

Separation when a child first comes to nursery can be difficult for parent and child alike.

How staff can get them off to a reassuring start?

Consider how your settling-in programme fits the needs of the child.

- Can the parent and child make visits in advance of returning to work?
- Have you helped parents return to work in stages? Offering short days for the child in the beginning can make the subsequent transition to a full day less traumatic.
- Are parent and child introduced to a keyworker who will take primary responsibility for the settling-in process and reporting to parents?
- Have you organised your environment to give the new child a space for belongings, for physical care objects, for objects to remind them of home (such as photos) and a hook for their outdoor clothes?
- Have you prepared the other children for the changes that may occur to their experiences when the new child joins?

Early years practitioners should be sensitive to parents' needs during this vulnerable period.

You can make the initial separation easier with a well-planned settling-in process that helps the child gain emotional balance and enables the parent to feel confident that their child will be safe and happy. A close working relationship with parents will dispel their fears and fantasies and give them the right sense of security about your abilities.

Customise your response to each individual child and parent so that they feel special and acknowledged.

Write a settling-in policy for parents to receive when they first visit your setting to enable them to judge your provision and help them prepare themselves and their child for the changes that will occur. Always remember that first impressions are long-lasting and that you are responsible for laying the foundations of a relationship that could last many years and have a profound impact on a child's continuing development.

Ensure that your settling in policy emphasises the need to enter into partnership with parents, who need their early experiences with their child to be heard and acknowledged.

- Ask them about their child's routines, personal likes and dislikes, and idiosyncrasies.
- Record this information and explain how it will help you and your staff build on the experiences, knowledge and understanding of each child.
- Encourage parents to plan their return to work and the process of leaving their child in your care. They should practise the new daily schedule of dropping off the child and making their way to work.
- Give parents tips about preparing baby clothes and objects the night before and getting up early enough to ensure that morning routines do not become stressful.

- Suggest to parents that they speak to their employers about the childcare that they have chosen, and the difference that this may make to their work schedule and their ability to work late. Clear communication at an early stage will help employers plan employees' timetables effectively. Suggest that they also think about alternative arrangements they may have to make if, for example, their child is sick for an extended period. This type of helpful advice is crucial to first-time parents who will rely on practitioners to support them and their children.

Reassuring Measures

Children settle more effectively if surrounded by objects that remind them of their home and family. This will help them associate the setting with the safety and security of their own territory and the people who inhabit it.

- Borrow family photographs, or ask if you can take some yourself. Young children enjoy gazing at photos of themselves and their family members.
- Let the child bring a favourite toy from home to play with or to cuddle.
- After consulting parents, provide some of the food that the child is used to eating.

You can also take simple steps to help the parents with their own settling-in process.

- Prepare the paperwork that parents should complete well in advance, so that on the first day of attendance you can give both parent and child your full attention.
- If possible, telephone the parent at work for the first few days to reassure them that their child is well and happy and to tell them what the child has been doing.
- Make a special effort to listen to parents' views and concerns. Explain how the daily routines have affected the child's mood or behaviour. Recall anecdotes to describe how well the child has responded to the other children and adults.

Only give advice when it is requested. But you can use examples of good practice to influence in a subtle way how parents conduct routines at home.

Continue to speak to the baby or toddler during the handover at the end of the day. These are some of the few precious moments available to parents to observe how you and their child interact. Positive handling at the beginning and end of the day make it more likely that parents appreciate this way of responding to their baby. They may copy your behaviour if they see it has a good effect on their child's behaviour. They will also feel pride in their child's success if you comment on the interesting and enjoyable day you had together.

Play and Routines

Help children develop a sense of belonging by involving them in everything that goes on around them. Like adults, young children want to control their world and take part in how it is organised and maintained.

- Use daily routines to engage babies and toddlers in learning simple tasks such as collecting clean nappies, putting tissues in the bin, picking up objects at tidy-up time and fetching their coats and shoes to go outdoors.

- Provide reassurance through frequent opportunities for children to cuddle and hold on to you. Show interest in them through positive body language, engaging eye contact and plenty of time for communication.

It is essential that you learn quickly how the new child is likely to respond to the experiences you plan, so that you focus effectively on their needs and wishes. This reflective process enlightens your early years practice and promotes to parents a clearly competent and committed approach to providing quality childcare.

Adapted from Lena Engel, Nursery World 6 January 2005