



Scottish Early Childhood, Children and Families Transitions Position Statement

Setting the Context

In today's world children and families experience more transitions than ever before: transitions are truly a way of life. Early childhood and family transitions influence children's day-to-day experiences and may have an impact in the longer term: for young children the first transitions may be into a care and early learning setting beyond the family and later into early primary school.

Family experience is affected by many factors, including relationships, health and well-being, housing and community, income and the services available. Families seek and are the main providers of continuity in their children's lives: supporting them to navigate change. As their children look forward to their first out-of-home experiences, the family task of providing continuity is made easier by responsive practitioners and early childhood and school settings. This Scottish Early Childhood, Children and Families Transitions Position Statement, developed through the Transitions as a Tool for Change Seminars Series and Conferences, and in collaboration with families, seeks to draw out important aspects of transitions in early childhood and to offer a set of principles and actions that stand to make a difference here in Scotland.

The early years, starting from before birth, offer a period of significant learning and development. Development is normally a continuous process, building on what has gone before. Play, the natural activity of children, is also continuous. Of course changes happen in the nature of the developmental journey, in learning and in play, and none of these is exactly the same for all children. Our early learning and school systems on the other hand are not continuous: they face children and their families as well as the professionals who work with them, with times of transition and potentially of interruption in learning and development. Traditionally systems are organised into separate sectors: early childhood, primary school education and the secondary years of schooling. Policy and guidance nevertheless promote continuity.

Transitions research and practice suggests that a positive start to school supports children in making important relationships with their educators and peers, in experiencing a sense of wellbeing and belonging when they are met by a balance between familiarity and the new, and in developing positive expectations (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011).

It is recognised in Scottish Policy that experiences in the early years of life affect the journeys that children make through childhood: in the family, in early learning and childcare, in school and in the community. In 2017 Scottish Government published its Blueprint for 2020 heralding the expansion of early learning and childcare. This important policy document lays the foundation for new approaches and a new significance being placed on children and families in the early years, and upon the practitioners who work with them, building on the foundations laid in 2008 when The Early Years Framework was published by Scottish Government. Since that time we have seen the establishment of Getting it Right for Every Child, the revision of the Birth to Three Guidance (2005) as Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families, and the rolling out of a Curriculum for Excellence: all related to a commitment to do the best for all children towards creating an equitable Scotland in which all children may grow up being able to realise their potential. This emphasis on the best possible start and the desire for equity brings a particular focus on transitions in early childhood, not only in Scotland, but worldwide. The OECD published Starting Strong V – Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education in June 2017, further emphasising the importance of attending to transitions by bridging and narrowing gaps between sectors.

In Scotland The Blueprint for 2020, Quality Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2017b) includes twelve essential characteristics of quality as defined by the Quality Action Plan stakeholder group: these include

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'transitions that are well-managed' and outlines ways in which strong pedagogical leadership; supporting parents; professionals working collaboratively; CPL opportunities; current guidance such as Building the Ambition (Scottish Government, 2014), Pre-birth to Three (Scottish Government, 2010) and Curriculum for Excellence Early Level (Scottish Government, 2007); supporting progression, and support services at key points of transition may each contribute to more positive transitions for children and their families.

Scotland was one of five countries that took part in the 'Pedagogies of Educational Transitions' Project, alongside researchers, policy makers and practitioners from Australia, Iceland, New Zealand and Sweden. Staff from each of five universities: one in each country, collaborated in a series of work packages held in each of the countries. The Scottish Work Package was called Transitions as Tools for Change and took place in Glasgow in September 2015. The work generated from this project attracted Scottish Government Workforce Development Funding to build on the learning from the wider-participation sessions in September 2015, by offering a series of working meetings, presentations and a conference continuing through 2016. Following our original Seminar Series and Succeeding Against the Odds Conference we have been working on themes of participation, opportunities, expectations, entitlements, aspirations and contribution in relation to early childhood experience before and after school start. Family engagement, learning journeys and leadership around transitions each make a contribution to supporting children to cope with change and future transitions.

Five Briefing Papers were produced following the Seminar Series, and it is from these, and through the rich knowledge exchange during the Series, that this Scottish Early Childhood, Children and Families Transitions Position Statement has grown.



Aims

This Scottish Early Childhood, Children and Families Transitions Position Statement is informed by a shared understanding of the importance of transitions and the need to address the impact of transitions in children's lives. We share the idea that a shared agenda for action will afford the best possible start in new settings and therefore aims

- To look at the opportunities, expectations and aspirations of early educators, children and families at times of transition
- To understand children's learning journeys, attainment and learning outcomes and the contribution of positive transitions
- To consider children's entitlements at times of transition
- To interrogate the extent to which early years transitions and transitions to school provide for the participation of child, family and professional together
- To reflect on beliefs and practices around transitions, the contributions children and families can make and to ensure transitions leadership in the system

The Six Principles

In order to ensure that families, children and providers in the early years and into school share understandings of the importance of

1. aspirations
2. expectations
3. opportunities
4. entitlements
5. participation
6. contribution

This statement elaborates the six principles and aims that they are all valued and respected through mutual knowledge sharing.

1 Aspirations

At times of transition, families and communities want their child's prior learning to be recognised and valued within inspiring, challenging and supportive environments. Within an aspirational community, the importance of continuity of experience is recognised, in balance with positive change. Aspirations are underpinned by recognition that children are creative, capable and competent. There is a need therefore to raise the aspirations of practitioners, parents, and children for an holistic approach to transitions which embraces these six inter-connected principles.

- Families hope their children will be happy and make a good start in any new setting, will be liked, respected and encouraged in their development and learning, and will be listened to.
- Children seek companionship and connections with others, thriving when their learning, friendships and voices are valued and met warmly, responsively and positively.
- Educators¹ aspire to support children well, listen to their contributions and extend their learning and development.

In realising a holistic transition for the child and their family this statement promotes and encourages the existence of effective collaborative partnership working across and within the varied ELC landscape and into the early years of school. Such partnerships acknowledge that continuity for children and families is achieved through strong, mutual understandings. Social, cultural and emotional resilience is key to sustaining and extending reciprocal trusting relationships and friendships. These shared understandings will include an understanding of, and put a premium upon, wellbeing, curricular continuity, positive educational outcomes and play as pedagogy.

To ensure such aspirational outcomes for and with children, families and communities, seeing transitions as a tool for change means taking realistic, achievable and innovative steps towards meeting child, family, community and educator aspirations.

¹ Educators is used to signify all practitioners and teachers with a responsibility for the care and education of young children in early learning and care (ELC) and early primary school settings.

2 Expectations

For children and families, moving into their early learning and childcare setting, and later on to primary school, should be a dynamic process, and a time of both progressive continuity and positive change.

These early transitions, like other transitions, are often regarded as an important milestone in our lives. We find that transitions often feature strongly, and come to mind most readily, when we try to recall our earliest childhood memories. We know that a transition should not be regarded as a single or isolated event, but rather recognised as an ongoing process. When you factor in the important role played by our expectations, which are formed over an extensive period of time in the lead up to transitions, then it is important that professionals don't leave transitions to chance, but work in partnership with children, families and communities in a planned and proactive way.

Effective transitions into primary school should therefore take account of the extended time over which children's and families' expectations start to form, and up to the time when they feel settled, secure and have developed a sense of belonging and wellbeing within the new situation. If parents expect transitions to be positive, and they feel confident and enthusiastic about what lies ahead, then children are much more likely to feel relaxed and happy too. Children's expectations are formed largely by what their families say and how they act. This is why transitions cannot be understood or treated solely as a children's matter, but rather as a family matter.

If transition-related actions recognise the important needs and interests of the adults in children's lives as a natural and intrinsic part of high quality transitions, then this in itself will enrich children's experiences.

If children's expectations are formed and shaped predominantly by their families, then where do parental expectations come from, and what informs and shapes them?

For the most part, parental expectations are built from parents' own personal and previous experiences, as well as what they learn and hear from family and friends. In some cases, these experiences may not have been positive, and so the lead-up time to and through transitions can therefore be looked upon and seized as a valuable opportunity to work together with children and families to help shape optimistic and confident expectations around transitions.

Young children naturally expect professionals to care about, understand, value and respect them and their family life, language and culture. If these expectations aren't realised, instead of developing a sense of belonging and wellbeing within the new situation, there is a risk that children will feel isolated, insecure or excluded.

Changing the narrative from transitions being a scary experience to one of positive self-expectancy and joyful anticipation about new and exciting opportunities, is paramount.

3 Opportunities

Thinking of transitions as an ongoing aspect of early childhood and family experience allows us to view transitions as a tool for change which creates many opportunities.

While continuity is important so is change. Well managed transitions provide the opportunity for continuity while recognising and celebrating the change that is happening. These transitions provide the opportunity for children and families to develop resilience; to recognise and celebrate progress and look forward to new challenges ahead.

There are many opportunities to embed continuity in transitions. From familiar routines the first time the child is cared for by someone outside of their own home or family circle, to continuity of relationships, to consideration of continuity and progression within the curriculum.

Experienced early level professionals know that positive transitions happen when the process is perceived as a collective responsibility where the shared aim is to ensure that children settle, thrive and develop a sense of wellbeing and belonging within the new setting.

Early level staff will create and embrace opportunities to have ongoing and open conversations with children and parents on either side of the move, so that they hear, understand and can support and address any lurking fears or anxieties that children and/or parents are harbouring.

The small, mid-scale and large-scale systems that underpin transitions all provide the opportunities to improve children and families' experiences. Connected systems which are responsive to community and family needs support continuity, policy delivery and improved outcomes. They can provide universal opportunity with the ability to progressively target need.

Transition provides opportunities for professional dialogue across and between settings. Practitioners have the opportunity to share their professional beliefs and values and pedagogical practice to develop shared approaches that support progression in learning and developmentally appropriate practice.

Transitions often provide the opportunity to develop and deepen relationships with the whole family. These opportunities can be the stimulus for families to take up opportunities for family learning or for practitioners to offer support for parental engagement in learning and support for the home learning environment. These opportunities can also lead to training and support for parents, employment, and the transformation of family life.

The opportunities for developing relationships can lead to families developing social capital and supporting one another. This in turn can lead to more empowered systems with greater community involvement and the co-construction of services for families.

4 Entitlements

Children are entitled to feel safe, secure and connected in environments that integrate attention to development and learning in an holistic way, when they change settings. Transitions may occur within the day, day-to-day, across time and between different providers, for example from home to nursery, from home to childminders, from home and childminders to the early years of school from ELC to school.

Children are active in their own transitions and are entitled to continuity of relationships, play, learning, curriculum, resources and environments which are responsive to their needs and rights. They need to have their previous experience and contribution recognised in any new setting, building on what has gone before.

Families and their children are entitled to quality, flexibility, affordability and accessibility of services. They are entitled to be listened to and respected as collaborators in their children's ELC and early school experiences, learning and well-being.

Every child and family is entitled to recognition of their own culture, identity, language and histories and to these being met by high quality, equitable provision in our ELC and school settings. Knowing that receiving settings will always make time to see and get to know each child and their family as a unit, is fair and just.

These entitlements sit comfortably with, and challenge thinking about current work in Scotland towards progressing the human rights of all children in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2018).



5 Participation

This statement recognises the importance of starting early. It acknowledges the need to equip parents and families with the skills and confidence to participate appropriately throughout the transitions process. To achieve the best possible outcomes for children, parents, families and communities then family and community engagement at times of transition should be underpinned by responsive, respectful relationships. Participation is strengthened when all concerned with the child begin by capitalising on the strengths and assets of the wider community. Working in this way will provide opportunities for all concerned to become resilient participants in the inevitable horizontal and vertical transitions that children and families encounter in life.

Making space for open conversation with children and families over an extended period of time, prior to, and following the transition, can help enormously to reduce apprehension and increase familiarisation so that positive expectations develop through a participative process, and confidence levels grow accordingly. Issues around for example toileting, playground, fewer adults, acceptance, bullying, friendships and learning are some of the areas quoted by parents when they are asked about their anxieties around their child starting school.

In Scotland, we want children and families to participate in a shared and supported way to ensure positive expectations leading to positive transition experiences. Having positive self-expectancy helps children and parents to create their own self-fulfilling prophecy for affable relationships, friendships, fun, learning and a sense of comfortableness and achievement.

Genuine participation means families will be welcomed with unconditional acceptance, and respected for knowing their own child best. It also means that professionals right across the early level will work with every family to create helpful bridges from the familiar into the unfamiliar, as the norm.

Children and families will always approach transitions with a range of differing expectations and feelings about what the up and coming new experience will bring. Fortunately there is much that professionals can do to ensure that those expectations are formed on a basis of honesty with trusted professionals, who see every child as knowledgeable, curious, capable and competent, and seek to be involved with all families.

6 Contributions

As we know, confidence in participation and participatory practice depends on collaborative working within and across communities, supported by an inclusive culture where contributions are explicitly valued and nurtured.

Having positive self-expectancy that professionals will seek, recognise, appreciate, celebrate and build on children's prior, and existing skills, achievements and knowledge, should be part and parcel of transitions for all children and families throughout their journey. Fostering family contributions through knowledge sharing in a welcoming ethos lays a foundation for families that their contribution is valued by our systems.

A sense of belonging is critical to each and every person as they move from the familiar to the new. For young children this sense of belonging is fostered by feelings of competence and of making a contribution. This means finding themselves with others who recognise and draw on their funds of knowledge, people who work from a strengths based approach and who take time to get to know newly arrived children and appreciate their dispositions. Bringing ideas, stories, experiences and favourite memories and being able to make choices over what to do and to share with others foster feelings of pride and contribution.



Recommendations

The Scottish Children and Families Transitions Position Statement has been developed both as a call to action, and as guidance for all those who place an importance on early childhood experiences, are committed to the best interests of the child, and know that means working together with both children and their families to ensure the best of experiences, positive relationships, positive continuity, learning, play and wellbeing. This includes educators, researchers, policy makers, families, associated professionals, educational systems and local and national government embracing the significance of transitions for children's lives:

1. Use the six principles in shaping policy and practices
2. Focus on children's and families' strengths, creativity, capability and competence
3. Recognition that attention given to transitions is part of ensuring quality in ELC and early Primary School
4. Confirm child, family and educator participation in transition approaches through mutual consultation and support
5. Include all families in transitions processes, providing appropriate support to ensure equity
6. Leadership and support for educators involved in transitions process, with a particular focus on play, pedagogy, curriculum and reflection
7. Recognition that the transitions that are part of our system can be opportunities and tools for change
8. Continued commitment to the entitlements of children, families and educators during the process of transitions

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Authors

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transitions, informing professional practice, publishing in books and journals and contributing to policy here in Scotland. The authors are:

Emeritus Professor Aline-Wendy Dunlop, Chair of the Transitions as a Tool for Change Working Group, School of Education, University of Strathclyde
Dr. Marion Burns, HMI, Education Scotland
Jean Carwood-Edwards, Chief Executive Early Years Scotland
Heather Douglas, Early Learning and Childcare Manager, Education Services, Glasgow
Siân Neil, Senior Education Officer, Children and Families, Education Scotland
Janine Ryan, Head of Childminding Services, Scottish Childminding Association

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University of Strathclyde Glasgow G1 1XQ
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