

Supporting Children to Settle into Child Care

By Phillip Rowell

Regardless of the age of a child, settling into a new care environment is an exciting and challenging time for children, families, carers and staff. It is also an emotional time as it is often the first major transition in a child's life from the known home environment to an unknown child care setting.

When managed sensitively, supportively and in collaboration with children and families, the orientation and settling process can be a positive experience that involves everyone. It can build the foundations for a rewarding and ongoing partnership that enables all stakeholders to work towards a common goal of providing and promoting consistent quality outcomes for individuals and groups of children.

The success of an orientation and settling process for children and families depends on several key factors:

- Maintaining consistent rituals and routines between home and child care
- Allowing children adequate time to settle
- Adopting flexible caregiving strategies
- Developing an understanding of individual needs
- Demonstrating empathy for all involved in the settling process, including children, families, carers and staff

Orientation processes

For most families, enrolment and orientation is their first experience with child care. It may also be the first time their child has been cared for by someone other than a relative or close friend of the family. Therefore, flexibility and sensitivity are key factors in ensuring that children and families have a positive enrolment and orientation experience.

Enrolment and orientation is designed to familiarise the child and family with the service and to develop trusting partnerships. It is important that carers and staff consider the individual needs of the child and family and aim to 'personalise' the process. To achieve this carers and staff can:

- Seek external support to facilitate the enrolment and orientation process for families from non-English speaking or low literacy backgrounds

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.5

OSHCQA Principles: 2.2 and 3.1

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3

- Negotiate enrolment and orientation processes with families to accommodate their work or study commitments
- Learn about each child's age, abilities, history of being cared for by others and ask families how the child has coped with separating from them in the past
- Ask families about their expectations of child care and about any past experiences they have had using child care. Consider whether the family is especially anxious about leaving their child in care and develop strategies to communicate with them frequently throughout the settling process
- Schedule a series of orientation visits where families can discuss the needs of their child and family with the service in a relaxed and informal style
- Consider developing an 'Orientation Plan' that documents each orientation visit. For example, document information about how the child settled during the visit, the caregivers present in the room during the visit, the child's emotional responses, how the child interacted with peers. It is also beneficial to evaluate how effectively the service's practices were communicated to the family. For example, were they: informed about sign-in/out procedures, shown where to place their child's personal belongings, advised about the service's planning and/or programming procedures
- Develop a mentor program or 'buddy' system for older children so that a new child can pair with a child who is already settled and confident in care. This is especially important for school age children who often feel they need to be accepted amongst their peers
- Invite families to communicate their experiences with settling their children to new families through the service's newsletter or informally when families are on an orientation visit to the service

- Ensure that communication is effective. This is also very important in before and after school care services where the collection and transportation of school age children involves the child, family, teachers and outside school hours staff

Enrolment and orientation is just the beginning of the settling process. The first few days of care create a lasting impression on both children and families. There is an assumption that a child and family can settle into care on the first day with minimal assistance because there was an orientation process. However this is often not the case as orientation and settling are two different aspects of a child's transition into care.

Helping children to cope with change

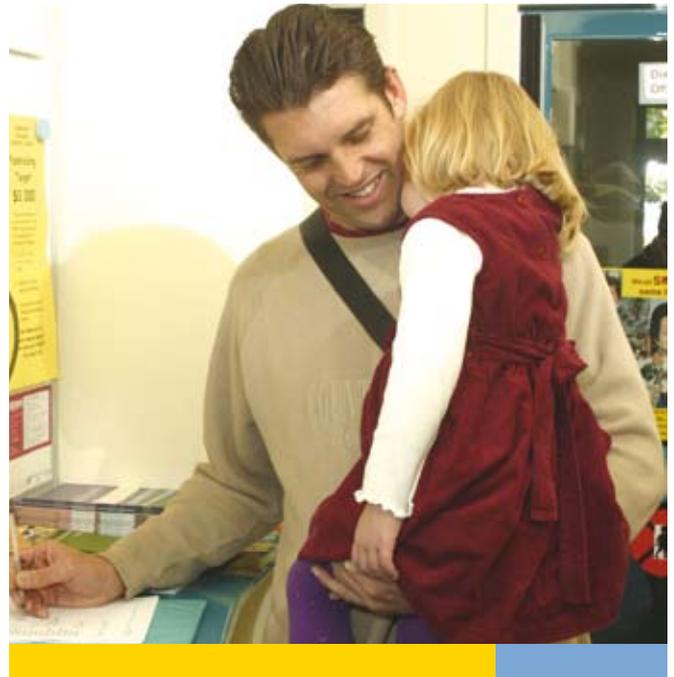
Adults deal with change all the time, and are often unconscious of the coping mechanisms they employ to handle change. Whether it is a new job, moving house, or having a child, adults often develop rituals that reinforce their control over change. This helps to protect them and assists them to cope. Such rituals or routines might include travelling via a specific route to work each day or maintaining the same routine at breakfast time. These small but important rituals can strengthen an individual's ability to cope with a major change.

These same principles apply to children when they are settling into care, moving from one care room to another in the service, or simply travelling from home to child care each morning. Consistent rituals or routines, which allow children to cope or to take some control of change, are essential to the success of settling into care. The key is to identify the rituals that children rely upon to help build their confidence and to create a sense of security that allows them to cope with the change.

Settling children effectively

An effective settling process is important as it promotes the development of positive relationships between children, carers and staff, which begins an ongoing partnership of trust. 'Settling' is about supporting children and families' emotional needs so that they develop a sense of security in a safe, comfortable and caring environment.

It is important to understand that every child is an individual and what works for settling one child will differ to another. There are a range of emotions that children may display when separating from their families or familiar caregivers.



A child's emotional response to separation anxiety is often quite apparent and may be demonstrated through tears, tantrums, silent stares, or isolating themselves from social interaction. Some children may smile and wave goodbye happily in one instant and then suddenly demonstrate a high level of emotion the next. However, there are many strategies that can assist carers and staff to support children when they are experiencing emotional difficulties with settling. These include:

- Reassuring children that the service is a safe and secure environment and that their parents/guardians will return to collect them
- Nurturing children when they are settling and striving to maintain continuity of care with carers and staff
- Discussing settling strategies with families and the comfort items and rituals used at home. For example, favourite songs, special toys, a blanket or a photograph of the child's family. Children often rely upon familiar comfort items and rituals to reaffirm their sense of belonging from one environment to the next
- Recognising the specific emotional needs of individual children and planning appropriate experiences to meet these. For example, waving goodbye at the front door, reading a favourite story or being involved in a special activity such as feeding the gold fish or helping to prepare morning tea
- Accepting that a child's individual eating, resting, toileting and playing patterns during the settling process may differ to their home

routine or to the routine at the service and accommodating this. It is essential to avoid placing undue pressure on children to conform to unfamiliar routines

- Empathising with the needs of older children when settling into care. It is important to recognise that sometimes the most apparently confident, happy and settled children are able to mask their emotions and in reality may not be coping well with change

The role of management

To facilitate a collaborative and consultative partnership with families when settling children into care, services can:

- Provide flexible opportunities for families to settle children into the service. For example, by gradually increasing the hours of attendance over a number of days
- Encourage families to telephone and seek reassurance, or seek families' permission to call them with updates of how a child is settling
- Give verbal or written information to families about what can be expected when their child is settling and emphasise the importance of maintaining open and honest communication between staff, carers and families
- Develop a written policy for settling children into the service that reflects best quality practices
- Establish procedures to support continuity of carers and staff when children are settling into a service or into a new room, or enable children to develop relationships with more than one adult in the service

- Consult and share information with families about how the child is settling. This may be documented in personal message books or diaries used for two-way communication with families, through a communication board or book and, most importantly, through daily verbal exchanges of information with families
- Encourage families to discuss any concerns or questions they have about their child's settling progress. Two-way, positive and open communication helps to achieve positive outcomes for children, families, carers and staff
- Support carers and staff when they are settling children. It is important to recognise that carers and staff may need professional guidance and time away from children as the settling process can also be quite stressful for them. This can be difficult for family day care carers and single staff model out of school hours services. However, developing an effective network with child care professionals from other services may be a useful way to gain support.

Effective orientation and settling experiences for children are characterised by environments where carers and staff demonstrate empathy toward children and families and where a flexible, consistent and individualised approach is adopted to meet children and families' needs.

Allowing adequate time and opportunities for the development of respectful and trusting relationships between children, families, carers and staff is one of the most crucial factors to successfully settling children into child care. ■

References and further reading

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