

# Facilitating a Successful Transition from Home to Preschool

A sociocultural perspective



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This article examines how educators and parents can enable young children to make a successful transition from home to the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting. A model developed in Dublin's North East Inner City highlights the value of taking a fresh perspective on family engagement in ECEC.

## Introduction

Although not the focus of a wide range of existing literature, the transition made by many young children from their home to an ECEC setting is among the most significant that they will face in their young lives (O'Kane, 2016). Transitions from one environment to another are important milestones for all children (Government of Ireland, 2018), because well-functioning transitions are crucial to 'supporting a child's current and future capacity for learning and development' (CECDE, 2006, p.8). However, transitions can often be times of stress for children and families, requiring support and understanding to enable both child and setting to successfully adapt.

## The role of the ECEC professional

Having an understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of early childhood enables ECEC professionals to be sensitive to the diverse ways that child development is constructed and enacted in families and communities, which can influence caregivers' expectations of the young child and their early care and education (Margetts & Kienig, 2013).

It is important for educators to make explicit links between children's sociocultural contexts and their experiences (Vogler et al., 2008), especially when the home culture differs from the prevailing philosophy in a setting (Sabol et al., 2018). This may involve professionals drawing on 'beliefs and knowledge about early childhood, in ways that are appropriate to local circumstances and changing practices' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p. 4).

Given that their parents' involvement in an early years setting can positively affect a child's well-being (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 39), and that effective engagement with parents has 'real potential to narrow the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds' (Goodall, 2017, p. 1), the ways that ECEC professionals co-operate with

parents, to effectively support children's successful transition to ECEC, is worth deeper consideration.

### Reframing parental involvement in ECEC

Building partnerships with parents in ECEC is generally framed as a way to raise awareness of the benefits of parents participating in and enhancing their child's early education, and to give them opportunities to do so (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 7). Some authors write that for effective partnerships to yield wider, positive results for families and communities, professionals need to engage in more meaningful parental involvement (Muller, 2009). The types of 'light touch' activities (Sabol et al., 2018) that are sometimes observed in Irish preschools are not always associated with positive impacts for children and do not necessarily create strong ties or meaningful gains in social capital (Small, 2017).

Parents and carers can be facilitated to guide children through a transition, with 'cultural mediation tools' such as play and routines enabling them to adapt successfully to their new 'pupil identity' (Lam and Pollard, 2006, pp. 131–132). Nonetheless, inequalities in economic or ethnic background may hinder cooperation between home and educational settings (Englund, 2010; Osgood, 2012). This requires educators to further acknowledge the various barriers that may affect some caregivers, and to appreciate the added benefits for particular families of having a positive sense of connection with their children's care and educational institutions (Vogler et al., 2008).

In this context, there seems to be real potential for a shift in emphasis during a child's early days in the ECEC setting, from the traditional settling-in process towards an alternative vision of building trust between parents, children, and professionals, by having fun and engaging in activities together. This repositions parents and carers as important actors in the introduction process, acknowledging their joint role in caring for the child (Markström & Simonsson, 2017) and framing an expectation that they will be actively involved in the setting from the beginning.

However, even if this fresh approach to collaborating actively with parents is embraced by an already exhausted ECEC workforce, there remains a reluctance to take a step further, to recognise the added value of promoting parents' own well-being and skill development through the ECEC setting. The benefits of this type of engagement are supported by research that finds the interests of young children and parents to be both compatible and synergistic (Brooks-Gunn et al, 2000).

One innovative model, which draws on a sociocultural perspective and embodies principles of parental empowerment, has been developed by a family resource centre based in the North East Inner City of Dublin, in response to a need to support young children in this highly diverse community to make a more positive transition to preschool.

The Preparation for Preschool (PfP) programme in Hill Street Family Resource Centre was originally designed to engage with children, while their parents and carers left the premises, but has since evolved to include

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parents by enabling them to have a deeper understanding of their child's early transitions and make better connections within their community.

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Adults separate from children by gradually withdrawing from their play session, to attend a parents' group run by an experienced community development worker. The play session is facilitated by skilled ECEC professionals, whose interactions and activities focus on children's socio-emotional skills and language development. Communication between parents and professionals is ongoing, during and after the group. There is explicit emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism, and one member of the team can converse with a number of families through their home language.

Parents and carers who recently contributed to research on the PfP programme, which was conducted through the Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) in DCU, identify a wide range of benefits, including their children becoming more capable and independent. Local ECEC professionals report directly observing the children who attend their settings transitioning more successfully to preschool, while their parents and carers seem able to connect more confidently with staff than other parents are.

This home-grown innovation offers a compelling demonstration of the potential for 'competent systems' (Urban et al., 2012), to support parents and carers from diverse backgrounds, to build their own capacity, becoming more invested in the structures and processes that underpin their children's experiences of early education and care, creating tangible, lasting connections that benefit families and the wider community.

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### Creative Kids

Children adjust to the 'new normal' at Creative Kids & Co, Walkinstown, Dublin, following adjustments made to the outdoor space and practice by Manager Valerie Gaynor and staff, in light of COVID-19.