

How can early years workers help children manage the transition back to nursery?



A list of top tips for Early Years workers



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

As we move closer to babies and young children returning to nursery, we need to consider how their experiences over the past months will have affected them, and what impact this may have on their transition back into childcare.

This is an important opportunity for early years workers to start planning now for how they may be able to help oil the wheels of this important transition, and make it as stress free for young children as possible.

Challenges faced by babies and young children during the Coronavirus crisis

During the crisis, many babies and young children will have been through significant changes and challenges, including the unplanned and abrupt disruption of nurseries and other childcare settings closing. The experience of stopping nursery and no longer seeing their keyworker is likely to be experienced as a loss. A number of children will also have been exposed to further distress and anxiety during the pandemic period, if their parents or carers had experienced illness or other emotional, psychological or financial strains.

All children - including babies and toddlers - will have registered and reacted to these changes in some way. To add to this, a young child does not yet have a fully developed 'sense of time' - so for them, a break of a few weeks or months can feel like a significant period of separation.

While some children may be eager to return to their old routine, others may well need a bit of help to adjust. It's important for early years workers to start thinking now about ways in which they might be able to help.

Below we've listed some of the measures you can take to support both parents/carer and their children with the transition.

Some can be taken in the period before the nursery opens, whilst others can take place once the new term begins.

Action to take before nurseries re-open

Make contact with children before they return

Before they reopen, nurseries can encourage key workers to reconnect with children (and parents or carers). This could be via phone calls, emails, letters, online meetings, or recorded video messages. For instance, for babies and younger toddlers, the contact via digital platforms could involve waving 'hello', and singing a nursery rhyme.

Parents or carers can also be invited to send pictures of activities or drawings to keyworkers, to help them stay in touch with the child's experiences.

This contact reassures the child that their keyworker is thinking about them, that they have not 'disappeared', and that they are hoping to see them again soon.

If a child's key worker is expected to change, this should be explained to the child in an age appropriate way before they come back to nursery, and they should have the chance to 'meet' the new worker in the ways suggested above.

Encourage parents/carers to start talking to their child about both their nursery and their key worker

Once a date for re-opening has been confirmed, keyworkers should encourage parent/carers to start talking to their babies and children about their nursery, whilst regularly using the main keyworker's name. This will help reintroduce the idea of nursery and remind them of this special person.

Suggest that parents/carers create a 'count down to nursery' calendar for their child

Toddlers and pre schoolers can benefit from counting down the days by using a visual timetable or calendar. This preparation provides sense of predictability and security, and this will counteract the feelings of uncertainty and disruption they may have experienced as a result of the crisis.

Arrange to have a catch up phone call with parents about the child's experiences during lockdown

Keyworkers can arrange a phone call or meeting with parents/carers, to review any issues that may have arisen during the break from the nursery. As well as getting a general sense of how the baby, toddler or young child is doing, it is helpful for keyworkers to be informed of any particularly difficult experiences the child may have had, including whether they or their parent(s) or carer(s) have lost anybody close to them. Having a sense of the baby's or child's experiences during the break will help keyworkers when trying to understand children's needs and communications after they return.

Talk to parents/carers about new social distancing measures being introduced at the nursery, and encourage them to prepare their child for them

It may be helpful for keyworkers to also plan a discussion with parents or carers to explain any changes there will be to the nursery routine or staffing as a result of social distancing or government guidelines, and to answer any questions.

At the same time, keyworkers can guide parents/carers about how they might talk to their children about these changes, or join them to explain them to children.



Actions to be taken once children return

Consider introducing a second 'settling in process' for the children (where possible), and prepare parents and carers for this possibility

Babies, toddlers or children may need another settling in period. Whilst some parents/carers, and certain children, may be keen to get back to their old routine, many will benefit from being given the opportunity to settle back in gently, and at their own pace. This will foster their sense of security in the nursery setting and enable them to re-establish their connection to their keyworker. Keyworkers should prepare parents or carers that it may feel as if they are 'starting again' with the process of settling their child. But they should reassure them that this is normal and to be expected.



If permitted, encourage children to bring in objects from home

Encourage the use of a 'transitional object' from home (where your nursery allows it). As with home visits and settling in periods, a familiar toy or object from home can be a 'bridge' which helps the child cope more easily with the separation from their home and their parents/carers. It will also help with the transition to being back in the care of their keyworker and foster their sense of security. If possible, encourage your child to choose something that can be cleaned on arrival.

Keep familiar routines

Keyworkers should try to maintain as many familiar routines from before the nursery closure as possible. Experiencing sudden or unexpected changes can be unsettling and undermine a baby or young child's growing sense of control over themselves, their experiences and relationships. It can also shake their capacity to engage in and learn from the world around them. Being able to slip back into predictable and consistent routines can counteract this, and support the child's growing sense of mastery over themselves and their environment.

Talk openly to the children about the changes to the nursery routine

If there are changes to the physical space or routine in the nursery, talk openly to the children about these. Acknowledge that it may feel strange and different, and take some time to get used to. Explain that these changes have been made to keep everybody safe. Although younger babies will not be able to tell you directly about their experience of changes, keyworkers should keep in mind that even the

youngest children register differences to their environment. Having an awareness of this is important, for it will help keyworkers stay attuned to babies' communications, after they return to nursery.

Help children work through any negative feelings they may have towards the nursery for closing

Some children may feel 'abandoned' by their nursery, or blame keyworkers or other staff for the nursery closing. This is an ordinary reaction in young children, and it will be helpful if children can feel able to express these feelings without worrying that they will upset the adults who care for them.

Some children may be able to directly communicate feelings through play or through words, but others, particularly babies and younger toddlers, may communicate worry, sadness or anger through their behaviour, such as changes in eating or sleeping patterns or an increase in tantrums or separation anxiety.

Keyworkers can help by trying to verbalise any difficult feelings that children may be experiencing, such as being worried, sad or cross.

Keep in mind that some babies and young children who have experienced trauma, either during this crisis or before, may be particularly sensitive to the disruptions caused by nursery closures.

Join Early Years in Mind

Early Years in Mind is a free network for early years staff and practitioners which offers termly updates on the latest advice, guidance and resources from the Anna Freud Centre in regards to the mental health and wellbeing of babies, infants and their families.

[Join the Early Years in Mind network.](#)

Find a way to say goodbye to children who are not returning to their nursery, due to school transition

Some children who are turning four before September may not return to their old nursery. For these children it would still be helpful to give them an opportunity to say goodbye to their keyworker and to the nursery. Where a face to face meeting is not possible, children could be sent a drawing or a letter to say goodbye. This will communicate to the child that they are being kept in mind by their keyworker as they make their transition to school from nursery.



Additional advice and guidance

Coronavirus: From the perspective of a baby or young child

Dr Camilla Rosan explores the potential impact of the current situation on the youngest members of our society. She urges early years professionals to reach out to parents and carers with tangible offers of support for the weeks ahead.

Read the blog [here](#).

Coronavirus: Keeping in mind the children of high conflict separated parents

Dr Emma Morris urges professionals to keep in mind the children of separated parents during the coronavirus lockdown. While the challenges are many, this should not lead to a loss of support. We can play a huge part in helping parents mediate, mobilising networks and checking in with the child.

Read the blog [here](#).

Top tips for parents and carers

Families play a hugely important part in supporting each other at times of uncertainty or concern especially especially as we are all spending more time together.

This pdf provides some simple advice and guidance to parents and carers to help families work together and support one another during the coronavirus outbreak.

[Download the pdf.](#)



About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families:

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 60 years.

Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment.

We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

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