

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 help them adapt to their new environment.

The importance of a successful transition

A successful transition can have long-lasting benefits

A successful transition from home to early learning services is important for all children, and can have long-lasting benefits. Those who experience a positive transition into their new environment are more 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, it's important for educators and families to 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 inside to outside environments, 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 as the child has a birthday and service-to-service transitions.

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 a time of mixed emotions for both children and their families. However, it is common for both children and families to experience a range of feelings about starting in a new learning environment, outside of the family home.

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 help support child wellbeing.

A child's first attachments with responsive parents and other trusting relationships help 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

can lead 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, with an expectation that these can be personalized for individual families.

Children and families living in diverse circumstances may need extra support, and special efforts to reach and include 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.

It's 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 and the family 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 can 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. A visual routine on the wall can help children understand what comes next and "that dad will pick me up afternoon tea".

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 can also provide more opportunities for obtaining information about the child's routines, comfort item or toy, favourite songs and book.

Families may also 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 help 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 Carol 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, can help familiarise and prepare children and may be especially useful for families that speak English as a second language at home.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about noticing and supporting children and young people who might be experiencing mental health challenges in the [Early Support](#) domain.

Bibliography

Visit [Transitions to early learning](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

External links

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

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

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

