SCHOOL READINESS MATTERS

Embedded and Threaded Transitions

Working together to Support Transition

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A Welcome from the Editors

Do you remember your first day of school? Perhaps you remember the new stiff clothes and unfamiliar shoes, the special book bag or lunch box you had chosen, perhaps you can recall a sense of nervous anticipation as the big day approached?

As parents and educators, we believe starting in a school setting is the beginning of a big adventure, one every child should enjoy. However, in recent years there has been increasing pressure to formalise learning in Reception classes. The imposition of pedagogically inappropriate assessment practices and intense focus on systematic synthetic phonics have reshaped the Reception year and made transition from early childhood settings to school settings increasingly difficult for many children.

Since the pandemic, research suggests that growing numbers of children are less ready for school settings in terms of their socio-emotional development, speech and language and self-care (Bakopoulou, 2022; La Valle et al, 2022). We suggest that the term 'school readiness' needs to be rethought in the light of the societal and systemic we have seen in recent times.

We have called on colleagues from different educational institutions to help us put together this text exploring what 'school readiness' really means and how we can support transition. Our aim is to ensure a shared understanding of school readiness, offering insights, advice and support for families and educators in early childhood settings and school settings so that every child enjoys the big adventure that awaits them and that school settings are ready to welcome them.

Kerrie and Viki

Introducing School Readiness as a Process of Transition

Kerrie Lee and Viki Veale

Starting in a school setting is a significant milestone for children and their families. For many, it marks the transition from part-time to full-time education and the beginning of a new adventure. In this text, we have brought together families, educators and academics to explore how we can work together to support transition and ensure school readiness. We begin by unpacking these terms and providing an overview of School Readiness Matters, which we hope will become a toolkit to support transition.

During the development of this document, created with contributions from across the Early Years sector, we encountered an interesting debate: What do we call ourselves? Do we have an umbrella term? If we work with children in Reception classes, are we all classed as a 'school'? Likewise, if we work with children preparing for Reception are we classed as Early Years settings, pre-schools or edu-care settings? Due to the widespread recognition that Early Years encompass birth to 8 and the fact that children are in a variety of settings before and after they start in a school setting, we were aware of the responsibility we had and the potential risk of alienating members of our sector if we did not get the terminology right. With this in mind, throughout this toolkit the term early childhood settings is used to acknowledge the breadth of provision children might access before starting in a school setting including (but not limited to) childminders, PVI's

and maintained nurseries. The term school settings is used to remind people that, although they are located within schools, Reception classes are still Early Years settings. Finally, to acknowledge the range of people children come into contact with in their daily lives and the various family structures they may live in, the term family has been used as the umbrella term for all caregivers.

Understanding Transition

The term 'transition' is frequently used in educational practice, policy and research. Vogler, Gina and Wood (2008:1) define transition as 'key events and/or processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course' involving changes in the physical individual or space/contact they interact with requiring 'psychosocial and cultural adjustments with cognitive, social and emotional dimensions.' As O'Connor (2018) explains, each of us experiences numerous transitions as part of our everyday activity. In Early Childhood these transitions can be thought of in three ways:

Horizontal Transitions	• daily and weekly activities, travelling to and from specific settings or rooms within them, interacting with different people in the course of the day
Internal Transitions	• a change in thinking or behaviour, usually linked to learning and development
Vertical Transitions	• specific events that do not happen regularly and are usually planned such as starting school or moving class

Although many children will have experienced numerous transitions in their young lives, starting in a school setting is perhaps one of the biggest and often most significant. Development Matters (DfE 2024:9) highlights that educators' knowledge and understanding of transition is key to ensuring all children receive 'High-Quality Care' as they move between settings. Our aim is to support families and educators in developing the knowledge and understanding they need to make the transition to a school setting a smooth and happy one.

The first day at a school setting is a very special occasion that will be marked with proud photos shared with loved ones, but we concur with the Early Years Coalition (2021:16) that transition must be thought of as a 'process rather than an event'. While most school settings will ensure carers and children have the opportunity to visit the setting and meet the teacher before that first day, the process of transition is much slower and more nuanced, beginning long before the first visit and continuing well into the first term of the academic year. As the DfE (2024) point out, effective communication between carers and settings throughout the transition period, is crucial to ensure a positive experience for all involved.

School Readiness

From a developmental perspective, school readiness refers to children's readiness for learning. Good (1973) defined this as the average age at which a group of individuals has developed a specified capacity. However, as the statutory framework acknowledges, all children grow and develop at different rates. It seems counter intuitive then, that the majority of children in England start in a school setting at the same point in the year: the September after their 4th birthday. This practice is at odds with that in other countries where the legal age at which children must attend full time education is much higher and a more considered approach is taken, with staggered entry points across the school year that enable children to start at the same age, rather than in the same month.

Scott-Little, Kagan and Frelow (2006) suggest that the construct of school readiness in England has moved away from the developmental model towards a narrow set of prescribed criteria related to children's academic performance. As pressure has been put on Reception classes to formalise learning and focus on prescribed content, we have seen increasing numbers of children who are not meeting the criteria prescribed within this new 'school readiness agenda' (McDowall Clark, 2017). Children with specific educational needs (Carlson et al, 2009), summer born children (Crawford, Dearden, and Meghir, 2007), and those from lower socio-economic groups who may have had fewer opportunities to experience high quality early childhood education and care outside the home (McIntyre et al, 2007) are all disadvantaged by the definitions of readiness that focus on academic outcomes.

Redefining School Readiness

It is evident that it is time to reconsider what we mean by 'school readiness'. As adults, we must remember what it is like to be new somewhere; to not yet have figured out how things work and who we can and cannot trust. When we experience something new, we are thrown into a state of disequilibrium, and it takes time to adjust to our new environment (Piaget 1985). It is also crucial that we are mindful that the extent to which we can cope with, and process, new experiences depends largely on the experiences that have preceded it. The range of early educational experiences children will have had before they start at a school setting varies greatly (McLeod and Anderson, 2019). Some may have attended day care from a very early age and be extremely socially confident, others may have had limited interactions with other children before starting at a school setting. Some will have benefited from secure attachments to care givers, while others may not. Understanding these experiences is an important starting point when assessing children's social and emotional readiness.

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Just as Article 28 of The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) protects the right of all children to education, Article 6 emphasises that child development must remain the standard for protecting children from harmful experiences and we must be mindful that this includes the experience of starting at a school setting. With so much pressure to focus on academic outcomes we must remember that, although they are located within schools, Reception classes are Early Years settings. If they are to meet the needs of the children joining them, Reception classes must be encouraged and supported to pursue developmentally appropriate practice (Veale, 2023). This means continuing to support the characteristics of effective learning (DfE, 2024) through relational pedagogy within an enabling environment in which the needs and interests of the unique child are prioritised when planning learning and development.

School Readiness Matters has been written from the perspective that starting in a school setting should be an exciting process that we engage in with children, rather than an event that happens to them. We believe that everyone involved in this exciting transition must work together whilst fundamentally acknowledging the children's active role in this process. This will then ensure not only that children and families are ready for a school setting, but that school settings are ready and able to meet the needs of the unique children joining them. In School Readiness Matters,

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we aim to offer support and guidance for families, school and early childhood settings so that, together, we can make sure that starting in a school setting is a truly wonderful adventure.

Overview of School Readiness Matters

Each chapter of this text explores a different aspect of school readiness, offering top-tips to families, early childhood and school settings based on research and lived experience.

In **Chapter 1**, Tanya Richardson, Alex Mofaki and Katie Freeland unpack the principles which underpin practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and which must be front and centre of policies and processes designed to support transition.

In **Chapter 2**, Eleanor Milligan, Helen Moylett, Lewis Fogarty, Rebecca Blake and Simon Airey consider the characteristics of effective learning, exploring how transition is supported by ensuring children have opportunities to continue playing and exploring, engaging in active learning and being able to be creative critical thinkers.

In **Chapter 3**, Tamsin Grimmer, Aaron Bradbury, David Wright and Marlis Juerging-Coles highlight the importance of understanding personal social and emotional development as a prime area of learning, and of maintaining this focus in Reception classes.

In **Chapter 4**, Sue Allingham, Karen Vincent, Kristy Howells and Viki Veale focus on physical development. They draw attention to the importance of educators thinking holistically about physical development and being aware of developmental difference.

In **Chapter 5**, Janet Morris, Eleanor Milligan, Richard Wolfendale and Emily Askew look at language and communication. They discuss the importance of rich learning opportunities and positive relationships in supporting all forms of communication and the role these have in supporting transitions.

In **Chapter 6**, Karen Boardman, Rachel Levy, John Clarke, Anthony Wainer and Gill Mason concentrate on developmentally appropriate practice related to literacy. They highlight the importance of promoting literacy skills through everyday activities in both the home and educational settings.

In **Chapter 7**, Elizabeth Carruthers, Maulfry Worthington and Sovay Bass-Carruthers discuss the funds of mathematical knowledge children build before starting at a school setting and how valuing this knowledge is central to developing a child-centred maths curriculum that supports transition.

In **Chapter 8**, Cathy Gunning, Debi Kyte-Hartland and Hannah Foster explore how expressive arts and design should be central in pedagogical thinking. They examine how and why, throughout.

In **Chapter 9**, Diane Boyd, Angela Scollan and Kerrie Lee look at the importance of open conversations that follow children's interests. They discuss how valuing and fostering curiosity supports children's understanding of the world and explain its crucial role in supporting transition not only to school settings but throughout children's lives.

In our final chapter we return to the vision and values which ensure embedded and threaded transitions. We hope you enjoy this text and that it supports you

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Principles Matter

Tanya Richardson, Alex Morfaki, Katie Freeland

Introduction

Four overarching principles shape Early Years practice in England, applying equally to early childhood settings and school-based provision:

- Every child is a **Unique Child**, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured.
- Children learn to be strong and independent through **Positive Relationships**.
- Children learn and develop well in **Enabling Environments** with teaching and support from adults, who respond to their individual interests and needs and help them to build their learning over time. Children benefit from a strong partnership between practitioners and families.
- **Learning and Development** are important and children learn and develop at different rates
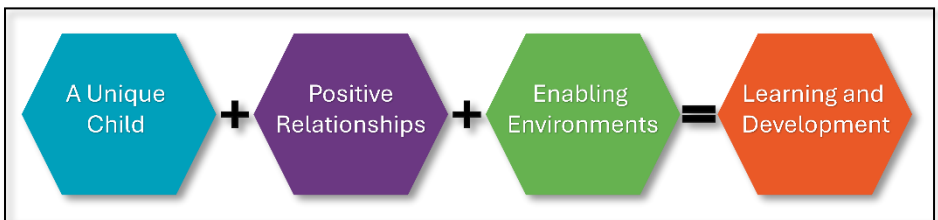
These principles should be at the forefront of policies, procedures and processes to assist children to be school setting ready and to assist school settings to be child ready. It is these principles that this chapter will discuss.

Unique Child

The Unique Child is a capable individual, whose development and potential is not purely innate or biological but is influenced by a range of factors that could affect their learning (Early Years Coalition, 2021). Children are competent learners (DfE, 2024) and should be afforded opportunities to develop their initiative through meaningful interactions with adults, who are attuned to their needs, and responsive to their interests. Carr and Claxton (2002) suggest that, during transitions, a child's academic capability should not be assessed against normative standards; rather, it is their attitude towards learning that educators must tune in to.

While cognitive development theory posits that a child's brain matures chronologically through experiential learning within their environment (Isaacs, 2015), development may not be sequential and does not happen in isolation (Vygotsky, 1978). The circumstances and cultural values of the families and communities within which the child grows and interacts shape development and should be celebrated. Fostering a sense of belonging during transitions will help children feel valued and accepted. Accordingly, personal, social and emotional well-being should take priority and will form the cornerstone of lifelong learning.

Positive Relationships

Positive Relationships are critical in fostering security and affirming children's self-worth and identity. Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992) theorised that secure attachments rooted in responsive and affectionate

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care set the blueprint that determines children's sense of self and ability to form meaningful relationships. Secure attachments begin at home but should be replicated within Reception classes to promote children's psychological and emotional well-being and support transitions.

During transitions, family knowledge and expertise should be valued and used to facilitate the settling in process. The EYFS (DfE, 2024) assigns key persons the responsibility not only of establishing meaningful relationships with

children, but also of developing collaborative partnerships with families (Early Years Coalition, 2021). Collaborative partnerships should be reciprocal and promote dialogue and communication between families, educators and other professionals involved with the child with the aim of placing their interests at the heart of practice. Engagement and involvement of families should be flexible and take different formats to ensure that all families are included, and their contribution is used to shape pedagogy and practice, particularly during the transition period.

Enabling Environments with Teaching and Support from Adults

Children thrive when learning in environments that are both enabling and supportive—a principle rooted in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). He proposed that a child's development is shaped not only by their immediate surroundings, such as family and classroom (micro

level), but also by broader societal influences, like curriculum expectations (macro level). In the context of school readiness and transitions, the environment plays a crucial role in shaping learning experiences.
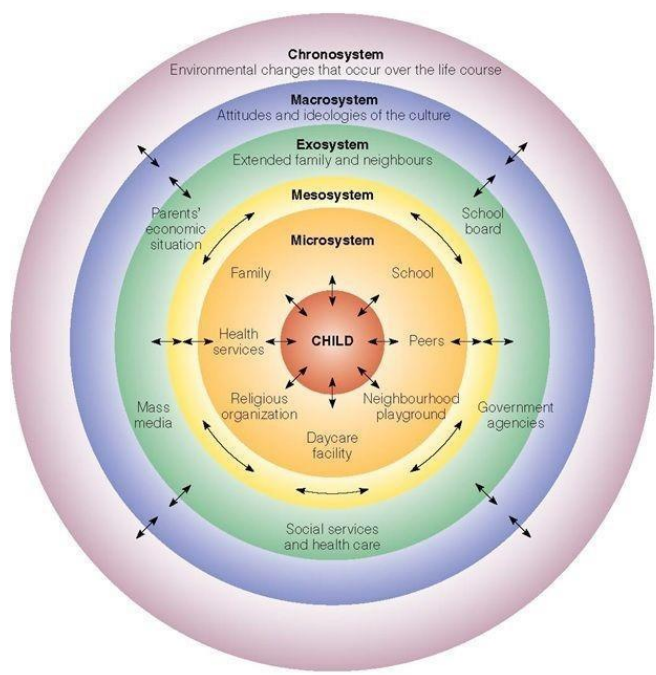
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model (1979)

While the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (DfE, 2024) does not explicitly define an Enabling Environment, *Birth to 5 Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2021) offers further clarity. It describes Enabling Environments as those that provide stimulating and culturally relevant resources, rich opportunities for learning through play, and space for risk-

taking and exploration. These characteristics help create a setting that supports children's growth and language development.

Crucially, to establish such an environment, practitioners must have a deep understanding of each child. This reinforces the importance of recognising the uniqueness of every child and fostering Positive Relationships—both of which are fundamental to creating a responsive and nurturing learning environment. Understanding each child ensures that environments are not just well-resourced but truly supportive of individual learning journeys.

Learning and Development

The EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2024:7) states "Children develop and learn at different rates". This recognises the importance of understanding that each child's learning and development is unique and non-linear. For effective learning and development to occur, The Early Years Coalition (2021) suggest that the other three EYFS principles – Unique Child, Positive Relationships, and Enabling Environments - must be well embedded, reinforcing the idea that all aspects of the framework are interdependent and build on one another

The EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2024), as well as the non-statutory guidance (Early Years Coalition, 2021, DfE, 2021) concur that play-based learning is central to early childhood development. The approach is embedded within the characteristics of effective learning, playing and

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exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically, where children can learn and develop through challenging and playful opportunities (Early Years Coalition, 2021).

Play-based learning is also a key concept within early childhood theories. Piaget (1952) emphasised that play supports cognitive development through active exploration, while Vygotsky (1978) demonstrated the importance of social interaction in play, developing children's problem-solving and critical thinking. These concepts shift the focus of school readiness away from purely academic skills towards a more holistic view of learning and development.

Case study

Children in a pre-school have been talking to their practitioners about the school settings they will be going to. The conversations naturally caused many emotions, children felt curious and excited but sometimes anxious. These conversations revealed a need for resources that reflect each child's background and experiences as unique.

Practitioners recognised this and created an inclusive environment, particularly embracing the different cultural experiences for children. Dual-language books, cultural resources and celebrations and reflecting familiar home routines were all introduced into the school setting environment, positively promoting identity and sense of belonging.

By understanding each child's unique experiences, practitioners had meaningful discussions with the children about transitioning to a school setting. Incorporating these resources into their usual environments also allowed the children to have visual

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Conclusion

What appears as the golden thread throughout this chapter is the importance of recognising each child as unique and supporting them as individuals when considering school readiness, rather than seeing them as one homogenous group. If we can do that right, then arguably the other principles follow.

Top-tips for Families

- Involve your child in the selection of their school bag, lunch box, and water bottles and encourage them to try on their school uniform.
- or children with sensory sensitivities, liaise with the school setting and discuss uniform adaptations (e.g., shorter sleeves or shorts).
- Walk or drive to the school setting at the time when it starts or finishes to ensure your child becomes used to the routine, noise and crowds and familiar with the landmarks. If the school setting has provided a booklet with relevant photos or has a website, share this during quiet times, discuss the new routines and encourage your child to ask questions.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

- Promote children's personal hygiene, encourage self-care, foster independence skills, and prepare them for the transition. For example, ask children to put their bags and coats on their pegs upon arrival, use the toilet independently, and select from the activities on offer during free play.
- Share children's progress records with their school setting and ensure these include their voice and family views.
- Where possible, facilitate visits for Reception class teachers to enable them to meet and observe the child in an environment that is comforting and familiar.

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Top-tips for School Settings

- Schedule informal opportunities to meet and greet families and children, such as stay- and- play sessions, or Teddy Bears Picnics.
- Ensure that settling in sessions are flexible and offer open-ended, individual and group play opportunities to allow children to feel at ease and explore.
- Classrooms should display visual routines, and corners should be thoughtfully set up with toys and resources to make the environment enticing, spark peer interactions, and offer opportunities for quiet time.

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Characteristics of Effective Learning Matter

Eleanor Milligan, Helen Moylett, Rebecca Blake, Lewis Fogarty and Simon Airey

Introduction

The transition from home or early childhood setting to a school setting is a pivotal moment in a child's life. While much attention is given to curriculum content, it is equally important to consider how children learn. The Characteristics of Effective Learning (CofEL) (DfE, 2024), central to the EYFS, provide a powerful framework for understanding and supporting children's dispositions, engagement, and learning processes during this key period of change.
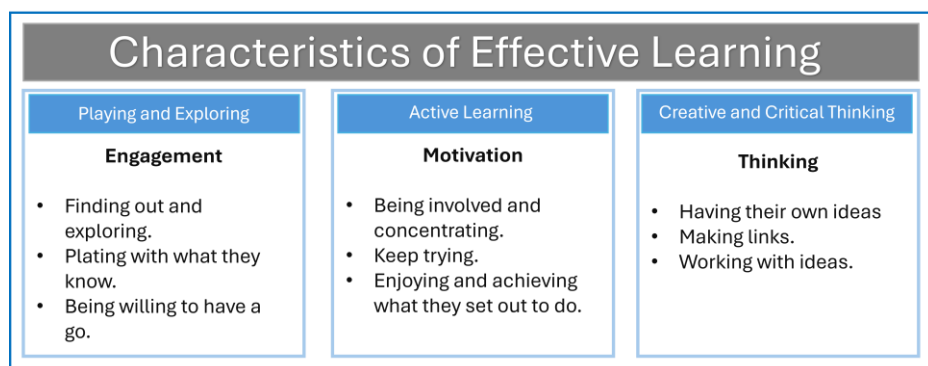
The three CofEL strands—Playing and Exploring, Active Learning, and Creating and Thinking Critically—offer insights into how children engage with their environment, maintain motivation, and develop independent thinking (Stewart 2017). Informed by the Tickell Review (2011), firmly embedded in the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2023) and supported by Birth to Five Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021), the CofEL are grounded in developmental and sociocultural theory (e.g., Piaget, Bandura, Bruner).

These perspectives prioritise agency, autonomy, and play-based learning as central to effective early years pedagogy.

Unlike curriculum outcomes, the CofEL focus on process over product, and they are not age-bound or formally assessed, allowing a truly child-centred approach to transition (Moylett 2022). This chapter will examine how these characteristics can underpin smooth, meaningful transitions to a school setting, drawing on policy guidance, research evidence, and pedagogical practice.

Playing and Exploring

The significance of learning and development through playing and exploring in Early Childhood is evident in current and historic literature, (Galbraith, 2024; Fox, Lang, Tebben, 2024; Timmins, and King, 2024; Vygotsky, 1967; Froebel,1898). The freedom to play is also enshrined as a human right in Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989) which means there is an ethical duty to ensure this right is embedded in pedagogical practice. However, despite extensive research-informed literature and international commitments, play remains an area that is viewed and valued differently throughout history. Outcome focused teaching can be perceived as preferable to a play-based approach (Bradbury, 2024), so challenging the deficit view and empowering educators to apply research-informed, practical strategies that encourage play remains vital.

Engaging children with open-ended materials supports transitions into new environments like Reception. Grimmer (2018), specifically identifies the effectiveness of utilising a wide range of resources that do not have 'correct' answers. Providing play resources that create different worlds and support open-ended play, encourages children to explore and develop creative thinking (Bruce 2023). Incorporating opportunities within or outside the class environment that adopt a 'what if' thinking approach to play, facilitates a shift from the 'actual' to the 'anything is possible' (Pramling and Samuelsson 2024). Transitioning to a Reception class can be unsettling, so providing children autonomy through the provision of a wide choice of resources that reflect the interests of the children can provide security in a time of uncertainty. Binfield-Skøie and Menning, (2024) refer to the selection of resources enabling agentic action to support children's participation in a new setting. Play opportunities can support children to take a step beyond their current abilities (Bruce, 2023). Providing open-ended materials and interest focused materials are approaches that can help exploration and smoother transitions.

Active Learning

Active learning in the Early Years is not keeping children busy; it's about growing motivation, interest, and resilience. For Reception-age children, this means experiencing safe, responsive spaces where they can feel confident to try, make

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mistakes, and try once more. Play is the best mechanism to promote active learning skills. It enables children to meet challenges, negotiate concepts, and resolve issues, sometimes without the intervention of adults. Open-ended activities give children room to explore, take ownership and develop confidence, while, as Bradbury et al (2025) explain, educators and families can use storytelling, puppet play, and real-life examples of resilience, engagement and motivation, to support understanding of these concepts.

Critically it is within play that we see children increase their levels of involvement, their ability to keep on trying if they encounter difficulties and not only enjoyment in achieving what they set out to do but the depth of their learning (Laevers and DeClercq 2018). By recognising and respecting process over product, particularly through play, we grow in children the very essence of active learning: resilience, engagement, and belief in themselves.

Transitions, like beginning at a school setting, can test children's self-concept and resilience, particularly if a child is neurodivergent or has a special educational need or disability (SEND). Emotionally safe environments are necessary, where error is encouraged, development is appreciated, and autonomy is promoted. The Early Years Coalition (2021) note that active learning flourishes when adults respond to each child's individual learning profile and offer the degree of support they require regardless of whether children are neurotypical, neurodivergent or have SEND. As Grimmer (2018) points out, daily routines, sensory-friendly settings, and visual cues can support all children, particularly those who are neurodivergent and those with

SEND, ensuring they feel secure enough to experiment, take risks and keep going, thus creating the conditions for active learning.

Creating and Thinking Critically

Play and active learning support cognitive self-regulation and provide the engagement and motivational context for children to enjoy being thinkers. When they are thinking creatively children use their imaginations and existing knowledge and experience to develop their own ideas and working theories. Their creative thinking feeds into their ability to think critically: to identify and solve problems and find strategies for monitoring and evaluating their own learning.

The role of the adult in child-led learning is complex. It goes beyond providing open ended materials which promote thinking, such as loose parts or blocks. It also goes beyond what might be called 'casual' observation and requires deep reflection on children's development and learning. It can help to remember that adults are active learners too. In their daily interactions, they must notice

what children do/ say and feel, recognise what this tells them about the child's evolving ideas and understandings and respond accordingly.

During transitions, children bring their interests, ideas and working theories with them. It is essential that they are supported by reflective adults who can tune in to them and enjoy a good learning conversation based on noticing, recognising and responding. Newman and Chilvers (2023) provide an example of how Helen Hedges' (2022) research on children's interests and working theories supports adults to notice, recognise and respond, enabling them to move beyond superficial responses and involve children in deeper conceptual learning. Reflective adults ensure they ask genuine questions that support critical thinking such as 'How do you think we could fix that?' rather than stepping in and doing the fixing. This is particularly important during transitions as it empowers children's autonomy supporting their sense of agency and self-confidence as they adapt to their new environment.

> ### Case study: Not Just Ready, but Recognised: Supporting Summer-Born Transitions
>
> *When my summer-born son transitioned to a school, he managed well in the classroom, meeting expectations and engaging with learning. But by the end of the day, he often seemed tense or "het up," as we'd say: on the edge of emotional overwhelm. During a school break, he attended his former nursery for a holiday club, and I noticed a marked change. He appeared freer, more relaxed, and more expressive. This shift in posture and temperament reminded me how important it is to support emotional regulation through environments that prioritise wellbeing, agency, and exploratory learning—key aspects of the Characteristics of Effective Learning.*

Conclusion

Recognising and prioritising the Characteristics of Effective Learning is essential for supporting children through the transition to Reception, not just academically, but also socially, emotionally, and cognitively. By

acknowledging the importance of these characteristics and working closely together, educators, families, and school setting leaders can lay strong foundations for lifelong learning. Focusing on *how* children learn, helps to nurture their ability to adapt, engage, and thrive, both in new environments and throughout their educational journey.

Top-tips for Families

Encourage independence and curiosity at home.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

Observe and talk about the Characteristics of Effective Learning in practice with children, families and staff in each child's new setting.

Top-tips for School Settings

Protect time for play-based and inquiry-driven approaches.

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Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) Matters

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Introduction

Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) lies at the heart of school readiness. PSED lays the foundation for how children understand themselves and relate to others. During the transition from a familiar early childhood setting or home environment to a school setting environment, children will experience new routines, unfamiliar faces, and different expectations. A strong PSED support system can ease this change and build resilience. The following sections highlight key considerations for children during school setting transition.

Attachment and Relationships

The ability for children to build positive relationships with peers and adults is key to successful transition to a school setting (Peckham, 2024). Children must negotiate the move from an established, typically smaller, network of friends and familiar adults with whom they have made secure attachment, to a new set of peers and adults. Forming new bonds with adults at a school setting helps children feel safe and secure (Zeedyk, 2020). Depending on prior experience, this can be a more daunting challenge for some individuals.

Families and educators in both settings should work together to share information, to support and reassure children during this sensitive period. Providing opportunities for families to come together, learn from and encourage each other helps support your children. Transition strategies like home visits, key person introductions, or buddy systems can ease this process and support relationship building. Bradbury and Grimmer (2024) emphasise that a loving pedagogy rooted in relational trust is essential in allowing children to feel emotionally secure at this time.

Emotional Security

Emotional security plays a vital role in children's ability to separate from their families; to make new friends and to feel comfortable with unfamiliar adults and is dependent on the attachment style each child has developed during infancy (Bowlby, 1953). Many factors influence this including support

from family, position in family, opportunities to socialise, cultural practices and beliefs, confidence, autonomy and individual character. Mainstone-Cotton (2020) reminds us that all children can find change difficult, but children with additional needs or those who have experienced trauma may need more support with transition to a school setting.

Familiarity helps, so visits to the new school setting, meeting the teacher in advance, or looking at photos of the classroom can build a sense of security (Grimmer, 2018). Reassurance, encouragement, affirmation,

validation of feelings, and consistent routines at home, all help children feel grounded. In addition, listening to children, advocating for them and giving them a voice is vital (Clark, 2017), assisting them to become emotionally secure and better ready to engage in school setting life. As highlighted in *Play Matters* (Bradbury et al., 2025), when adults prioritise emotional connection and nurture, they create the psychological safety children need to make sense of change and manage uncertainty.

Confidence and Independence

Encouraging children's autonomy (putting on coats, managing personal belongings, asking for help) boosts their self-esteem. Building independence before starting at a school setting can make the transition smoother and help children feel more in control in a new environment (Grimmer, 2018). Encouraging children to manage self-care independently where appropriate, for example, being able to dress independently, manage their toileting, remember to wash their hands after visiting the bathroom and use a knife and fork while eating, and asking someone to pass the ketchup will support the development of the confidence and independence that indicate children are ready for starting at a school setting.

Using language which builds a confident and positive inner voice is also a powerful tool to encourage independence and outward confidence. Pointing out "You found that tricky, but you kept trying and now you did it!" can support skill building whilst holding on to connection and can build determination to tackle challenges with a 'can do' attitude. Children can also develop independent skills and gain confidence by roleplaying at school settings: from doing a register with cuddly toys, to eating

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sandwiches from their school lunchbox, and practising changing into and out of PE kit and school uniform (Grimmer, 2018).

Social Skills

Although two-year-olds may enjoy playing alongside their peers, Parten (1932) suggests that cooperative play begins at around 3-4 years of age and can be seen as a key skill to support transition to school settings and school readiness. Sharing, turn-taking, and listening to others helps children navigate group activities, build relationships and make new friends. Early childhood settings and families can support this development during everyday activities. These opportunities can then be built upon by engaging with transition events offered by school settings before children start.

For social skills to develop we also need to help children understand that others may hold a differing view from themselves, sometimes described as Theory of Mind (Rose, Gilbert, and Richards, 2016). This is linked with cognitive empathy as children can imagine how others might feel, building on their natural ability, through the mirror neuron system, to empathise through feeling (Corradini and Antonietti, 2013). When showing empathy towards children, as well as offering gentle guidance, adults can strengthen children's ability to empathise, gain social competence and navigate their own social situations effectively.

Self-regulation and Emotional Literacy

There is a wealth of research which suggests self-regulation is a key competency or even a predictor of school readiness, contributing to success both during the transition to a school setting but also academically in the future (Barrett-Young et al., 2024; Bautista et al., 2024). However, self-regulation is sometimes misunderstood within early childhood and purely equated with managing behaviour and self-control. Grimmer and Geens (2023) explain that, in reality self-regulation is an umbrella term encompassing executive function skills, impulse control, focus and attention, goal attainment and emotional regulation (Grimmer and Geens, 2023). All these skills are essential not just in school settings but in life in general.

To support transition, families and educators must promote self-regulation and executive function skills alongside emotional literacy. In practical terms this means supporting children to develop their working memory, singing songs and rhymes with repeated refrains, playing imitation games, engaging in challenges such as obstacle courses, risky play or problem-solving activities and recognising and naming emotions (Grimmer and Geens, 2023). Children who can identify how they feel are better equipped to seek help and manage big emotions. Storybooks, role-play, and emotion cards can be helpful tools to build this understanding. Through emotion coaching and modelling calm behaviour and empathy, adults can support emotional regulation (Gilbert, Gus and Rose, 2021) and therefore support school readiness.

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Resilience and Coping Strategies

Even well-prepared children may face challenges during transitions. Providing children with a toolkit of simple coping strategies, such as deep breathing, using their whole body to regulate, or using a calm corner, will give them tools to manage stress or anxiety (Murphy, 2024). Praising children's effort and persistence (rather than only achievement) also builds resilience, as does promoting self-efficacy and a 'can do' attitude (Bandura, 1991). However, it is also important to be mindful that young children may not be ready for many of the behaviour support systems commonly used in school settings. Systems that rely on rewards and sanctions for social compliance may limit children's ability to see themselves as competent learners (Lungu, 2018, Grimmer, 2022) and should be avoided in order to support transition. With this in mind, Lungu, (2018) and Grimmer (2022) caution against reward systems based on social compliance due to the potential negative impact they may have on children's self-image and self-esteem.

Case study: Transition Time – A labour of Love

For us, transition time is a true labour of love. A final act of celebrating the holistic child before letting them go and hoping that it was enough. We focus on many elements of transition, from independence, trusting their inner voice, speaking with, and holding space for, families as they support their children's transition at home, often uncertain what the future will hold, to meetings with school settings and exchanges of our views of each child. It is role play, the availability of local school shirts, stories at circle time that mention the many emotions of transition, facilitating visits to and from school settings, and holding space for all the big and little feelings surrounding this change.

Case study: Transition Time – A labour of Love...Continued

And then, the love letters. A keyperson's letter directly to their key child, telling them of their story at Preschool, marvelling at all that they are and all they have become, and a reminder that they are ready for the journey ahead. A letter shared with children, families, and prospective school settings alike. A view of the holistic child and all they are capable of.

Dear Danny.

It seems like only a heartbeat ago since I first met you at Preschool...and yet, you have packed so much growing into your time here, it is really-quite unbelievable!

You had not long turned three when you joined the Jack and Jill family, and you came in ready to explore!

Whilst you clearly loved the environment, you could feel quite shy when it came to playing with the other children and you often preferred being accompanied by an adult over a child.

You knew your own mind and you loved playing, but other children could make you feel a little unsettled, especially if they did not agree with your play ideas.

And yet, you tackled each challenge, each problem, each worry, and with every little success, you trusted your play partners more!

...continued

When it came to the Summer, your Mama and daddy made the brave choice to allow you an extra year at Preschool - do you know, that took great courage as not everyone would have made the same choice, so I think you must have been teaching them all the bravery you had learned!

Having you an extra year at Preschool meant that I got the absolute privilege of turning from your occasional play partner to your actual keyperson, exploring the setting around us together.

And Danny, you have blown me away.

Today, you still know your own mind, but you are so much more open to - and excited by! - compromise.

You come up with the most stunning ideas (little engineer!) and you show such genuine delight when you get to trial your ideas!

Sometimes, plans don't quite work out... the tower is too wobbly, the playdough too sticky, or the ramp is sliding off the stacks...and then you dig deep into the resilience you've built, and you try again, adjusting your ideas and solving problems together with your play partners.

Just as you have grown your wings, your little brother has joined Preschool. I love to watch you share your expertise and invite Chris to play, often guiding him to opportunities he hadn't spotted yet.

Danny, I am so very, very proud of you. And whilst I will miss you A LOT, I know the world is gaining another beautiful butterfly. And I know you are ready to take to the skies and take on your next great adventure.

So thank you for sharing part of your journey with me - I can't wait to hear what you get up to next. Love, Marlis & the rest of your Jack and Jill family xx

Conclusion

Families and educators all play a role in supporting PSED during transitions. Working together to share knowledge about the child, creating consistency, and maintaining open communication can make a world of difference. A collaborative approach builds trust and ensures that children feel supported in every environment they move between.

Transitioning to a school setting is more about being emotionally and socially prepared than being academically ready. With nurturing support, opportunities to develop independence and relationships, and a focus on emotional wellbeing, children can make a confident and happy start to their setting journey.

Top-tips for Families

Support school readiness by encouraging independence in daily routines, talking about feelings, and modelling calm responses. Provide opportunities for play with others to build social skills like sharing and empathy. These experiences help children feel confident, capable, and emotionally secure.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

Create secure attachments through key person relationships to help children feel safe and build trust. Embed emotional literacy using emotion coaching and reflective dialogue. Foster resilience and agency through play and choice, enabling children to develop confidence, self-regulation, and strong social skills.

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Top-tips for School Settings

Create an emotionally responsive classroom by prioritising connection, routine, and relationships. Build in time for social and emotional learning through play, stories, and discussion. Collaborate with early years professionals and families to ensure a smooth, supportive transition into a school setting.

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Physical Development Matters

Sue Allingham, Karen Vincent, Kristy Howells and Viki Veale

Introduction

The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (2024:7) states 'Children learn and develop at a faster rate from birth to five years old than at any other time in their lives, so their experiences in the early years have a major impact on their future life chances.' This relates to all areas of development including physicality. This chapter explores what families and educators need to know to support this element of 'school readiness'.

Outside Play to Support Transition

 'Physical interaction with the environment and social engagement with families are two of the vital ingredients for later social integration and educational achievement' (Goddard-Blythe, 2011:1). Opportunities to play outdoors are particularly important in relation to physical development, offering open-ended learning opportunities that enable free movement of

the whole-body, setting children up for lifelong health (Ouvry, 2003; Bilton, 2010). Considered outdoor spaces offer different terrain for feet to navigate, different height surfaces for walking, running, climbing and sliding and different bodily sensations from grass, mud, sand and water. These early experiences are essential.

The stimulation, possibility and enjoyment offered by outdoor natural environments serve to motivate and arouse curiosity and learning (Waite, 2010). The Statutory Framework (DfE, 2024) states that children must have daily access to the outdoor area, this means opportunities to play outside in all seasons. Experiences such as kicking leaves, splashing through puddles sliding through mud, digging, planting and harvesting vegetables and fruit foster engagement and involvement in new ways, stimulating children's muscles along with their minds (Ouvry, 2003) while also enhancing vitality and wellbeing (Kiviranta et al, 2023).

Whilst opportunities for physical development will support children in preparing for more formal learning, adult attitudes to risk and challenge may impact the opportunities available for them to do so. Educators must be prepared to relinquish aspects of control and move towards more child-led approaches (Papadopoulou and Vincent, 2025). A sensible attitude includes an appreciation that eliminating hazards whilst supporting manageable risk-taking builds confidence and helps to develop large and small muscle groups essential for hand-eye coordination (Tovey, 2017). As Goddard-Blythe (2000) notes, this can be nurtured by empowering children to foster conscious awareness through their attention, balance and coordination: vital elements in supporting effective transition into more formal school settings.

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Outdoor environments vary according to the location and resources of the setting. Whatever the size and scope of the outdoor environment, it is the creativity, willingness and attitude of adults towards learning outside that matters more than the actual space itself. With ingenuity, time and attention, amazing things can be done with limited resources, particularly if the whole community of educators and families is included and consulted. This consultation and meaningful partnership with families is crucial for educators to understand the 'unique child' (DfE,2024:7), and will enable a more physically curious approach.

Physical Curiosity

Huggett and Howells (2024) note that many children are not meeting age expected levels of motor competency, fine and gross motor skills, core strength, and coordination set out in the statutory framework (DfE, 2024). Motor competency supports not just physical health, but also social and emotional development. To support physical development, educators must expand their understanding of what motor competency is, recognise varying physical development levels, and know how to plan for purposeful movement. Almond and Lambden (2016) called this *physical curiosity*: creating opportunities for children to explore what their bodies can do, how and why.

Physical readiness varies greatly. Summer-born children may have had fewer movement opportunities than their winter-born peers and may appear less ready as a result. The difference in physical development

between a four and a five-year-old typically lies in improved coordination, strength and control. Meaning that, by the age of five, children may demonstrate greater confidence and endurance in structured gross motor activities.

Educators need to distinguish between balanced and unbalanced movement and understand *why* they offer certain activities. If we can offer the 'why' alongside the 'how' and the 'what', this will lead to healthy, active lives for all children (Howells and Sammon, 2023).

The why, how and the what? - Howells and Sammon (2023)

Central to this is the ability to *see movement*. Educators must 'see' not just whether a child moves, but how—confidently or hesitantly, fluidly or awkwardly. These observations can reveal much about a child's physical readiness and highlight where support is needed. From this comes *understanding movement*: recognising typical development, identifying red flags, and planning accordingly. For example, poor balance may indicate weak core strength; an awkward pencil grip may suggest the need

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for more foundational gross and fine motor activities. This informs *purposeful movement*—intentional activities that ensure developmental learning in everyday play. Everyday tools become opportunities to build physical readiness, which underpins attention, confidence, and emotional regulation—all essential for school readiness.
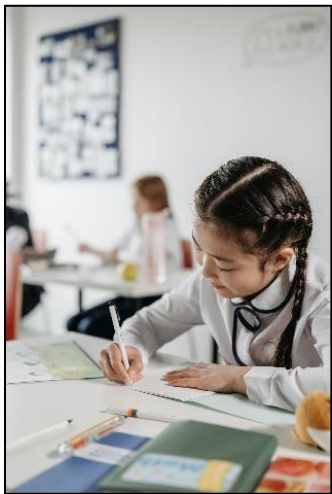
Huggett and Howells (2024) illustrate how child-initiated and adult-led activities support physical readiness. For fine motor development, the *kneading and rolling* of playdough requires finger tension and control development, whilst *weaving* encourages grasp and pincer grip, all essential for pencil gripping, cutlery use and small tool control. Outdoors, *climbing and swinging* build core strength and coordination, and gripping bars strengthens hands and forearms. *Gardening* supports gross motor development through squatting, lifting, and carrying items like soil or pushing wheelbarrows. These repeated, everyday movements develop strength, control, and confidence.

Although school settings are under pressure to get children writing (Kay, 2018), the bones in the wrist necessary to develop fine motor skills, such as writing, are not fully formed until children are up to five years old. It is important to be aware of gender differences in development as girls' wrists tend to develop by the age of 4 ½ while boys are not fully formed until five (Kiviranta et al, 2023). This has obvious implications for children's readiness for formal learning. Rather than focusing on 'interventions' for children who may struggle to write, which can damage their self-esteem and wellbeing (Hargreaves, 2019), children need pedagogically informed

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play-based opportunities to strengthen their wrists, hands and fingers and meaningful opportunities to experiment with mark making (Smith, 2021).

In essence, physical development is inseparable from school readiness. When children can move with control, confidence and purpose, they are better equipped to sit, listen, engage and participate. By seeing, understanding and planning for purposeful movement, educators create the conditions for children to thrive—not just physically, but across the full spectrum of early learning.

Sleep and 'School Readiness'

Physical development is not just about movement and motor skills, it also encompasses *'self-care, including toileting, oral health, feeding and sleep'* (DfE, 2024). As noted above, in Reception classes, some children may be five whilst others may only have just turned four. At this age, the difference between the oldest and youngest children in a cohort is equivalent of up to a quarter of a lifetime. This means they may be entering full time education at very different developmental stages in terms of sleep, toileting and self-

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care (Children's Society, 2024). Consequently, Stormont and Cohen (2021) suggest sleep patterns must also be considered when determining readiness for a school setting, as outlined in the case study below.

Case study: A parent's perspective on school readiness

I have a summer-born son. As the time for him to start at a school approached, I became increasingly anxious. He was physically and socially confident, and loved learning, but he was also a very early riser who, by midday, was ready for a nap! After the first week, when the children only did mornings and then went home for lunch, it became clear that he was not ready to spend a full day at the school setting. I discussed my concerns with his teacher, but by the third time he had fallen asleep in his lunch during the second week, I decided that he would be part-time until Christmas. I met much resistance from the setting, but, as children do not legally have to attend school full-time until the term after their fifth birthday, I stood my ground. Looking back, it was absolutely the right thing for my son. He is now an academically gifted teenager with a wide circle of friends, who no longer wakes at the crack of dawn! I would advise families to know their rights - if you have a summer-born child who is not ready for a full-time school setting place, don't be afraid to go part-time till they are ready.

Conclusion

In order to support school readiness, we must be aware of developmental differences between boys and girls and between our oldest and youngest learners transitioning to a school setting.

Top-tips for Families

Establish a good sleep routine that will support your child's growth and development.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

Ensure that you have a good understanding of motor competence, recognise varying physical development levels and plan for purposeful movement.

Top-tips for School Settings

Remember that outdoor play is vital for young children to move freely and develop the physical competence necessary to refine their motor skills.

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Communication and Language Matters

Janet Morris, Eleanor Milligan, Rachel Wolfendale and Emily Askew

Introduction

Communication and language are especially important as children transition into a school setting, where the language used tends to take a more formal, academic form (Theakston, 2015). At this crucial developmental stage, children are rapidly expanding the vital communication and language skills needed to interact with others, build relationships, express needs, navigate conflict, think, solve problems, and learn (Law et al., 2017). Unfamiliarity with more formal language can create a barrier for some children especially where the differences in cultural/linguistic styles and norms between home and setting are the greatest. While basic interpersonal communication skills may develop rapidly within supportive social and emotional environments, for learners in their early language developmental stages (including second language learners), cognitively demanding academic language proficiency develops more slowly (Cummins, 2000).

Within the EYFS (DfE, 2023), Communication and Language comprises the development of the skills of listening and attention (developing greater intentional listening and being able to control attention, enabling sustained attention in group settings), understanding (to make sense of what is happening and what is expected of them), and speaking (to express

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needs and ideas, negotiate roles in play, and ask questions). Responsive, back-and-forth interactions between children and adults, located in meaningful experiences, where adults 'tune in' and respond to children's vocalisations, gestures or words in meaningful dialogue are fundamental to language development (Rowe and Snow, 2020). Important contexts for language-building interactions include conversations about what children are doing, thinking or feeling; remembering together or planning future events; play -especially role play; sharing and talking about book; and storytelling (EEF, 2018a; DfE, 2018).

Families, early childhood and school settings can each provide meaningful experiences that promote language skills, enabling children to express their needs, concerns and ideas, and to make friends. Building effective links, supports continuity for children as they transition to the language practices of school settings.

Families

Warm, nurturing, two-way interactions and conversations in the home language and familiar contexts, incorporating both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication, are foundational to children's developing understanding of how language and communication work and building their skills. Families 'tune in' to their child's efforts at communication, pick up on their cues, and have shared understandings which, in sustaining interactions (Flewitt, 2005), are supportive of language development.

Early Childhood Settings

High-quality early years education and care is based on an authentic understanding of each child and their individual needs, recognising the "unique child" (DfE, 2023:7), upholding children's rights to feel seen and be heard, to be *with* the conversation, rather than the subject of it.

Building meaningful relationships with children and their families through sustained communication and establishing familiarity builds confidence and enables language to flourish. However, some children have increased vulnerability during transitions (Early Years Coalition, 2021); being unable to communicate would add to a child's vulnerability. It is therefore important that early childhood settings support children in developing the core skills needed to sustain confident communication.

Positive relationships built in early childhood settings can create secure environments in which children can grow in independence and feel empowered to communicate their needs and interests to those adults around them. Creating rich learning opportunities that expose children to new social situations, not only prepares children for upcoming challenges in transition but can also be

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utilised to develop core vocabulary and a range of communication methods, equipping children with the skills to convey their needs, wishes, and interests.

School Settings

Recognising and supporting language growth during transition is critical to establishing secure, responsive and inclusive learning environments, attending to each aspect of communication and language development. Fisher (2016) highlights the importance of responsive adults, noting how effective practitioners attune to children's communicative cues. She shows how responsive, language-rich interactions enable teachers to know the child, an essential component of supporting their transition. For 4- and 5-year-olds, this means transition is not only about adapting to routines but about being known, understood, and responded to through language.

Listening and Attention:

Teachers can support development through modelling of listening skills, creating spaces where children feel heard and supporting a gradual shift from self-directed play to shared attention in contexts initiated or led by others. It is also supported through clear routines, visual supports, and interactions that are paced sensitively to children's developmental stage and engagement levels.

Understanding:

Receptive language continues to outpace expressive language at this stage Hoff (2013), meaning children may understand more than they can articulate. Teachers need to tune into non-verbal cues and use repetition, modelling, and scaffolding to extend understanding. Embedding language in play, storytelling, and daily routines supports comprehension while reducing anxiety during transition.

Speaking:

Speaking skills are closely linked to emotional expression and social inclusion (Blanden, Hansen and McNally., 2016). In Reception, opportunities for meaningful talk—through role play, shared reading, and adult-child conversation are vital. Teachers need to be patient listeners, providing wait time and valuing every attempt at verbal/non-verbal expression.

Case Study – Cherry Primary School

Cherry Primary is a 2-form entry school in a diverse area of London. Many pupils come from multilingual homes, and the proportion eligible for pupil premium funding is average. While there is a small on-site pre-school, most children come from various local feeder pre-schools.

Case Study – Cherry Primary School...continued

The early years team has carefully refined their transition process to ensure a smooth and collaborative transition for new pupils and to maximise relationship and communication and language building opportunities between staff, families and children.

Transition Procedures

Summer term

Pre-school setting visits or telephone calls *(with parent permission) to find out about the child's interests, likes and dislikes, relationships, language and communication skills and preferences during their time in the setting.*

*Parents and carers are invited for **a school visit and information meeting** while the children **stay and play** in the classrooms.*

***Home visits**. A 30-minute informal visit with two members of staff to chat with the child and parents in their family environment. A questionnaire with a few open-ended prompts is provided in advance to allow the family and child time to talk and consider what they will want share in the visit. A polaroid photograph is taken so the child and family can talk about their new teachers and the visit, and a family picture (including pets!) can be shared with school staff to display in the classroom as a talking point on the first day.*

Some schools carry out visits in the autumn term instead or, if home visiting is not an option, they might invite each child and family into the school for a meeting with a similar purpose.

A postcard home *with an exciting picture of the school (in the snow for example, or of the forest school area) is sent from the head teacher to welcome each child.*

On site pre-school or nursery visits*. Children spend short periods of time visiting the reception class and reception staff will also read stories and play in the pre-school setting.*

Transition books *are created for children who might need additional reassurance using a visual social story.*

Autumn term

Classroom environment *set up to reflect children's interests and identities, including photographs on display that will inspire communication with staff and amongst the children.*

Staggered start dates *allow for conversations and relationship building to take place between staff, families and children within a calm and settled environment.*

Conclusion

Sensitive attention to communication and language contributes to effective transition, supporting relationship building and enhancing

continuity, helping children to adapt to the unfamiliarity of a school setting and its more formal language practices. Collaborative transition processes facilitate effective communication and provide a context for reassuring discussions about the upcoming transition. Importantly, they create opportunities to share understanding of each child's identity, interests, and communication preferences which enable staff to respond to, adapt their language use, and communicate with new children. In this way, children can be listened to and 'known', building confidence and security, creating the foundations for responsive, language rich interactions and learning at a school setting.

Top-tips for Families

- Take advantage of any opportunities to chat, play, read and sing to foster children's communication and language development and help prepare them for the more formal learning environment of a school setting.
- Use everyday experiences to develop specific language for expressing their needs to unfamiliar adults. For example, modelling asking for the toilet, expressing hunger or thirst or expressing emotions such as happiness, sadness or fear.
- Sharing books about starting at a school setting can also be helpful here. Respond to any questions children may have about school settings, chatting positively within the family about things to look forward to there.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

- Support children with the upcoming transition by developing opportunities to introduce and extend vocabulary that supports their independence and unique sense of self.

- Encourage children to share their interests with others, for example, through circle time social activities that reflect the structure of a classroom-based learning environment. Roleplay activities are a great way to encourage children to use new phrases associated with their needs, pose questions to others, and voice their concerns.
- Support children to spontaneously tell you they need help with their bag or going to the toilet.

Top-tips for School Settings

- Recognise and value the diversity of children's languages and modes of communication.
- Model listening skills; tune in and respond to children to support two-way communication
- Plan time for child-led play and interaction
- Provide thinking time for children before expecting them to communicate

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Literacy Matters

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Introduction

Literacy is vital for all young children's learning and development from birth and throughout their lifelong journey of learning (Boardman, 2024; Flewitt, 2013; Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). We refer to literacy in this chapter to include communication, language, speaking, listening, reading and writing linked to meaningful, relational and embodied literacy – not necessarily as a set of isolated skills to be learned or taught.

Literacy and Transition

We have known for some time that the home environment plays a critical role in children's development. For example, influential studies such as The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project, clearly demonstrate that specific activities undertaken with young children in the home have a positive effect on their development (Sylva et al., 2004). This has particular, implications for children living in disadvantage as the quality of the home learning environment was seen to be more important for children's intellectual and social development than family occupation, education or income.

Given that literacy and language development is strongly associated with a range of benefits, including success in school settings and beyond (Bynner and Parsons, 2001; Levy, et al., 2014), much research has focused on the 'Home Literacy Environment', a term used to describe 'literacy-related

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interactions, resources and attitudes that children experience at home (Hamilton et al., 2016:401). While studies have shown that formal direct teaching in the home, such as families teaching children letter names and sounds, is related to early literacy skill (e.g., Bus and Ijzendoorn 1995), much further research has shown that informal interactions, such as shared reading, playing word games, rhyming games and parent-child talk is very beneficial for children's language development (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002: Flewitt, Nind and Payler, 2009). This was emphasised in the work of Logan et al (2019), who found that children who are read to on a daily basis hear hundreds of thousands more words by the time they are five years old, in comparison with children who are never read to.

As children transition into the school setting environment, it is also important to consider how the Home Literacy Environment influences attitudes towards literacy; this is seen clearly in studies that have researched shared reading in the home. Over the years there has been a steady flow of research to suggest that the *ways* in which families read to and with their children can have an impact on children's motivation and engagement with reading. For example, Baker, Scher and Mackler found that families who believed that reading is a source of entertainment 'have children with more positive views about reading than do families who emphasize the skills aspect of reading development' (1997: 69).

More recently other researchers have concluded that when families read with their children, it is important that they promote the enjoyment of reading, rather than focusing on technical reading skill (Curenton and Justice, 2008; Makin, 2006). What is more, recent research emphasised

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that it is important that both the family member and child enjoy the activity if shared reading is to continue (Levy and Hall, 2021).

The Journey of Literacy for Children and Families

Providing meaningful opportunities for literacy play is not only an essential part of supporting children's holistic development but is a matter of social justice (Smith and Vincent, 2022). Books (printed and digital) support children in their literacy journey but can also serve as vehicles for such social justice (Serroukh 2024). Early exposure to books and stories supports brain development, promotes bonding and sensory discovery, and brings lifelong benefits, especially for children from low-income families. EEF (2018b) studies indicate that the poorer children in society often attain lower literacy outcomes throughout their time in education. To address this, young children must be provided with an environment and resources that enable them to become actively engaged in language and literacy as users and creators, empowering them through books that authentically represent their context, culture and linguistic capacities.

Language, as speech and gesture, and other communicative movements such as mark making and representation, help young children to construct personal stories to share with others and enable them to create those stories about the things that are important to them. The telling of these stories also helps to make sense of their world and what they know about it. Through the merging of imaginative and real-life experiences in their play, children become authors of their own stories. The development of this narrative thinking formed through interactions

with others supports children in their understanding of language patterns, structures and purposes (Smidt, 2006).

Books and early reading practices, such as rhyme, rhythm and steady beat are pivotal as tools for exploration and play, supporting young children to develop sustained attention and enabling them to become immersed in rich language experiences (Boardman 2019). Literacy experiences provide opportunities for young children to explore their inner world in new and exciting ways, shaping and expanding their imagination and allowing them to make connections with their everyday experiences to support the development of their critical thinking.

As children transition to a school setting, policy dictates that their engagement with literacy often becomes more structured, with a greater emphasis upon direct instruction and phonics. However, it is vital to maintain a broad approach for literacy, supporting children in finding opportunities to express themselves in meaningful and purposeful ways, to enable young children to access books and stories which excite them. The joy of literacy is so important for all young children – being able to return to their favourite rhymes, books, stories and songs again and again.

Case study: Sharing literacy readiness with families in early childhood settings

Our nursery setting creates a love of songs, rhymes and stories and how as part of this we spend a lot of time supporting our families with the journey of literacy and the role these play. Discussions with families around their child's transition to school settings are usually focussed on how to support their child with learning phonics (letter and sound correspondence). However, it is important that we support their understanding of the wider literacy practices to support transitions demonstrating the importance of the breadth of literacy for young children. For example, language, communication, speaking, listening, reading and writing. This involves lots of listening, communication, speech and language activities – not just sharing books. We encourage families to share stories, pointing out the characters, the story scene, the pictures and images within their storytelling routines so that their children can develop their language and vocabulary to understand and express their own ideas. We also encourage families to tell and retell familiar stories, so that their children can also retell their favourite stories in their own way – possibly make up their own endings or characters. When children talk about stories, songs, rhymes, letters and shapes, they will make meaningful connections, notice, respond and engage with sounds and images in the environment, which are all important literacy skills.

Our families are often not aware of how singing songs and nursery rhymes or rapping, playing games with rhythm and steady beat link to their children developing an understanding of letter, sounds, words. and overall key communication skills including, but not restricted to, writing.

Conclusion

In summary, literacy readiness is all about building meaningful connections and relationships with language, sound, patterns within everyday activities. It is vitally important that the critical role of the home in promoting children's literacy skill and motivation for literacy is recognised within our early childhood literacy policies.

Top-tips for Families

Encourage a chatty environment at home and whilst out on visits – talk to your children about what they see, hear and notice.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

Encourage lots of singing, rhyming and music making to support repetition, predictable rhyme, alliteration, patterns and steady beat.

Top-tips for School Settings

Make story time a key focus for young children and share books, materials or resources that represent the children's real world.

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Mathematics Matters

Elizabeth Carruthers, Maulfry Worthington and Sovay Bass-Carruthers

Introduction

Transition research mainly focuses on young children's well-being (Bulkeley and Fabian, 2006). But largely missing from the debate is *curriculum transition* (or continuity), which is likely to be especially acute for mathematics. As a subject, mathematics is often seen as a formal step-by-step process, but from a child-centred perspective it is more fluid and has breadth as well as depth. Researchers are now moving away from the traditional stance of mathematics education being polarised as either correct or wrong answers (Carruthers, 2015; Coles and Sinclair, 2024). Instead, in line with article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) the advice is more focused on the child's perspective, and importantly valuing what children bring to their mathematics education.

What do we know about Children and their Mathematics?

Mathematical learning does not start when children enter a school setting; from birth, children enter a mathematical world in which they eagerly engage (Carruthers and Worthington, 2011). Researchers have identified young children's mathematical understanding on entry to a school setting, recognising that they have considerable mathematical power (Perry, Dockett and Harley, 2007). This is important, as both Perry, Dockett and

Harley (2007) and Davies (2008) suggest that early competence in mathematics is a strong predictor of later success in the subject.

Young children's previous experiences of mathematics at home and in early childhood settings provide them with much wider mathematical knowledge than the often-narrow experience of school setting mathematics (Carruthers, 2015). In line with the statutory guidance (DfE, 2024) children rarely go beyond the number ten and spend a vast amount of time on subitising whilst at home they may show an interest in larger numbers or more complex mathematical concepts. Children are engaged in a wealth of experience from their world outside and before the school setting and this experience is not just at a high level but involves all areas of mathematics.

Children communicate their mathematics in many ways, including speech, graphics (Carruthers and Worthington, 2005) and multi-modality (Flewitt, 2008). It is these informal communications that children bring with them to the setting, that they need to continue to use as they take on more standard mathematics. In the case of written mathematics, children's own mathematical graphics helps their continuity of communicating their mathematical thinking throughout the foundation stage. Most significantly, children's own graphics enables them to bridge the divide between their early concrete knowledge, and the standard (abstract) written language of mathematics (Carruthers and Worthington, 2005).

Mathematics is about problem solving and, as children are mathematicians from birth, they are not only natural problem solvers, but they enjoy the challenge of exploring and finding out. As Birth to Five

Matters stresses 'This curiosity and enjoyment should be nurtured through their interactions with people and the world around them, drawing on their personal and cultural knowledge' (Early Years Coalition, 2021:99). Children, when given the opportunity, can continue to develop their agency and aptitude for mathematical problem solving through the foundation stage.

Mathematical Play

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2024) places emphasis on the acquisition of mathematical knowledge and skills, which are largely viewed as to be delivered by teachers or practitioners in adult-led groups or whole class mathematics lessons. However, the same document asserts, 'Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals, and solve problems' (DfE, 2024:17). Sarama and Clements (2009:327) declare that mathematics is conveyed in children's play in two forms, 'play that involves mathematics and play with mathematics itself'.

Play with mathematics might be, for example, when children play a number game like snakes and ladders. Play that involves mathematics is wider which could mean, for example, children playing with blocks and pretending to be airplanes, talking together about their plane flying higher and going through the clouds.

Pretend play is the very best medium for the young child to develop and learn (Vygotsky, 1978; Worthington, 2018) and as Paley, a teacher all her life, states, pretend play is 'the curriculum the children have for themselves' (Paley, 2004:20); more than ever before, children desperately need us to be advocates for play to be at the heart of their experience throughout the Foundation stage. They might only touch on mathematical concepts, but both types of mathematical play are valid, however it is the pretend play that has greatest potential for continuity in mathematical learning (Papandreou and Carruthers, 2025). This is the play that almost all children have engaged in since they were toddlers.

Do we know Children's Mathematics?

We can know children's mathematics as they transition into the school setting world, but teachers need to build on and appreciate children's funds of mathematical knowledge (Worthington and van Oers, 2016) not just school mathematics. 'Funds of knowledge' (Moll et. al., 1992) refers to the personal understandings that children draw on from their home, cultural and community experiences, including their mathematical

knowledge. Play is a vehicle for blending home and setting knowledge, as in this case study from a Reception teacher.

Case study

In our Reception unit we deliberately have strong communications with our families through home visits, play and stays, parent meetings and consistent verbal communication in the morning, at drop off time. We know our children well and welcome their mathematics. We have direct teaching inputs, but we also listen to children's mathematics which comes through our discussions and play. When the direct input blends with their play then that is powerful for the children, sustaining their mathematical world that makes sense to them.

For example, when teaching a mathematical unit on measurement, the children were interested in heights observing if they were taller or shorter than certain objects in the classroom. In outside play, Tony made a sign and put it alongside the slide. He had written a horizontal line and told the children they had to be taller than the line to get on the slide. The children lined up and Tony measured them; the children were intrigued by this. Tony said to me that in the local theme park 'they won't let you on the big rides if you are not taller than the mark'. Tony had brought a purpose to measuring and he was spreading that idea to his Reception friends, some of whom made their own marks and put them in different areas of the outside play area. Tony had

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In the above example of children's mathematics, the child has made his personal sense of the direct teaching input of the teacher. The teacher has listened to the child, enabling her to comprehend his play and mathematical meaning. The opportunity for the child to express their

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understanding of measurement, through play, is crucial for their understanding. He has also influenced other children, and they are taking his play on and replicating it, in their own way, thus adding to their mathematical knowledge.

As well as children making their sense of the school setting mathematics curriculum, teachers also need to add to the mathematics curriculum by developing children's interests and experiences. The Reception teacher above exemplifies this point below.

> *Case study:*
>
> *A group of children were interested in roads and cars, often playing with the set of cars and single roads in our class. I wanted to capitalise on and extend their mathematical knowledge, and I drew the beginnings of a motorway on large paper. The children got excited and, drawing on their funds of knowledge, told me that some motorways had four lanes, and you can go very fast on the lanes. They drew their own motorway and created a story about a lorry going too fast and crashing into the barrier resulting in the AA van and the ambulance arriving on the scene. This play continued for several weeks bringing in mathematical concepts of speed, distance, direction, quantity and time.*

Conclusion

How we blend mathematical learning and widen the scope for the learners, who already come to a school setting with the breadth of mathematical understanding, is paramount to offering children smooth mathematics transitions. The ways in which adults view young children as learners, will impact their sense of agency, self-esteem and their subsequent

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confidence with mathematics. Children need to be offered, 'many different experiences and opportunities to play freely and to explore and investigate. Make time and space for children to become deeply involved in imaginative play, indoors and outside' (DfE, 2023, p. 19). Mathematical transitions, from early childhood setting to a school setting, need to build on and extend the children's earlier experiences and confidence, both within their play and in adult-led groups.

Top-tips for Families

Remember to continue to listen and converse with your child at home as they engage with everyday mathematical activities, e.g., setting the table for dinner. Keep an open dialogue with your child's school setting informing them of any noteworthy mathematical interests your child partakes in.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

Collect a range of observations of children engaged in mathematical activities that you can utilize in your own practice and pass on to the children's school setting during transition.

Top-tips for School Settings

Value and build on the mathematical experiences and knowledge the children bring to a school setting from home and early childhood settings. Keep an open dialogue with families and early childhood settings about children's mathematics, discussing development and how you provide an interesting child-centred mathematics curriculum.

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Expressive Arts and Design (EAD) Matters

Hannah Foster, Cathy Gunning and Debi Keyte-Hartland

Introduction

The authors share a conviction that we should place the Expressive Arts and Design (EAD) and creativity centrally in our pedagogical thinking. The arts and aesthetic experiences affect both individual growth and collective wellbeing to enable children (and adults) to thrive as communities (Magsamen and Ross, 2023).

We believe that an arts-full creative and expressive approach is a crucial and protective factor for children's flourishing and mental wellness, recognising their uniqueness and strengths while *readying* them for future changes. When centring a creative and responsive pedagogy we offer children possibility and hope as creative and imaginative thinkers to participate in this *readying* of themselves; and in centring this pedagogical approach the school setting and the educators are *readying themselves* for the children and what they bring too. *Readying* therefore is reciprocal in its nature. In this chapter through an examination of theory and practice, we explore how and why EAD, and creative approaches can enable children to think about, participate in and adapt to processes of transition that they will experience in their learning journey.

Theory and Research

Every child has the right to participate in artistic and cultural experiences (Article 31, UNCRC, 1989) and the area of EAD supports these rights for children to develop their imaginative and creative thinking abilities (DfE, 2024). This involves constructing experiences with children where their imagination, original ideas and responses are valued over copying, following instructions, and imitating the ideas of adults or existing artworks (Early Years Coalition, 2021). EAD experiences also enable children to co-regulate with materials and in modalities that are engaging, playful, sensory, affirming, and pleasurable (Malaguzzi, 1985).

Through processes of designing and making, young children use their imaginations to create, invent, innovate, experiment, test out, and critically evaluate their ideas (Robinson, 2022). These activities engage them in learning and development across the EYFS which is simultaneously practical, relational, affective, and cognitive, developing skills within the context of relationships and meaning making.

To express oneself is to communicate, and the arts can be considered as languages which enable all young children to communicate through *more than words* in materials, media and modalities to convey their ideas, thinking and emotions which will increase in complexity and skill over time. These creative languages build reciprocity, empathy and wellness within a learning community in which children can engage in enquiry with increased competencies in critical thinking, highlighting the significance of collective responsibility, care, and attention to well-being (Keyte-Hartland and Lowings, 2025). These interrelated processes help children

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understand and construct knowledge about the world, exploring what matters to them through the languages of art (Sellers, 2013).

In collaborating and working together through EAD, children communicate, connect, co-regulate and relate, listening to the differences in their ideas and working theories (Hedges, 2014) enabling them to imagine alternative possibilities, develop empathy and negotiate change (Vecchi, 2019). In supporting children to share their anxieties, fears or wishes and in attending and attuning to their plurality of ways of communicating through EAD, educators develop 'Attuned Teaching' as an approach, encompassing equity, anti-bias, acceptance, safety and community (Gunning and Lofthouse, 2021).

EAD, accompanied by children's creativity, can be developed within a child-centred approach, to offer continuity and coherence at a time of transition when this is viewed as a process as opposed to an event (Early Years Coalition, 2021). As evidenced in the case study below, exploring ideas through the use of familiar materials and media creates permanence, continuity and consistency even in times of change.

EAD matters for Transitions because it is a powerful activator and generator of the conditions for positive mental wellness, where children thrive, flourish, and learn alongside attuned and responsive educators. By approaching change in this way, educators can co-construct curriculum *with* children (Chesworth, 2022), centring their agency and participation in learning together, whilst expanding educators' own creative pedagogies in

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response to what children express, create, imagine and explore at times of change.

Case study: Hannah, a pre-prep Reception teacher

Whilst teaching in Reception, I observed that some children found it tricky to regulate their emotions, maintain focus, or communicate their needs. They were bright, curious children, yet these types of interactions were particularly overwhelming during periods of transition and change.

Within our team, discussions frequently revolved around the concept of "school readiness," prompting us to delve deeper into its implications for our children and their experiences. We wondered:

In the midst of change, how do we foster continuity and reassurance in children's transitions through creative approaches involving expressive arts and design?

Although EAD had been valued as an enriching activity, we wanted to integrate it more intentionally into our daily routines and practices. This core strategy was to provide consistency and reassurance in children's learning and development, particularly during transitional phases.

We adapted our planning to adopt a more child-centred approach, aligning it closely with the children's enquiries and aspirations. This granted greater agency in their learning and development. We also creatively engaged in exploring their hopes and dreams for their futures. The impact of this provided valuable and rich insights into their perspectives, feelings and thought processes in understanding what made them anxious about their next phase of learning. It also alerted us to what sparked their curiosity and motivation; and what they wondered about and dreamt of doing so that we could respond.

Case study: Hannah, a pre-prep Reception teacher...continued

With the insights gained from the children, we were able to ready the new environment in year 1 to welcome the Reception children transitioning into it. Their new space became more attuned, informed, responsive and child centred as a space.

It was their nurturing space for creative possibility. We learnt that continuity needed to be consistent. Whilst many elements of their previous environment were changing, their peer group community with all their ideas and thoughts provided a vital sense of consistency as children anchored each other in what was an overwhelming time.

We adapted our practice by integrating these Ten EAD Creative Inclusion Factors:

- *Addressing anxieties through reflecting together; finding out what matters to all children*
- *Engaging with and being curious about children's ideas, interests and passions*
- *Using these interests to shape, design and curate learning contexts*
- *Adapting the wider environment with familiar resources and materials*
- *Being aware of children's sensory and embodied needs and not just their cognitive responses to change and transition*
- *Highlighting the new and different materials and resources that they could enjoy exploring and discovering*
- *Collaborating and deciding together what to do and learn next (co-creating)*

Case study: Hannah, a pre-prep Reception teacher...continued

- *Using story as a way to connect through finding relatable characters or circumstances that provided comfort and reassurance, or activated memories or connection in experience*
- *Providing open-ended materials to create with to express their own ideas, thinking, feeling and experiences, without an adult designed outcome in mind.*
- *Using the expressive arts as inclusive languages to communicate through enabling expression in modes other than words alone*

The impact of applying these factors throughout the transition process enabled children to:

Imagine what change might be like, before transition occurred so they could play with possibilities of what it might be like in positive ways

Find their familiar or sensorial anchor points, helping them feel reassured through a sense of consistency and coherence where their needs continued to be met

Reveal their capabilities of building resilience in their ability to adapt through having their anxieties recognised, heard and responded to,

Conclusion

Our concept of *readying* for the children, by putting them at the centre of both practice and pedagogy through considering their needs and rights in an attuned and responsive approach to teaching is fundamental to children's flourishing, especially at times and processes of transition.

We have explored how applying an arts-full and creative approach to teaching can *ready* a space to welcome children with a consistency and

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coherency of experience full of assurance and support for the children. Their learning environment must be an enabling and nurturing space, co-created and designed with the children, in response to their feelings and ideas expressed. Progress and achievement are not separate from children's meaning-making and experience but co-located in their agency and participation in which their thinking evolves and becomes more complex, they broaden and deepen connections made in their learning and increase mastery in skills developed.

This approach clearly has implications for re-thinking curriculum and how we co-construct it with children in mind and at its heart: attuning, responding, and creating inclusive environments of welcome and empathy. It is a process of reciprocal *readying* alongside and with children and, in *readying* our classrooms, our pedagogical approaches and school settings environments for all children, we enable every child to flourish.

Top-tips for Families

Play and interact together in creative ways using the arts to build connection and co-regulation; create with and respond to different materials and media around you.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings:

Use story, music, visual arts, drama and dance as ways of communicating and making connections between children's previous and new experiences.

Top-tips for School Settings

Increase children's agency and participation so that they know that their thinking and ideas matter, through responding to their enquiries and feelings expressed.

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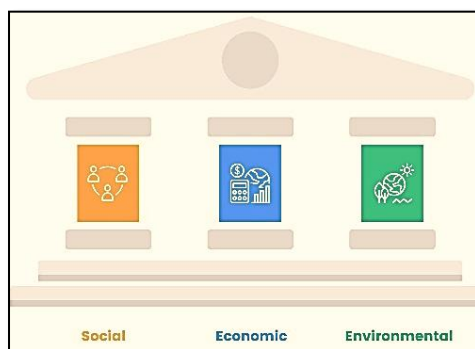
Understanding the World Matters

Diane Boyd, Angela Scollan, Kerrie Lee

The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2024:11) requires educators to support children to 'understand the world...to make sense of their physical world and their community.' To Understand the World, we need to be open to the lived realities that immerse both children and adults, even those that might be sensitive and difficult to untangle. To support transitions, we all need to spend time, being open to those tricky conversations that enable children to make contextual sense of the world.

Economic, Environmental and Socio-Cultural Curiosity

Understanding the World encompasses more than developing children's ecological awareness. Rather, the physical world encompasses the Three Pillars of Sustainability: Economic, Environmental and Socio-cultural, introduced in the Brundtland Report as a ''*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs''* (WCED 1987:47). These Three Pillars, Early Childhood and transitions interconnect when the

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curious educator follows the child, whose curiosity has been *sparked* by their community.

The case study below captures how respectful and tricky dialogues respond to how children understand their world and how this understanding can be *fuelled* and supported, or not. Respectful, authentic, transitional two-way dialogue is used to continue *sparking and fuelling* curiosity.

Case study

On a cold December evening, 5-year-old Enzo was out shopping with his father Sebastian. As they approached the Supermarket Enzo saw a homeless man sitting with his dog against the wall in the doorway. In front of him was a sign asking for donations because he was hungry and homeless. Enzo asked, "why is he there, what is he doing?" Sebastian explained to Enzo that the man did not have a home, money or food and he was asking for help.

Enzo prompted his father to buy some food for the man ''to be kind and caring to others". This interaction demonstrates Enzo's agency, his confidence to articulate feelings and an awareness of empathy towards others, as well as reflecting an emphasis of socio-sustainability. As they were leaving the supermarket after purchasing some sandwiches, Enzo said he wanted to "pass the food to the man himself" who was very happy to receive them.

The EYFS (DfE 2024:9) requires educators to consider "sensitive questioning" which Sebastian demonstrated when Enzo again asked questions during the Christmas period including:

Where are his mom and dad?

Will he get Christmas present?

Why does he have a house?

Does he have friends?

Image by Sebastian and

Enzo Thorpe

The conversations developed further into discussing the children in his school setting and that not everyone has the same things as him, such as home, food, clothes, toys, and they might be sad, so we must remember to be kind. With Christmas approaching, Enzo's initial concern for the homeless man had transitioned into discussions on the difficulties 'others' might be experiencing, such as having no home and people/children not having presents at Christmas. He was concerned that children could become homeless and found this difficult to understand asking: "Where are their mums and dads?" "Do they have toys?" and "If they're homeless how can they go to school?"

Enzo and his father discussed how someone who is homeless might feel and the words that were offered included being sad, hungry, dirty and cold, demonstrating Enzo's growing understanding and developing empathy.

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This case study demonstrates how with careful and sensitive conversations educators, or in this case families, can manage to discuss societal issues such as poverty and a lack of home, resonating with Sustainable Development Goal 1 No Poverty (UNESCO 2015). Enzo's questioning and thinking was extended further with sensitive conversations, demonstrating how his thinking was developing and extending as a result. Enzo has clearly internalised his thinking and is now more aware of why people end up living on the streets but because of the conversations with his son Sebastian's thinking has also deepened and changed. He now recognises that Enzo has an energy and wants to help within his community, and that Sebastian needs to have more background information on the topic, so he can support Enzo's thinking.

Curiosity as the Impetus for Internal Transition

Understanding the World through a rights-based lens provokes reflections about how children are positioned during daily interactions. It is vital to flip the narrative to consider how we perceive and communicate with children to explore *sparks* of curiosity further. Throughout the day children and adults transition in and out of many roles, identities and situations that can be challenging to notice, such as physical, emotional and cognitive 'micro transitions' (Scollan and Gallagher, 2016). Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Brooker (2008) recognise that those working with and for children must be mindful of direct and indirect levels of transitions children engage in that

impact on their meaning making and knowledge of the world, as curiosity is a form of *Internal Transition*.

Children are active citizens and knowledge holders who empathise with and for the world they live in and when we actively follow what it is that *sparks* children's curiosity, opportunities present for authentic engagement (Allen et al, 2019). The word *spark* is a wonderful word when connected to understanding the world because a *spark* can be defined as a particle of energy. *Spark* means to act suddenly; *spark* is a glimmer or a burning ember and for a *spark* to ignite energy, movement and a clash of materials (flint, stone, bark and hands) are needed to start a flame. How exciting is it to observe, listen and learn from the endless *sparks* of curiosity.

Pestalozzi's (1951) hand, heart and head capture how the Socio-Cultural Pillar of Sustainability provokes adults to reflect on how they react to *sparks* and *fuel* curiosity. Pestalozzi's theory reminds us that to support curiosity we need to be present alongside children and to think about the type of dialogue we engage in so that we can immerse ourselves into children's *curiosity spaces*. Farini and Scollan (2023) apply Bohm's theory (1996) on dialogue, advocating for i) empathy (ii) suspending expectation and (iii) equality in participation to underpin pedagogical communication and levels of respect for children. Baraldi, Joslyn and Farini (2021) remind

us that how we facilitate dialogue is dependent on how we listen to, hear and perceive children's curiosity.

Children's self-determination to explore their world and to develop their curiosity are their fundamental rights (UN, 1989). Self-determination is defined as the ability to make choices, independently from the wish and command of others (Farini and Scollan, 2019) and is aligned with the definition of agency developed within the sociological fields of Childhood and Youth Studies (Oswell 2013, Baraldi, 2015). Children's self-determination is recognised as agency in social contexts, where the choices they make have consequence for learning about and understanding their world. In the UNCRC (UN 1989), self-determination of the child is as important as safety or protection. Children have the right 'to say what they think in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously' (Article 12), 'to seek and receive information' (Article 13), 'to meet with other children and young people and to join groups and organizations' (Article 15).

However, as we see in the case study, the choices, dialogues and *sparks* of curiosity from children are dependent on the responses, resources and opportunities available in social contexts (Morrow, 2011; Moss, 2009; Penn, 2005). In the case study it was Sebastian's decision to actively follow Enzo's thinking, regardless of the difficulties Sebastian felt about Enzo's questions and curiosity that made this a truly transformative and transitional experience for them both.

Top-tips for Families

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Listen and follow children's thinking and questions to unfold curiosity, no matter how difficult you feel they may be. Supporting these types of conversation will ensure that developing skills, including knowledge and empathy, are celebrated at home, in early childhood settings and school settings during periods of transitions and beyond.

Top-tips for Early Childhood Settings

Engage with your physical world and community, including families and school settings. By using them as the third environment, sparks of curiosity can be fuelled, supporting developing knowledge and skills throughout all transitions, including into a school setting.

Top-tips for School Settings

Reflect on how children's curiosity can make you think about something differently. Explore and be open to the previous knowledge they bring with them, celebrating the opportunity to be co-researchers during their school setting life

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Conclusion

Kerrie Lee and Viki Veale

Our aim, throughout this text, has been to help families and all educators rethink what we mean by 'school readiness'. School readiness isn't about making sure children can follow instructions or write their name, it is about making sure we use what we know about the unique child to enable learning and development throughout this transition. To do this, we need to prioritise positive relationships that offer a secure base from which they can explore their new environment. School readiness is as much about school settings being ready to meet the needs of the children as it is about children being ready for the school settings.

Working together, families, early childhood settings and school settings can ensure that every child has the best possible experience and the best possible support as they start a school setting. While there is much to be done at policy level to ensure the curriculum is fit for purpose, it is within our power to make sure the unique child is at the heart of everything we do to support transition.

We urge families to approach their child starting a school setting from a place of curiosity and to see themselves as co-adventurers. We encourage early childhood settings to communicate who each child is, not just what they can and can't do, and we implore school settings to prioritise play based provision that fosters the characteristics of effective learning. Above all, we want school and early childhood settings to have confidence in their transition practices. For families to know that their child will be loved and supported throughout their educational journey and finally for every child to love and enjoy school settings from their very first experience.

Top Tips for Families:

- Involve your child in the selection of their school bag, lunch box, and water bottles and encourage them to try on their school uniform.
- For children with sensory sensitivities, liaise with the school setting and discuss uniform adaptations (e.g., shorter sleeves or shorts).
- Walk or drive to the school setting at the time when the setting starts or finishes to ensure your child becomes used to the routine, noise and crowds and familiar with the landmarks. If the setting has provided a booklet with relevant photos or has a website, share this during quiet times, discuss the new routines and encourage your child to ask questions.
- Encourage independence and curiosity at home.
- Support school readiness by encouraging independence in daily routines, talking about feelings, and modelling calm responses. Provide opportunities for play with others to build social skills like sharing and empathy. These experiences help children feel confident, capable, and emotionally secure.
- Make sure that you establish a good sleep routine that will support your child's growth and development
- Take advantage of any opportunities to chat, play, read and sing to foster children's communication and language development and help prepare them for the more formal learning environment of school settings.
- Use everyday experiences to develop specific language for expressing their needs to unfamiliar adults. For example, modelling asking for the toilet, expressing hunger or thirst or expressing emotions such as happiness, sadness or fear.
- Sharing books about starting at a school setting can also be helpful here. Respond to any questions children may have about the school settings,

chatting positively within the family about things to look forward to there.

- Encourage a chatty environment at home and whilst out on visits – talk to your children about what they see, hear and notice.
- Remember to continue to listen and converse with your child at home as they engage with everyday mathematical activities, e.g., setting the table for dinner. Keep an open dialogue with your child's school setting informing them of any noteworthy mathematical interests your child partakes in.
- Play and interact together in creative ways, using the arts to build connection and co-regulation; create with and respond to different materials and media around you.
- Listen and follow children's thinking and questions to unfold curiosity, no matter how difficult you feel they may be. Supporting these types of conversation will ensure that developing skills, including knowledge and empathy, are celebrated at home, early childhood and school settings during periods of transitions and beyond.

Top Tips for Early Childhood Settings

- Promote children's personal hygiene, encourage self-care, foster independence skills, and prepare them for the transition. For example, ask children to put their bags and coats on their pegs upon arrival, use the toilet independently, and select from the activities on offer during free play.
- Share children's progress records with their school setting and ensure these include their voice and family views.
- Where possible, facilitate visits for Reception class teachers to enable them to meet and observe the child in an environment that is comforting and familiar.
- Observe and talk about the Characteristics of Effective Learning in practice with children, families and staff in each child's new setting
- Create secure attachments, through key person relationships, to help children feel safe and build trust. Embed emotional literacy using emotion coaching and reflective dialogue. Foster resilience and agency through play and choice, enabling children to develop confidence, self-regulation, and strong social skills.
- Ensure that you have a good understanding of motor competence, recognise varying physical development levels and plan for purposeful movement
- Support children with the upcoming transition by developing opportunities to introduce and extend vocabulary that supports their independence and unique sense of self.
- Encourage children to share their interests with others, for example, through circle time social activities that reflect the structure of a classroom-based learning environment.
- Roleplay activities are a great way to encourage children to use new phrases associated with their needs, pose questions to others, and voice their concerns.

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- Support children to spontaneously tell you they need help with their bag or going to the toilet.
- Encourage lots of singing, rhyming and music making to support repetition, predictable rhyme, alliteration, patterns and steady beat.
- Collect a range of observations of children engaged in mathematical activities that you can utilize in your own practice and pass on to the children's school setting during transition.
- Use story, music, visual arts, drama and dance as ways of communicating and making connections between children's previous and new experiences.
- Engage with your physical world and community, including families and school settings. By using them as the third environment, sparks of curiosity can be fuelled, supporting developing knowledge and skills throughout all transitions, including into a school setting.

Top Tips for School Settings

- Schedule informal opportunities to meet and greet families and children, such as stay- and- play sessions, or Teddy Bears Picnics.
- Ensure that settling in sessions are flexible and offer open-ended, individual and group play opportunities to allow children to feel at ease and explore.
- Classrooms should display visual routines, and corners should be thoughtfully set up with toys and resources to make the environment enticing, spark peer interactions, and offer opportunities for quiet time.
- Protect time for play-based and inquiry-driven approaches.
- Create an emotionally responsive classroom by prioritising connection, routine, and relationships.
- Build in time for social and emotional learning through play, stories, and discussion.
- Collaborate with early years professionals and families to ensure a smooth, supportive transition into a school setting
- Remember that outdoor play is vital for young children to move freely and develop the physical competence necessary to refine their motor skills.
- Recognise and value the diversity of children's languages and modes of communication.
- Model listening skills; tune in and respond to children to support two-way communication
- Plan time for child-led play and interaction
- Provide thinking time for children before expecting them to communicate
- Make story time a key focus for young children and share books, materials or resources that represent the children's real world.

- Value and build on the mathematical experiences and knowledge the children bring to school settings from home and early childhood settings. Keep an open dialogue with families and early childhood setting providers about children's mathematics, discussing development and how you provide an interesting child-centred mathematics curriculum.
- Increase children's agency and participation so that they know that their thinking and ideas matter, through responding to their enquiries and feelings expressed.
- Reflect on how children's curiosity can make you think about something differently.
- Explore and be open to the previous knowledge they bring with them, working together with the child to be co-researchers during their school setting life

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SCHOOL READINESS MATTERS

As growing concerns emerge over the narrowing definitions of school readiness in policy and practice, School Readiness Matters invites a fresh dialogue, presenting real-lifecase studies, research-informed guidance, and practitioner perspectives to support embedded and threaded transitions that honour each child's unique journey.

Edited by Kerrie Lee (University of Hull) and Viki Veale (St Marys University), this timelyand essential text brings together the voices of educators, academics, and early years advocates to explore what it truly means to support children through the vital transition into school based settings.

School Readiness Matters is an essential read for early childhood educators, schoolleaders, policymakers, and all those working to ensure that children are not simply ready for school, but that schools are ready for children.

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