



# Transitions into School Age Childcare Settings

Attending school and school age childcare (SAC) is an important symbol of recovery and resilience for children and parents coming from Ukraine. As SAC settings in Ireland welcome children and families, it is important to recognise the key role that supportive transitions play in children's wellbeing.

While attendance at school and an SAC service is a key step towards a return to normalcy for children and their families, settling in needs to be carefully planned. The transition into a new SAC setting can be stressful for any child and their parents, but it may be more difficult for a child and family from Ukraine, especially if they have experienced trauma.

A school age childcare setting needs to be a place where children can relax, have fun and engage in recreation. All children, and particularly those dealing with so much change in their lives, need opportunities for play and relaxation with other children. The relationships that children develop with both the adults and other children who attend the setting will be crucial for their successful settling in and for their wellbeing and development.

It is likely you already have policies and practices in place in your setting to ensure that children are supported in a sensitive way to settle in as smoothly as possible and begin to form positive relationships. You will play a key role in helping children and families to cope with change and to feel welcome and connected, as well as 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 SAC 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 very 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 some of the language and culture of Ukraine.
- ◆ Remember that children and families from Ukraine come from diverse backgrounds.
- ◆ Support children's sense of identity and belonging by ensuring that the environment reflects familiar aspects of their lives and has representations of their community.
- ◆ Provide images of the setting and photos of key adults to the child and family.
- ◆ Make time to share information about your setting and the role of the staff team with families, and outline how their child will be welcomed. Show children and parents around the setting.
- ◆ Encourage children to explore the setting and observe what seems to interest them. 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 things that give them comfort. Consider how you can access these.

## Building Relationships

The availability of trusted and caring adults in a 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 to feel secure, bring about a sense of connection and belonging, and foster trust and their sense of 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 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 children and their 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 the child and their parents. Some information can be gathered over time when trust has been developed. Just focus on what is necessary initially.
- ◆ 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 at any time and check in with them 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

A very gradual settling in may be necessary even for older children, allowing them time to become more comfortable in the setting. This is especially important for children and families who have experienced trauma, and involves working with children and their parents to plan for separations ahead of time. Children who have experienced severe trauma will often experience extreme separation anxiety and may revert, for a time, to behaviours more associated with younger children such as sucking their thumb or needing to hold a comfort item.

- ◆ Encourage family members to stay with their child in the setting initially and provide comfortable seating for them.
- ◆ As the child's key person, engage with the child by showing them the play options that are in the setting and staying near them to show you will be there for support.

- ◆ Follow the child's lead. If the child is playing away from their family for short periods and showing signs of making connections with other children, this may be an indication that they might be ready for a short separation.
- ◆ Let the child and family know that they can bring in a comfort object that the child can hold onto, or keep in their own cubby if they prefer, when their family is not with them.
- ◆ Advise the family to let their child know when they are leaving and when they will be back.
- ◆ Stay close to the child and let them know that you will be there for them if they need anything 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 settling-in process. It may take weeks. If a child is not given enough time and understanding it can result in more stress, anxiety and difficulty developing trust.



## Supporting Play and Engagement with Other Children



The transition into a SAC setting is not a once off event, it happens over time. Part of a successful transition involves ensuring that children get to know the other children in the setting and can play happily with them and fully join in with all of the activities.

- ◆ Provide lots of open-ended, flexible materials and unstructured play opportunities that allow freedom and choice, and don't require an understanding of English to help get children started into playing and enjoying their play.
- ◆ Involve the other children in the group and help them to empathise with the new child who may find it really hard coming to a new country with little or no English. Encourage them to help the new child feel welcome and part of the group by inviting them to join in their play.
- ◆ Depending on their individual temperament and experiences, some children may have no difficulty settling in to play with other children while others may need support.

- ◆ If a child is holding back and seems reluctant to join the other children in play, don't rush to help immediately, give them as much time as they need to just watch. Follow the child's lead.
- ◆ Ensure children can access the outdoor play area at any time. Playing outside with lots of opportunities for movement can help a child to feel calmer and more regulated than when indoors, and help them feel more ready and confident to play with other children.

## Communication

- ◆ Do not overwhelm the child or the family with too much information.
- ◆ If possible, have your information materials, such as your parent handbook and child friendly policies booklet, 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, using translation apps with families can be helpful.
- ◆ 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 in their home language or they have English as a second language.
- ◆ Be cognisant that, if there is too much talking, a child or their parents might stop listening and stop trying to understand. They may even try to avoid being with you or other children 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](#)

[Adult-Child Relationships in School Age Childcare](#)

[First 5 - Ukraine Supports](#)

[National Quality Guidelines for School Age Childcare Services](#)

T: 01 453 0355

E: [resources@barnardos.ie](mailto:resources@barnardos.ie)

W: [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

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