09.4 Prime times – Settling in and transitions

To feel securely settled and ready to learn, children need to form attachments with the adults who care for them, primarily a key person, but others too. In this way they feel part of a community; they can contribute to that community and receive from it. Very young children, especially two- to three-year-olds, approach separation from their parent with anxieties, older children have a more secure understanding of 'people permanence' and can approach new experiences with confidence; but also need time to adjust and feel secure. It is the entitlement of all children to be settled comfortably into a new environment.

We follow a three-stage model of settling in based on three key needs:

1. *Proximity* - young children feel safest when a familiar adult, such as a parent, is present when they are getting used to a new carer and new surroundings. In this way they can become confident in engaging with those experiences independently later on.
2. *Secure base* – Because the initial need for proximity of the parent has been met, young children gradually begin to feel secure with a key person in a new surrounding so that they are able to participate independently for small periods of time.
3. *Dependency* –young children are able to separate from parents' and main carers when they have formed a secure attachment to their key person who knows and understands them best and on whom they can depend for their needs to be met.

The setting manager and key person explain the need for settling in and agree a plan with the parents/carer.

Settling-in for children with SEND

- If a child has been identified as having SEND then the key person/SENCO and parents/carers will need to identify and address potential barriers to settling in e.g. timings of medication and invasive procedures, specific routines and levels of support.

Promoting proximity

- For the first few days, the parent/carer attends with the child and does not leave for any time.
- One to two hours is sufficient for a child and parent/carer to attend on any one day initially.
- On the first day, the key person shows the parent/carer around, introduces members of staff, and explains how the day is organised, making the parent/carer and child feel welcome and comfortable.
- The parent/carer is invited to play with their child and the key person spends time with them. As much time as possible is allowed for the key person to do this.
- Over subsequent days, depending how the child is responding, the parent/carer is invited to attend other significant times of the day eg lunch.

- At this time, the key person does not change the child but observes the parent/carer's handling of the child and how the child responds.
- The key person will engage the child in eye contact but not rush to handle the child if this causes them distress.
- The key person observes to see if the child is recognising them, beginning to explore the environment (if able), noting what they seem to like and making sure it is available the next day.

Promoting secure base

- When the young child has experienced different times of the day, these are then fitted together to establish continuity of the day.
- The parent/carer now attends with the child for the whole morning including lunch time. During this time, the key person and parent establish how the child is getting to know the key person. They note when the child seems distressed and when the child is happy and build on this.
- If the child is responding to the situation positively, then the child is ready for the parent/carer to spend short periods of time away in another part of the building. If signs of distress are still apparent then the separation will be approached more slowly, starting with the parent/carer staying in the room, but taking a 'back seat', while the key person spends time with the child.
- When the parent/carer leaves, they always say goodbye and say they are coming back. Parents/carers should never slip away without the child noticing; this leads to greater distress.
- Gradually, time out of the room is extended from 10 to 20 minutes, and then 30 minutes.
- When the child can comfortably cope with 30 minutes, the key person and parent/carer plan the next stage.

Promoting dependency

- Attachment can be seen when the child shows signs that they are happy to transfer their need to be dependent onto the key person. Key persons look for signs such as the child being pleased to see them, looking for them when distressed, holding out their arms to be held, establishing eye contact, responding to play and taking comfort from the key person.
- Parents/carers can now leave their child for longer, until the child can cope with a longer day.
- After 4-6 weeks, the key person reviews the settling in plan with the parent/carer and discusses how well the child has settled. They discuss problems that may have arisen and plan how they will be overcome. They plan for the next few weeks and set a time to review.

When children do not seem to settle

- It is not good for children to be in a setting when they are acutely distressed and anxious. A child who is not securely attached and settled is overwhelmed with fear. They are unable to participate in any activity and do not learn. It is not in their immediate or long-term interest to attempt to prolong what is an agonising experience for them.
- A highly distressed child will need 1:1 attention consistently; their distress will upset other children and put stress on staff. If this is the case, the key person discusses with the manager or deputy.
- Attempts are made to reduce anxiety and distress through a planned approach with the parent/carer.
- The three stages of settling-in are reviewed and the plan is pitched back at the appropriate stage.
- Particular triggers of distress are discussed to see what can be done to alleviate it.
- If all attempts have been made and the child still cannot cope without the parent, then the place is offered only with the parent/carer attending. In some cases it may be appropriate to withdraw the place and help the parent/carer consider alternatives. For a child 'in need' this may need to be discussed with the social care worker, where one is allocated to the child, health visitor or referring agency.

When a parent is unable or refuses to take part in settling in

- Information about the 'settling in' plan is given at the first visit and the reasons are explained.
- If the parent/carer feels that this will be difficult – perhaps another close relative can come in instead.
- Genuine difficulties need to be handled sensitively, but generally speaking this is not an issue where the parent/carer has a choice not to attend with their child. A parent/carer who refuses to take part in settling in may have the offer of the place withdrawn.

Prolonged absences

- If a child is absent from the setting for any for periods of time beyond one or two weeks, their attachment to their key persons will have decreased and will need to be built up again.
- Parents/carers are made aware of the need to 're-settle' their children and a plan is agreed.
- The child gradually spends more time with the new key person until they can cope in their new room.

Two-year-olds starting a setting for the first time

- A two-year-old may have little or no experience of group care. As part of gathering information from parents, it is important to find out about the child's experience of non-parental care, for example grandparents, or childminder; this informs staff as to how a child may respond to a new situation.
- The three-stage approach involving *Proximity, Secure Base* and *Dependency/Independence* is applied.
- After the induction meeting with the setting manager or deputy and key person, a settling-in plan is drawn up. Where possible, a home visit is carried out for the same purpose.

- To settle in a two-year-old, the setting will go through the same process of gradually increasing the time a child attends with a parent/carer during the proximity stage.
- On the first day, the parent/carer attends with the child, and stays for the morning (less if the child becomes tired). On day two, the parent/carer stays longer and on day three stays until, and including lunch
- It is evident that the child is developing a sense of secure base when he or she shows interest in activities and begins to engage with the key person and other children. Then the parent/ carer may gradually start to spend short periods of time in another room to see how the child responds, this time increases until the child can manage a whole session without the parent.
- Separation causes anxiety in two-year-olds, as they have no concept of where their parents/carers have gone. Parents/carers should always say goodbye and tell them when they will return. Patience with the process will ensure children are happy and eager to come to play and be cared for in the setting.

Three- and four-year-olds

- Most children of this age can move through the stages more quickly and confidently.
- Some children take longer, and their needs for proximity and secure base stages should be accommodated as much as possible.
- Some children appear to leap to dependency/independence within a couple of days. In most cases, they will revert to the need for proximity and secure base. It can be difficult to progress to true dependency/independence and this can be frustrating.
- After the parent/carer attends for an induction meeting with the setting manager or deputy and key person, (or in some circumstances a home visit), a settling-in plan is drawn up.
- On the first day, the parent attends with the child and stays for the morning (less if the child becomes tired), on day two, longer and the next day stays until and including lunch (if full day care).
- If the child shows interest in the activities and is beginning to engage with the key person and other children, the parent/carer spends time in the parent/carer room (if available) to see how the child responds.
- Parents/carers are encouraged to explain to their child where they are going, and that they will return.
- If by the fifth day, the child is able to spend more time without the parent/carer, the child may be ready for a short day or session the following week, progressing to a full day or session very soon.

For children whose first language is not English

- For many children learning English as an additional language, the stage of proximity takes longer as the child is dependent upon the parent/carers' input to make sense of what is going on.

- If the parent/carer does not speak English, efforts are made to source an interpreter for induction; it will be helpful for them to see around the setting and be clear about their role in interpreting in the play area.
- The settling-in programme is explained to the parent/carer, and it is emphasised how important it is that they stay with the child and talk to him/her in the home language to be able to explain things.
- Through the interpreter, the key person will try to gauge the child's level of skills in their home language; this will give the key person an idea of the child's interests and levels of understanding.
- The need for the parent/carer to converse in the child's home language is important.
- The key person makes the parent/carer feel welcome using smiles and gestures.
- With the parent/carer, make a list of key words in the child's home language; sometimes it is useful to write the word as you would pronounce it. These words will be used with the child and parents/carers will be addressed with 'hello' and 'goodbye' in their language.
- The key person prepares for the child's visits by having a favourite toy or activity ready for the child to provide a means to interact with the child.
- Children will be spoken to as per any other child, using gestures and facial expressions to help.
- When the child feels happy to spend time with the key person (secure base), the parent/carer should spend time outside of the room.
- Progress with settling in will be done as with any other child; it just takes a little longer to reach dependency/independence.