

Managing Transitions

Whole-school strategies to support children's wellbeing

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Acknowledge and accept change

When children return to school after a period of disruption or change, we cannot assume that everyone has had the same experience. Some children will have dealt with bereavement, isolation, or fear. Others may have thrived in a quieter environment and find the return to school difficult in its own way. The impact of change will not always be obvious, and it will look different for every child.

As educators, we need to acknowledge that change has happened, that it will have been profound for some and less so for others, and that it affects children and staff alike.

Assessing the impact of change

Spend time noticing the children in your class and building relationships that allow them to feel safe enough to reveal their needs. A curriculum that creates space for observation — open-ended investigations, independent activities, and child-led learning — enables teachers and teaching assistants to assess both academic and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs in a low-stakes, supportive environment.

Begin by organising learning that does not raise anxiety — tasks that remind children how much they already know. Once children have had time to settle and a clearer picture has emerged, teaching can gently build on and stretch their skills and knowledge at their own pace.

How to notice SEMH needs

A picture of a child's needs can be built in two ways: through cognitive processes (thinking, knowing, remembering, and problem-solving) and through body language and behaviour.

Some children will not be able to work through emotions cognitively. Watch for physical signs: a tight jaw, nausea, tension headaches, raised shoulders, no eye contact or excessive eye contact, unusual quietness or overactivity, lethargy, or sudden changes in behaviour. Help children to recognise these signs in their own bodies, and use your observation skills to identify when a child may need extra support.

The S.L.O.W approach

To help children reflect on their feelings and the impact on their behaviour, encourage them to slow down using the S.L.O.W approach:

- **Stop:** build time into the day for mindfulness. Pause and consider: how do I feel right now? What has led me to feel this way?
- **Listen:** listen inwards and to others. What do I hear when I look inside myself? Can I relate to the experiences of those around me?
- **Open up:** share thoughts and feelings with those around us. Finding words for how we feel can begin the process of understanding — and sometimes healing.
- **Work together:** working with others — in pairs or groups — helps us understand our experiences better and consider ways forward.

Emotion coaching

Emotion coaching (developed by John Gottman) helps children become more aware of their emotions and manage their own feelings — particularly when they are not yet able to self-regulate. All behaviour is communication: when a child is struggling, it is worth considering what is being communicated behind the behaviour.

Emotion coaching involves these steps:

- **Recognise feelings:** talk to the child and begin to name what you can observe.
- **Validate and label emotions:** the feelings wheel (Gottman Institute) is helpful here.
- **Set clear limits where needed:** share your expectations and make clear what safe and appropriate behaviour looks like.
- **Problem-solve together:** develop more effective strategies with the child for next time.

Further information: emotioncoachinguk.com

Supporting children to talk about feelings

The Feelings Wheel is a useful tool for helping children articulate their emotions. The centre of the wheel contains basic descriptions; each outer layer adds richer vocabulary to help children reflect more precisely on what they are experiencing.

Protective behaviours

Children need to know they have a right to feel safe all of the time. Co-regulation supports self-regulation: teach children behaviours that help them manage anxiety before crisis points arise. Work with the child to create a shared plan for difficult times.

- Ask the child to identify their triggers and triggering feelings.
- Ask them to identify a trusted adult and a safe place.
- Remind them they can always talk to someone, even if the problem feels small or difficult to explain.
- Remind them to use the stop-feel-think-do process once they have their own safety plan.

Further resources: familiesfeelingsafe.co.uk