

Understanding and supporting transitions

Some questions/ideas to think about:

- What are some of the transitions, both large and small, that happen for children in your setting?
- Why do you think transitions can be challenging for young children with SEND in particular?
- Think about what can be done to make transitions more manageable and successful.
- Find out what is in place to manage transitions in your setting. Could anything else be added?

The importance of transitions for young children with SEND: by 'transition', we mean any change, both large and small. It is important to recognise that there is a wide range of transitions for both the family and the child.

When we consider transitions, we need to consider the whole family, which may include siblings and other family members, and the impact of having a child with SEN or a disability. This in itself may mean that all of those close to the child are on a journey, and are progressing at different rates in their understanding of what this means to them, individually and as a family member. This can be an extremely sensitive and unpredictable journey and indeed is a major transition; it can last for a significant period of time, and is re-experienced and revisited at key stages of a child's life. Where the child's needs are lifelong, these transitions can reoccur in adolescence and adulthood.

A baby who is born with a disabling condition and who may also have health needs is likely to have to make frequent visits to the hospital for interventions. This usually brings with it changes from what was expected by parents, to the reality of what is needed to care for the baby. There could be high levels of involvement of medical staff, health care staff, therapists and other professionals, all of whom are offering support and advice. The parents are continuously required to interpret this advice and make adjustments to the care of their baby. Sometimes this may involve parents learning specific processes and procedures for feeding their baby or administering medication on a regular basis, or even using specialist equipment and apparatus.

Once the baby or child begins to attend an early years setting, the sort of transitions which each family and their child go through will differ. Whether a child's needs are already identified prior to joining the early years provision, or whether their needs are identified over the course of time they spend with you, will impact on the kinds of transitions experienced to some extent.

It is important to think about transitions both large and small – some of these seem quite obvious, such as moving from one setting to another, but others may be taken for granted as most children manage them easily. Consider transitions which are frequent and part of an early years environment, such as transition between activities, spaces, or staff and even the daily transition from home to setting, or to another environment. Some transitions and the impact on individual children may at first not be obvious to those who know the child, as other children and the adults themselves may have adjusted and adapted without being aware of it. For example, a change in the usual routine of the day, the arrival of an unexpected visitor, a change of plans, moving furniture or adding new displays. For some children these changes are exciting and stimulate exploration and investigation, but for other children this can lead to anxiety, confusion and becoming overwhelmed. In this situation it is common to see a change in the child's behaviour which may be an indication that they are not coping and need some support.

It is not possible to avoid change. Whether we think about transitions that are frequent and happen many times within a day, or those which happen as the child moves through different phases of early childhood, it is important to consider how all those who know the child work together to provide appropriate support to for effective transitions for the family and child effectively.

There are many different types of transitions, and each deserves its own consideration, reflecting on how each child can be given the appropriate level of support to manage it successfully. The fact that transitions, adapting to change, and flexibility are part of everyday life, means that enabling all children to deal with transitions is key to a lifelong set of skills. In order to build the child's ability to do this, it is important for the adults to be able to see the world from the child's perspective. It can be surprising just how complicated and challenging things can be from a child's perspective, just to get through a day!

Much of the effective practice in relation to effective transitions depends upon time for planning, building relationships, open and honest communication, sharing information, providing continuity and being prepared to be flexible. This is the responsibility of all practitioners.

In terms of the EYFS, it is an essential part of providing an 'enabling environment' and 'positive relationships' and in terms of the Equality Act 2010, it should be considered as part of the reasonable adjustments duty. In the 2015 publication, 'Disabled children and the Equality Act 2010: what early years providers need to know and do, including responsibilities to disabled children under the Children and Families Act' this anticipatory duty, 'requires settings to think ahead and consider what adjustments they may need to make so that disabled children can be included in the life of the setting as fully as possible'. It goes on to say 'it is good practice to involve parents and children themselves in planning reasonable adjustments.' Parents may already have considered what changes and adjustments are necessary for their child and be making these on a regular basis, particularly when dealing with daily transitions. Working together to discover what is effective is essential for good transitions.

Section 10 of the Council for Disabled Children's SEN and Disability Toolkit considers transitions for disabled children and children with SEN in relation to transition from home to an early years setting, changing between providers, or moving from a setting into a school. It states: 'It is important that when children start in a setting, move on to another setting or to school, that they have the best possible chance of a smooth transition and successful placement'. It continues by stating that 'If transition is a process, the key to its success lies in the preparation and planning beforehand and the settling in, or follow up afterwards'.

You should first consider how you will support daily transitions as part of high quality universal practice. The establishment of daily routines helps all children to predict what is coming next and to feel that they can be involved and included throughout the day. The key person plays an important part in helping children feel safe, happy and included; they provide reliable and familiar reassurance for the child throughout the day and offer a 'secure base to explore from' and 'a safe haven to retreat to'. Routines relating to specific aspects of the day such as the beginning and end of sessions, snack time, group time and so on are important for all children throughout their time in the setting. There may also be certain routines that are part of the child's home life that are important to providing continuity and predictability. All transitions involve change and this can lead to excitement and new experiences, but can also increase children's anxiety due to unfamiliarity and feeling out of control.

As part of daily practice there are many simple ways in which children can be offered additional support to be prepared for and manage transitions. For example, using sand timers and clear visual cues for when an activity or session is going to begin or end can be useful. Music, songs or rhymes can be used to signal different parts of the session, such as tidy up time. It is important to remember that, depending on the child's individual needs, some things may be more successful than others. Some young children need adults to let them know what is happening by addressing them by name at their eye level. Some children may miss more general cues, as they might not realise that what is being said includes them, or their individual impairment might mean that they are not aware of the cue. Some children become so engrossed in what they are doing that they may not be aware of what is going on

around them, whereas others may be very sensitive to too much sensory input and may 'zone out' to avoid being overwhelmed.

The use of visual timetables or schedules is very popular and can help children check for themselves what is coming up. In choosing what to use to represent what is going to happen, you will need to decide whether objects, photographs, symbols or words, or a combination of these, will be the most helpful. Not all young children are ready for symbols and many will benefit from real objects or photographs of real objects. Some children will need their schedule to be highly personalised and accessible in a specific place.

When children require their transitions to be planned for in smaller steps, then the use of 'Now and Then' or 'Now and Next' boards can be useful. These can be made of card and laminated, drawn on a small white board, or be a surface where you can stick or attach images. These show the child what they are doing 'now' and what will happen once this activity has ended; this can be extremely useful in helping children to understand that an activity (whether liked or disliked) will not last forever.

Some children may need plenty of repetition and rehearsal to become used to the approaches which support daily transitions; it is important not to assume a child has picked it up. You may need to model using these repeatedly and also offer 'hand on hand' guidance if appropriate. Look out for when the child shows that they are anticipating a change or transition, and when they start to use the chosen approach for themselves, for example, they go to their own timetable.

A more individualised approach could include using 'objects of reference'. These are real objects which represent a particular event, for example, a cup for snack time, or a book for story time. The child is given the object and the adult names it using the appropriate communication system. You could also consider using sensory clues such as smell, which can be very effective for young children with multiple sensory impairments. However, be careful when using this approach as the sense of smell can be a very powerful one and can be overwhelming for some children.

The use of 'transitional objects' is also useful. This involves children having an object from home which they bring to the setting and which they can access throughout the day, perhaps a scarf which smells of their primary care giver. Over time, children will generally need the transitional object less and less as they start to feel safe and settled. However if they start to feel unsettled or when they are under the weather, they may seek this out again

The SEN and Disability Toolkit referred to earlier states that: 'Successful transition for disabled children and children with SEN has its foundation in good practice for all children. Where a child's needs have been identified before they are admitted to the setting, transition is likely to require more detailed planning, the closer participation of parents and the sharing of a wider range of information. The period of planning and preparation is likely to involve the SENCO as well as the allocated key person and, for some children, a wider range of professionals. Different settings plan transition in different ways and leaders decide how to support the process.'

There are some effective tools, particularly when gathering information about the child and family, which help to establish that all-important relationship as soon as possible. The use of 'All about me' books and good admission and registration processes support good transitions. Regular opportunities to share information are really important as an ongoing process. The more involved the parent feels, the better the relationship and communication is likely to be. Visits to the new space, place or setting are important, and it can also be helpful to create a book or album of photos which may be important to the child, such as where to hang their coat, put their lunch box, the toilets, and so on, as well as the new people the child will meet. This provides a source of information to go through with the child to help prepare them. Some providers use 'key person' boxes with a photo of the child's key person, and maybe a favourite book or toy that is associated with that person, which the child can take home. The use of familiar toys, books and photos of the child's home and family are also very useful.

The use of person-centred 'one page profiles' can also help ensure that the vital information about a child is captured simply and effectively; this can support a good experience whilst undergoing a transition to somewhere new. The key information for these profiles includes 'What people like and admire about me', 'What is important to me', 'What is important for me' and 'How best to support me', and the writing of the profile can be a positive and useful dialogue between the provider and the parent.

Some useful resources include: SEN and Disability in the Early Years A toolkit

<https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/import/early-years-toolkit-merged.pdf>

Nasen Transition miniguide <http://www.nasen.org.uk/miniguides/>

Helen Sanderson Associates (person-centred tools) <http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/>

Reflection questions and activities:

| Question/activity | Response |
|---|----------|
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