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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

Research Digest
Standard 13 Transitions

Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.

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Introduction

Young children may experience many transitions in their lives; from home to an early childhood setting, between early childhood settings, from there to primary school and from one aspect of the daily routine to the next. The early years mark the beginning of these various transitions and so, early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings have a tremendous role in laying strong foundations for ensuring the continuity of experiences for young children. In order to support these transitions, and to make them meaningful to everyone involved, effective management and a variety of communication systems (Research Digest/Standard 12: Communication) are required. This involves developing policies, procedures and practice that promote consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent) and the close involvement of parents and relevant professionals.

Socio-cultural factors are paramount to any understanding of transitions. The child and her/his surrounding environment are not separate entities. Rather, the child is part of a social matrix where previous experiences influence the speed and comfort at which she/he can make the transition from one setting to another. Personal, family and background experiences, for example, impact on a child's adjustment to a new setting. When making a transition, the child is leaving behind (albeit temporarily) someplace where they have an established sense of identity, and beginning someplace where they will engage in new experiences, face physical, social, and behavioural changes, and meet with new challenges and expectations. This raises issues of continuity and discontinuity. It is, therefore, imperative that transitions are facilitated in a sensitive, responsive and smooth manner.

Recent Research

Consistent key relationships

Transitions are eased by the child's experience, from birth onwards, of reliable, stable, continuous, and loving relationships. Close and direct contact by the primary caregiver with the settings, along with careful thought applied to the transitions children experience in their care, is required (Keinig, 2002). This can be facilitated in early childhood settings through a key worker system, where each child and family is assigned a person who has a particular responsibility for liaison with the child and family, and who may:

- Undertake a home visit in advance of a child coming to the centre

- Assess, understand and plan to meet the child and parent's/ carer's needs

- Link closely with parents/carers in helping to settle the child into the centre

- Understand cultural differences and/or key words from a child's first language

- Make contact at the beginning and end of each day with the child and parent/carer

- Ensure that transitions within the daily routine are sensitively planned (e.g., children are alerted to the next activity, have choice regarding who to sit beside, are given sufficient time to finish their previous activity)

- Monitor the curriculum offered to the children for depth, balance, and relevance (Research Digest/Standard 7: Curriculum)

- Provide an update on progress and advice to other team members, and take part in reviews with the children

- Support the child in the transition to school

- Bridge the worlds of home and the setting (French, 2003; French and Murphy, 2005)

The provision of reminders of home, such as special toys, blankets and soothers, and photographs of special people and pets, can also support the transition from home to the setting (French and Murphy, 2005). Dockett and Perry (2002) identified two elements of school readiness research that have been ignored – first, the significance of children's ability to form meaningful relationships and, second, understanding issues from the child's perspective. Cassidy (2005) concurs; children are rarely, if ever, consulted on their experience of the transition to school. For them, knowing the rules and having friends when starting school are the most significant factors (Dockett and Perry, 2002). Smooth transitions are supported by consultation and communication between settings (home, early childhood service, school and specialist staff), sharing information and establishing welcoming environments for the child and family (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002).

Appropriate liaison and consultation within and between settings

Research has highlighted the significance of smooth transitions between settings and the long-term impact of how these transitions are experienced (Dockett and Perry, 2002; Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Keinig, 2002; Cassidy, 2005; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Success in earlier transitions can positively influence subsequent ones. Conceptualised as 'border crossing', children need support to mark and successfully negotiate transitions (Keinig, 2002; Fabian and Dunlop, 2005).

In order for children to feel 'suitable' (e.g., having feelings of well-being, identity, belonging and capability to succeed), Brostrom (2002) explores the requirement for children being ready for school, and also for schools being ready for children. She enumerates several practical activities that are considered to be positive in supporting transitions, including positive liaison (based on personal contact prior to children starting school), collecting information on the child's interests and needs, and ongoing communication regarding activities and the curriculum. Each context is different; the important thing is for settings (e.g., childminders, early childhood services, schools) to

proactively connect and collaborate with parents on the kind of information sharing that is useful (Research Digest/Standard 12: Communication). Brostrom (2002) recommends the use of photographs, children's drawings and favourite stories forwarded from the earlier setting. Margetts (2002) advises the establishment of a local transitions team in order to develop effective transition programmes. In Ireland, in communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage, the Home School Community Liaison Teacher works to support and facilitate smooth transitions.

Policy and procedures on Transitions

Cassidy (2005) conceptualises the differences in the learning environments between settings and the potential pressures and anxieties that may be exacerbated by such for young children. The importance of continuity within and between settings has been recognised, in terms of learning experiences, relationships, and physical differences such as class size and adult: child ratios. This necessitates a common language and understanding regarding transitions (Brostrom, 2002; Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). In a national study in Ireland regarding the transition to school, only 10% of preschools have a transition policy and implementation plan, and levels of communication between preschool and primary school are reportedly low (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Having recorded, clear and disseminated policies and procedures ensures that children, parents, early childhood and school staff have a shared focus and direction for supporting children in the transition to school (Dockett and Perry, 2002; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006).

Children with low self-esteem, those who have difficulty sitting still, listening and concentrating, and those with behavioural problems are challenged in the transition to school. It is, therefore, important to develop independence, self-reliance, concentration, communication, and language skills in young children (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Skills in problem-solving, social competence, determination and '*knowing about not knowing and what to do about it*' were also identified (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002:126). Fabian and Dunlop (2005) refer to the power of play in bridging the transitions from one educational phase to the next. They believe that it can develop children's understanding of the

new situation/curriculum, encourage confidence and competence, and progress learning. How these skills are supported can be articulated in a general transitions policy which may include a key worker policy, a recording system, a 'settling in' policy, a play policy and a 'moving on' policy to support continuity between settings (French, 2003).

Implementing the Standard

Smooth transitions should be facilitated and promoted through the provision of consistent key relationships within the setting. How the setting achieves this can be determined by a number of factors:

- Experience of the adults

- Presence of the same adults throughout the year

- Ensuring sensitivity to the child's needs at transition times throughout the day (Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions)

- Providing secure attachment relationships with adults in the setting

- Acknowledging how these secure relationships facilitate the easy transition of children into/within/from the setting

- Key worker system in operation

In addition to appropriate liaison within a setting, smooth transitions are promoted through similar liaison between settings. The child's transition into/within/from settings can be supported through:

- The collection of information before the child enters the setting

- Sharing this information appropriately within the setting

- Making connections with other relevant settings/schools/organisations/individuals

- Providing information and advice to other settings/schools/ organisations/ individuals when the child is transferring from one setting to another

In ensuring that transitions are made as smooth as possible for children and their parents, children themselves and the relevant professionals should be consulted and involved in the process. A setting can encourage such engagement by:

- Enabling staff and parents to meet and discuss issues prior to enrolment

- Providing opportunities to visit the setting prior to enrolment

- Introducing children to the setting following enrolment

- Facilitating and encouraging parents to spend time in the setting with their child following enrolment

- Accessing information about the child from parents and/or previous settings

- Providing information to other settings, with parental consent (Research Digest/Standard 12: Communication)

- Recognising how formal and informal links with other relevant organisations or agencies in the community can support transitions

Policies and procedures related to children's transitions should be reviewed and updated regularly, and translated into everyday practice. All procedures should be well-documented and made known to relevant staff and adults.

Conclusion

There is a certain irony inherent in the discussion of transitions, which centres on how a transition is deemed successful or not. While a transition is often assessed as being the relatively short 'settling in' period for a child beginning in a new setting, the reality is that the transition's impact can only be fully evaluated over time, through factors such as curriculum, relationships, communication skills, and so forth. Well-functioning transitions support a child's current and future capacities for learning and development.

At a contextual level, communication between parents and settings is vital in ensuring smooth transitions. This is particularly relevant when the heterogeneous nature of current Irish society is considered. Where so many ethnic, cultural and linguistic variables exist, settings need to demonstrate their capacity to meet diversity by facilitating the cultural background of each child. Transitions, therefore, are highly dependant on effective partnerships, which should be characterised by consultation and involvement.

Transitions don't simply mark the progression from one setting to another. They represent change on many levels, ranging from the daily experiences of children in settings to the broader themes of culture, identity, roles, and status. Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote the sensitive handling and management of these changes.

Resources for Transitions

Brostrom, S. (2002). Transitions from Kindergarten to School (in) Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (Eds.). *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 52-63.

Cassidy, M. (2005). They Do it Anyway: A Study of One Teacher's Perceptions of Children's Transitions into Primary Education. *Early Years*, Volume 25 (July), pp. 143-153.

Dockett, S. and Perry, B. (2002). Who's Ready for What? Young Children Starting School. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Volume 3, No. 1, pp. 67-89.

Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (2002). Conclusion: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education (in) Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (Eds.). *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 146-154.

Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (2005). The Importance of Play in the Transition to School (in) Moyles, J. (Ed.). *The Excellence of Play* (2nd ed.). Berkshire: Open University Press, pp. 228-241.

French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

French, G. and Murphy, P. (2005). *Once in a Lifetime: Early Childhood Care and Education for Children from Birth to Three*. Dublin: Barnardos.

Keinig, A. (2002). The Importance of Social Adjustment for Future Success (in) Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (Eds.). *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 23-37.

Margetts, K. (2002). Planning Transition Programmes (in) Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (Eds.). *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 111-122.

O'Kane, M. and Hayes, N. (2006). The Transition to School in Ireland: Views of Preschool and Primary School Teachers. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood*, Volume 2, pp. 4–16.

Children's Books

Anholt, L. (2005). *Going to Playgroup*. London: Orchard Books. [Explores a child's fear of leaving her mother and going to a new, unfamiliar place].

Edwards, B. and Flintoft, A. (2004). *My First Day at Nursery School*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. [Prepares children for separation from their parents].

Forward, T. (2004). *The First Day of School*. London: Doubleday. [Prepares children for the transition to primary school].

Teague, K. (1991). *Anna Goes to School*. London: Magi Publications. [Charts a little girl's first day at school and the changes in her routine].

Worth, B. (1991). *Bye-Bye High Chair.* New York: Muppet Babies Big Steps Series (Golden Books). [Designed for toddlers, in preparation for the transition the nursery/pre-school setting].

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