

# How can childcare workers support families and children return to early years settings?



**A list of top tips for Early Years workers**

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**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

During the pandemic, babies and young children have been impacted in a number of different ways. Some childcare settings have been forcibly shut, some experienced severe staff shortages, some families haven't felt safe for their children to be in childcare arrangements, and some families simply could not longer afford to send them in.

Whatever the pandemic brought, it is clear that our youngest children have been affected. As schools and early years settings start to re-open, it is an important opportunity for early years workers to start planning 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 early years 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 parents and carers and their children with the transition.

Some can be taken in the period before early years settings re-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, early years settings 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 and 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 lockdown will help keyworkers when trying to understand children's needs and communications after they return.

### **Talk to parents and carers about new social distancing measures being introduced in your setting 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 and 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 and 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 their childcare setting and enable them to re-establish their connection to their keyworker. Keyworkers should prepare parents and 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 childcare setting 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 or 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.



### What is attachment? booklet

This booklet is for early years workers working with young children under five - be it in a nursery, hospital, community or family setting.

This booklet explains in simple terms:

- what exactly an 'attachment informed' approach to childcare is;
- how you can use attachment ideas in your practice to support positive relationships with the children in your care;
- what you should look out for if you are concerned about a child's attachment style in your setting; and
- how you can support parents and carers to develop healthy and strong.

### Common difficulties in the early year: A-Z guide for early years practitioners

As most early years practitioners will know, babies and young children come with a range of different experiences, challenges and mental health needs. Some kinds of behaviour can be stressful for early years workers to manage, if they don't have the right tools to deal with it.

Because of this, we have created an A-Z Common Difficulties Guide which offers advice on how to manage a wide range of social and emotional issues and behaviours affecting children. Subjects range from bereavement to sleep difficulties, to anxiety, to tantrums.

**For more resources visit: [annafreud.org/eyim](http://annafreud.org/eyim)**



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**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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