



Helping Your Child Transition Back to Early Years Education and Childcare after COVID-19

A Parent's Guide: For Children Aged 6 Months to 6 Years

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Introduction

Your young child has just had months of time with you at home. For many, there have been no other caregivers outside of your own family, due to the COVID-19 guidelines & restrictions. But now as communities begin to re-open you may be facing a major transition for your family again which is heading back to your childcare/early education setting. If you imagine this change may be hard for your child after months of “just you,” you are probably right.

Remember that this is not just a regular transition back to school. Most families had to go through and manage a lot of stressors—balancing work and family demands, financial concerns, worries about illness.

Even very young children sense when there is stress, change and new routines in the household. Your child went through this period of confusing changes with you and now they are encountering yet another big transition—going back to child care but not as they knew it! Your sensitivity and patience are key ingredients for helping your child make a successful move back to their new look care setting.

This booklet provides some practical tips and advice for managing this transition with your child post-Covid.



Some common reactions you may see when your child is transitioning back



“With young children, the feelings often don’t show up blatantly and openly in an obvious way that’s easier for us to understand. They’re more likely to show up as testing behaviour, unreasonable behaviour, resistance, fragile emotions around a lot of things that don’t seem to have anything to do with this transition they’ve made.”

Helping A Child Adjust to Two Households or Other Changes in Care by Janet Lansbury

While young children may not understand the full facts or impact of COVID-19, they are sensitive to changes in their lives, routines, new education and care environments and possibly caregivers/educators. It can affect their ability to act in their usual ways and affects their emotions. Most often, young children cannot talk about their fears or distress and are more likely to express these fears or anxieties as follows:

- **Emotional Reactions:** Frequent crying; difficulty staying still; problems falling asleep and staying asleep; nightmares; clinging to their caregivers, separation anxiety, fears of being alone, asking the same question repeatedly despite knowing the answer.
- **Physical Reactions:** Bed wetting/toileting accidents, change in eating habits, change to sleep routines
- **Repetitive Play:** They may repeat over and over again what they have heard; they may try to take special care of their dolls or stuffed animals and hide or cover them.
- **Behaviour:** Some children may act out more with their behaviour by being angry, upset or aggressive. Others may become withdrawn or quieter than usual and not want to engage or behave as they usually do.
- **Developmental Regression:** Some may act like younger children, lose their toilet training, want a bottle rather than drinking from a glass as they usually did, want to eat baby food or refuse to eat, stop using their words, talk like a much younger child/engage in ‘baby talk’.

BUT REMEMBER!

For most children these reactions are a normal part of the transition process, it’s how young children deal with and adapt to change. The good news is for most children, this phase is temporary. Remember, what you can do most at this time to support them is provide nurturing, love, support and patience and you’ll find they soon return to their “big kid” behaviours.

Things you can do in advance to help prepare your child for their return to childcare

Remember that every child is different, some children settle straight away and others take longer (days or weeks). Take it at your child's own pace. By doing this you are laying the foundations for them to learn and develop healthy coping mechanisms for future life transitions and events. Here are some tips that may help you with your child's transition:

“Letting Children make some of their own choices, within reason, can be a huge help towards helping them cope.”

Marianna Pogosyan,
PhD, in “Helping Children
Through Transitions”

- **Manage your own worries.** Your worries are important. As communities re-open, you may have concerns about the safety of your child's care and education programme. Many parents are feeling this way. Talk to your child's educator and the manager to learn what procedures they are using to keep children safe and healthy. If you feel more reassured so will your child. They will be happy to share their policy with you.
- **Use pretend play to explore the new routines of child care with your toddler.** Ask your childcare service what your child's new routine/environment will look like. Take turns being the parent, child, and educator. Act out common daily routines, like saying good-bye to mammy/daddy, taking off your coat, singing songs, reading stories, having Circle Time, and playing outside.
- **Read books about child care.** If you're able to access a public library (or online stories), choose a few titles about going to child care. Talk about the story and how the characters are feeling. Ask how your child is feeling (excited, scared, worried, happy?). Check out titles like *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn, *Day I Love You All Long* by Francesca Rusackas, *Bye-Bye Time* by Elizabeth Verdick, or *Llama Llama Misses Mama* by Anna Dewdney.
- **Listen to your child's worries.** It's tempting to quickly reassure your child and move on, but when you listen and respond to children's worries, they feel safe and supported. Explain that although there will be lots of different things about their setting, point out what things will be the same too. Tell your child starting something new can bring up worries and questions and that lots of people feel that way. By doing this you are normalizing what your child may feel which makes it easier for them to talk to you if they feel worried/upset.



- **Suggest coping strategies.** When you allow your child to share their worries, you can help them think through how to deal with them. For example, if they are worried about missing you, the two of you can make a book of family photos or special keepsake to look at/hold in child-care if they feel lonely.
- **Get back into the routines of bedtimes and waking times.** The transition to child care is easier when you are not also dealing with a tired, cranky little one. In the week before your return to your child's programme, begin to use "school night" bedtimes and wake-up times so that everyone can get back into the child care routine.
- **Don't forget the basics.** Ensuring your child has a balanced diet, drinks regularly and has plenty of opportunities to play & rest is key also to helping them feel well and ready for the transition ahead.
- **Before your child starts back, ask about new systems, e.g. new drop-off routine.** Because of new health screening and sanitizing requirements, you may not be able to stay with your child to help them transition during morning drop-off. Talk to your provider about new drop-off/collection procedures or other new systems. Explain exactly to your child what will happen so they are prepared, answering any questions they may have.
- **Offer Choices.** Sometimes, children exhibit negative behaviour during new changes because they feel out of control. They are used to one routine and now may not know what to expect from day to day. Offer them choices throughout the day and give them two options.
"Which one of these books would you like to read?"
"Which one of these outfits would you like to wear today?"
"Would you like to go to the park or the library this afternoon?"
"Would you like to colour or build blocks this morning?"
- **Start the separation process in advance.** Before your child returns to childcare help them get used to separating and being apart from you. Start small by leaving them with someone else for an hour or two and build up from there. This will greatly help your child on their first morning back to childcare and make separating easier for them and you!

What you can do to help your child during their transition back to childcare

Consider the idea of having a small transition object your child can bring to childcare to help them still feel connected to you while apart. Check with your child's programme for ideas that might work for your child as a lot of the common comfort toys/soft toys won't comply with new hygiene measures. Items could include, a special bracelet (washable), a picture of you in a keyring they can attach to their bag/coat or a 'hug button' (a button or sticker) you could attach to your child's coat, bag or top. They can press this anytime they miss you and it'll send them a hug back from you. You can practice this as a new game before your child starts back in childcare.



- **Talk with your child's educator about how you soothe your child.** When educators use similar comfort methods, babies and toddlers feel more safe and "at-home" in the child care setting
- **Keep your tone positive and upbeat.** Children pick up on the reactions of the trusted adults in their lives. So try not to look worried or sad, and don't linger too long when it's time to go. Say a quick, upbeat good-bye, reassure them
- **Tell them who will collect them, and when.** Always tell your child who will collect them with age appropriate timeframes (after you have outside time/dinner time, etc.) Being on time is very important in the early transition stage back to childcare.
- **Think about creating a special good-bye routine.** E.g., you can give your child a kiss on the palm to "hold" all day long. Or, the two of you can sing a special song together before you leave. Good-bye routines are comforting to children and help them understand and prepare for what will happen next.
- **Avoid introducing any other new routines/changes during the transition programme.** Young children cannot cope with too much change altogether. Now is not the time to make any other changes at home where possible such as changing from a cot to a 'big boy/girl' bed or toilet training. Try to keep as much the same as possible with home routines and life. This will give added reassurance and comfort to your child. If you need to introduce new routines at home, try to do this before your child transitions back to childcare.

- **Allow extra time.** Give yourself extra time for the first week or so. This allows your child time to get used to the new routine and not feel rushed and you time to manage any worries or upset that you or your child may feel.
- **Plan fun activities.** If your child has something fun to look forward to or special 1:1 time with you when they get home doing a favourite game, it can help them manage and cope better during the day.
- **Talk to your child's service.** If you are worried your child is not settling well, talk to your child's educator, together you might be able to work out if there's a part of the routine or day that is not working for your child that may be able to be changed or adjusted. Remember your child's educator wants your child to settle and be happy too.
- **Listen to your gut.** We all have that parental instinct. If your gut is telling you that more is going on than the stress of your child's new routine or is taking longer than it should, listen to it! Its never a bad idea to make an apt with your local GP, PHN or community health Officer if you have ongoing concerns or worries. Your childcare provider can help direct you too.



Helpful Links/Resources to help your child understand the coronavirus and practice good personal hygiene

To help prepare your child to engage and learn new personal hygiene practices there are a number of great fun ways you can practice with your child before they start back in childcare. The key to getting your child engage with good hygiene is making them fun and interactive!

1. To Help Explain the Corona Virus to young children - the following are links designed specifically for young children

Don't Worry Little Bear! - This is a lovely story to help explain Coronavirus to children and to assure them that everything will be okay (www.earlyyearsstorybox.com). It includes a free downloadable/printable story and activities.

My Name is Corona Virus - This booklet from @mindheart.kids, Manuela Molina, offers a lovely, child friendly explanation of coronavirus and comes in various languages.

<https://www.mindheart.co/descargables>

2. Resources to Help young children engage with and understand social distancing practices

While young children are not expected to engage fully with guidelines around social distancing in childcare settings , they will need to learn and understand personal space to help stop germs spreading. The following are good resources to check out and talk to your child about in an age-appropriate way:

'While we can't hug' is a lovely video/printable story about Hedgehog and Tortoise who want to give each other a great big hug, but they're not allowed to touch.

<https://bit.ly/hug-video>

3. Resources to help young children learn the proper way to wash their hands

Raya teaches Elmo the Handwashing Song (Sesame Street)

<https://bit.ly/elmo-handwashing-song>

Washy Wash Song: How to Wash your Hands (Sesame Street)

<https://bit.ly/washy-wash-song>

A video helping children understand the importance of always washing your hands: Washing your hands the Rufus way (from Safefood). <https://bit.ly/rufus-wash-hands>

4. Resources to help young children learn the proper way to cough and sneeze

Elmo and Rosita: The right way to sneeze (Sesame Street)

<https://bit.ly/elmo-sneeze>

Play Kids' I love to learn: Cover your mouth when you cough

<https://bit.ly/play-kids-cough>



Preparing your child for Play Pods

It's a good idea to prepare your child in advance that the spaces and/or rooms in their childcare setting will now look different. Talking to your childcare provider is a good first step to understand what the new spaces will look like. Then talk to your child about these changes in a fun, positive way! Some language that may help could include:



“Your educator has made some changes to your old room to help keep everyone safe and healthy. It has a fun new name called a play pod!”

“Your play pod will be a special group of friends you get to spend all your time playing together with. Like your very own team!”

“Your play pod will have some space inside and some space outside.

You’ll do lots of fun activities like before like play, read stories, eat and relax.”

“There will be lots of different play pods, but your play pod belongs just to you and your new team of friends. None of the children from other play pods will come into your play pod and you won’t go into other children’s play pods. This helps keep everyone healthy and not spread germs.”

“You’ll have 2 educators to make sure you have a lovely time and ask questions to about your new play pod or help you with any worries.”