

## Comment

### Starting School – a Major Transition

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In Britain, every September, thousands of four year olds start their journey along the path of formal education. It is a legal requirement for them to do so, even if they are to receive home schooling. Most will have completed two years of the Foundation Stage curriculum in pre-school settings and are then, inexplicably moved to more formal settings – primary schools – to complete the final year of this early years programme of study. In the face of much research which shows that many are simply not ready for this transition and the evidence gathered from more enlightened nations around the world, which shows that a later start to formal education does not affect subsequent attainment and achievement, we still insist that this is the 'way we do it' in Britain.

However, as always, British teachers make the best of a bad job and work tirelessly to happily induct their small charges each September, the eldest of whom will be attending school full time within a few weeks of entering the building. At least the days are gone when thirty little strangers arrived at the start of the new school year, to be dropped off at the school gate by tearful mums and herded straight into a classroom to begin learning their letter shapes. Examples of good practice now include effective liaison with preschool settings, summer induction sessions, home visits, flexible attendance patterns, personalised routines and a concentrated effort to involve families, as much as possible, in the induction period. At least we're getting something right these days!

So how can we, as teachers and parents, ensure the very best start at school for our children? 'Best', in this context, must necessarily mean 'happiest'.

Children are born into their family conscience groups. (Conscience, in this context, meaning that 'inner compass' which sustains loyalty and directs the ability to 'belong' to a system, culture or group). Within these groups are parents, immediate family and extended family and children learn early that 'chameleon' like ability to adapt to the presence and expectations of different family members. With support, they learn to move on to and adapt to others that are less intimate, from pre-school to school, to larger school, neighbourhood, community and others as they go through life. Adapting becomes more and more challenging as we grow and enter the world of ever more culturally complex and larger conscience groups, and care and nurture are needed at the point of each transition.

Adapting can feel very confusing if the new system holds expectations and values which are very different or even at odds with the system before. In order to find their place in the new setting, children may find that they need to behave in a way that makes them feel as if they are betraying the old system, to which, of course they still wish and need to belong. Children can move from one sort of behaviour and cultural group to another with relative ease if nothing too central and fundamental is challenged within them.



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No two groups ever quite match and adaption is required by all. All transitions are stressful, even when they are wanted and welcomed. One of the first of these transition points is the entry into formal schooling. Many children will then have seven years before the next major transition – into secondary school – but some will need to make further transitions before this. Little surprise, then, that educationalists believe a child regresses about six months, emotionally and academically, at the point of each transition, and that behaviour, attainment and social issues are so great in garrison schools and those with high pupil turnover. One of the most challenging aspects of any transition, as child or adult, is the feeling of not being 'known'. This is not merely a question of friendships, but of our identity. The way we were 'known' in the old ways may be irrelevant in the new system, or, at best, will take our new peers a time to recognise, acknowledge and value. We can suddenly feel very anonymous and unsupported. If the new system is larger and more complex than the one we are used to, we can feel very small until we find our right place within it.

We often forget, as teachers, that these points of transition can be equally challenging for parents too. Teachers can help parents explore and widen their sense and understanding of what surrounds the child and the important role they can play in supporting the movement into wider settings. Indeed, parents can impede this process by failing to respond to the need of the child to belong to more than the family system or to acknowledge the significance of all of the systems in the child's life – those that have gone before, will come in the future and all which surround the child. Parents and teachers can support each other by consistently reminding each other of these issues.

Indeed, teachers of Reception age children are often amazed at the mismatch between what parents and pre-school settings report a child can do or the way he or she behaves, and the reality they are seeing before them in the first few months of formal schooling. The truth is probably that the child is totally centred on the 'adaption' process and that learning is put on hold until that is resolved. Those that immediately succeed are those for whom the adaption is less. Various factors influence this – the child's family culture may be very similar to that of the school or the class, mum may be very like the new teacher, he or she may have older siblings at the school and may have already sensed and internalised the culture of the new system and begun the adaption process. Starting school alongside a group of peers already known and perhaps with a pre-school setting in common may also accelerate and ease the starting up process.

Current best practice in Early Years transition can hold many clues for those inducting new pupils into a school at any age. Teaching staff understand that the adaption process needs to be supported, take as long as it will and will vary from child to child. The family needs not simply to be involved and their support enlisted, but also honoured, whoever they may be. The child's history and divided loyalties must be acknowledged and respected, the roots of his or her identity – home and previous settings – given a place. In the past few years, **ecl** teachers have explored many innovative ways to make their classrooms into vibrantly inclusive systems where there are rituals, tools and rules to foster the sense of belonging and where the well being and health of every child is the responsibility of everyone. New children are welcomed with a real intention to 'know' them as quickly and deeply as possible.

This much is true – that until a child has fully adapted to his or her new system, learning is unlikely to happen on any level other than the most superficial. The focus, trust and patience required of adults supporting his process can be huge, but well worth the effort – however old the child and at whatever stage of education.

