

## Settling in: Getting to know children and families

### Parents, Early Years and Learning: Practice example

The way in which children and families are welcomed into a setting is crucial. Managed well, the move from home is an obvious time to begin building positive relationships, establishing a two-way dialogue with parents about learning.

This process can start some time before entry – with open days for children and parents to visit the setting together and play.

#### Pre-entry groups

Some settings will be fortunate enough to have space for toddler 'drop-ins' for the under-threes. So parents and children will already feel 'at home' and may well have formed relationships with some practitioners.

**Home visits** before entry are a well-established method of getting to know children and families. In their own home, parents have a chance to talk one-to-one and feel valued as an individual.

Practitioners can learn something about the child's home context and interests. Taking a book illustrated with photographs of the nursery, practitioners, everyday routines and children at play is helpful; it acts as a visual focus for discussion and can serve to open the dialogue about learning intentions.

Children benefit from meeting practitioners at home, then seeing familiar faces as they enter a setting. They remember and like to talk about the home visit long after the actual event. This recall can be enhanced if digital photographs have been taken to share with the family.

Having a policy on a **settling-in period**, which is made clear to parents before their child enters, can help a child settle more readily and be used as a time to establish relationships, communicate with parents and talk about educational practice and philosophy.

“Mandy came to visit Hannah at home. It really helped. She knew her when she got to nursery and I felt I knew that she would be well cared for.”





**Konstam Children's Centre, London Borough of Camden** asks parents to make an adult (family or friend) available for two weeks to help settle their child.

During this period, parents are encouraged to spend time in the setting in order to get to know staff and each other, and see how children play and learn. The approach is flexible, with parents able to move away when their child seems ready, as long as they remain nearby and readily contactable.

The centre takes this opportunity to discuss its aims and expectations for the child's care. Parents help to prepare their own child's space, bringing in a few of the child's clothes, a changing basket and some family photos. Favoured objects are also welcomed so that the child has something familiar at nursery.

Parents are asked to show and explain how they feed, change and comfort their child. Interpreters are organised so that parents can use their home language in these discussions. Practitioners also try to learn some key words and phrases in a child's home language.

An **introductory meeting** for new parents is also organised, where staff introduce themselves and talk about some of the procedures. Established parents then take new parents and families on short tours of the centre before sharing refreshments with them. This is followed by an open forum, without the staff present, so that new parents can chat to existing parents about anything they like, in a more open and relaxed way.

**York Rise Nursery, London Borough of Camden** is developing 'settling in' boxes. When children visit the nursery before entry, to meet their key worker, they are given a simple box with photos of the practitioners and a book with pictures of the child's peg, areas of the nursery and everyday routines. Parent and child will be able to look through this together at home and talk about what will happen when the child enters nursery. The box can also be used on the first day to

bring in some items from home, such as a favourite toy or book, or family photo. This establishes an early connection between home and school. The child can use photos to show who they are talking about and the two-way dialogue between parent and practitioner is then established from day one.

Separation can cause great distress for some parents and children. **The Camden Early Years Intervention team** have worked successfully with children, parents and settings to help manage this process.

It helps to take some time to talk to a parent and work on a strategy together. Ali, a two-and-a-half-year-old from a refugee family with very little English, was very distressed each day and stood by the door crying for long periods of time despite the best efforts of staff to comfort him. After talking to his mother, she started to leave her hat so that he had something familiar to hold and smell. The nursery displayed a series of photos, at his eye level, showing the sequence of his day with Mummy leaving, the daily routine and Mummy returning. This was talked through with his mum and simple phrases used to explain each one, to give him reassurance that she would return. His mum also recorded two familiar rhymes for him on tape in his home language, which was played in the setting and at story times.

This way of working gives comfort to both parent and child; a parent is supported in a positive way to separate and it begins dialogue around sharing observations and knowledge of the child.

'Letting Go', *Nursery World*, 25th March 2004.