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Because childhood lasts a lifetime

GUIDANCE FOR CHILDMINDERS

Supporting Children with Transitions

Children experience many transitions in their lives. Some of these are big transitions, such as moving from home to a childminder setting or starting a new school, while others are smaller, daily transitions, like moving from playing in the sandpit to having lunch. Whatever the size or scope of the transition, children need support from the important adults in their lives to navigate the changes taking place.

As a childminder, you develop close, nurturing relationships with the children in your care. This enables you to offer individualised support around transitions based on each child's needs. When you plan transitions well, in collaboration with a child's family, you can prepare the child for what is to come, help them adapt to the new situation, and ease any concerns they might have. In doing so, the child is more likely to experience positive outcomes and to become confident in anticipating and managing change, now and in the future.

This resource offers guidance on how you can support children's social and emotional development and wellbeing during transitions.

What is a Transition?

A transition is the process of moving from one situation to another and taking the time to adjust (*AistearSíolta Practice Guide*). For children, there are the big transitions such as joining the childminding setting for the first time, starting preschool, moving from preschool to primary school, and moving from primary school to secondary school. Then there are the smaller, but just as important, transitions that take place every day such as arriving at and leaving your home, going to and from the park, and moving between daily activities such as play, mealtimes, tidy up and sleep.

Even for adults, leaving a safe, predictable environment for something unfamiliar can be challenging, and everyone copes with change differently. Whether it is encountering new places, people and expectations, or simply moving from one activity to another, we all need to learn to adapt and adjust to what is happening in the moment. Even the small, daily transitions mentioned on the previous page can cause upset if they are abrupt, inconsistent, or unclear.

For children, particularly babies, toddlers, and very young children with fewer past experiences or funds of knowledge[1] to draw from, transitions can be particularly challenging. They often need extra support and reassurance to feel safe, confident and positive about changes taking place. When transitions are well planned, with adults providing stability and security, most children adapt and soon settle in to the new situation. If a transition isn't carefully managed or supported by key adults, however, transitions can be confusing, unsettling, or even cause stress for a child.

As a childminder, it is important to recognise that a transition is only complete when the child is fully settled – both physically and emotionally.

'All transitions are important and are recognised as a process that takes time rather than a once-off event.' (*Aistear*)

How transitions are handled in early childhood affects not only the child's current wellbeing, but will also shape how they react and respond to change in the future.

Reflecting on Transitions

Take a few minutes to reflect on a time when you experienced a transition in your own life. This could be anything from starting a new job, joining a new club, going on a holiday or just leaving your home to go to work or to an activity.

- How did the experience make you feel at the time?
- What did you do to prepare yourself?
- How did your preparation help you to manage the situation?
- Was there a particular person or thing that you found helpful during the transition?

Now think about how a child, who may have less control about how the situation proceeds, might feel in a similar situation. What might make the transition a more positive experience for them?

1 Funds of knowledge refers to the valuable skills, knowledge and interests that babies, toddlers and young children learn from their families and communities.

Supporting Children with Transitions

There are a number of key considerations and actions you might take, outlined below, that will help you plan for and support children with transitions.

Every Child is Unique

Every child is unique and their reaction to a transition will depend on a number of different factors including their age and stage of development and understanding, their individual personality and temperament, their previous experiences with change, and the support they receive from the adults around them. It may take some children longer to settle in and experience a sense of wellbeing and comfort in a new situation than others.

You can best support children through transitions by building a nurturing, empathetic relationship with them and developing collaborative partnerships with their parents and family. When you know a child well, and engage in focused interactions with them, you will be more attuned to how they are feeling and will be better able to plan for a smooth transition. By ensuring that transitions are gradual where possible, and involving children in decisions being made, you can retain elements of familiarity and consistency for a child and adapt for their individual needs.

All transitions should be child-led with the child's needs at the centre of any decisions being made.

Children Have Rights

All children have the right to thrive and to be nurtured by adults who promote their general wellbeing, health, nutrition and safety. They also have the right to express their opinions and make choices and decisions in their daily lives. As their childminder, it is important that you:

- Understand that the child is a participant in the transition, rather than it being something that is happening 'to' them.
- Recognise each child as an individual with their own abilities, experiences, preferences and needs, and as an independent and competent learner.
- Ensure that every child has a voice in deciding what activities they participate in throughout the day and how much or how little they will participate.
- Offer children choices.
- Support them to be independent and make decisions about what is happening in their daily lives.
- Understand a child's right to change their minds.

Partnership with Parents

It is important to recognise and respect the knowledge, expertise and experiences that parents bring.

Working in partnership with parents involves a collaborative relationship, sharing information and making decisions together in the child's best interests. Taking this approach will keep parents informed and involved in their child's daily experiences, interests, and behaviour while in your care, and also help you to understand how the child is at home. Through this, you can create continuity and consistency in the care children receive at home and in your setting – their '*home-from-home*' – which will support both everyday transitions and bigger life changes.

Collaborative relationships with parents help create an environment where babies, toddlers, and children feel happy, secure, and confident, and build a foundation for smooth transitions.

Understanding Children's Behaviour at Times of Transition

To support children's social and emotional wellbeing and development during transitions, you must first understand that a child's behaviour is a way for them to communicate their emotions and their needs.

When you consider the reasons behind a child's behaviour, and try to understand what it is they might be feeling, you will be able to respond in a positive rather than a reactive way, which will lead to better outcomes for the child.

Transitions can bring about different emotional reactions for children, including excitement, worry and even fear, and it is important to be tuned in to any signs of distress that a child might be showing. Some children may show their distress through increased clinginess while other children may withdraw or appear disengaged. Some may have emotional outbursts or even physical symptoms such as tummy upsets or trouble sleeping, or there be a regression in behaviour such as toileting. Sometimes a child may appear to settle quickly and then a few days later start to show signs of distress, while others, particularly older children, might appear to be adapting well to a change but are concealing their upset.

Babies and toddlers may not have the words to explain how a transition is making them feel. You will need to observe their behaviour closely to understand how they might be feeling and communicate openly with the child's parents to get an insight into any behavioural changes they have noticed. If a child is showing signs of distress, speak in a soft and soothing tone and reassure them through gentle touch. By creating a calm space where children feel safe and secure, you can help them to regulate their heightened emotions.

Support older children to manage their big emotions by being sensitive and responsive to their attempts to communicate through their behaviour and by giving them words to express their feelings. Children who are encouraged to express their ideas and their emotions – joy, sadness, upset, anger, frustration and fear – can develop ways to cope with new, challenging or stressful situations. Let children know that all feelings are okay and sometimes it is natural to feel strong emotions. It is what the child learns to do with these strong emotions that is important. Support children to find ways of self-soothing or coping, such as taking long deep breaths or drawing a picture to take home.

Older children will be better able to cope with change when they are prepared for what is coming next so establish predictable routines, help them explore the new environment and be realistic in your expectations of them.

By tuning into each child's temperament, their sensitivity, their energy levels or level of tiredness on a given day, you will be able to offer each child the support they need.

Create a caring, relaxed and supportive environment where each child feels accepted, always focusing on each child's individual strengths and what they *can* do rather than what they *can't* do.

Settling in to Your Home

Settling into a new childminding setting is a big change for any child, especially for a baby or toddler who may be the only person in the room who does not know why they are there.

Depending on their stage of development and also on individual differences and past experiences, some children will adjust easily to the new environment while others will need more time. Some children are more sensitive than others and may become distressed more easily, and it may take time for you to develop a relationship with them where they feel secure and safe.

Attachment

Attachment theory helps us to understand how the secure bonds that children form in early childhood with their parents and other key caregivers supports them to grow and develop, and to reach their full potential. These emotional bonds are essential for a child's wellbeing and holistic development. Children with secure attachments are better able to cope with change, to manage adversity, and to overcome challenges.

You can help children to develop a secure attachment with you, and feel safe and secure in your care, by:

- **Providing consistent and sensitive caregiving,** especially in activities such as feeding, care routines such as nappy changing and toileting, and settling for sleep, or when encouraging older children to learn and practise personal care routines. This includes slowing things down, moving at the child's pace, and taking notice of how they are feeling and reacting to any new situations or events.
- **Being attuned to children.** When you can interpret what a child needs at any given time from their behaviour or cues, you will be better able to respond to them appropriately. This is particularly important for babies and toddlers who use many different ways to communicate other than speech, such as gestures, facial expressions and body language.
- **Being sensitive and responsive to the child's emotional needs.** This is important all the time but particularly during times of change.

- **Demonstrating empathy and compassion.** Think about the child's thoughts and feelings in your interactions with them and let the child know that you are doing so.
- **Supporting children to develop their independence.** Provide opportunities for children to learn or practise new skills while also providing encouragement and reassurance. Where possible, avoid doing things for children that they are capable of doing for themselves, even though sometimes it may be quicker or less messy.

A Sense of Belonging

When children see themselves, their interests and their identities reflected in an environment they feel a sense of belonging, which helps them to settle in. You can enhance children's sense of belonging in your setting in the following ways:

- Get to know each child's interests, likes and dislikes.
- Find out about family values, culture and traditions.
- Provide a variety of toys, games and activities that reflect the child's interests and that you know they will enjoy.
- Have a space where children can display artwork or things they have made.
- Have a dedicated space where children can keep their belongings and know where to find them.

Planning the Settling-in Period

The following practical ideas may be helpful as babies, toddlers and children settle into your care:

- **Create social stories.** These are short, personalised stories that can be shared with the family before they start that shows what the childminding setting looks like and explains what will happen there, all in an age-appropriate way. This might be through a storybook or a video.
- **Plan for a phased settling-in period.** Whatever age a baby, toddler or child is when starting in your childminding setting, it is really important to plan together with their parents for a gradual and phased settling-in period that meets the child's individual needs, involving children in these discussions where possible. Although it may be difficult logistically for some parents, this settling-in plan should take the form of shorter visits, shorter days and fewer days to begin with. The length of time that this phase needs will depend on the individual child and family.
- **Create an individualised settling-in record** in partnership with parents and children where you can document key information about the child including their routines, likes and dislikes. Depending on the age and developmental stage of the child, you might invite them to draw a picture of their favourite activity or encourage older children to write about what they enjoy.
- **Encourage children to bring comfort objects from home** or familiar games or toys to offer some familiarity in this new environment. Gather photos of the child's family they can look at throughout the day.
- **Talk to children about what is happening,** particularly if routines change.
- **Develop a familiar routine** in partnership with parents for children when they enter and leave your home.
- **Always encourage parents to say goodbye to children** before they leave each day. This will help children to feel secure and know what is coming next.

It is important not to forget how parents may be feeling – a child's transition into your home can be an emotional event for parents too. Your reassurance and support can help at this time. Talk through any concerns or worries parents might have before the first day, and maintain an ongoing conversation about how everyone is feeling.

It is essential that settling in to your childminding setting happens gradually and takes place at a pace that meets the needs of the child.

Starting or Moving to a New Preschool or School

Some of the children in your care may be starting preschool or primary school, and part of your role may be to bring them to and from this new environment on a daily basis. Other children may be moving from primary to secondary school or moving to a new school. Each of these transitions is a major change for any child, with separation from familiar adults, peers and places, and an introduction to new people, new routines and, often, a larger, noisier environment. There will also likely be different expectations of the child and they will need to learn new skills to adapt to the environment around them.

There are a number of things you can do to help children prepare for this big life change, but the most important thing you can do is talk with the child on an ongoing basis as you prepare together for the transition about what they expect, the concerns they might have, what they are looking forward to, the differences and similarities between your setting and preschool or primary and secondary school, and so on.

When the transitions into preschool and school are smooth, and children are well supported to adapt to the new experience, it will have a positive impact for children's learning and development and their educational journey, now and into the future.

The Physical Environment

While some children may have visited a preschool or school with older siblings, entering the building and grounds will be a new experience for many children, even those going to secondary school. There are a number of things you can do to help them overcome the fear of the unknown and to prepare:

- Introduce school concepts through play to allow children to explore the idea of school in a low-pressure way. Set up a pretend 'classroom' with books, a bell, and chairs, and encourage role-play games with children taking turns to be both pupils and teacher. This is a playful way for children to naturally express their emotions and expectations around starting school, including their hopes and concerns, and will give you an important insight in to how the child is feeling.
- Wearing a school uniform will be a new experience for some children. Help children prepare by showing them photos or adding school uniforms to the dress-up box. Uniforms can often be found in local charity shops or from parents who may have some older uniforms at home.

- Where possible, go for walks near the school grounds to build familiarity.
- Together with the child, look up the school website where you can often find pictures of the school environment and school activities.
- Invite children to draw pictures, write a story, or compose a song about what they think the school will look like and what they think will happen there.
- Read books about starting school or moving to a new school, and discuss how the characters might be feeling.
- Have regular conversations with children about their new school environment, what they are looking forward to and what they are unsure about to allay any concerns and to enhance feelings of safety and security.

Change in Routine

Starting a new preschool or school will impact on different aspects of a child's daily routine. Work with the child and their parents to develop a new routine that offers continuity and enables the child to prepare for what will be happening on a daily basis with confidence.

- Find out the name of the key person assigned to the child in preschool, or of the child's teachers in school. This will be helpful if you have any questions about the child's day.
- Find out about any of the preschool or school policies that might be relevant to you, such as drop off and collections. Is there are specific area where you wait to collect children, for example?
- Talk to the child about aspects of their routines, such as when and where you will collect them, so they know what to expect.
- Use visual aids, such as maps or bus routes, and practise walking the journey.
- Help children develop independence skills. For young children this might be putting on their own coat while for older children it might be packing their bag or planning their day.
- Encourage children to keep a transition diary or scrapbook where they write or draw how they're feeling about the change.
- Ensure that children arrive and are collected on time. It can be upsetting for children if they join the class late or are the last to be collected, so consider the best way to make the journey each day, taking in to account how busy school routes can be in the morning and afternoons.
- Establish mealtime routines. It is important that children have breakfast before they go to school, and they are often hungry when they finish school.
- Offer opportunities for rest and relaxation. Children may seem more tired than usual when they first start preschool or school and they often need time to relax and unwind after a busy day.

Making New Friends

In the new preschool or school environment, children will be mixing with new children, forming new friendships and meeting new teachers. You can help children to navigate and develop relationships with adults and other children by guiding their social skills and development.

- Bring children on outings in the local community where they might meet other children from the preschool or school, such as libraries and parks.
- Ask them how they are feeling about meeting new people, and gently open up conversations about the importance of friendships, being kind to others and so on.
- If it is their first time at preschool or they are starting primary school, read stories with children about starting school and making friends.
- Encourage children to be curious and ask questions from their new peers.
- Play games that require cooperation and turn taking.
- Provide lots of opportunities for children to role play situations that require them to be empathic. Empathy – the ability to step into the shoes of another person and imagine how they might feel – is a key skill in developing friendships.
- Support children to regulate their emotions and express how they are feeling, both to the adults around them and to their new peers.
- Encourage independence and provide children with opportunities to make choices and decisions.
- Older children may be excited but also anxious, with puberty sometimes making children feel more self-conscious about what others, especially their peers, might think of them. Discuss how they are feeling and help children to understand that many others might be feeling the same way.

Always keep parents informed on how drop off and collections are going and share any important information you have been told by the preschool or school.

Daily Transitions

Like the bigger transitions described above, the smaller transitions that take place often throughout the day deserve thoughtful support and planning, always keeping in mind that transitions are a process.

Making routines predictable, such as always tidying up before you have lunch or reading a story before home time, offers consistency, meaning children are prepared for what comes next, which helps them feel secure and confident. When children know what to expect, it is easier for them to stay calm and manage their emotions and behaviour. It is important, however, that these routines are also flexible, enabling you to remain responsive and make adjustments based on the needs of each child at a particular time, and to change plans if required.

The following considerations will help daily transitions run more smoothly.

- Establish routines that are child-centred and flexible to changing needs.
- Use visual routines where appropriate.
- Do not move abruptly from one activity to the next. Signal an upcoming change ahead of time, using verbal and visual cues paired together, 'We'll be putting on our shoes and coats to go to the park in two minutes', using an egg timer to count down to the transition.
- Prepare children using familiar playful transition activities. For example, when moving from playtime to mealtime sing a tidy-up song, wash your hands and set the table together. It is especially helpful if one song is used for the same transition each day. Repetition creates a sense of safety and predictability.
- Involve children in the transition process and support them to express how they are feeling.
- If children are upset by a particular transition, try to find out what is happening for them in that moment, and discuss with parents.

When supporting children of any age through transitions, the most important thing is that you communicate to each child, 'I see you, I care about how you feel, I will keep you safe and I can help'.

Further Information

Useful weblinks

Guidance for Childminders

An Introduction to The Rights of the Child in Early Learning and Care - Barnardos

Early Years Inspectorate - Childminding Services

Aistear Síolta Practice Guide

Nurturing Skills

Children's Participation Toolkit

For parents

First 5 Resources for Parents

Your Young Child's Behaviour: How You Can Help (Barnardos)

Information Leaflets (National Parents Council)

Let's Get Ready! Transition Resources and Information (Better Start)

T: 01 453 0355

E: resources@barnardos.ie

W: www.barnardos.ie

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Department of Children, Disability and Equality

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