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# STARTING STRONG

Supporting families experiencing poverty through the early years transition phase



**Save the  
Children**  
Achuby Plant

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# SECTION ONE:

## CONTEXT

### SAVE THE CHILDREN CYMRU

We believe that every child has the right to a safe, healthy and happy childhood. The early years of a child's life shapes their personality and skills and forms the foundation for their future. This is the time which offers the greatest opportunities for learning and development, helping to shape the kind of people we grow up to be. However, poverty can put tremendous pressure on families and make it harder for parents to play and learn with their children and provide all that they need to grow up happy and healthy.

Poverty is on the rise across the UK and Wales has the highest level of child poverty compared to all other nations, with nearly 1 in 4 children growing up in its grip. The deepening tragedy of child poverty in the UK has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. It has left the most vulnerable children and their families facing increasing hardship.

We all need to work together to address these challenges. We are striving to reduce the number of children growing up in poverty in Wales by working in partnership with others, listening to the latest evidence, and most importantly listening to the voices of children and families.

### INTRODUCTION

The early years are a critical stage in children's development. Yet, we know that right now too many children in Wales don't have what they need for a fair start in school. We know from speaking to schools, early years settings, parents and to children themselves that the transition into primary is an important but sometimes difficult time. We've heard that progress made to engage with parents and children in the early years was sometimes lost when children moved into statutory provision and that information about children's needs and families' circumstances was

not always shared between services and settings. The aim of our Starting Strong project was to help young children adapt to the big change of starting school, making sure that they and their families had the right support around them at the critical point in their young lives. We wanted to find out what tools, techniques and approaches could support the transition into education, particularly for those children living in areas of high deprivation in Wales.

The schools and nurseries that took part in the research did so in the context of significant disruption; settings were working within the bounds of restrictions from the pandemic, and at the same time introducing the new Curriculum for Wales. Despite this, and testament to the tenacity and determination of educators to make a difference to children's lives, the activities went ahead, and the case-studies and techniques highlighted in this report are evidence of the impact they made.

### PROJECT STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

Starting Strong developed organically through Save the Children's place-based community partnerships. Through intensive partner collaboration, we identified a common ambition to improve practice in the early years transitions phase as a means to improving outcomes for children living in poverty.

A formal research project was developed and ran with partners settings between November 2021 and November 2022. Participatory methodology was built into the heart of the project. Children and parents were supported to play an active and influential role, having a say on the issues that were important to them and shaping what their local transitions activities looked like and how they were delivered.

The project started with Save the Children, schools and nurseries delivering participatory workshops with children to understand young children's hopes, fears and wishes around starting school. Workshops were organised voluntarily by settings taking part in the research, with the majority focused in areas that recorded above national average levels of child poverty. A full summary of the approaches, techniques and findings from the children's workshops is included in the Save the Children Cymru's Children's Workshop report.<sup>1</sup>





**117 children took part in workshops**



**Across 10 different primary schools and early years settings**



**8/10 schools were in 25% most deprived areas in Wales**

The themes that emerged from the children's workshops were used to develop a series of workshops for parents. In the workshops, Save the Children, school and nursery staff worked with parents to unpick some of the findings that emerged from the children's workshops. As with the Children's workshops, the parents' workshops took place in areas that recorded higher than national-average levels of child poverty. A full summary of the approaches, techniques and findings from the children's workshops is included in Save the Children Cymru's Parents' workshop report.<sup>2</sup>



**72 parents or carers took part in workshops**



**Across 11 different primary schools and early years settings**



**8/11 schools were in 25% most deprived areas in Wales. An average of 36% of children in these schools were eligible for free school meals.**

The results from the children and parents' workshops were presented back to the schools and nurseries who took part in the research, to help build a common understanding of the themes and issues which were important to children and families experiencing poverty. Save the Children staff then ran a series of innovation workshops with schools and nurseries to support planning for the early years transitions activities which would take place in the individual settings. The innovation workshops were primarily undertaken in peer-group settings, giving schools and nurseries the time and space to reflect on their plans and ambitions whilst gaining feedback from peers. It is important to note that schools and nurseries came into the project with individual contexts, resources, challenges and opportunities and the innovation workshops sought to draw out what could be done to support children and families within the boundaries of the resources available in each individual setting.

Schools and nurseries delivered their early years transitions activities for children and families in Summer Term 2022. The tools and techniques included in this report provide an outline of the practices tested during that term.

We worked with Swansea University to conduct an evaluation of the transition's activities, focusing on parent and practitioner views on what was delivered.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Save the Children spoke to schools and nurseries over two terms following delivery to understand practitioners' views on the long-term impact of delivering enhanced early years transition activities in areas recording high levels of deprivation. Some of the longer-term impacts reported by schools and nurseries are captured in the case studies in this report.

# CHILD POVERTY AND EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS



CHILD

***"They might tell you off for being naughty"***

Children's early years shape their personality, skills and ability. We all want children to have the best start in life, to be happy and have every opportunity to learn. Despite the strong link between poverty and early learning outcomes in Wales, no child's development during the crucial early years is pre-determined; every activity in early childhood is an opportunity for them to learn and develop and with the right support every child in Wales can start school with the level of development they need to succeed.

Families experiencing poverty in Wales are living under huge stress, growing economic uncertainty and ever-increasing costs. There is deep concern amongst practitioners about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children's health, development and wellbeing now and in the future. Even before the current crisis, levels of child poverty in Wales were persistently high and families, children and communities were suffering the long-term impacts of inequality and poverty.



CHILD

***"I didn't want to go to school...but hugs help"***

Children experiencing poverty often say that they find it hard to take part and be happy at school. Although education is free, many activities and resources required for school have a cost attached and parents are regularly asked to contribute to the costs of school trips, meals, snacks, equipment and uniform. <sup>4</sup> Many of the families we work struggle to afford basics like heating or food and have no disposable income available to contribute towards the costs associated with school. Where families are unable to contribute towards costs, children sometimes miss out on trips, equipment and meals and are at risk of social exclusion, stigma and shame. <sup>5</sup>

Families living in poverty may experience additional challenges when their children start school <sup>6 7</sup> and do not have access to the support which enables their children to experience a successful transition. <sup>8</sup> Research tells us that during transition periods, children can suffer emotional distress, and that this in turn can affect their progress and undermine their resilience. <sup>9</sup> Importantly, for children experiencing poverty, what happens during transition periods not only affects their progress but can have an impact across their whole education and their life after school. <sup>10</sup>

There is a well-established link between efforts made during transition periods, engagement with parents and improved outcomes and wellbeing for pupils. <sup>11</sup> School staff sometimes expect children and families to have a certain level of skill or a set understanding of the education system, but this is often not the case for families living in poverty. <sup>12 13</sup> The wider the gap between the expectations of the school, and the previous experience of the child or family the more difficult transition periods are likely to be. <sup>14</sup>

Evidence shows that when children experience a successful or high-quality transition process it has a long-term positive impact on a child's wellbeing and attainment. <sup>15 16</sup> Children are shown to have more successful transitions when they and their parents have enough information about the new school, its routines and personnel, and when teachers have adequate information about the children's stages of development and experiences. <sup>17 18</sup> Further, when children and families are involved and engaged throughout the process, the transition process for those children is improved as a whole. <sup>19</sup>



CHILD

***"They need to know how to do good sitting"***

# THE POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT IN WALES

This project was developed with partners during a period of extended disruption for children during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interventions delivered in schools and nurseries were predominately tested in summer and autumn term 2022; a time when not only young children themselves were experiencing transition, but schools were experiencing their own transition marked by the introduction of the new Curriculum for Wales.<sup>20</sup>

The new Curriculum for Wales sets out a framework for learning that promotes collaboration and cross-disciplinary planning. It aims to help learners build connections across their learning and combine different experiences, knowledge and skills. There are limited references to transitions in the new curriculum guidance, and where it is discussed, it primarily relates to primary-secondary transition. The guidance states that learners should be involved in the transition process as much as possible, and that learners should be assessed within six weeks of entering a setting to support understanding of learners' journeys and tailor learning and teaching.<sup>21</sup>

'Community Schools' have been integral to the Welsh Government's educational approach since devolution in 1997. ESTYN also highlight the positive impact that family and community engagement can have on 'the success of all children in the school, particularly those who are disadvantaged by poverty.'<sup>22</sup> In June 2022, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles MS, made it clear that tackling the impact of poverty on attainment was his number one priority. In a keynote speech, the Minister set out a whole system approach being developed by Welsh Government which aimed to enable all children to achieve high standards and aspirations.<sup>23</sup>

In 2011 Wales became the first country in the UK to make the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) part of its domestic law. Children and young people have 42 rights under the UNCRC.<sup>24</sup> The rights are broad and encompassing, ensuring children have what they need to grow up happily, healthily, and safely. Specifically in relation to poverty and transitions, they include children's right to have a say on matters that affect them (Article 12), the right of every child to a standard of living adequate

for the child's development (Article 27) and that respect should be given to the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents (Article 5).

Approaches that support the engagement of parents and communities in learning is an area of national policy focus, cemented as a priority by the introduction of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) in 2012. The PDG sought to specifically improve outcomes for learners eligible for free school meals and Looked After Children.<sup>25</sup> In 2016, the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant was introduced specifically to reduce the impact of poverty on attainment for 3–4-year-olds, as an extension of the pre-existing Pupil Deprivation Grant.

Flying Start is Welsh Government's targeted Early Years programme for families with children under 4 years of age, living in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Wales. The core elements of the programme are drawn from evidence of interventions that demonstrate positive outcomes for children and their families. These include, free quality, part-time childcare for 2–3-year-olds, enhanced health visiting services, parenting support, and support for speech, language and communication. Useful guidance exists to support the process of transition for children accessing flying start provision<sup>26</sup>, but the guidance is not widely understood and transitions between early years and statutory provision remains problematic.

There is a strong link between what Welsh Government recognises as valuable, and what is recognised as good practice in schools in relation to educational transitions. Despite this there currently isn't any specific practice or policy guidance on early-years transitions in Wales. Occasional guidance is published as part of ESTYN's thematic reviews, however this usually focusses on children with Additional Learning Needs or the primary to secondary transition.<sup>27</sup>

# THE VOICE OF THE CHILD

have their views considered, and taken seriously, particularly in decisions that affect them.



CHILD

*"I was a bit nervous and scared....because I was scared of the other children... ...I feel happy now...because I've met my friends."*



CHILD

*"Big bells might hurt my ears"*

Children's right to be heard under Article 12 of the UNCRC is the foundation for children's participation. Participation is an individual child's right, but also a working method that is cross-cutting, permeating all themes and contexts. Children's rights are at the heart of everything we do at Save the Children, and shifting power to children and families is central to our UK strategy.<sup>28</sup> Welsh Government have also taken a lead in promoting children's rights, basing their approach on a commitment to the principles of the UNCRC.<sup>29</sup> Children's rights are enshrined in Welsh law under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011, which underlines the commitment in Wales to listening to children. This means ensuring children have opportunities to express their views, feelings and wishes, and

It makes sense to listen to children; if we want to understand how to best support them through transitions, then we need to ask children what's important to them. That's why the foundation for this project was a series of workshops with children who were about to start or have recently started school or nursery. Through the workshops, we wanted to facilitate children's involvement in decision-making in matters that concerned them. The remainder of the report outlines what was developed by schools and nurseries as a result of their engagement with children and parents.

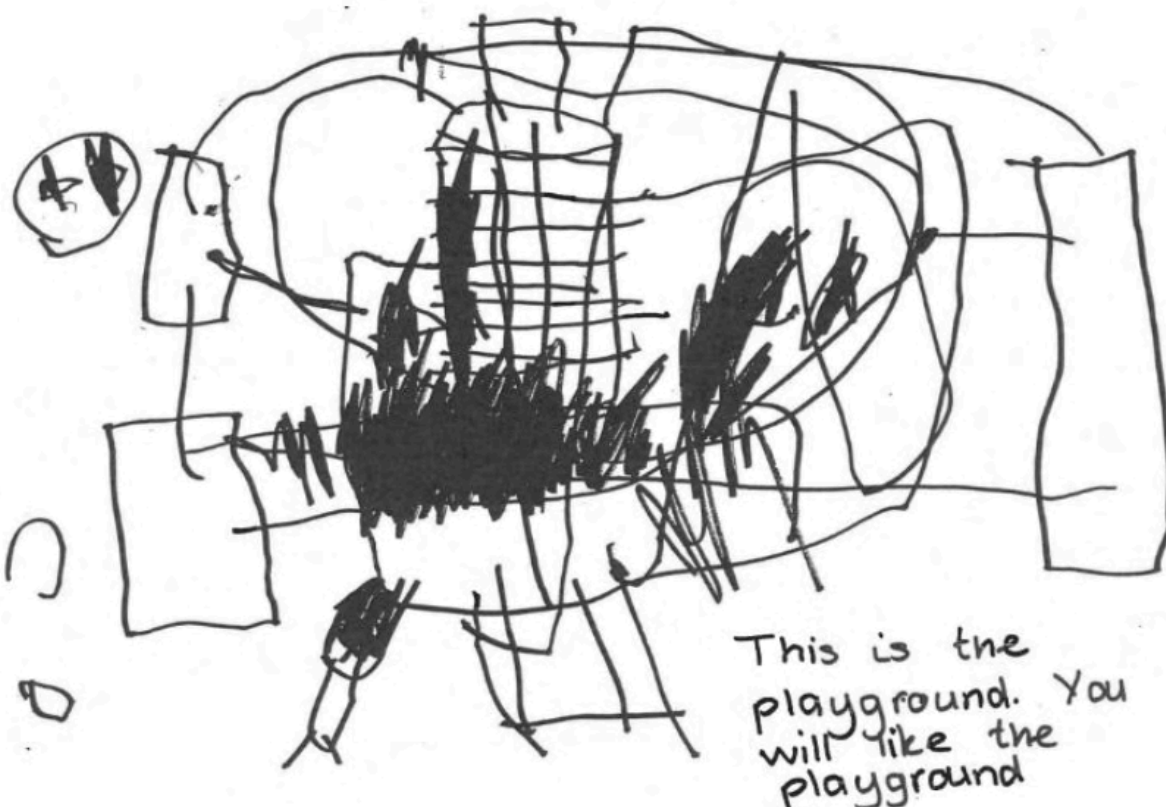


Photo: Child's drawing during activity session | Save the Children







# SECTION TWO:

## TOOLS & TECHNIQUES FOR SUPPORTING THE EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PHASE

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ANALYSIS

An overarching goal of Starting Strong was to facilitate parental engagement with children's learning at the early years transition phase. We know that where parents take an active role in their children's learning at home and in the community, children do better in school and are more positive about learning. This is the case regardless of family income, so that parental engagement in children's learning is a key lever for change, particularly in communities and families experiencing low income. The earlier relationships with parents are built, the more likely it is that parents are engaged in their children's learning. The project attempted to ensure that parental engagement was encouraged at the earliest opportunity.

One of the key objectives of Starting Strong was to share good parental engagement practice, specifically in relation to families experiencing poverty who face multiple barriers to engaging with their children's learning. Settings placed an emphasis on testing activities that suited their demographic. The activities and their implementation are therefore particularly suited to engage families experiencing poverty who may find it more difficult to engage as they experience multiple barriers.

The schools and nurseries that took part in Starting Strong were asked to provide case studies following a simple template provided by Save the Children. A total of 18 settings provided feedback. Some of the case studies were very detailed, others a shorter summary of the activities settings offered as part of Starting Strong. Case studies were analysed to identify different categories of transition activities.

### CATEGORISING ACTIVITIES

The objectives of Starting Strong in relation to settings were to identify and share best practice, which this chapter attempts to do. It also aimed to enable systems to work better together and to address this, we have specifically included case studies where a systems approach was taken. The project also aimed to build good relationships between parents and settings, and to break down existing barriers. For children, the project aimed to ensure that they started education confident and with a positive attitude towards school or nursery. There are therefore 4 places or domains where outcomes were intended:

- Children
- Parents
- Settings
- The System

Transition activities may serve different functions and impact different domains. The functions of activities are:

- Providing information
- Building relationships
- Providing resources
- Building skills
- Changing attitudes
- Consulting and co-designing

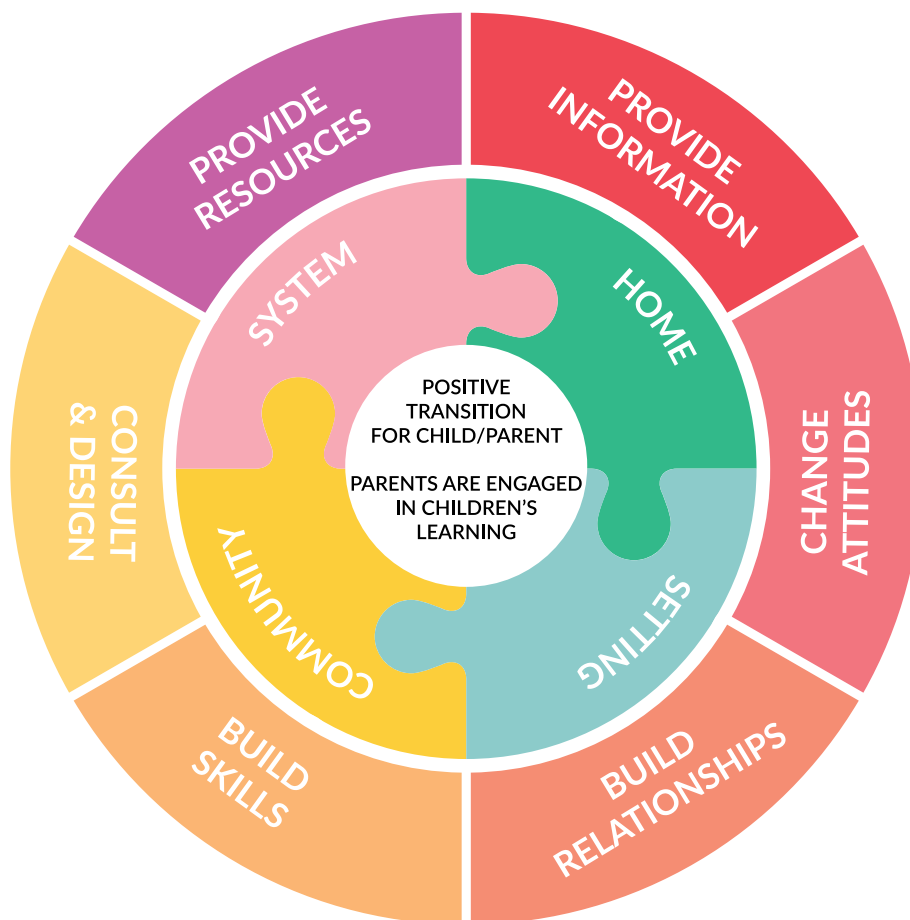
At a basic level, building relationships and providing information are a necessary basis for higher levels of parental engagement and thus need to be built first. This includes fostering an understanding in both settings and families of why parental engagement is important and the impact it can have on a child's learning and attitude to learning. Moreover, parents need to feel confident in their own abilities to support their children's learning. Information and relationship building can support building this confidence as a foundation that can then be developed further. Higher level parental engagement activities can then build on this solid foundation, such as providing resources, building skills of parents and staff, consulting with parents, co-designing activities with parents and changing attitudes of parents, children, settings, and systems. Each activity may serve more than one function. The domains that activities may impact on are:

- Home (parent and child)
- Setting (nursery and school)
- Community (wider local community)

- System (changes to the wider system supporting children)

Each activity may impact on one or more domains.

The analysis below identifies which activity supports which of these functions so that settings are enabled to choose activities that enhance their current parental engagement practice or contribute to taking their existing practice to the next level.



## THE ACTIVITY TABLE

Each transition activity may impact on one or more of these domains and take on one or more functions and we have tried to identify this in an overview table. For the purpose of explaining the activity, we have focused on the main function. However, it will be apparent that individual activities can be adapted by adding elements that impact on additional domains and that take on additional functions. Similarly, it is easy to combine activities in one event: for example an open day at the school can be combined with gifting, providing information and inviting local services in to raise awareness of what is available locally. We hope that this chapter will help settings to identify this and to enable them to plan for and develop transition activities that suit their particular circumstances.

The table is also useful in considering and developing future activities. For example, often activities are leaning towards provision of information and building relationships. Settings and systems may recognise that this is working

well but that other domains are not (yet) well represented and decide to focus on these or add elements of that domain to existing activities. In principle, any activity can be adapted to include elements of every domain and function. The table is meant to help consider how this might be done. Similarly, where the information flow is predominantly school to parent, settings may explore if they can develop reciprocal information flows. In this way, the table and description of activities can be used as a tool for analysing and enhancing or developing practice in individual settings and we hope that it is useful for this purpose.

Where the activity involves “minimal” parental engagement, this is not a value judgement; it might be the correct initial activity for parents who are new to the setting. As relationships are slowly developed, activities can move towards a greater engagement of parents in the life of the school, the learning of their children, and even in the design and co-production of future activities, as a natural progression.

	Provide Information	Build Relationships	Provide Resources	Build Skills	Consult, Design, Partner	Change Attitudes	Setting	Home	Community	System	Minimal	Receiving	Giving	Reciprocal	Co-designing
School Handbook	✓						✓	✓			✓	✓			
Top tips leaflet	✓							✓			✓	✓			
Getting ready for school leaflet	✓							✓			✓	✓			
Webpage	✓						✓				✓	✓			
Book about starting school	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			✓	✓			
Parent questionnaire	✓	✓					✓	✓					✓		
All about me	✓	✓					✓	✓					✓		
Class Dojo; seesaw	✓	✓					✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
Email list of parents							✓				✓	✓			
Photos of staff	✓	✓					✓	✓			✓	✓			
School or nursery tour	✓	✓				✓	✓				✓	✓			
Parent and child lunch in dining hall	✓	✓					✓					✓			
Information about local initiatives	✓		✓						✓	✓	✓	✓			
10 min slot for parent/child	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓						✓	
Taster session	✓	✓				✓	✓					✓			
Phone calls, email		✓					✓	✓			✓			✓	
Coffee morning/open evening	✓	✓				✓	✓		✓			✓		✓	
Stay and play	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
Home visit		✓		✓		✓		✓						✓	
Meet the teacher		✓				✓	✓					✓			
Open door policy		✓			✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	
Buddy system		✓				✓	✓				✓				
Open day	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓								
Transition workshops		✓				✓	✓					✓		✓	
Reception teachers visit nursery		✓					✓			✓	✓			✓	
Nursery teachers/children visit school		✓					✓			✓	✓				
Nursery teacher forum/catch up	✓	✓					✓		✓	✓					
Teddy bear picnic		✓				✓	✓		✓			✓			
Relationship based play sessions		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	
Outdoor activities		✓		✓			✓		✓			✓		✓	
Involve other professionals in activities		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓		✓	
Adult learning opportunities		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	
After school book club		✓		✓			✓		✓					✓	
Regular family engagement sessions		✓		✓			✓							✓	
Book gifting with arts and crafts activity		✓	✓	✓				✓				✓			
Community group		✓					✓		✓					✓	
Parenting sessions		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	
Emotional coaching		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓		✓	
Baby massage/club		✓		✓			✓	✓				✓			
Workshops for parents		✓		✓		✓	✓					✓			
Forest school sessions		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓					✓	
Parental engagement programme				✓			✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
Training for staff				✓		✓	✓			✓	✓				
Swap shop for school supplies (uniform, dressing up days)			✓				✓		✓					✓	
Cosy packs		✓	✓				✓	✓			✓	✓			
Food bank			✓						✓			✓	✓		
Dedicated staff (FEO)			✓		✓		✓					✓		✓	✓
Dedicated room			✓			✓	✓							✓	✓
Parental Partnership Strategy				✓	✓		✓			✓					✓
Consult with parents to plan future transition activities					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
Free flow between nursery and reception classroom		✓			✓		✓				✓				
Welcome display	✓	✓				✓	✓				✓	✓			
Staff at school gate	✓	✓				✓	✓							✓	



# PROVIDE INFORMATION

This section describes activities that schools and early years settings engaged in which have the primary function of providing information. The flow of information can be either from school to home, or from home to school, or a combination of the two. It is noteworthy that while it is easy to compile and share information, information is better received if connected with an activity that builds relationships or where this information is provided through a relational interaction. It is however easy to combine activities that provide information with those that build and develop relationships.

## SCHOOL HANDBOOK

Settings develop an information booklet with all relevant information about the school. This can be handed out in physical form or be made available as a digital download. It can also be handed out at other transition activities and form a basis for parental questions. The school handbook can collate all relevant information in one place. Some of the other initiatives may give inspiration for including specific items in a school handbook.

There is a risk that the school handbook is a long and wordy document which, while ideal as a point of reference, may not be read or retained in its entirety.

It provides information in one direction from school to parent.

Its main function is to provide information.

It impacts mainly on the school.

## TOP TIPS LEAFLET/GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL LEAFLET

This is a short leaflet for parents with specific tips for starting school. It is easily digestible and may lend itself for visual elements that are accessible. It is tangible and could be included in the school handbook.

It provides information in one direction from school to parent.

Its main function is to provide information.

It impacts on both home and school domain.

## WEBPAGE

A school webpage provides online information and can also host other pieces of information such as the school handbook or leaflets. Webpages have functionalities for regular updates. There is potential to link webpages to other activities and to use it to promote activities.

It provides information in one direction from school to parent.

Its main function is to provide information.

It mainly impacts on the school domain by ensuring parent is informed about the school.



Photo: Sara Drysdale | Save the Children

## BOOK ABOUT STARTING SCHOOL

This is a book gifted to the family that parent and child can share. It helps the child to understand and have a positive attitude to starting school and encourages a parent and child to talk about the transition to school. As a gifted resource, there is an additional element of surprise and connection which can be a foundation for more relational activities.

It provides information in one direction from school to parent and child.

$$1+1=2$$

Its main function is to provide information. It has a minor function of building relationships. It impacts on the home.

## PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

A parent questionnaire provides the school with information about the child and the family. This can help to start to get to know the family and help to start building relationships.

Its function is to provide information from a family to the school.

It impacts mainly on the school domain.



## ALL ABOUT ME

This is a form of a questionnaire that the child can complete, with help of the parent. It gives the teacher/school information about the child which will help to be aware of likes and dislikes and enable a tailoring of resources, engagement, and teaching to the child. It can also help start to build a relationship with the child but may also help with the foundations of a relationship with a parent. It gives an opportunity for a parent and child to explore the school start but also to engage in an activity that by design fosters connection.

Its function is to provide information from a family to the school (in relation to the child).

Its impact is on the school and home domain.

## CLASS DOJO / SEESAW

Class Dojo and Seesaw are applications that allow for technologically enhanced communication between parents and school. Its functionality allows for engaging content and potentially a two-way communication. It can share what children have done at school, give ideas for activities at home and much more. Unlike other activities in the “providing information” function, it offers reciprocal communication, is responsive and at the cusp of building relationships. It relies on parents being digitally included.

Its function is mainly to provide information although it may also be a tool to build relationships. Information can flow reciprocally.

Its impact is on the school and home domain in the main but there is potential for wider impact.



## PARENT

*“The apps were great...I was able to see photos of my child”*

## EMAIL LIST/PHONE NUMBER LIST OF PARENTS

Compiling a list of contact details enables the school to communicate to the parent by phone or email. This can be useful to promote other activities through a group call, as well as support other activities where a phone call or email contact would be useful. It is worth considering who is included and who is not included in such lists, how certain technologies are used and if the route for contact works for all parents.

Its function is to provide information from school to parent, although in theory there is capacity for reciprocity.

Its impact is on the school domain.

## PHOTOS OF STAFF

Photos of staff were provided in different locations to make connections easier. Some schools provided photos in the school handbook, others in the welcoming area. It's worth considering which location is most suitable for parents.

Its main function is to provide information. It sits in the school domain.



# MEETING ON THE GROUND: TED AND NORA'S STORY

The following case study is taken from an interview with a mother who recently had two children transition into primary school. The transition activities were organised as part of place-based work in the Bettws Early Learning Community.

With Ted we didn't live here, from the age of 2 he had to go to a private nursery, and he was screaming in tears, it was absolutely horrible but I had to leave him because I had to work. When we moved here, it was like a summer or so before he had to go into reception and I don't know what the difference was, maybe because he was older or he was looking forward to going to school.

I was expecting the tears, I was expecting the crying because me and my little boy had spent the whole summer together because I wasn't working. I don't know what changed maybe like his age, maybe I did prepare him somehow.... he just did it himself, he was ready for school. I told him, you're going to be going to school. I knew that he'd be fine without me the entire day because I had to have full nursery cover, about 7 hours a day he had to be away from me, especially at two years old, but needs must unfortunately. So I knew time-wise he'd be fine without me it was just that initially getting him in, but no he decided I'm not going to be shy I'm going to be good so whatever I said to him, telling him about school and everything I'm not really sure what happened. It was amazing, I was very, very lucky with him.

He did get to meet his teacher once, I think we went into the classroom once. They do some sort of meet and greet with the parents and the children to see the classroom, to see the teachers. His first teacher, well all his teachers have been amazing.

With Nora, when I applied for the nursery spot, after Covid happened, they did a home visit, so they met her on her ground, as they put it. I thought that was really nice actually, because the child can meet them in a safe space. You get to ask questions, the kids can show them their toys that kind of thing, which they did. I think it's a good ice-breaker, so when they see them in school they know that they've been in a safe

space, and link them with a safe space. That kind of thing, if a school doesn't do that, definitely they should.

[The teachers] They're all amazing. When I pick them up, they're always happy to chat, any problems they're happy to speak to you about anything. They've been great, I've not had a bad experience with them yet.

Impact-wise because it was all positive it's not really impacted us much. I mean if it had been negative, a lot of stress would have come into it and the kids wouldn't have been happy and that kind of thing so I'm just so glad it happened the way it did.

\*Pseudonyms have been used in the above extract

## INFORMATION ABOUT LOCAL INITIATIVES

Some schools provided information about local initiatives. This supports the school linking in with the community and for the family, to see the school as a community of support. There are many ways of providing this information – it can be done as part of a school tour, other events and also be included on the website or on Dojo/ Seesaw. Representatives of local initiatives can be involved in transition activities to expand this approach beyond the provision of information to relationship building.

This activity provides information but may be extended to build relationships.

It has the potential to impact on the home, school, system, and community.

## SCHOOL OR NURSERY TOUR

A school or nursery tour offers an opportunity to parent and child to see the setting and the different rooms before the child starts school. It can give an opportunity for the parent and child to meet the class teacher, head teacher, other staff and to find out about the school culture, activities and values in an informal way. It can remove a barrier of entering the school or nursery building. With parents and staff engaging during the visit, this is both an opportunity to provide information in a reciprocal way but also to start building relationships.



Its main function is to provide information although it may also start building relationships.

Its impact is on the school and the home domain.



## PARENT AND CHILD LUNCH IN DINING HALL

Similar to a school visit, this allows both parent and child to gain an insight into how part of the school day looks. It directly helps the child familiarise themselves with the lunchtime routine, and helps the parent support their child with this routine. It shows the parent the school set up and gives an opportunity to experience part of the school day together. It is possible to combine this activity with information provision as well as a school tour or meeting relevant staff.

The main function is to provide information although it also builds relationships.

Its impact is on the home domain.

## SHORT MEETING BETWEEN TEACHER/HEAD TEACHER FOR PARENT/CHILD

This activity provides a one-to-one opportunity for families to get to know either the headteacher or the class teacher. It is an opportunity for a reciprocal exchange of information as well as allowing a first step towards building relationships. The suggested time was 10 minutes, but this is of course flexible. It could be combined with other activities.

Its main function is to provide information

although it also starts to build relationships. It's an opportunity for reciprocal information exchange.

It impacts mainly on the school domain.

## TASTER SESSION

A taster session gives parent and/or child an opportunity to experience a typical lesson. This can help break down barriers, help parents understand how teaching is approached and has the potential of building trust between parent and school or nursery. It also nurtures interest in children's learning which may make it easier for parents and children to talk about their school day.

Its main function is to provide information although it also builds relationships. It impacts on the home domain.

## CASE STUDY: BETTWS EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITY, NEWPORT

**Context:** Bettws Early Learning Community (BELC) in Newport is a partnership between Save the Children, local professionals, organisations, schools and families working together to ensure children in the area get the support they need to have the best possible start in life. The Bettws area has been categorised as one of the most underserved in Wales with the number of children living in low-income families is above the Wales average of 20.5% and in two areas of Bettws, this reaches over 40%, twice the Welsh average.

BELC uses a systems approach to tackle the root causes of why children start school unprepared to learn, bringing partners together around a shared vision to address the challenges within Bettws as a place. BELC has strong relationships between partners, who can discuss and challenge each other about the challenges they face. By building trust across settings, they have been able to successfully work together on cross-organisational delivery within the community.

**What was done:** The key settings in BELC (Chuckles Nursery, Millbrook Primary School, Monnow Primary School, Ysgol Gymraeg Ifor Hael, Flying Start North Hub, Aneurin Bevan Speech



and Language) came together as a workstream to develop a consistent process for sharing information and guidance around starting nursery and school. The workstream met half termly to develop a shared information process, as well

as developing their own individual transition activities which included Teddy Bears Picnics, Forest School and Home Visits. The group worked towards a whole place approach to transitions. Throughout the summer of 2021, facilitated by the BELC, Monnow School held around 22 transition Forest School sessions for the children and parents/carers who were transitioning into nursery and reception.

**Impact:** The sessions created a space for the children to play together and make friends, enabled them to get to know the teachers and the school, and created a space for the teaching staff to engage with the parents in a way that there hadn't been an opportunity to before. Staff found this broke down barriers where families were able to communicate some of their fears and concerns around their child starting school. By breaking down barriers, staff were able to go deeper into the family dynamic, identifying and referring families to additional community support where needed. Subsequently, as the children started school in September, the school noticed that children were more confident and trusting and settled well in the school routine and environment.

## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

We have brought together activities under this heading which have as their primary function to build and develop relationships between children, parents, teachers, community practitioners and others. Each activity may focus on different relationships, such as between children, between parents, between parent and school, between school and nursery, between school and community practitioners or between parents and community practitioners. In most instances, these activities are also an opportunity to provide information, yet this is not their primary function.

## PHONE CALLS, EMAILS

Phone calls and emails are a way to establish ongoing channels of communication. There is

a risk that phone calls can raise anxiety levels, so it is best employed to communicate positive feedback or information. They allow for individual contact which supports building relationships.

The main function is to build relationship although it is also used to provide information.

The impact is on the school and home domain.



### PARENT

*"Teachers need to know about what triggers cause behavioural issues"*

## COFFEE MORNING /OPEN EVENING

Coffee mornings and open evenings provide an informal opportunity for parents and staff to develop relationships. These can be used to provide information as well as to allow parents to connect with one another. The informal nature is non-threatening while the activity can serve many functions. It's sociable in nature and thus particularly suited for developing relationships.

Its function is the build relationships though it will also provide information.

It impacts on the school, home, and community domain.

## STAY AND PLAY

Stay and play involves the parent coming into the nursery to play with their child. It gives an opportunity to see their child interact with the nursery environment, get to know staff, and for the staff to get to know the parent and their way of interacting with their child. It can build trust and relationships but also helps the child to settle and see nursery and home as a continuum rather than entirely separate places. It can be difficult to accommodate for parents who work or who have other children to care for. It may cause additional stress or anxiety in the parent. Family Engagement Officers may be invited to attend to connect with families.

Its function is to build relationships. It can be a vehicle to provide information.

It impacts on the childcare setting and home.



Photo: Sara Drysdale | Save the Children

## HOME VISIT

Some settings offer a home visit before a child starts nursery or school. A home visit enables tailored sharing of information and answering questions families may have in a personalised and private way, enabling open conversations. Home visits may be conducted by Family Engagement Officers. They offer an opportunity to complete forms (and provide help in completing these where this may be a barrier for the parent), to find out about a child's likes and dislikes. It also provides an opportunity to observe the child in a familiar setting and parent child interaction at home. This in turn may make it easier to adapt activities at the nursery or school in a way that is enjoyed by the child. Initially there were concerns that parents felt scrutinised but once home visits were established as a routine activity, and with good communication as to their rationale, parents received them positively. In some schools they are offered as optional activities, in others they are offered to all families.

Its function is to build relationship and to provide an exchange of information in a reciprocal way.

It impacts on the setting.



### PARENT

*"The home visits were a really nice touch..."*

## MEET THE TEACHER - IN SCHOOL OR NURSERY

This is an opportunity for the child to meet their future teacher. This could be a meeting between child, parent and future teacher and it can take place in different locations. For example, the teacher may visit the child in the nursery, or the child may visit the future teacher at the school. It can also involve the nursery teacher taking the child to visit the school and their future teacher.

Depending on how this is conducted, the function and impact may vary: It builds relationships between child and teacher before the child starts school and may alleviate anxieties. It can also build relationships between the parent and the teacher if the parent is involved in this activity. If nursery staff are involved, it may also strengthen relationships between nursery and school. An element of gifting may be included in this activity



which in turn can be a vehicle for exchanging information. This can happen as a one-off activity or be a regular activity.

The impact is therefore also dependent on how this activity is set up. It will impact on the child and familiarise them with teachers. The impact on the school is that teachers are already familiar with the child who will be starting school. There is also an opportunity to impact on the home.

## **BUDDY SYSTEM**

Schools with a buddy system provide a buddy to their new starters, either from Year 1 or an older year group. The buddy may meet the child at the school gate and help them settle into the school routine, show them around and be available at play time and lunch time. It was also connected with informal activities for parent and child to build relationships. This means that it can then enhance relationships between parents, between children, between staff and parents and between staff and children. It is possible to combine it with other activities such as gifting, school tours etc.

The main function is to build relationship although it also provides information.

The impact is on the child, parent, setting.

## **OPEN DAY/TRANSITION WORKSHOPS**

Open days or transition workshops at the school provide an opportunity for informal and fun activities for parents and children in the new settings. It allows for connections between parents, between children, between staff and parents and between staff and children to be made. It may be combined with information sharing, gifting, and presence of services in the community.

The main function is to build relationships although it also provides information.

The impact is on the setting, the home and potentially on the community.

## **TEDDY BEAR PICNIC**

A teddy bear picnic provides a fun and engaging opportunity for children to get to know one another. It can offer a range of activities and provide a chance for staff and parents to have informal conversations. There is potential to link it with other activities such as gifting, provision of information and community practitioners could be involved too.

The function is to build relationship though other functions can be incorporated.

The impact is primarily on the child.

## **NURSERY TEACHER FORUM/ CATCH UP**

This forum enables nursery teachers from different intake nurseries to meet to create links and plan the transition with intake schools. This helps with the flow of information about children. The forum can also include health visitors, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. It helps to be more aware of the needs of children and to plan accordingly.

Its function is to build relationships between different settings and staff and to provide information about children.

Its impact is on the settings.

## **RELATIONSHIP BASED PLAY SESSIONS**

This is an activity that builds relationships with new families which can be combined with gifting play resources that continue to engage families in play activities.

Its function is to build relationships.

Its impact is on the setting and the home.

## **OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES**

One setting offered outdoor play sessions that parents were invited to during the last two weeks of term. Nursery teachers were present to guide activities and it proved an activity that was enjoyed by all involved.

Its function is to build relationships.

Its impact is on the setting, the home and potentially the community if it encourages to use

outdoor spaces more often.



## PARENT

*"It would be good to know about community led projects"*

## INVOLVE OTHER PROFESSIONALS IN ACTIVITIES

For any activity, consideration can be given to whether it would be useful to involve other professionals to foster relationships and links, as well as support school staff in developing their knowledge about parental engagement as well as specialist support. This nurtures a better collaboration across the system and may also

remove barriers for accessing other services in the community. It can also help parents gain professional support in a timely way without having to attend separate appointments. Furthermore, it is an opportunity for schools to sustain engagement and foster relationships with local professionals who can potentially provide ongoing parental engagement sessions within the school. It is not an activity as such, but an approach or add on for existing activities. This can include health or community professionals amongst others.

Its function is to build relationships and to provide information.

Its impact is on all domains.





## CASE STUDY: A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH TO PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT. ELY AND CAERAU NURSERY TEACHER FORUM, CARDIFF

**Context:** Ely and Caerau is a vibrant, historic community in the West of Cardiff. It is in the top ten most deprived communities in Wales, with high levels of child poverty and low levels of educational attainment. In 2010 the Ely and Caerau Learning Partnership Board (LPB) was set up for statutory, voluntary and community groups to come together to discuss local issues, identify barriers to educational attainment and share resources and good practice. The collaboration aims to improve the learning outcomes and well-being of children, young people and their families.

**What was done:** At the outset of Starting Strong, a Nursery Teacher sub-group was formed under the LPB. The Forum discussed and identified cross-community challenges and worked together on collaborative approaches to early-years transition. Organisations represented included Ely and Caerau Children's Centre, three local primary schools – Trelai, Millbank and Hywel Dda, Action in Caerau & Ely (ACE) and Flying Start. The forum took a participative approach, working directly with children and families to develop innovative approaches that addressed their specific needs.

The main issues identified across the community were;

1. Child poverty, particularly related to hunger and warmth
2. Social isolation and parental and child mental health following the pandemic
3. Speech, language and communication skills
4. Attendance

Transition activities were designed to support the needs of the community's families. They included teddy bears picnics, stay and play sessions, home visits and 121 phone-calls with parents. Settings invited community organisations into transition

sessions to link families to wider support available within the community, for instance dental nurses and school attendance staff.

**Impact:** The forum felt that professional dialogue and sharing good practice had helped improve the early-years transition process in the community. They decided to continue meeting and will expand their reach to include more setting and community-based staff in discussions. An ongoing aim will be to provide more opportunities for parents to be made aware of support available in the community.

## CASE STUDY: CYLCH MEITHRIN FELINFOEL, LLANELLI, CARMARTHENSHIRE

**Context:** Cylch Meithrin Felinfoel is a rural Cylch with 38 children who are two or three years old. The Cylch has five staff members and follows a family engagement scheme with the Welsh Government. The Cylch is based in a building that also houses a family centre and they are a Flying Start setting. The Cylch's aim throughout Starting Strong was to improve communication with parents and to work more closely with the different schools in the area to ensure that children had a smooth transition into primary school.

**What was done:** The Cylch used story time and puppets to prepare children for their transition into school. Transition meetings with teachers and parents were offered alongside visits to the school. There were opportunities for parents and children to ask questions about starting school. The Cylch supported children to reflect on their feelings about starting school, displaying and discussing images that expressed different feelings.

**Impact:** Parents welcomed and enjoyed the new transition activities. Coordinated visits to school helped parents and children develop familiarity with the new settings. The close partnership working between the Cylch and the school helped the school understand each child and their individual needs before they arrived on site, so that appropriate support could be put in place in a timely manner.

# PROVIDE RESOURCES

This category describes activities that provide resources for families. Resources are understood in the widest sense, and of course every activity that has been described so far could be considered as a provision of resources, as it requires the resource time of staff. Similarly, information provided to families is also a resource. However, the type of resources listed here are more explicit and may have a direct impact on reducing cost for families experiencing financial difficulties.

## SWAP SHOP FOR SCHOOL SUPPLIES (UNIFORM, DRESSING UP DAYS)

A swap shop for school supplies both reduces the cost of the school day for families and encourages sustainable practices. In fact, a focus on sustainability and reducing the carbon footprint of school supplies can reduce the stigma that may be attached to re-using school related items, a stigma that is particularly strongly felt amongst families experiencing poverty or low income. Such a swap shop can include school uniform items, and items for themed dress up days such as World Book Day, Christmas Jumper Day, or sports day outfits. An additional benefit of this activity is that it allows parents to volunteer which builds parent to parent relationships in the setting.

Its function is to provide resources, but it also builds relationships.

Its impact is on the home and community.

## BOOK GIFTING

Some settings offered a form of book gifting, either as a one-off gift or a recurring event such as the Imagination Library project, where children are gifted a book a month for the duration of two years. This ensures that every child has access to books at home which can then also be used to encourage book sharing between parent and child.



## COSY PACKS

One setting provided cosy packs for new families for the winter. Gifting builds relationships, and this pack also encouraged positive relationships at home. The contents of the cosy packs consisted of duvets, blankets, socks, hats, gloves, and heat packs.

The function is to provide resources, but it also builds relationships.

Its impact is on the home.

## FOOD BANK

Some settings operate a food bank. There may be stigma attached to using foodbanks so that a focus on reducing food waste may be useful to reduce barriers for families to make use of the school-based food bank. An advantage of offering a food bank at a school setting is that it is a location that does not involve additional travel, however it will also be more difficult to ensure privacy. An additional benefit of this activity is that it allows parents to volunteer which builds parent to parent relationships in the setting.

Its function is to provide resources and it also builds relationships.

Its impact is on the home and the community.



## DEDICATED STAFF (FEO)

Many settings have access to a dedicated Family Engagement Officer whose role it is to link with families and between the setting and the home. Such dedicated staff provides time and staffing resources as well as a practitioner who is not a teacher, which may make it easier for some families to start engaging with the setting. A Family Engagement Officer is able to dedicate the time and energy to organise activities on an ongoing basis without additional pressures on the teaching staff. They are also uniquely placed to provide links to community resources

and services. They are also able to run regular sessions that engage families, such as courses, programmes, play groups, baby massage. They are able to build relationships from birth and can signpost to other services.

Its function is to provide resources, as well as to build relationships, provide information and to build skills.

Its impact is on the home, the setting, and the community.

## DEDICATED SPACE

A dedicated space in a setting for use by parents can be a significant enabler. This could be a room that can be used ad hoc but is a multi-purpose room, or it can be a dedicated room for use by families. It signals that parents are valued and important and provides a space for activities to take place in, especially if also supported by a Family Engagement Officer.

Its function is to provide resources and it is also a function of design.

Its impact is on the setting, the home, and the community.

## CASE STUDY: PENCOED PRIMARY SCHOOL, BRIDGEND

**Context:** Pencoed Primary School is a community focused school in the town of Pencoed, near Bridgend. There are 600 pupils including 37 pupils who attend one of the four learning resource units for children with learning difficulties.

**What was Done:** A Caterpillar Club transition programme was formed to build relationships between the school, parents and the wider community. Parents were invited to join the Class Dojo app once their child's place had been confirmed in school. Home visits were offered and families were welcomed as important and valued members of the school community. The nursery teacher visited all feeder nurseries and local baby and toddler groups where they gathered information about the children to help the transition process. The new pre-school children visited the nursery class for a stay and

play session with their parents. Sessions were attended by community health visitors who could provide wider support and information. A further three sessions were offered to help parents and children focus on foundational skills to support their transition to school. This included focus on literacy skills, personal and social skills, and gross and fine motor skills.

**Impact:** When the transitions activities were evaluated, parents said that home visits had helped them to get to know the teacher on a more personal level and to build a relationship with them: "It gave me a chance to ask questions without the feeling of being rushed by other parents who also wanted to speak to the teacher." Parents also felt reassured and that the transition process was smooth and gentle: "Our twins absolutely loved meeting the school staff and other children. They talked about their teacher throughout the summer holidays and it was clear to see they felt comfortable and so happy with her." The strong relationships built with parents meant that individual needs were better met and that support could be accessed early.

## BUILD SKILLS

This chapter compiles activities which develop or build skills of either parents or staff. This may relate directly to the school setting or go beyond it. As with other activities, there is an opportunity to link the primary function with secondary functions, such as building relationships, providing resources or information. It can also support consultation and co-design, or be a result of consultation and co-design.

## ADULT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Some settings offered adult learning opportunities for parents. This initiative helps establish the school as a community for both parents and children. It provides links with community practitioners and thus also works towards a systems change approach, fostering collaboration. Parents could be involved in choosing and developing adult learning opportunities; however this necessitates that a relationship of trust between school and parents has already been developed to be successful.

Its function is to build skills.

Its impact is on the home domain, with secondary impact on the setting and community.

## **AFTER-SCHOOL BOOK CLUB**

This is an informal activity for parents to talk about books they have read. It is not as such linked to the normal school day but supports building a sense of belonging, community, and peer support. It establishes the school as a place where the community can come together in general.

## **REGULAR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS**

These were regular sessions in the nursery setting where parents and children can engage in themed activities together. They can model engagement in children's play and learning which could have a positive impact on the home learning environment, while making engagement with settings a regular and normal occurrence. The impact is on the home, with secondary impact on the setting.

## **BOOK GIFTING WITH ARTS AND CRAFTS ACTIVITY**

Many settings used gifting activities to engage families. This could be through gifting books and associated activities, or other gifts related to play and early learning or that support positive parent child relationships. Gifting bestows value on the person receiving the gift and builds social reciprocity, making engagement more likely, changing attitudes, and strengthening relationships. The impact of small gifting gestures cannot be underestimated. This activity can easily be combined with other activities.

The function is to build skills, to build relationships and to provide resources.

## **COMMUNITY GROUP**

One setting set up a community group which was attended by health visitors, CAHMS and nurture group practitioners. This helped break down barriers and provide information of what services are available locally and how they can support

families. As an informal group, this was less threatening than formal referrals.

The function is to build skills and develop relationships.

The impact is on the home, setting, community.

## **PARENTING SESSIONS/ WORKSHOPS FOR PARENTS**

These workshops or sessions were aimed at parents and provide information that supports parents in their role. They can also demonstrate how schools teach or show how a child spends their day at schools. This can be linked with offering ideas how to incorporate school learning in everyday activities at home.

Its function is to build skills and to develop relationships.

Its impact is on the home and the setting.

## **PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME**

Parental engagement programmes specifically enhances parental engagement practice of schools while also equipping parents with tools to support early learning through play-based activities. Both parent and child may attend such programmes.

Its function is to develop skills and build relationships.

Its impact is on the home and the setting. There may be impact on the community domain too.

## **BABY MASSAGE/CLUB**

Some settings offered a baby club or baby massage. This meant that parents could be engaged very early on while also having an opportunity to take part in activities that support parent-child relationships and interactions. It was also seen as useful for parents who have children of different ages where one child might attend the nursery/school, while the younger sibling can benefit from the baby club activities.

Its function is to build skills and develop relationships.

Its impact is on the home.



## FOREST SCHOOL SESSIONS

One setting offered transition sessions in a forest school throughout the summer weeks where children and parents transitioning into nursery and reception could take part in. This helped children make friends prior to starting in a new setting. They were also able to get to know teachers and staff, while staff were able to informally engage with parents in different ways. Parents were also able to connect with other parents. Forest school sessions are also particularly suited to engage fathers.

## TRAINING FOR STAFF

Some settings offered training for staff that increased the capacity to meet the needs of individual pupils ahead of them starting in a new setting. Staff training could also be used to support transition initiatives, such as ensuring that parental engagement and parents' contribution to children's learning is valued and encouraged throughout the setting. It could also be used to enable staff to deliver specific programmes that aim to increase parental engagement in children's learning.

## CASE STUDY: PARC PRIMARY SCHOOL, TREORCHY, RHONDDA CYNON TAF

**Context:** Parc Primary is a rural school of 213 pupils with Flying Start provision on site. The school has an established, strong relationship with the community. School staff encourage the community to use the school as a resource and to take part in activities, workshops and adult learning programmes.

**What was Done:** The Family Engagement Officer conducted home visits before children started nursery, providing information and supporting families to complete documents. School and nursery staff worked together to meet the needs of individual children. This included organising staff visits to nursery settings to build relationships with the children in advance of them starting. The Family Engagement Officer organised whole-family transition workshops where parents had the chance to take part in

activities and get to know one another and the school. After the children had started school, coffee mornings were organised to give parents the opportunity to meet again and give feedback to the school. Communication was supported through parentmail, phone calls and class dojo. A baby club was set-up to foster relationships between the school and families at the earliest opportunity.

**Impact:** The transition activities have established stronger engagement between families and the school. Staff felt that they had a better understanding of the home environment and families while parents reported that their knowledge of the school had improved. Both parents and children reported that their confidence in relation to starting school had increased and that they felt reassured and part of the school community. Parc Primary's future plans include establishing an after school book club for parents and children, offering adult learning opportunities, and increasing awareness of support that the school can offer, including referrals, foodbank vouchers and emotional learning support.

## CONSULT AND DESIGN

This category describes activities where parents take a role of actively shaping parental engagement practice at settings. This is generally not the first activity but could be a goal to work towards for settings. It includes consultation of parents all the way to working in equal partnership with parents and co-designing transition activities. In addition, this category also includes elements of design that enable transition activities.

## PARENTAL PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY

A setting may wish to develop a parental partnership strategy which provides a values-based expression of intent. This strategy may or may not be developed in consultation or co-production with parents. It ensures that the whole settings shares values and practices in relation to parental engagement.

Its impact is primarily on the setting.

## CONSULT WITH PARENTS TO PLAN FUTURE TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

Schools consult with parents to identify which transition activities were useful and how these could be improved in the future. This activity relies on initial transition activities having been rolled out and having achieved a critical level of parental engagement.

Its impact is on the setting, home, and community.

## FREE FLOW BETWEEN NURSERY AND RECEPTION CLASSROOM

This is a particular design intervention that breaks down barriers for children between the nursery class and the reception class. It helps to make children feel more comfortable and confident about their transition to formal schooling.

Its impact is on the child.

Its function is design (of space).

## CASE STUDY: COEDFFRANC PRIMARY, NEATH PORT TALBOT

**Context:** Coedffranc is a large school of 423 pupils, with 60 children attending the nursery. The school has strong established links with the 'Little People' pre-school provision, which is situated next to the school, and broad links with other organisations in the community. The school has a full time Family Engagement Officer (FEO) who works with children and families across the school, as well as from birth within the local community.

**What was done:** The school set out to build on positive progress already made through focus on early-intervention and building relationships with families. Two family transition sessions were organised on the school site in collaboration with nursery staff, the FEO and staff from Little People. Families received a 'starting nursery pack' which included information on child development and were offered a home visit.

**Impact:** The sessions were well attended, families embraced the opportunity to view and explore the setting, take part in activities and ask questions. Staff started to build constructive relationships with new families. Many parents also welcomed information to support specific aspects of child development. Since starting Nursery, the children have transitioned positively. Children receive a monthly story book accompanied by ideas for home learning. Families have access to a variety of parenting programmes and attend learning through play sessions which are run by the FEO and supported by a Nursery Teaching Assistant. The Nursery continues to offer support and advice to families alongside an 'open door' policy.

## CHANGE ATTITUDES

This category compiles interventions which in the main contribute to changing attitudes of school staff, parents, or children. Naturally, many other activities may also contribute to changing attitudes and often this is a slow process. It can be a barrier for families when the school is perceived as different to their own experience – schools can be seen as middle class, establishment institutions in particular by families who are not part of this social group. Conversely, schools may view parents as "other" and promote consciously or unconsciously to maintain a distance. This category is about initiatives that break down attitudes on either side to work towards a whole school community where everyone is respected, and settings and families work in partnership for their children.

## WELCOME DISPLAY

A welcome display at the school door can signal that parents are welcome and a valued member of the school community.

## STAFF AT SCHOOL GATE

Teaching staff are available at the start and/or end of the school day to speak to parents. This gives an opportunity for informal conversations and breaks down the barrier where parents may feel excluded from school (in comparison to nurseries where they are able to enter a playroom).

Its function is to change attitudes and to build

relationships. Information may be exchanged reciprocally as well.

## OPEN DOOR POLICY

Similarly, an open door policy invites parents to engage with the school informally and to feel that it is a space that they are allowed and welcome to be in.

## CASE STUDY: GELLI PRIMARY SCHOOL, RHONDDA CYNON TAF

**Context:** Gelli is a community primary school based in the village of Pentre in the South Wales valleys. The school has high levels of free school meals and supports a high percentage of children with additional learning needs. The early years transition phase has always been a challenge as the school doesn't have direct linked pre-school provision, but instead works with numerous different providers within and outside the area.

**What was done:** Gelli set out to build a new early years transition process, building links with families and the community and helping alleviate children and families' anxieties around starting school. The school held different family and child events and offered home visits to share information and familiarise parents and children with school staff. School staff also visited pre-school settings to meet the children in an environment that was familiar to them, and to obtain important information about the children's needs, wants, likes and dislikes from early years key workers who knew them well.

**Impact:** Taking a broader community-based approach to the early years transition phased meant the school was able to improve how the school, families and the community worked together around the needs of the child. This was especially important and helpful in achieving a continuum of education as described in the Additional Learning Needs Bill. All of the families who came to the transitions activities chose Gelli for their child's nursery placement. The school continues to build on the positive relationships developed through the transition sessions with ongoing engagement with parents and community organisations.

## ENABLERS

This section aims to outline some common enablers that settings shared as supporting the parental engagement practice in relation to the transition from nursery to Reception. These are more general practices that can be incorporated into or help select and develop specific activities.

## BUILDING LINKS

Building links between settings, or with different practitioners and professionals was seen as enhancing transition activities. This includes linking between nursery providers and school settings, and linking up with other services available in the community. It facilitates collaboration and a systems change approach, but also helps to remove barriers to accessing services that parents may experience.

## FOSTERING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL

Fostering a positive attitude to school is crucial in sustained parental engagement that can be built on as time at primary school progresses. There are many ways of achieving this and keeping it in mind as an overarching goal can help design activities that contribute to this. This positive attitude includes both parents and children. Where children enjoy the transition activities, they are more likely to approach school in a positive way which ensures an effective learning environment. Where parents have a positive attitude to school, they feel more able to engage with children's learning but will also reflect this attitude to their child. This can have a lasting impact on learning outcomes.

## FUN ACTIVITIES

Transition activities which are fun for both parent and child and informal work best. They engage families in a non-threatening way and build positive relationships. Play based activities are working well in this respect.

## ADVANCE PLANNING

Many settings stressed that advance planning of transition activities was necessary. Similarly, starting transition activities earlier in the year was seen to be beneficial, rather than accumulating them at the end of term which is already a very busy time for settings.

## INVOLVEMENT OF FAMILIES IN INITIATIVES

Transition activities were most successful and well received where families were involved in their planning and implementation. This can take the form of consultation, volunteering in the implementation, or reviewing activities. Parents could also be involved by leading some activities where they have skills to contribute or in the development of new activities. Families can also be involved in school improvement.

## FAMILIARITY OF ENVIRONMENT AND STAFF

Where families were familiar with staff and the environment, they felt it was easier to engage with settings. Transition activities can thus take a format that is initially informal and non-threatening but provides first touch points that can develop such familiarity. Presence of key staff at such opportunities would be helpful, or the Family Engagement Officer can act as an intermediary.

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT OFFICER

A dedicated FEO is a significant enabler as they have the capacity and role to focus on engaging and building relationships with families, as well as developing partnerships in the wider community with a view to integrating services. They can provide information on resources in the community, signpost and develop activities, including in co-production with families. They can engage with families in a less formal way while also providing practical and financial support for parents affected by poverty. FEOs may also have specific skills and training to support families experiencing poverty or trauma. Their link to the community puts them into a unique role to link the whole system around families and enable access beyond the school setting. However, there is also a risk that where settings rely on FEOs for their parental engagement, this misses out on the benefit of a whole settings approach to parental engagement.

## AWARENESS

This is a wide reaching if somewhat undefined enabler. Where staff understand and have an awareness of what parents find difficult, or what the children's home environment looks like, it

makes it much easier to build relationships and respond to needs. Similarly, it is helpful for staff to be aware of children's needs, likes and dislikes which can help tailor teaching in a way that ensures it is a positive experience for all children. For parents, it is helpful to have an awareness of what happens during a normal school day, who the teachers are, what the school environment looks like. Being aware of existing support networks, groups and services in the community is of value to parents but also to school staff. Many activities contribute to this general sense of awareness, and this is something that can be built on easily. Above all, being aware alleviates anxieties of the unknown for children and families. It can reassure and build confidence.



## PARENTS FEEL WELCOME AND VALUED

Where parents feel welcome in the setting, they are more likely to engage. Ensuring that parents feel welcome and valued is more than just a tokenistic mindset but involves proactive and sustained initiative. The gains are significant: it can help break down barriers, enable parents to ask questions, and build parental engagement on a positive relationship and attitude to school.

## SENSE OF BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Where parents and children feel a sense of belonging to the school community, engagement will be particularly enabled. This is maybe an ultimate goal rather than an enabler because it will create a virtuous cycle of engagement which can be sustained in the medium term.



## **BARRIERS**

Settings also shared with us what they perceived to be the main barriers to organising a transition to primary school that was inclusive and a positive experience. Exploring these can be useful to create a plan to overcome them in the following transition period.

### **NOT KNOWING EARLY ENOUGH WHICH SCHOOL CHILD WILL ATTEND**

Settings fed back that a barrier to engaging families in transition activities was where they were not aware in a timely manner if a child was going to attend their setting. This makes it particularly difficult to plan transition activities that start earlier, which is seen as an enabler. This means that earlier and ongoing activities may be beneficial but potentially exclude children that are not yet known to the setting.

### **INTAKE FROM DIFFERENT NURSERIES**

Similarly, where settings had an intake from different nurseries, there may be barriers to engaging all prospective pupils and parents in transition activities. To mediate against this, some schools were proactive in engaging with all feeder nurseries.

### **DIFFERENCE IN INTAKE PROCESS**

Where schools have iterative intakes, it is more difficult to organise transition sessions on a larger scale. Planning transition sessions can be complex for settings where children start at different times of the year.

### **CONTACT DETAILS FOR ALL PARENTS**

Obtaining contact details for all parents can also be a barrier to implementing effective transition activities. It is linked partly to late awareness of which children are joining the setting. There may also be additional barriers for co-parenting families where only the contact details of one parent are held, or information is provided to the main carer.

## **ACTIVITIES THAT NEED TO BE COMPLETED AT HOME**

Settings felt that activities that need to be completed at home were problematic as it was not always possible to ensure a return. This could relate to completing questionnaires or forms but also to activities that support learning at home. A solution for this is to provide opportunities to complete forms or similar in the setting at informal events, effectively combining them with other activities. In relation to home activities that support learning, modelling these in settings and providing information as to how they support learning may be helpful. Feedback and reflection opportunities and mechanisms as to how families experienced such activities may also be helpful in providing motivation and prioritising engagement in such activities.

### **STAFF CHANGES AND STAFF TIME**

Changes in staffing can be a particular barrier in smaller settings. Similarly, transition activities are time consuming and in small settings, this relies on a small number of staff. It may be difficult for some settings to prioritise transition activities in a busy schedule. What may be helpful is a clear understanding of the long-term benefits of a positive transition experience for children in respect to higher levels of parental engagement and a more positive attitude to school and that it will work towards ensuring that children growing up in poverty have a better chance of equity in educational attainment. Where a Family Engagement Officer can support transition activities pressure on staffing is reduced. At the same time, parental engagement needs to be a whole school approach to ensure sustainability and to mitigate against overload of caseload for one individual, or parents developing a dependency on one member of staff to the detriment of wider relationships between parents and the setting.

## CASE STUDY:

# YSGOL BRYNAMAN, CARMARTHENSHIRE

**Context:** Ysgol Brynaman is a Welsh Medium primary school with 291 pupils, in Upper Brynaman, Ammanford. 26% of children are eligible for free school meals. The school is on the border of Neath Port Talbot and Carmarthen and welcomes children and families from either local authority.

**What was done:** the school worked closely with Cylch Meithrin Cwarter Bach to organise introductory transition visits for children. The sessions provided an opportunity for children to meet other children who were already in nursery and familiarise themselves with the new environment. The school also organised an open evening for families, where children and parents could meet their new teacher, familiarise themselves with the environment and ask questions. Parents who attended open days had the opportunity to share their views which were taken on board by the school and used to inform future communication and engagement with the parents. Where parents had concerns about their child's needs or abilities the school could reassure or provide additional information to help address the parents' concerns.

**Impact:** The improved focus on the early-years transition process was reflected on positively by staff and parents. There was significantly improved engagement by parents compared to previous years. Communication between the Cylch and the primary school provided an important opportunity for staff to get to know children's individual needs and preferences which helped to ease children into the new environment. In future years the settings will build on progress made by enhancing the transition sessions to include more information on the curriculum and child development

## SECTION THREE:

### FINAL WORDS

The transition into education provides a key opportunity for parents, schools, early years settings, and wider community partners to work together. We know that when all these people work in partnership, they can mitigate the impact of poverty and give children the best chance in life.

There is a need for consistent, supportive communication and dialogue between children, parents, pre-schools and schools. This 'ongoing conversation' between different people is needed to share the wealth of information about children, home life, and the school or nursery itself so that everyone can feel more prepared. It also helps to build trust and foster positive relationships between children, parents, educators and the community.

Where families have additional social or financial needs, the transition into education provides a key opportunity for education and community partners to come together to identify and target additional help in a positive, supportive environment. We know that when we help to ensure families' social and financial needs are met, we provide the building blocks on which positive education and development outcomes can be built.

The early years transition stage is the start of a vital process into education, and the relationships developed between children, parents, educators and the community at this stage will influence children's learning experiences and opportunities both now and in the future. For children whose lives are impacted by poverty, a positive experience of this process is even more essential for their future success and wellbeing.

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