



The transition to early learning settings: ages 3–5

For a positive transition from home to their early learning service, children need support and routines to adapt to their new environment.

The importance of a successful transition

A successful transition has long-lasting benefits

A successful transition from home to early learning services is important for all children and has long-lasting benefits.

Children who experience a positive transition into their new environment are likely to feel connected, enjoy a sense of belonging and have a positive sense of social and emotional wellbeing, which allows them to learn and thrive.

As development is on a continuum, educators and families must be responsive to the child based on their needs, regardless of their age.

For an introduction to transitions, see [Transitions in learning communities](#).

Understanding behaviour

Small transitions throughout the day

In early learning services, children experience transitions throughout their day – not just from home to the service.

This includes transitions for the child from one part of the day to another; from big groups to small groups; care routines (such as meals, sleep and rest times); supported self-care routines (such as handwashing); and end-of-day to home transitions.

Transitions also include room transitions throughout the year and service-to-service transitions. Benefits of being resilient

Common feelings and concerns

For the child, moving from home to early learning involves being separated from their family, often for the first time.

This can be an exciting time for both children and their families. However, it is common for children to have a range of feelings about starting in a new learning environment.

Some typical feelings are:

- excitement
- feeling comfortable about entering a new learning environment
- feeling anxious, nervous or unsettled.

Trusting and supportive relationships

Strong relationships between children, their families and educators support child wellbeing.

It is a child's first attachments with responsive parents and other trusting relationships that provide them with a secure base for exploration and learning.

Trusting and supportive relationships provide children with consistent environments at home, in early learning settings and at school. This leads to security and confidence, as well as greater learning, development and wellbeing.

As an educator, you can include families to establish transition policies and practices that best meet the needs of the children at your service.

Children and families living in diverse circumstances may need extra support, and special efforts to reach families may be required for some children. Planning for transitions and inclusive practices are key.

The transition is more likely to be successful when educators and families communicate, and the relationships are responsive and mindful of everyone in the learning community.

Build positive relationships with families before the child starts at the early learning service.

It is important for early learning settings to build positive relationships with families and the child before starting in the new learning setting.

Educators who develop nurturing relationships with children and provide them with consistent emotional support can help them make a positive transition into early learning services.

Supporting transitions

How can educators support a smooth transition to the new early learning setting?

Here are some strategies that involve both educators and families.

- Start gradually

Work out a plan that suits everyone and organise orientation visits to allow the child to see what the early learning setting looks like, to meet key people and to see what happens during the day.

On the first day or days, invite families to stay for a while at the start of the day. Remember to let the children know how long their families are staying for.

Ensure that the family member says goodbye to the child before they leave. The child may become upset at this time – but if the family member leaves without the child noticing, this will create distrust and further anxiety for the child in the long term.

- Establish routines

Routines can help the child feel safer, especially when new things are happening. Children require specific information about transitions. Use rituals, consider attachment, agency, autonomy and self-regulation – as well as the constant conversations necessary to support the explanation of the transition. For example, talk to the children and tell them what's happening next in their day.

Consistent routines can help prevent confusion and make children feel more secure.

- Welcome, and communicate with, the child's family

Encourage parents to spend time at the early learning service and participate in the program.

Children who see their families connected with the service (for example, through having

positive communication relationships with educators), can feel more secure and safe.

Regular contact and good communication with a child's family will also provide more opportunities for obtaining information about the child's routines, comfort item or toy, favourite songs and book.

Parents themselves may experience a sense of loss or be anxious during this transition. For example, they may feel concerned about their child's ability to cope in the new environment. Building a partnership with families can contribute to a common understanding about expectations, which can help them adjust.

- Acknowledge the child's achievements

Positive acknowledgement when the child meets new people or attempts new things is a good way to increase the child's confidence and sense of competency. For example, acknowledge when the child is making attempts to interact positively with peers: "I can see you and Tom both like rolling the ball. It looks like fun".

- Read books about starting in a new early learning setting

Reading books to children about starting in an early learning service can prepare a child for what to expect.

A picture book of the service, including photos of the educators, will help familiarise and prepare children and may be especially useful for families that speak a language other than English at home.

References

Child Australia (2012). Plan effective transitions for children in education and care services. Retrieved from

<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-01/PlanEffectiveTransitionsForChildren.PDF>

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Dunlop, A. & Fabian, H. (2007). Informing transitions in the early years: Research, Policy and Practice. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

Rosier, K. & McDonald, M. (2011). Promoting positive education and care transitions for children. Retrieved from <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/promoting-positive-education-and-care-transitions-children>

External links

[Anxiety: The stepladder approach \(Suitable for 3–8 years\)](#)

[Preschooler behaviour: What to expect \(Suitable for 3–5 years\)](#)

[Starting preschool \(Suitable for 3–5 years\)](#)