortable, feeling distressed, tired or hungry.

The National Minimum Standards for Childcare in Wales (p25 8.6) recognises a child’s need for secure attachment and says

“babies and very young children are able to develop an attachment to a consistent carer or small number of regular carers”.

**Think about** how you can foster secure attachments between yourself and the children you care for or between a key worker and the children they are responsible for.

### 4. Key person

In keeping with attachment theory and the need for children to build secure relationships, the EYFS 2014 in England (p21 3.27) says that each child must be assigned a key person.

“Providers must inform parents and/or carers of the name of the key person, and explain their role, when a child starts attending a setting. The key person must help ensure that

every child's learning and care is tailored to meet their individual needs. The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home. They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate."

A strong bond with a key person will help young children settle in.

"This bond is like an emotional safety net and it is essential that it is strong enough to 'catch' the child in the absence of their parents,"

Penny Tassoni, Nursery World article on working with two year olds (14 January 2013)

When children have this bond, they will be more likely to enjoy being in settings and the activities on offer.



Try to start establishing this connection before the child starts at the setting. It's useful for the parents and child to have a point of contact for any questions, home visits, and to arrange settling in sessions. If a home visit isn't practical, **think about** making a "getting to know me" sheet for key workers, with a couple of photos and list of things they like or enjoy that the child could relate to. This could then be sent to the family before the child starts.

Make sure the key person is available and not on holiday or attending training during the settling in process and the child's first few days at the setting. And, have a back up childminder or key person that the child is familiar and comfortable with, in case of holidays, sickness or emergencies.

**Observe** a child who is struggling with a transition in their lives or with settling in to see if they have a secure attachment with an adult in your setting.

- Do they seek them out as a source of comfort?
- Do they recognise and smile at the adult on arrival?
- Do they check where the adult is?
- Are they pleased when they spend time with the adult?

## 5. Separation anxiety

Mixed up in the transition from home to childcare is likely to be some level of separation anxiety. This is a normal stage of development for babies at around 8 to 14 months, but can also occur at different times in a young child's life.

The baby will become distressed when their parent goes out of view or leaves the room. The feelings are tied up with a very real fear that their parent or trusted adult will go away and not come back. This fear can feel like a physical pain, and it is helpful to acknowledge this.

By the time a child reaches the age of about two, children begin to feel safe and independent in other environments.

“Children are able to recognise that, although parents may temporarily leave them with other people, they do return,”

Julia Park, Who Minds? article on settling in (Oct/Nov 2012)

An article in the journal *Infant Behaviour and Development* (June 2012) says

“in order to take part in stimulating and facilitating interactions and activities in day care, young children first have to overcome initial feelings of insecurity and come to terms with separation from and the absence of their parents.”

One idea that might help children experiencing separation anxiety is a book of familiar photos that a child can take with them for the day. You could even add laminated photos to a key ring for the child to hold or have attached to clothing.

**Think about** what signs you might look out for to tell if a child in your care is struggling with transition to your childcare setting or whether they are experiencing separation anxiety. What can you do to ease separation anxiety in a baby or young child?

## 6. Settling in

One important transition for children is settling into your childcare setting, whatever age they are. For some children or babies, it may be the first time they have been left with people who aren't their parents. Others will need to get used to a new environment, new adults and children, and new ways of doing things.

Parents will have varying attitudes to their child starting with you too. If they have older children, they will be familiar with the process. But if not, they may be feeling anxious or guilty about going back to work and worried about leaving their child with you as childcare could be new to them. So building up a relationship with the parents and getting to know them is just as important as with the child. If a parent is comfortable with you and trusts you, the transition will be so much easier.



When settling a new child in, particularly into the smaller group of a childminding setting, think about the other children in your group and the transitions they are making towards accommodating and welcoming the newcomer.

The National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales (p25 8.5) sets the benchmark:

“the settling-in process and separation from parents or carers minimises distress and anxiety.”

### **Your contract**

PACEY recommends that there is a two to four week settling in period, and this should be in a separate area of the contract. If the child is unusually unhappy during this period, the contract may be ended during the settling-in period without the usual notice required.

Each child is different and some will need longer to settle in – be led by the child and discuss this with the parents.

### **The settling-in period**

Take your time to get to know the parents as well as the children during the settling in period, and ask if possible to be introduced to anyone else who will be picking up the child.

Allow the introduction to your setting to be gradual, starting with the child attending with the parent, to the parent moving to a different part of the setting out of view, to the parent popping out for half an hour.

Eventually, build this up to the child attending for a full session or day. As part of the settling-in period, some settings carry out home visits to get to know the child in a familiar and comfortable environment and to talk to the parent in a relaxed way.

To begin with, stay in contact with the parent during the time the child is left with you even if you're just available to answer the phone for a few reassuring words, or send a text message or photo message showing how the child is doing. If the child is distressed and is unable to be settled, call the parent to come and collect them.

Create a familiar routine and stick with it as much as you can so that the child knows what to expect when they are dropped off at your setting.

### **Getting to know each other**

During the settling-in period find out:

- The child's likes and dislikes
- The usual routine, especially if you're welcoming a baby
- Whether they have attended childcare before, are attending any other childcare settings, or are used to being left with other people
- The child's favourite activities, toys or books
- Whether the child has any additional needs, disabilities or developmental concerns that needs to be taken into account
- Who, apart from the parents, may be picking the child up from your setting.

Also, it's just as important that the child gets to know you or their key worker during this period. Allow extra time to spend with the child during the settling-in period, and check that you or any key workers don't have any holidays or training sessions planned.

Some settings have asked key workers to fill shoe boxes with photos and personal mementoes – anything that they can share and talk about with the children to help the bonding process. The children could do the same.

### Greeting and saying goodbye

During the settling-in period, encourage parents to say goodbye in a calm and brief manner, and ask them to tell the child when they'll be back. Staff should confidently greet and say goodbye to babies and children too.

Development Matters (p8) suggests that

“at times of transition (such as shift changes) make sure staff greet and say goodbye to babies and their carers. This helps to develop secure and trusting three-way relationships.”

Some children might like to keep a favourite toy or cuddly with them to begin with as a transitional object.

Invite any new starters to family events you may have planned in the run up to them joining you. For example, open days, fundraising events or summer fayres. And for childminders, you may have family days, drop-ins, or summer outings planned that you can invite new families to join.

**Think about** creating a settling-in policy. Include the time period you usually suggest, your routine during the period and how you will maintain contact with parents.

If you are in a larger setting with staff who work shifts, **think about** how you can support staff building consistent relationships with parents.

## 7. Moving rooms

If you are caring for under threes in a centre-based nursery, it is likely that you will have separate rooms for the different age groups. Moving rooms is an important yet under-estimated transition for young children who will need to get used to a different environment and different staff. The child will need time to get to know their new key worker, and the visits to the new room should be short to begin with and accompanied by their existing key worker.

Gradually introduce the child to activities at different times of the day – including getting used to a new place to sleep.

Talk to parents when you're planning to move their child, invite them to meet the new key worker and take a look around the new room, tell them what will be different about the room, for example, lower staffing, and children becoming more independent. Check they are going to be around during that time (for example, that they are not going on holiday in the middle of the



settling-in process), and that the child won't have any other big transitions happening at the same time.

**Think about** how you manage the move to different rooms.

- How do you help children bond with their new key workers?
- How do you involve parents in the process?

## 8. Moving on

There will come a time when a child needs to move on from your setting. They may be starting primary school, pre-school or moving house. What can you do to make that transition easier? Encourage conversation about the move with photographs of the school, or new setting, or if the child is moving home – ask the parents for photos to share with your group. Share pictures of the new teacher, and talk about the new routine. If the children are moving on to primary school, have a fun afternoon with uniforms and PE kits available that children can dress up in. Listen to any worries, and share stories about positive change.

### Take a moment to reflect

You will be writing summative assessments if you've been providing early years education and the child is moving into a reception class at primary school. Take this moment of reflection to **think about** how the child has developed since starting with you, and the experiences and fun times you've had. How can you capture that for the child? A book of memories would be a lovely thing to compile together. Some settings have simple leaving ceremonies for children who are moving on together with a card and token to remember the time they've spent with you.

**Find out** about settling-in days at school or any special events that the new setting is holding that families are invited to. For example, sports days, picnics or the summer fair. Share these dates with the parents or if parents are working, see if you can take the children along. Or set up and run joint events with the schools and other childcare settings in your area.

**Think about** ways in which you can keep in touch with the children you've cared for. It may be impractical if there are lots of children, but you have been an important and influential adult in their lives so far. Some settings have an annual event where past and present families can get together.



## 9. PACEY Professional Standards

Here are the areas of professional standards that this practice guide relates to. Remember reading practice guides can count towards your CPD and can support you in reflecting and completing the professional standards audit tool.



## **PACEY Professional occupational standards**

### **Member**

Supporting transitions and settling-in for the children in your care will help you meet the standard: **C4.1 Support the children to handle the transitions in their lives** with support from other professionals or organisations as needed.

### **Affiliate**

Supporting transitions and settling-in for the children in your care will help you meet the standard: **C4.2 Support children to handle the transitions in their lives** by gathering relevant information and advice to help you understand and identify transitions and their effects, deciding on and putting into practice a clear and supportive approach to settling in, and providing opportunities for children to explore and discuss significant events and life experiences that may impact on them, seeking to make them as smooth as possible.

### **Fellow**

Supporting transitions and settling-in for the children in your care will help you meet the standard: **C6.3 Empower children to reach their full potential**, by anticipating the social, emotional, physical and information needs of children facing significant transition and collaborate with others to find ways to help them manage and learn from such events.

## **9. References**

**Toddlers' transition to out-of-home day care: Settling into a new care environment** – Infant Behaviour and Development 2012 June; 35 (3): 439-451

**Learning & Development: Two-Year-Olds: Part 1 – Settling in** – Penny Tassoni, Nursery World, 14 January 2013

**Helping Children Settle In** by Rachel Newcombe- Who Minds? Oct/Nov 2012

## **10. Resources**

**Understanding Transitions in the Early Years: Supporting Change through Attachment and resilience** – Anne O'Connor

**Transition in the Early Years – from principles into practice** – Terry Gould

**Key Persons in the Early Years** – Peter Elfer and Dorothy Selleck

**Attachment and Loss** – Dr John Bowlby

**Young Minds** website [www.youngminds.co.uk](http://www.youngminds.co.uk) has useful information on separation anxiety at different ages and stages.

## **11. Frameworks and legislation**

**Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS)**, Department for Education, 2014  
**National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales**, Welsh Government  
**Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**, Early Education

## **12. Support from PACEY**

As a PACEY member you can get more help by visiting the website [www.pacey.org.uk](http://www.pacey.org.uk) or by calling 0300 003 0006

PACEY is the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years. A standard-setting organisation, we promote best practice and support childcare professionals to deliver high standards of care and learning.

Since 1977 we have provided high quality support to our members and have worked with government, local authorities and others to raise standards.

Together with our members - childminders, nannies and nursery workers - we are working to become the professional association for everyone in childcare and early years and ensure our members are recognised for the vital role they play in helping children get the best start in life.

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