How Is This Transition Different?

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that most young children have spent the past few months at home with only their immediate families. The transition to ELC is likely to have a big impact on their emotional well-being, even for the most secure and confident children. Not only will children be trying to cope with all the changes that typically occur when starting in ELC, such as new caregivers, other children, the daily routine and environment, now they are also adjusting to life in the context of Covid-19 infection prevention and control measures.

It is very likely that some children in your setting will have experienced significant stressors during the time the service was closed, for example, the death or serious illness of a family member, an increase in conflict at home and/or loss of family income, resulting in changes to their usual routine and sense of security. This type of stress on children and families can take a toll on their resilience, making it even more challenging to adapt to change.

Children may have spent the past months being reminded by their families to stay away from others and some may now be confused and worried about playing closely beside the other children in their new ‘play-pod’. In some cases, children may have had no experience of the idea of staying away from others so it will feel strange not to be able to move from room to room or interact with others in the setting. For children returning to your setting, the early years environment, while it may still be familiar in some respects, is likely to have changed. The room layout may have been altered, the play resources available may be limited or different, and the children in their play-pod may not include all, or any, of the children they typically played with. There will be also new health and safety measures in place that are unfamiliar.
Transitions and the Impact on Children’s Emotional Well-being

A good starting point when thinking about supporting children’s emotional well-being is to consider the transition from the child’s perspective.

My World

- Imagine you are a child returning to your service. You are approaching the front door…what do you see…does it look different to the last time you were there…how are you feeling…are you excited/nervous/a little bit scared?
- Who is at the door to meet you…do you know them… are you asked to do anything different to last time you were there…do you have to wash or put gel on your hands?
- Your Mum/Dad is talking with the person at the door…what are they saying…do they seem nervous…does it seem different…are they standing apart?
- You need to say goodbye to your Mum/Dad…how does this make you feel…are you feeling confused about why they need to stay at the door…where do you put your bag and coat?
- You are brought to your room…what has changed in the room…what sounds do you hear…what does it smell like…what is happening in the room…does the room seem busy and loud or is it quiet and calm…can you see your friends?
- It’s time for play…are there lots of things to choose from…can you find your favourite toys…are you having fun…do you get to go outside…do you get to play with other children?
- It’s snack time…were you finished what you were doing…who gets your bag for you…do you wash your hands again…who do you sit bedside…what do you have for your lunch today…do you like it…do you feel rushed or do you enjoy chatting with your friends…what’s being talked about?
- It’s home time….do you have to wash your hands before leaving…does that seem strange to you…does your Mum/Dad come to the door of the room to collect you….who walks you to the front door…what are they saying to your Mum/Dad…are you happy to be going home?
For any person, adult or child, change, especially a big change, will bring with it some level of stress. Recognising and managing this stress is an important element of supporting successful transitions. The transition into the setting will affect children in different ways and is dependent on several factors. These include:

- The child’s age
- Their stage of development
- Their temperament
- Whether they have any additional needs
- Their previous experience in the setting (if any)
- The child’s own family, culture and community contexts
- The experiences they and their family have had during closures
- The availability of responsive sensitive caregivers

When children experience stress their stress response system is activated, triggering a fight, flight or freeze survival response. This is an automatic response everyone has when they feel under threat. We know that traumatic stress in childhood has lasting detrimental effects on a person’s health, behaviour and life outcomes when not buffered by caring adults who are there to support them. This makes it particularly important that early years educators respond appropriately to signs of distress and attend to children who appear to be becoming overwhelmed.

The table below provides some examples of behaviours that may be symptomatic of children’s stress responses and the underlying conscious or unconscious feelings that might accompany them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIOUR</th>
<th>HOW THE CHILD MIGHT BE FEELING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘freeze’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I feel scared and anxious.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurting others</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘fight’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelling and screaming</td>
<td>‘I feel scared and in danger.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding under tables, covering</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘flight’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face, eyes and ears</td>
<td>‘I feel overwhelmed and panicked.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demanding and controlling</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘fight’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I feel unsafe and I need to be in control,’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running away</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘flight’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I feel scared and I need to get away,’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throwing and breaking toys</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘fight’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I feel unlovable and unimportant.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unresponsive to questions or</td>
<td>Child might be having a ‘freeze’ response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name called</td>
<td>‘I feel disconnected like I’m in a dream,’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appears sleepy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preparing for the Transition

While the transition to ELC in these current times presents particular challenges and will require careful planning, many of the usual aspects of supporting children in the move to ELC will still apply. Some practical steps to consider in managing this major transition, include:

1. Caring for the carer
2. Providing continuity of care
3. Working in partnership with parents
4. Ensuring the child’s emotional needs are met

We will now look at each of these in more detail.

Caring for the Carer

The Covid-19 pandemic has not just impacted on children and families but will also have been a very worrying time for early years educators, both personally and professionally. Pre Covid-19, the ELC workforce was already vulnerable to the significant stresses associated with working in a sector with typically poor working conditions along with the intense demands the role of caring for and educating young children brings.

Given the realities of the job and the expected detrimental impact of Covid-19 on children’s emotional well-being, it is of vital importance that engagement in self-care practices is prioritised. The expectation that early years educators can support children’s emotional well-being if their own emotional needs are unmet is unrealistic. To avoid burnout and to build resilience, early years educators and the systems they work in need to consider ways to support well-being at an individual and setting level.

- **Recognising the signs of stress:** Stress can manifest itself in different ways such as increased anxiety, irritability, tiredness, feeling overwhelmed, having difficulty making decisions and feeling detached from others. It is important to reflect on your own vulnerabilities, and think about the situations that trigger a stress reaction in you. Beginning this process of self-awareness will help you to think about what you could do to build your coping skills.

- **Actively planning self-care practices:** Spend time thinking about what activities you find restorative. This will be different for different people and may include physical activities like yoga and walking, creative activities like art and music, being outdoors, reflective activities like mindfulness and writing, engaging in spiritual practices, spending time with supportive people and accessing professional supports such as therapy.

- **Creating wellness environments:** Within a setting team, it is important that team members feel supported, as this will help to reduce burnout. Create an environment where it is ok to talk about stress. Place importance on relationships to help build a friendly, communicative and supportive team. Have regular team meetings and put self-care practices on the agenda so that everyone can contribute ideas. Think about ways the physical environment can promote wellness. Ensure there is regular effective supervision.
Providing Continuity of Care

Within their family home, children usually know what to expect such as who will be there, the daily routine and the physical structure and layout of their home. When they return to the early years setting, even if they have only been away for a few months, everything will probably seem strange and unfamiliar. A few months feels much longer to a young child than to an adult. The social world which children belong to at home is very different to the one in the setting. Care and support from all of the adults in their lives is required to help children develop a strong sense of identity and belonging to ensure they feel connected to the people around them.

When early years educators, together with parents and carers, support continuity of care by providing a safe, supportive in-between space for children, this will allow the child to move comfortably within and between both worlds. Children can learn to navigate the social world and the culture of the early years setting along with their familiar home culture, and truly be themselves.

Tilly’s parents were anxious about how she would settle on her return to the early years setting and had many questions, not only about the emotional support she needed but also about the safety precautions that would be put in place. They contacted the setting and highlighted their anxieties and from this a plan was developed with Maria, Tilly’s key person. Maria sent photos to the family of herself and the other adult that would be in Tilly’s ‘pod’ as well as photos of the common areas of the setting such as the entrance, the room that Tilly would be in and some of the toys she usually enjoyed playing with when she was there. She suggested that the family regularly look at these with Tilly prior to her returning. Maria also outlined all the safety procedures that must be adhered to and forwarded an advice sheet to Tilly’s parents. The setting and the parents agreed to maintain regular contact and share information to ensure that all of their needs were being met, particularly Tilly’s.

The importance of relationships

The key to supporting children’s social and emotional well-being in ELC lies in the provision of consistent caring, sensitive and responsive relationships. We know from research that children who are securely attached to their primary caregivers (usually their parents but not necessarily) cope better with stress. Attachment describes the child’s tendency to seek comfort, support, nurturance and protection from a small number of caregivers. In the ELC setting, we can offer children the opportunity to form secondary attachments with their early years educator.

Consistent and sensitive caregiving, especially in activities such as feeding, care routines and settling for sleep, helps to develop a secure attachment. Being responsive to a child’s emotional needs by giving them comfort and protection and helping them with organising their feelings will help the child to see the early years educator as a safe haven in times of stress. Being a secure base for children by watching over them, playing with them and offering encouragement will help them to feel safe to explore their world, make friends and learn.
The key person approach

Attachment theory has contributed to the realisation of the importance of the key person approach in providing continuity of care to children through consistent, sensitive and responsive relationships. Key persons are also important in establishing the strong and important link between the child’s life at home and in the early years setting. Settings that implement a key person approach recognise the emotional need for stability and continuity in a child’s life. Having a relationship with a key person will help each child to feel secure, bring about a sense of belonging, and foster a sense of trust and personal identity. For children who are returning, consider any relationships they previously had with the educators in your setting when deciding on key persons.

Practical steps in setting up a key person system for the child’s play-pod involve discussing the approach and what it entails with the whole staff team and looking at the implications, and getting information on the various ways that it can be implemented. A Key Person Policy and clear procedures will support its implementation.

Working in Partnership with Parents

We know that how a parent is coping affects how their child is coping. Parents are likely to have been under tremendous stress over the past months with many trying to continue working, caring for cocooning relatives, facing financial strain, and all the additional pressures that arose without access to their usual support structures. It is important to acknowledge these difficulties and to accept and understand that these may impact on how a parent interacts with you.

Establishing a good relationship with parents and families is an important early step in the management of the transition to ELC. Working in partnership with parents with open and ongoing two-way communication will help to build a trusting relationship between the setting and home.

Many early years educators have maintained connections with parents during closures and this will really help with the transition back to ELC. Where this has not been the case, it is important to get in touch with parents so that the partnership relationship can be encouraged from the earliest possible time. Parents know their children best and this will give you the opportunity to find out how the child and family have coped while the setting has been closed, and if there has been any change in circumstances for the family. In this way parents can provide you with any information about the child that might help you to prepare for the transition. Working together will smooth the way for the child to move successfully between the home and the early years setting and to feel confident in both.
While it is essential to engage with parents in the early stages of the transition process, for example before the child comes back to the setting and the first days of settling in, it is also important for this to continue. Parents and educators should both recognise that the transition process will last for a different length of time for each child and that a true partnership will be of lasting benefit for all parties, establishing that important continuity of care. Keep an open discussion with parents to support you both to recognise any changes in the child’s behaviour that might suggest they are under excess stress.

In addition to preparing to manage the separation from the child’s perspective, you should consider the needs of parents as they may also be anxious. Parents can find it very stressful when they are leaving their child to be cared for by someone else and they are likely to be particularly concerned about the health and safety guidance relating to Covid-19. If parents are stressed, this may affect their ability to think clearly and to remember everything you tell them. Below are some ideas for supporting parents who may need reassurance:

- Listen to parents’ concerns, acknowledge them and take them seriously. Remember, they know their child best and their worries are valid.
- Explain to parents the new measures you have put in place in light of Covid-19 and how their child’s health and well-being will be supported. It will be useful to write up a list of changes you have put in place and send this to parents, giving them the opportunity to ask questions in advance of their child’s return.
- If possible, encourage the parent and child to visit the setting in advance of the first day back. This will need to be pre-arranged to ensure appropriate social distancing.
- Reassure parents through video/webcams if used, or share with them a picture of their child playing after they have left (privacy and data protection procedures must of course be followed).
- Keep in contact with parents to let them know how their child is doing and reassure them that they are being well cared for.

Eoin had just turned three when he began pre-school in September. He had never left his mum before as she parented him alone and had no family supports close by. On his first day he clung to his mum when she tried to leave, however with some encouraging words from the educators he seemed to settle and she was able to leave. This pattern continued for a number of weeks but slowly eased, however it re-emerged after any break in the term (Halloween and Christmas). Each time, Eoin found it difficult to re-adjust to the group and his surroundings. His mum was very anxious about how he would settle back on his return to pre-school after the Covid-19 related closures. She contacted the setting and spoke with the manager and a plan was put in place. This included Eoin and his mum watching a video that the service had prepared for all children returning, showing the building and the changes that had been made. They also reassured Eoin’s mum that the key person and other children would be familiar to him and that the group would be smaller, which might make the transition an easier process for him. The setting team forwarded a tip sheet for Eoin’s mum on how she could support him in preparing for the return to the service and they agreed to maintain regular contact prior to and during the transition phase.
Ensuring The Child’s Emotional Needs are Met

Children need to be given time to adjust to such a major separation and some children will take longer than others. As explained earlier, some children’s distress might be obvious and they may protest loudly, cry or try to leave the room. For other children, their distress might not be so obvious. Some children might be quiet or withdrawn or appear to be busy with toys while being overwhelmed with feelings.

Children have a right to participate in matters affecting them and have a right to make choices. For example, if they want to move away from the group they need space to do this. You can support children’s transitions by involving them in decisions about the new set up of the setting and the resources and materials you will include, within the guidelines.

Some practical strategies and activities that will support children during the transition period are outlined below:

- Consider a graduated and phased plan for attendance to allow the child to engage in gentle transitions, through a flexible settling-in period from home to the setting. This can include staggering the intake over some days to allow play-pod members to settle in gradually and having shorter sessions for the first few days.
- It is important to make the transition as predictable as possible for children. Plan ways to introduce the children to any new layout, change in routine etc. The use of visual aids will be helpful, for example, videos and photos. Give gentle, supportive reminders throughout the day.
- Some children get important comfort from bringing in objects from home. Allow children to bring in their own soft toys or comfort blankets as long as they are machine washed and are not shared (as per government guidelines).
- Keep the child’s routine consistent and as close as possible to what they are used to at home.
- Allow for plenty of free play and don’t expect children to remain sitting for more than a few minutes at a time.
- Build in extra rest time during the day as children may find adjusting to all the changes tiring.
Emotional co-regulation

When children are distressed and feeling overwhelmed by big feelings, they have become emotionally dysregulated. For children to return to a regulated state they need the help of a caring adult. This co-regulation is a powerful tool to support children’s emotional well-being. When we use co-regulation, children learn to feel cared for, safe and protected.

- If a child becomes distressed, for example, crying when being separated from their parent, it is important to calmly acknowledge the child’s feelings and to offer comfort.
- Understand that if a child is very distressed they will find it difficult to access their thinking brain and may not be able to put their feelings into words, tell you what’s wrong or problem solve. They will also find it difficult to follow any instructions.
- When you use co-regulation you are organising the child’s feelings. ‘I can see you are really sad, you wanted to stay with Daddy. I’m going to stay with you and keep you safe.’
- Sometimes we can be very uncomfortable with children’s feelings of distress and we try to distract from or ‘fix’ situations. Try taking a deep breath and thinking, ‘What is this child feeling right now? What does this child need from me?’
- When the child has returned to a calm and alert state, this is the time to talk to them about situations they are finding difficult and, if appropriate, to come up with solutions together. ‘You were really upset this morning when I collected you from your Daddy. I wonder if there is something we could do tomorrow to make it easier?’

Children who are not allowed to express how they feel will learn that it is not ok to express emotions. They will still feel the feelings but they will keep pushing those feelings down and this will cause problems for them later.

Play as an emotional support

Research tells us that children use free play to express their emotions and learn to deal with their fears and scary experiences. When playing freely, children can process emotions and ‘play out’ their fears and traumas. This happens in a very natural way and is healthy and should be encouraged. Your role as the educator is to provide the environment, the opportunities and especially the time for this to happen.

The essence of free play is that it is child-led, child-initiated, and not directed by adults. Outdoor play in a natural environment is best for this type of play where possible. There is increasing evidence that spending time in natural environments can help children who are exposed to stressful events to be less anxious.

Providing open-ended materials like sand, water, sticks, blocks and art materials gives children the opportunity to make choices and have control to play out different roles and scenarios. Small world toys and real world items in the Home Corner that reflect the home cultures of the children in the play-pod will also be very helpful.
Conclusion

We hope you found this resource helpful in planning for children’s return to ELC. We know that preparing for reopening ELC settings is a mammoth task. We have focused on the important role of supporting children’s emotional well-being during this time but we are aware this is one of the many tasks that are ahead of you over the coming months. We hope that the ideas we have presented will inspire reflection, start conversations in your settings and, most of all, be of assistance to you as you continue to build consistent, caring and responsive relationships with the children in your care.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Barnardos Resources
For educators
Support for Early Learning and Care Settings during Covid-19 Crisis
The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years (ebook)
The Key Person Approach: Supporting Relationships in the Early Years Setting (elearning)
Working in Partnership with Parents: A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals (ebook)

For parents
Barnardos Parent Supportline
Barnardos Heart, Body and Mind
Supporting Your Child’s Emotional Well-being on their Return to ELC
Your Young Child’s Behaviour (ebook)
Guide to Partnership in Childcare (ebook)

Other Resources
DCYA COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control guidance for settings providing childcare
First 5 Guidance for Reopening
First 5: Resources for Parents
HSE Information about Covid-19

For regular updates join us on Facebook