



Transitions: between groups, settings and beyond

All children attending Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services experience transitions as part of the program, and as part of their individual development. Small, routine transitions mark each day—from arriving to sitting down for meals and then leaving for home. Larger transitions are required when children move to different rooms or groups within a service, and then on to formal schooling.

The National Quality Standard (NQS) deals with all types of transitions, primarily through Quality Area 1 (knowledge of children's strengths, capabilities and family life) and Quality Area 6 (forming collaborative partnerships with families and communities, and supporting continuity of learning). These parts of the NQS emphasise the importance of knowing children, their families and their communities, and building strong, positive partnerships that support transitions big and small. The NQS is also very closely linked to the *Early Years Learning Framework*, in which the concept of 'belonging' is central.

In this series of articles, we talk to educators at three different services about how they support children's transitions, and what children might be learning as they move through periods of change.

Case study No.1

Umina Child Care Centre

Long day care centre

Umina, Central Coast of NSW

'Transitions are a fantastic time for relationship-building, for meaningful interactions with the children, to prepare them for what's next.'

Sarah Hammersley is an early childhood teacher and the educational leader at the Umina Child Care Centre on the Central Coast of NSW. Sarah describes the centre as part of 'a very close-knit community', where many of the relationships between the children were formed before they entered the early childhood setting.

Relationships are at the heart of managing transitions at the Umina centre. 'We have a deep belief that, if we have a good understanding of who the child is within the context of their home and their family life and the wider community, we'll be able to provide an environment where they feel safe, secure and respected,' Sarah says.

'The key to success in all transitions is the relationships that you have with the children and their families,' she says. 'Relationships really are the cornerstone for high-quality education and, if you know your children, and you work in a collaborative partnership with their families, children are going to feel safe and secure and supported to grow in confidence and really enjoy beginning their educational journeys with you.'

Building these relationships begins with the formal orientation process at the Umina centre, and continues over the days or weeks before a child's first day of care. On the first day, families are encouraged to send along an item of comfort and a family photo to add to the community board, to build 'a sense of home and connection to their family,' says Sarah. And the comforting runs in both directions: 'We always give the family a courtesy call, just to let them know how their child is settling into the day and the sorts of experiences they've been engaged in.'



The success of routine transitions at the centre, including daily arrivals and departures, depends in large part on predictability and security. Each educator works the same shift throughout the calendar year, so that the children and their families consistently know who they will greet each morning, and who'll be there in the evening to share the news of the day with them,' Sarah explains. Consistency from families is also important: 'Because we understand that the drop-off and pick-up times can be very busy and hurried times, we really encourage the families to create a ritual with their child, which can just be a moment that they can enjoy together before heading to work or before heading home'.

Sarah is very positive about the learning opportunities that transitions bring. 'Transitions are a fantastic time for relationship-building, for meaningful interactions with the children, to prepare them for what's next,' she says. Educators at the centre recently introduced a more self-initiated process for routine transitions—with great results. 'We've tried to minimise the number of transitions that involve large groups of children, and we've found that that actually creates a much calmer and more relaxed atmosphere,' Sarah explains.

'We're giving the children a lot more options to make decisions about certain times of the day.' This includes a progressive approach to morning tea and also to rest time, giving the children a choice between resting and participating in other experiences. 'It was interesting to watch the kids that said, "you know what—I am tired, I am going to go inside and have a rest,"' she says. 'We were surprised by how responsible they were in making decisions themselves, when they were given the ownership to do it.'

The process of moving into a new group, and a new room, at the Umina centre 'begins well before the move,' Sarah says, as educators work to form relationships with all of the children across the 50-place centre, utilising mixed-age groupings in early mornings and evenings, and time in the shared playground.



The centre also follows a formal two week transition process in November each year, ahead of room changes the following January. In the first week of the process, children and their educators spend around an hour each day experiencing the routine and curriculum in the room they will move into. In the second week, the children stay for longer periods, and the educators encourage children in the room to 'scaffold the learning and really teach the other children about the environment and what it's like to be a member of that mini community'.

When it comes to preparing children for formal schooling, Sarah says she finds it 'a bit sad and a bit concerning that some educators still have a very narrow view of school transition and school readiness.' She says that her professional experience has convinced her that 'transitioning is not about hothousing' and that everything a child needs to be school-ready can be delivered through a play-based curriculum, using both spontaneous and intentional teaching.

'It's about giving children every opportunity to have an understanding of who they are before entering the school environment—giving them an opportunity to feel important, valued and respected for who they are, providing them with a safe environment to take risks and to fail, but then being able to pick themselves back up again,' Sarah says.

The educators at Umina also invite their former preschoolers back for a visit during their first year at school, using it as a forum to share their learning about school and the things they did and didn't know. Invariably, the children nominate their play and friendships as the most important things at school: 'Should they not be the important things for us, too?' Sarah asks.

In the next article in this series, we visit a long day care centre located on a university campus in Melbourne.



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