

The use of visual aids in supporting children to make successful transitions within the Early Years Setting/Reception class.

Children have to make many transitions during the day, home to nursery, nursery to home, shopping trips, visits to friends and family. These are the obvious ones but there also many transitions during the day at their Early Years settings and these can be very stressful for children particularly those with communication and interaction difficulties. Children may find it difficult to stop activities and start new ones and they may not understand what is happening next in the day. Young children find time a difficult concept and may have difficulty understanding the routines of the day.

There are a number of strategies that can help young children manage and understand these transitions in order to alleviate stress and enable them to learn more effectively.

These strategies are aimed at enabling practitioners to support the children in their care. The strategies are universal and beneficial for ALL young children, as well as those with SEND.

Why so visual?

The use of visual aids to promote communication and language is by far the most effective way to enhance learning and communication throughout the learning environment. Especially when visual aids are used in conjunction with spoken language and signing.

As children develop, their day to day learning is 3% through taste, 3% through smell, 6% through touch, 13% through hearing, 75% through seeing. Typically, in 3 days we remember: 10% of all we hear, 35% of all we see and 65% of all we see and hear at the same time.

There are many benefits of using visual aids within the learning environment, not least of which is the fact that the strategy helps to reduce a child's anxiety. They are especially effective for those children that struggle with change and communication.

Children of this age have rapidly developing but incredibly varied language skills, visual aids are effective in introducing developing and embedding the routines and transitions within the learning environment. Visual aids are a practical simple and inclusive strategy that every practitioner can use. Visual supports need to be phased depending on the developmental level of the child, some children may need an 'object of reference' (concrete object) to indicate nappy changing whilst some will be able to understand a photograph or more abstract picture such as communicate in Print symbols. Visual supports are a starting point for those children who may need to be further supported by professionals in using a communication board of the PECS system.

How to use visual aids at a universal level

Visual timetables are just like ordinary timetables but are made visual through the use of objects, photographs, pictures and symbols.

These timetables can range in complexity, depending on the developmental needs of the children. Some groups, or individuals may need these routines breaking down into the simpler Now and Next boards.

Things to think about when introducing a visual timetable:

- Ensure that a relevant and simple visual timetable is accessible and referred to by all practitioners, throughout the day.
- Are the pictures simple and relevant to the child/children?
- Have you identified the key parts of the day? Try not to have more than 5 symbols on display at a time.
- Where is it in the room? Is it in a clear, uncluttered space without distractions?
- Can the children see it? Is the timetable situated at the children's level and read horizontally from left to right?
- Are you removing the pictures as an activity has finished? The idea being that the session moves forward to what's next.
- Do the children understand what each symbol means? And how do you know they understand?

More targeted support for children that find transitions difficult

The use of visual aids should be relevant to the developmental needs of the child, whether they are very young, or have specific needs. Below is an explanation of a few different approaches, graduating based around the need and developmental level of the children. Some children may need to start at Step 1, while others may start at 3. The practitioner will know the child and be able to make an informed judgement, based on the Observation and Assessment cycle.

1. Objects of Reference:

Some children, especially those with Communication & Interactions Difficulties, may need REAL objects to support their understanding of transitions and daily routines. We call these 'Objects of Reference', for example a nappy may be shown when it's changing time.

During child-initiated play, these could also be used to provide a child with a limited choice of activity, for example a toy train or a brick.

2. Now/Next:

For those children that struggle with the more in-depth visual timetable, a Now and Next board may be appropriate. These children generally find transitions difficult and the Now and Next board can support them in understanding their next 'move'.

3. Makaton symbols:

Settings can decide on a bank of core vocabulary that all practitioners use throughout the environment. These may include symbols to indicate: taking turns, snack, stop, finished and more.

Some practitioners find it helpful to keep a keyring of common symbols on their person, throughout the day.

4. Makaton signing:

Makaton signing has a place within the Universal level of support, but is also an effective tool in promoting communication for children who struggle in this area.

Again, it is helpful for practitioners to agree on a core bank of a few signs, used for specific reasons. Children that struggle with transitions, will need the 'finished' sign quickly followed by direction towards the next activity. i.e. The 5.4.3.2.1.0...finished and now we are doing xxxx, is a proactive and directive use of the sign that moves the child through the transition quickly and smoothly.

There are many more ways of using visual aids within the learning environment, to promote different outcomes, however these are by far the most common and most effective.

The Benefits of using Visual Aids:

- They help children, and practitioners, to understand what is going to happen next/join a session, what they are expected to do and assists in developing their sense of time.
- They promote the development of attention and organisational skills e.g. left-right working.
- They develop a shared understanding of expectations, throughout the setting.
- They promote the development of general communication skills such as listening, commenting, making choices and questioning.
- They help to provide a platform to develop vocabulary related to time such as then, now and next as well as developing recall and prediction skills, alongside the concept of the passage of time, past and future. This is at the heart of all their future learning and development.
- They help to reduce anxiety, promote positive and smooth transitions.
- They make communicate physical and consistent rather than fleeting and inconsistent, like spoken words can be.

TELL me and I forget.

SHOW me and I remember.

INVOLVE me and I understand.

(Chinese proverb)

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