Top Tips for Transitions to School during COVID-19

Transition arrangements for children are likely to look very different this year due to COVID-19. Many children will be aware of the current health situation and will have experienced some level of change in their lives; their daily routines are likely to have been disrupted and many will be feeling anxious. During this time it is more important than ever to ensure ongoing alignment of systems and practices between provisions keeping the needs of the developing child firmly at the centre. The closer the systems align the lower children and families anxiety levels around transition are likely to be.

It is highly unlikely that the usual transition activities will take place this year. Children will need a different type of support so now is a good time to review transition arrangements and reflect on what you can do that is achievable and in the best interest of the child and their family.

The proposed strategies below are intended to help support children moving on to school during COVID-19. It is not an exhaustive list, but offers some suggestions to help children feel safe in their new environment and feel supported, connected and emotionally ready to learn.

Top tips for early years providers:

- Compile some form of transitional information to the best of your ability in light of the current pandemic. Consider what information you hold about the child that would be useful to share. It is particularly important to capture their strengths, interests, achievements and needs.
- Ensure for children in attendance, their tracking document is updated towards the end of term to reflect their current abilities and send this as part of your transition information. Staff should have awareness that many children’s learning and development will have been impacted by COVID-19 and therefore, they may not be at the typical level of learning. For children not in attendance, where possible update their last Individual Tracker to reflect the ir learning and development for the last month they were with you.
- Find ways to obtain the views of parents/carers. For children not returning, contact parents/carers to find out about the ir child’s current needs and interests. In cases where children attend, but for safety purposes parents/carers ‘drop and go’ at the door, arrange a time to call or email transition questions and prompts to them to respond. Talk about parents/carers hopes and fears for their child starting school.
- Ask parents/carers “what has life been like for your child during COVID-19?” Sensitively explore their lockdown experience e.g. have there been any changes to children’s routines, any new behaviours or changes regarding their sleep pattern, eating habits or toileting, have they experienced a loss or thrived from being at home?
- Make contact with schools as soon as possible to schedule a transition meeting for children with additional needs. This could be held virtually so that everyone involved in the child’s life could be included while social distancing.
- For children attending, find creative ways for teachers (if available) to visit the child at the setting. Is there a suitable outdoor area where teachers could meet children and talk to key people whilst maintaining a safe distance?
- Discuss with feeder schools the types of daily routines the children are familiar with to promote alignment of practices to offer some continuity on entry.
- Share images of the schools and key staff where children will be attending.
- Create opportunities for ongoing dialogue with school staff to find out if there are any areas of learning and development you could target to better prepare children moving on to school in the next academic year.
Top tips for receiving schools:

- Connect with families by arranging a virtual chat.
- Establish with parents/carers if staff from the new school could safely complete a face to face visit, this could be limited to families with no access to technology. The family may have a garden that would promote social distancing and allow for everyone to be outdoors.
- Talk to feeder settings to establish if you could conduct a visit to meet children. Again, they may have a suitable outdoor space you could utilise.
- Allow time to be ready to support children with additional needs from the outset. Make links with early years providers to find out about the children moving on to your school. Make good use of virtual meetings to enable parents/carers and all professionals take part in conversations to identify any arrangements that need to be put in to place.
- Ask parents/carers or practitioners at the feeder setting about the child’s friendship groups. Having familiar faces and friends helps children to settle in to a new environment.
- Use your website/social media account to upload video blogs to introduce key staff and the new environment, this could include staff reading stories and giving a virtual tour at child height of the indoors and outdoors.
- Email or make available online a welcome pack for parents/carers to share key information about the school.
- Do you have a school mascot/class toy? Introduce it to the children and have it ready to meet them on arrival.
- Use knowledge from parents/carers and practitioners to plan activities and experiences reflecting children’s current interests.
- Focus on creating a sense of safety for parents/carers and children to alleviate worries and concerns by sharing expectations.
- Reassure parents/carers that the focus will be on children settling in to their new environment and there will be no rush for children to catch up.
- Reassure parents/carers there will be an extended transition period for children to settle in to school.
- Ask parents/carers opinions about what would help their child have a successful transition. Talk about ways to help support the child’s wellbeing.
- Signpost parents/carers to useful resources they could access and use at home with their child to alleviate anxiety.
- Re-evaluate timetables and routines to ensure they reflect the current situation and help provide consistency in children’s lives. Is it possible to align practices with feeder settings to provide children with familiarity? For example, are children used to the self-service snack being available at certain times of the day?
- Develop a relationship rich environment where adults gently support children to feel safe and secure.
- Make time to talk with the children and help nurture their emotional vocabulary. Teaching, learning styles and activities will need to match the emotional developmental level of the child.
- Focus on providing sustained play opportunities to help support children’s social and emotional needs and wellbeing.
- Create a calm space for children who need somewhere restful to regulate their emotions.
- Make extended use of outdoor spaces as part of your learning environment. A mobile sink outside would be convenient to help instil good hand washing practice.
- Give children a voice by involving them in decisions affecting them to help them feel in control.
- Give children specific responsibility to help them to rebuild confidence in their own abilities.
- Familiarise yourself with breathing and relaxation techniques in order to have some strategies to hand to support anxious children.
- Establish partnership working with local providers to be able to have ongoing conversations and revisit information about children where necessary once the child starts school.
- Ensure developing skills for resilience and self-regulation are at the heart of your practice to help children to manage their emotions and return to a sense of calm.
- Be prepared to observe closely and tune in to changes in behaviour to be able to consider what it might mean for the child and put appropriate support measures in to place swiftly.