

Advice, support and suggestions for schools: Transition to school for new children and families during COVID-19

Remember:

- Expectations of children and their families need adjusting during times of uncertainty and instability
- Family well-being is a central aspect of transition to school
- Many families will be facing increased anxiety levels and could be experiencing worries about:
 - their own health or that of other family members; some could have experienced recent bereavement and trauma
 - finances – some could have lost jobs or had businesses which have collapsed
 - their children being ready for school when they have missed a significant part of their time at pre-school, nursery, etc.
 - how their children will cope going to school when they have been used to being with their parent(s) constantly throughout lockdown
 - how you will keep their children safe
- Families may need your understanding and support once schools do reopen to re-establish routines and to get to school on time

Adapting during COVID-19 – the coming weeks and months

It will, of course, be necessary to review your current transition processes, resources, documentation, etc. in light of the current situation.

As we are unsure when schools will open, we can only be honest about this with parents whilst reassuring them that, as the picture changes, they will be kept informed of any new plans. They will need reassuring that, should they have any questions, worries or suggestions they wish to share, you will be contactable and willing to support them.

What matters most over the coming weeks is not just the information you as a school share with prospective children and families, but all the information you glean from them. It is important as a school to consider how you will develop warm and supportive relationships with new children and their families over the coming weeks and what questions you will ask them.

Our hope is that every child and family due to start with you will feel that you have actively listened to their individual thoughts and suggestions, worries and questions prior to the start of the school year.

During these weeks and months, it is even more important that we:

- Communicate in a warm and genuine manner with all families in a way which best suits them
- Move away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach to transition

- Gain the perspectives of all children and their families on starting school and use this to inform processes and communications -

https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/field/pdf/2019/6/7/child-and-family-perspectives_0.pdf

- Provide support to parents during and following transitions -
<https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/field/pdf/2019/6/12/Supporting%20parents.pdf>
- Be prepared to share with your children and families a few facts about yourself, your likes and dislikes, hobbies, pets, favourites thing to do, places you like to visit, etc.
- Value and celebrate all children and their families, recognising the positives and the potential of each and every one – it is our job to find, celebrate and use these to inform our practice, provision and planning
- Ask about and listen to parents hopes and dreams for their child and give them opportunities to share any worries or concerns
- Strive to find out about, understand and overcome barriers for those families who find it more difficult to engage with you - <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/engaging-parents-and-families-a-toolkit-for-practitioners/>
- Don't assume parents will ask for help and information – we have to first develop positive relationships with all families and offer that support and information, asking what is most helpful to them
- Listen to and value parents' knowledge of what their child knows and can do
- Use children's strengths and fascinations (including media and popular culture) as the starting point for planning
- Ensure planning is flexible, open-ended and empowers children to lead their own learning

Aspects to reflect on and discuss:

As a school, consider:

What is still possible in relation to transition?

What is no longer possible or not possible at the moment?

What might be an effective alternative?

You might find new and inventive ways of doing things that you decide to use in subsequent years too! e.g. you may need to think of alternatives for home visits, settling in sessions, visits to feeder settings. It is better to be prepared and have a plan, even if it becomes possible to do some activities before the summer holidays.

What is relevant/not relevant right now?

e.g. your "Starting school pack" – you might consider splitting the information into parts, sharing aspects now which could reassure families and give them positive things to talk about together in relation to starting school; you may decide to send some elements of the pack later after you have established relationships with children and families – e.g. forms which must be filled in, information related to attendance, uniform, etc.

Some practical suggestions:

- Make and share videos – e.g. via the school website, emails to parents, via a platform already used by the school (e.g. Tapestry, Seesaw, ClassDojo). These could be of:
 - an introduction to the class teacher/support staff - each member of staff could have an “all about me” box or bag with items that tell something about themselves – their likes and dislikes, their pets, their favourite things to do, favourite place to be, etc.
 - a virtual tour of the learning environment – e.g. the continuous provision indoors, the outdoor area, forest school. The cloakroom, toilets and other areas of the school could also be included.
 - stories read by the class teacher or support staff specifically for new children – they could be a regular feature – e.g. one a week.
 - ideas and activities introduced by the teacher for children and families to do at home if they wish.
- Add a page on your school website specifically for transition so it becomes the ‘go to’ place for information for parents – this is where you could put the latest news and updates in relation to transition, along with all the information that parents may need. Be aware of information that may reassure parents and information that may unsettle them or cause them to worry. You may make some information available on the webpage first and then add to it as your relationships with children and families develop.
- Make phone calls to families – to introduce yourselves and to get to know children and their parents/carers. You may consider other ways to communicate – e.g. applications which allow you to see the child and their family and allow them to see you. Some families may welcome this approach and others may not – it is important you tailor your communications to best fit each family. Always ask what suits them.
- Communications with pre-schools, nurseries and childminders about the children coming into their school. These will be especially important for vulnerable children and/or those with SEND. At this point, many early years providers are closed and cannot be contacted on the usual telephone numbers. We are currently working on a guidance document to support early years providers during transition this year. Once this is completed we will also share this with schools so that everyone is aware of the best ways to work together.
- Establish ways that children and parents can communicate with teaching staff – ways for parents to ask burning questions and share their suggestions/concerns; ways for children to share messages, activities they have been involved in at home, things they are proud of/ things that are important to them and which they want to share etc.
 - Offer a variety of ways for families to communicate with you if possible.
 - Consider adding children and families to your established platforms for sharing learning before they start school – e.g. Tapestry, Seesaw, ClassDojo.
 - Make a display in the classroom ready for when the children start school using their photos, interests, pets, people who are special to them, their creations, etc.

Lastly, an important reminder that all our schools in Leicestershire should ensure that their approach to transition is in line with and promotes Leicestershire's shared vision on School Readiness.

A parent leaflet and a booklet for professionals are available to download here:

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-years-and-childcare/school-readiness>

Parents should have received the leaflet at the end of last year – it will be useful for them if you could talk about it, share it, display it, etc. It explains what it means for children to be ready for school and gives suggestions of how families can support them. You can reiterate these messages in your communications with them.

The booklet for professionals outlines 13 key ways in which schools can ensure they are ready for children and their families.

An important part of Leicestershire's School Readiness approach is the toolkit which has been produced for both early years providers and schools. Now is a great time to use the School Toolkit. It contains information, suggestions and thought-provoking articles, research and approaches detailing how schools can be ready for children and their families:

<https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-years/school-readiness-toolkit/school-toolkit>

You can use the "School Readiness Audit grid" to highlight strengths and areas for development in relation to each of the 13 statements – use this and give your school a rating on each one as you progress through the webpages linked to the 4 themes of the EYFS:

<https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/sites/resource/files/field/pdf/2019/6/12/School-Toolkit-audit.pdf>

Once you have found an area you want to develop further, you can then use the links to access a wealth of resources and ideas.

Useful links for children and families:

Tiny Happy People - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people>

Hungry Little Minds - <https://hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk/>

Home learning environment early years apps: parent guidance - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-apps-pilot-home-learning-environment/home-learning-environment-early-years-apps-parent-guidance>

Health for Kids – Looking after yourself - A kit to help you take care of yourself
https://www.healthforkids.co.uk/grownups/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/04/Health-for-Kids_-_Looking-after-yourself-kit-min.pdf

Leicestershire County Council – School Readiness webpage
<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/early-years-and-childcare/school-readiness>

Health for Under 5s - <https://healthforunder5s.co.uk/>