

Easy does it

Some two-year-olds may have difficulty settling in, but taking steps to review your process and working more closely with parents can help to smooth the transition. *Kay Mathieson* explains

Q We have recently had an influx of two-year-olds because of the funded places scheme for this age group. While most of the children have settled reasonably well, two of the boys continue to be upset, tearful and often have temper tantrums. This situation is making the atmosphere in the setting stressful for the other children, to say nothing of the adults! We have tried all our usual strategies and settling techniques, but none are having any impact. What do you advise?

A For all children, starting at an early years setting can be a difficult and confusing time. For parents, uncertainty, anxiety and a range of mixed emotions underpin the process of selecting, applying and taking up a place in a setting. For practitioners, establishing relationships and expectations with new children and their families can be stressful too.

Mostly, after a few weeks the majority of children seem to be able to feel sufficiently at ease in the setting to engage in activities and interact with adults and other children appropriately.

This can sometimes give us a false sense of security and establish a view that for children who struggle with this 'settling-in' period they or their parents are somehow at fault.

Two-year-olds are particularly vulnerable to finding this transition from home to setting difficult because of the significant developmental changes that take place around this phase in their lives.

They have had two years of discovering 'how the world works' in the unique social context of their lives. This can vary from lots of social contact with other children and adults to predominantly time with one parent or carer.

The range of places where the socialising occurs will also vary



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considerably. A child's experience of being in a home which has many and regular visitors will be different from a child who frequently travels to visit others, and both will be in contrast to a child who is often solely in the company of one adult.

STARTING POINTS FOR REFLECTION

To give each child coming to your setting the 'best possible chance' of making a successful transition, it is useful to review regularly the essence and flexibility of your settling-in process.

The starting point for reflection is that no two children will need exactly the same process. Although parents will know best what their child's needs are, they are not in a position to know what the possibilities or expectations are from a practitioner's viewpoint.

The practitioner needs to gather sensitively insights and information about the child's experiences so far. In particular, social situations, time away from the parents, close relationships with other children and adults, as well as understanding places that the child finds exciting, calming, interesting, anxious-making or frightening.

Ideally, the 'settling-in' process can be designed jointly between parent and practitioner with a focus on making the unfamiliar more familiar for the child.

One of the most effective ways to begin this process is with a home visit. This gives an opportunity for the child to meet adults from the setting in a place where they are likely to feel most at ease. If this can be the key person, then information and insights about the child's perspective will inform how the key person supports the child to make sense of the setting and the opportunities on offer.

A child is much more likely to feel at ease in a setting if their parent also feels welcome and relaxed there. Children are particularly tuned into, and take their lead from, the way their 'special people' respond to unfamiliar people and places. It can be helpful, therefore, to enable parents to spend some time in the setting first to get a sense of what goes on, without having to worry about how their child is responding.

With support from practitioners, the parent then has a chance to think about what would make the initial introduction to the setting easier for their child. This can include time of arrival – before, after or during the usual 'rush' times – who will meet and greet the child, and whether time to watch or immediate introduction to a familiar activity would work best.

Crucial routines such as nappy changing, toileting and mealtimes need to be thought through and ideally experienced in the first instance with parent and key person taking



MORE INFORMATION

- *Key Persons in the Early Years* (2nd Ed) by P Elfer, E Goldschmied and DY Selleck (2011)
- *People Under Three: young children in day care* (2nd ed) by E Goldschmied and S Jackson (2004) – see in particular p42
- *Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development* (3rd ed) by M Dowling (2009)

part to reassure the child that they are emotionally safe and being nurtured in this new place.

THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

In situations where the settling-in process has not enabled the child to feel at ease and secure in the setting, a discussion between parents and the key person is the essential starting point.

By each of you sharing your understanding of the child's perspective, both adults can combine their knowledge to inform their comprehension of what the child is communicating through their behaviour.

This is most likely to include a mixture of anxiety, confusion, frustration, fear and sadness. A two-year-old attending an early years setting for the first time does not understand why they are there and can be overwhelmed by a sense of loss when a parent leaves (Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004).

Developmentally, the conviction that parents will return is still being established and the heightened emotions may also, at least temporarily, undermine what was previously a certainty in the child's understanding.

Other gradually developing concepts of time, place, constancy of relationships, language comprehension and security are all challenged by being brought to an unfamiliar place, with unfamiliar adults for an indeterminate length of time.

To get things back on track and to reduce the child's anxiety and distress, the conversations with the parent need to focus on reassurance and a positive way forward. It is the practitioner's professional role to work alongside the parent and lead the problem-solving process.

A first step is to identify exceptions – for example, over the past few days, what has been the 'least bad' experience of arriving and remaining at the setting?

By working through the detail of how the day started for the child and how they were supported to engage in interactions with their key person and appropriate activities, it is possible to begin to understand the child's perspective more clearly.

This then offers a sound foundation to make the more positive transitions into the setting happen more often. There is no quick fix but focusing on the child's perspective provides the most effective route to more positive experiences for all. ■

WORKING MUM

Making a right mess

Messy is fine – to a point, says WorkingMum. But it would help if parents were told the purpose of it all

My 18-month-old came home from nursery resembling a Smurf last week. She'd decided to paint herself and was covered in blue paint. Her hair was sticking up where staff had tried to wash the paint out and it was liberally spread over her pinafore and top. She was a funny sight and even turned the bath water blue.

Thankfully, I'm used to collecting a filthy child from nursery – her big sister is a dirt magnet. DD1 (Dear Daughter 1) loves digging in muck and climbing trees. I joke with her carers that she hasn't had a good day if she's not smeared in dirt, but some of my friends are horrified at the idea.

One was even advised to judge a nursery on whether the children had snotty noses. They regarded it as a sign of lack of care. Personally, I know how much DD2 (Dear Daughter 2) protests at having her nose wiped and would rather she be allowed to focus on what she is doing than be constantly accosted by a practitioner wielding a tissue.

I once bumped into a local childminder while we were playing in the park and was amazed at the number of times she cleaned her children's hands with sanitising gel. They were afraid to pick up sticks. I would have loved to have seen her reaction to DD1 experimentally licking frost off a leaf or eating soil.

SPOTLESS

I feel it's a difficult line for childcarers to tread. Before starting nursery, DD1 was cared for by a childminder who was great but I did occasionally worry about her being so spotless at the end of the day. My husband and I even half-jokingly wondered if she stripped DD1 off after we'd left.

I was concerned that she wasn't being allowed to get hands-on, but now she attends nursery I find it annoying that our wash basket is constantly overflowing and, I admit, it can be embarrassing taking filthy kids home on the bus.

While it is fantastic to have a range of messy play activities on offer, I would prefer it if my girls were encouraged to wear overalls and aprons. A friend even complained to her child's nursery about the actual paint they used as it wouldn't wash out of clothes. Replacing them was getting expensive.

I'd also like the importance of handwashing to be higher on the nursery's agenda. Sometimes I can't find soap or a dry towel when I go into

the children's toilets.

It makes me question how the children can clean themselves independently after messy activities, let alone after going to the toilet.

Recently, my children have been loving investigating a mud kitchen and 'swamp'

filled with green slime, grass and twigs at nursery. While the evidence of what they've been enjoying is plastered all over them, practitioners haven't actually explained to us parents what the children gain from all this grubby play. We need educating too. Knowing how my youngest benefited from covering herself in blue paint may have made scrubbing her, and the bath, less of a chore.

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