

8 ways parents and carers can help children manage the transition back to nursery



A list of top tips that Early Years workers can share with parents and carers



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

As we move closer to babies and young children returning to nursery, it's important for parents and carers to start planning how they can help make the process as stress free for children as possible.

How have children been affected by the crisis, and how will this affect their return to nursery?

During the crisis, many babies and young children will have been through significant changes and challenges, including the unplanned and abrupt closure of their nurseries or childcare settings. The experience of stopping nursery, and no longer seeing their keyworker is likely to be experienced as a loss.

A number of children will also have been exposed to further distress and anxiety during the pandemic period, if their homelives have been touched by illness or other emotional, psychological or financial strains.

All children - including babies and toddlers - will have registered and reacted to these changes in some way. To add to this, a young child does not yet have a fully developed 'sense of time' - so for them, a break of a few weeks or months can feel like a significant period of separation.

While some children may be eager to return to their old routine, others may well need a bit of help to adjust. It's important for parents and carers to start thinking now about ways in which they might be able to

help this process run smoothly.

Below we've listed some of the measures parents/carers can take to support children with the transition.

1. Start talking to the child about both their nursery and their key worker

Once a date for re-opening has been confirmed, start talking to babies and children about their nursery, whilst regularly using the keyworker's name. This will help reintroduce the idea of nursery, and remind them of this special person.

2. Create a 'count down to nursery' calendar for their child

Toddlers and pre schoolers can benefit from counting down the days by using a visual timetable or calendar. This preparation provides sense of predictability and security, and this will counteract the feelings of uncertainty and disruption they may have experienced as a result of the crisis.

3. Acknowledge your child's feelings about returning

Your child might feel sad, worried or cross about the sudden break from nursery, or about going back. They might talk or play about these feelings, or they might show them to you through tantrums or other changes in behaviour. You can help by staying calm, and trying to name these feelings out loud. This shows that you understand and will help your child to cope with their big feelings.

4. Prepare your child for the new social distancing measures being introduced at the nursery and the changes to the nursery routine. Keep talking about them after the return has begun.

If there are to be changes to the nursery routine or staffing as a result of social distancing or government guidelines, find out what these will be. You might find it useful to then talk to your children about these and explain the new changes.

Acknowledge that certain changes might feel strange and different, and take some time to get used to.

If the child's key worker is expected to change, this should be explained to the child in an age appropriate way before they come back to nursery.

Although younger babies will not be able to tell you directly about their experience of changes, even the youngest children register differences to their environment.

Having an awareness of this is important, for it will help you stay attuned to the baby's communications, after they return to nursery.

5. It might be possible for your child to have some contact with their key worker before the nursery opens - if the nursery is able to facilitate this

Before they reopen, your nursery might agree to your child's key worker connecting with your child in some way. It could be by a phone call, email, letter, online meeting, or recorded video messages. For instance, for babies and younger toddlers, the contact via digital platforms could involve waving 'hello', and singing a nursery rhyme.

Maybe you could send pictures of activities or drawings to keyworkers, to help them stay in touch with the child's experiences.

This contact reassures the child that their keyworker is thinking about them, that they have not 'disappeared', and that they are hoping to see them again soon.

If the child is getting a new key worker, they could also perhaps connect with them in some of the above ways before the return.

6. Arrange to have a catch up phone call with your child's key worker about the child's experiences during lockdown

This might be useful, in order to review any issues that may have arisen during the break from the nursery. As well as getting a general sense of how the baby, toddler or young child is doing, it is helpful for keyworkers to be informed of any particularly difficult experiences the child may have had, including whether they or their parent(s) or carer(s) have lost anybody close to them. Having a sense of the baby's



or child's experiences during the break will help keyworkers when trying to understand children's needs and communications after they return.

7. Find out if your nursery is re-introducing a second 'settling in process' for the children

Some babies, toddlers or children may need another settling in period. If you feel it would help, talk to your nursery about the possibility of reintroducing a second 'settling in process' for your child. Whilst some parents/carers, and certain children, may be keen to get back to their old routine, many will benefit from being given the opportunity to settle back in gently, and at their own pace. This will foster their sense of security in the nursery setting, and enable them to re establish their connection to their keyworker. As parents/carers, you may feel as though you are 'starting again' with the process of settling their child. But this is normal and expectable.

8. Ask if children are permitted to bring in objects from home

A familiar toy, object or blanket from home can be a 'bridge' which helps the child cope more easily with the separation from their home environment, and their parents/carers. If permitted, it will also help with the transition to being back in the care of their keyworker, and foster their sense of security when away from home.

For more advice and guidance for parents and carers, please visit:
www.annafreud.org/coronavirussupport



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