



Transitions into Early Learning and Care Settings

Attending Early Learning and Care (ELC) is an important symbol of recovery and resilience for children and parents coming from Ukraine. As settings in Ireland welcome children and families, it is important to recognise the key role that a supportive transition plays in children's wellbeing.

While attendance at an ELC service is an important step towards a return to normalcy for families, it need to be carefully planned. The transition into an ELC setting can be stressful for all children and their parents, but it may be particularly difficult for families coming from Ukraine who have experienced trauma. It is likely you already have policies and practices in place in your setting to ensure that all children are supported in a sensitive way to settle in as smoothly as possible. These will guide you as you play a key role in helping children and families to feel welcome and connected, and in supporting children who have experienced trauma to feel safe, calm and secure.

This resource highlights some of the key things to consider as you support children and families coming from Ukraine to settle into your setting.

Planning the Transition Process

When planning for the transition, it is important to consider how the experience of starting in a new ELC setting in a new country might be from the child's and family's perspective. This is a big event and you will need to be sensitive and empathic to how they both might be feeling, so consider what will help them feel safe. Transitions that are not carefully planned can trigger feelings of anxiety, fear and danger.

- ◆ Meet with your team to reflect on and discuss the settling-in procedures currently in place and any changes you might make.
- ◆ Show interest in and learn about the language and culture of Ukraine.
- ◆ Support children's sense of identity and belonging by ensuring that the environment reflects familiar aspects of their lives and is representative of their community.
- ◆ Provide images of the setting and photos of key adults to the family.

- ◆ Make time to share information about your setting and the role of the educators with families, and outline how their child will be welcomed. Show parents around the setting.
- ◆ Listen to the information that parents share about their child's interests and experiences, and find out about what their child likes as well as their favourite toys, books, music, food and comfort items. Consider how you can access these.



Building Relationships

The availability of trusted and caring adults in a young child's life provides them with feelings of safety and security, and is a strong protective factor, buffering the impact of trauma and supporting their resilience.

- ◆ Adopt a key person approach to support the child and their family when they are first settling in and throughout the child's time in the setting. Having a key person will help the child feel secure, bring about a sense of connection and belonging, and foster trust and personal identity.
- ◆ As a child's key person, lead the transition, attuning to the specific needs of the child and responding to them in a way that takes into account the huge upheaval they have experienced, being away from all that is familiar, including close family, friends and surroundings.
- ◆ Provide time and space for families to meet you as their child's key person during the settling-in phase so you can develop a positive relationship with them and establish trust.
- ◆ Engage with parents in a friendly, open and gentle manner. Parents may be exhibiting disorientation and other stress responses, so be aware of this.
- ◆ Be sensitive about what you are asking parents. Some information can be gathered over time when you have developed trust. Just focus on what is necessary for now.
- ◆ Think about the requests you are making to families to provide additional items such as wellies for their child. They may not have the resources or know where to get them.

- ◆ Remember that a family's circumstances, such as their address, may change quickly so let parents know they can update you any time and check in again from time to time.

Children who have experienced trauma may be too anxious or frightened to engage in play or they may be overwhelmed by the new environment and all its sights, smells, sounds, people, toys, activities and expectations. By being more aware of the trauma children may have experienced and the impacts this can have, you can ensure that the transition into your setting supports children and their families to feel safe and secure, and prevents re-traumatisation.

Gradual Separation

Ensure a very gradual separation between the child and parent by slowly increasing the length of separations as the child becomes more comfortable in the setting. This is especially important for families who have experienced trauma, and involves working with parents and children to plan for separations ahead of time. Children who have experienced severe trauma will often experience extreme separation anxiety.

- ◆ Work together with families to plan for separations ahead of time.
- ◆ Encourage family members to stay with their child in the setting and provide comfortable seating for them.
- ◆ As the child's key person, gradually move closer to the child and play alongside them.



- ◆ Follow the child's lead. If the child is playing away from their family for short periods this can be an indication that they might be ready for a short separation.
- ◆ Ask the family to bring in a comfort object that the child can hold onto when their family is not with them.
- ◆ Advise the family to say goodbye to their child before they leave.
- ◆ Stay close to the child and let them know that you will care for and keep them safe until their family returns.
- ◆ Acknowledge a child's emotions when they are feeling sad, angry or worried, and comfort them.

Remember, each child is different and it is important not to rush the setting-in process. It may take weeks. If attempted too quickly, the separation can result in more stress, anxiety and difficulty developing trust.

Communication

- ◆ Do not overwhelm the family with too much information.
- ◆ If possible, have your information materials, such as your parent handbook, translated into families' home languages. If more appropriate, ensure that all information is written in plain English or with visuals.

- ◆ In the absence of a person to translate, use translation apps with families.
- ◆ Be aware that, as trauma and stress can reduce a person's ability to absorb new information, parents may have difficulty processing what you are telling them, even if you are speaking to a parent in their home language or they have English as a second language.
- ◆ Be cognisant that, if there is too much talking, families might stop listening and stop trying to understand. They may even avoid being with you because it causes them stress when they do not understand.

Being more trauma aware will help you to support children to settle in to your setting and feel comforted and protected. Only when they feel safe are children able to explore their environment, build relationships and learn.

Useful resources

[Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care](#)
[The Key Person Approach](#)



T: 01 453 0355

E: resources@barnardos.ie

W: www.barnardos.ie

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