

Solihull Early Years Support & Assessment Team

Transition advice to schools and settings following the COVID-19 pandemic 'lockdown'

Returning to schools and settings that are opening after the Covid-19 lockdown will be hard. We cannot predict what it will look like or when or how it will happen. Each child will have had their own experience. It will take time for children to re-establish and re-learn routines and expectations. It will be important to respond to what children have learnt, not what we expect them to have learnt and what they may have forgotten. It could well be over whelming and frightening to be amongst groups of children and adults, especially given the concentrated time spent in the home environment because of 'lock down'. Children will have become used to being with their parents and immediate family for an extended period. This will be a potential source of anxiety for young children.

We know that transition is a process and not an event. Under current conditions we need to carefully think about and consider the processes we would have implemented for information exchanges with previous settings and parents, visits to the school or home visits to meet the children; for example how much of this can be moved online and how much may need to be moved to September. It will become even more important for children starting at a new setting to have a staggered start, slowly allowing them to become accustomed both to the new setting and the psychological adjustment required.

Some key considerations to assist with that process might be:

1. **Consider the health and wellbeing of your staff.** You will need to take time to consider the health and mental wellbeing of your staff as they return to work following the COVID-19 pandemic. Be aware of;
 - a. Physical changes
 - b. Emotional and behavioural changes
 - c. Work performance

You can consider using the 'Take 10 Together' toolkit to start a conversation with them. <https://mhfaengland.org/>

Ensure that you follow the guidelines set out in the [PPE guidance table](#) for Solihull

2. **Consider what your setting will look like for children.** You will need to help the child to **become familiar** with your setting. Under these current circumstances this could be by providing virtual photo books and/or video tours of key features of the school/setting e.g. entrance, toilets, pegs, break out area, playground and/or a selection of toys and equipment available. If you are unsure how to do this, your EYSAT Early Years Area SENCo can support you with this and share examples with you.
3. If the child is moving to a new school/setting you will need to ensure that you have a robust system set up for sharing information. You might need to consider additional questions to be included and discussed in your **transition documentation** E.g. sleep and energy patterns; how the child usually shows anxiety or distress; what helps to soothe and comfort them; the child's motivations, their favourite themes in play; how the parent would like to approach the separation and what they think would most help their child.
4. **Having friends in the same class** helps children adjust to the demands of the setting and can possibly help compensate for other factors that can make children more vulnerable during transition. Ask parents/carers and staff at previous settings about a child's friendships and be flexible in your approach to groupings to take account of these.
5. **Relaxed/staggered starts** under the current situation will be evermore important to allow the child and their parent/carer to take their time separating and to choose what the child is ready to engage in. Coming into an active environment with self-registration and continuous provision (as opposed to carpet-based registration routines) provides the child and parent/carer with lots of options for handling the separation in ways that work best for them.
6. **Predictability and routines.** These will be important, especially during the settling in phase without too many interruptions to sustained play or too many breaks for adult-driven tasks, such as snack times, assemblies and whole-class discussions.
7. **Listen to the children** – Take the opportunity to ask gentle questions, provide opportunity for children to voice concerns. Incorporate ideas and feelings about change and transition into their play, through story and in their 'small world' play. Classic stories and fairy tales that reflect human experience of change and uncertainty and explore what it feels like to find yourself in a place, conquering your fears and persevering through adversity can be a helpful springboard.

8. You will need to place an even stronger emphasis on **consulting with parents/carers**. This will help to reduce their stress which can otherwise transmit to their child. Strong, supportive links help the child with the vital task of holding their important people in mind when they are apart from them. This will also help to play a part in supporting vulnerable attachments in the home or in a care setting.
9. Adopt an **individualised approach to separation**. Be watchful and flexible to respond to the variable needs of individual children and families. These are likely to be accentuated after the COVID-19 lockdown. Observe attachment behaviours. Young children who are securely attached need to continue to experience an optimum level of support and nurturing care with their key adults. Children who are showing insecure or avoidant attachment behaviours need help building relationships. Your Early Years Area SENCo will be able to provide you with advice around this.
10. **Transitional objects**: You will need to understand and appreciate the role that **comforters** play. This will help us to respond sensitively to their presence. If it's important to the child's security then it needs to be somewhere it can be seen until it's no longer required. 'Virtual' transitional objects can also convey equally important reassurance. You can help parents to explore the ways that they can make use of these powerful images to strengthen connection and support their child with separation: E.g. a kiss or a smile to keep in the child's pocket for when it's needed.
11. **Hellos and goodbyes**: This is the time when parents/carers will need to feel most connected with and supported by practitioners, especially at this challenging time. What parents and children will need at handover transition times is the soothing presence of a sensitive practitioner who understands and empathises with them and doesn't try to dismiss their anxiety or briskly 'fix' the child's distress. As well as being tired and possibly hungry, a child can be unsettled by the transition of leaving the socially and intellectually stimulating environment of the setting/classroom. Seeing their parent/carer again can also remind them of how much they missed them.

Useful references:

1. <https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/resources/10-practical-tips-for-school-staff-to-help-children-settle-when-starting-primary-school/>

2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing/guidance-for-parents-and-carers-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>
3. "Understanding Transitions in the Early Years" - (2nd edition: 2018). Anne O'Connor
4. Transition to school from Foundation Stage to Year R Northamptonshire eps. (2020) Alison Gardner SSEP-EY , Northamptonshire EPS