Local action on health inequalities:

Improving the home to school transition

About PHE

Public Health England exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. It does this through advocacy, partnerships, world-class science, knowledge and intelligence, and the delivery of specialist public health services. PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health.

About the UCL Institute of Health Equity

The Institute is led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot and seeks to increase health equity through action on the social determinants of health, specifically in four areas: influencing global, national and local policies; advising on and learning from practice; building the evidence base; and capacity building. The Institute builds on previous work to tackle inequalities in health led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot and his team, including the 'Commission on Social Determinants of Health', 'Fair Society Healthy Lives' (The Marmot Review) and the 'Review of Social Determinants of Health and the Health Divide for the WHO European Region'. www.instituteofhealthequity.org

About this briefing

This briefing was commissioned by PHE and written by the Institute of Health Equity (IHE). It is a summary of a more detailed evidence review on the same topic and is intended primarily for directors of public health, public health teams and local authorities. This briefing and accompanying evidence reviews are part of a series commissioned by PHE to describe and demonstrate effective, practical local action on a range of social determinants of health.

Angela Donkin wrote this briefing for IHE.

We would like to thank all those on our advisory group who commented on the drafts of this briefing.

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Improving the home to school transition

Summary

1. When children start school, a good transition from the home or nursery environment is important, particularly for those who live in more difficult circumstances, who have special needs, or for whom English is not a first language.

2. Good home to school transition programmes have been linked to better outcomes, particularly for at-risk groups, meaning these programmes have a role to play in reducing inequalities in outcomes.

3. Practices to support children's start at school, such as open days, familiarisation lessons and visits, are linked with them making a better adjustment to the school environment and having improved social and emotional skills.

4. Support for parents through the transition period can also be helpful in reducing anxiety and social isolation.

The importance of smooth transitions

The home to school transition is the move young children make from home or nursery to primary school normally around age five in England. The time when a child makes the transition to school can be a critical period in their development because it can impact on their level of engagement with school and therefore affect their attainment.

The majority of children make successful transitions at different stages during their education.[1,2] However, some groups of children and young people are more likely to find significant changes to their daily routine challenging compared with their peers. Those children who experience difficulties are more likely to come from vulnerable groups, for example to come from more deprived backgrounds or to have special educational needs. In addition, children who are the youngest in their year may experience difficulties,[2] while those with English as a second language may find their start at primary school more challenging.[3]

Children with poor socio-emotional skills, low self-esteem or low self-confidence may be particularly vulnerable during the home to school transition because they lack the skills that would provide them with stronger emotional resilience to cope with new expectations and new social relationships.[3] Children who have had limited opportunities to socialise and manage their emotions may not have the competencies needed for a successful start at primary school such as turn-taking and the ability to respond appropriately to different situations.[4,5]

A smooth home to school transition is important because previous reviews of evidence have shown a link between poor transitions and less successful outcomes. For example, the evidence suggests less successful transitions may lead to subsequent poor attendance and disengagement.

Generally, practices to support children through a period of transition, such as open days and part time starts to the year, are associated with children making a better adjustment to the new school environment and improved social and emotional skills among children and young people. Review

findings show that such practices are linked with improvements in young people's attainment in some academic subjects although not across all subjects. However, researchers have found that children with the greatest risk of poor transition experiences benefit more from good transitions and achieve better grades.[6,7]

Parents can also find transition difficult and school efforts to support them during a transition period can help to reduce their stress and anxiety, ensure support from other services continues, and address social isolation in parents where this is an issue.

What works for achieving a good home to school transition?

There is evidence to suggest that gradual changes and familiarisation are helpful. Children who have attended nursery or other early years settings before they start primary school may also experience challenges around curriculum continuity.[2] This includes the sudden change to more formal teaching and learning styles, greater emphasis on 'hard work', less time for play and fewer opportunities for child-initiated activities.

A lack of support and advice for children and families during the transition process can also contribute to the level of transition difficulties children and young people may experience. For example, successful transition can be hindered because schools have different admissions and transition practices, and some parents may be ill-prepared to support their children through the process. Box A summarises research on good transition practices.

BOX A

Good transition practices[3]

Focus on the whole child. For example, ask children about family, likes and dislikes and show an interest in more than knowledge of the alphabet.

Implement a variety of practices (for example, open days, information sessions, one to one support) because the more practices in place the greater the benefit. The use of several practices is particularly beneficial for children who are at greatest risk of poor transition.

Provide targeted support for at-risk groups such as looked-after children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Be flexible and responsive to local needs, for example, by being flexible on times, providing appropriate translation services and crèches.

Ensure strong leadership and high-quality delivery. This includes strong leadership from the local authority and full engagement from senior management within schools. Careful recruitment of staff for the curriculum delivery is equally important.

Share information and proactively seek it. For example, record sharing, pre-school and school-linking schemes, teachers familiarising themselves with previous curriculums in pre-school, and getting transition information from parents and services in contact with the child.

Hold induction and orientation meetings for when the child starts school.

Adopt shortened school days at the beginning of the school year with part-time attendance at first.

Continue some of the activities and routines from the EYFS at Key Stage 1

Ensure good communication between all parties. In general, where communication between all parties was better, the transition programme was more successful.

Where parents find the transition difficult, practices that enable them to meet other parents, familiarise themselves with the school and what is expected of them can help to reduce anxiety and social isolation. When a child starts primary school, parents who have previously been in contact with children's centres or other early years services may no longer have the same level of support. Therefore professionals should share information with parents about the continuing support available to them.

In addition, the school day may be difficult to manage for working parents and slow transitions with children starting part-time for initial weeks may be harder to manage, especially where families are large, as these practices can take up a large percentage of annual leave. Early warning of such practices is important so that parents can ask for holiday time to cover this period if needed. Services such as breakfast clubs and after school provision are helpful for these parents, as are transition events that are scheduled at different times including the evenings.

Most schools will put in place some of the ideas outlined in box A. However specific schemes have also been devised and tested that build on some of the early years research around the importance of the home learning environment and parenting. Box B provides an example relating to transition information sessions, which can be provided by parent support advisors based in schools. Box C provides some information from a study in the US which demonstrated positive results.

BOX B
Transition information sessions[8]
Parent support advisors in schools host information sessions for new parents to enhance the home–school relationship. The evidence shows that these sessions can motivate parents on family and parenting issues, and how to keep their child safe, happy and learning. The information sessions engaged parents in dialogue with their local school and with other parents. There was evidence of positive outcomes for a majority of parents in the short-term, including: raised confidence about what to expect for their child's time at school, knowing where to go for information, and supporting their child's learning; and early evidence that parents took further action as a result of the sessions, including contacting their school for more information, and keeping in touch with other parents. The review concluded that information sessions could be effective if provided alongside open days and one-to-one support from school staff. They should be marketed effectively, have crèches if possible, and should try harder to reach fathers.

BOX C
Evidence from the Seattle development project[9]
The Seattle social development project was a school-based intervention that returned very positive results in the cost-benefit analysis. This programme was implemented for two cohorts of students: the first were in their first year at school (age six) and the second were in grade five (age 11).

Evidence and impact. The study found that the programme was significantly more effective when implemented during the first year at school, at age six. Research has found that the most effective programmes at this age are those that involve the family as well as the child. In this vein, the Seattle social development project aims to be a school-based intervention that promotes the bond between child, family and school.

Conclusion

While the majority of children make a successful transition into nursery and school, those with poor socio-emotional skills, poor self-esteem or low self-confidence may be particularly vulnerable to transition. Children who are the youngest in year may also experience difficulties as may those for whom English is not a first language.

Practical steps can be taken to reduce difficulties during the home to school transition. Combining a number of different practices together can be particularly beneficial for children in at-risk groups in aiding successful transition, such as open days, one-to-one support, and induction and orientation meetings.

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