

Significantly Different and Substantially the Same: Examining Core Principles of Early Childhood Education practice within the context of Retransition

A briefing paper to inform the Knowledge Makes Change Seminar Series

Knowledge Makes Change is part of the Early Childhood Development Programme. The programme is led by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) in partnership with the States of Jersey and Jersey Child Care Trust, informed by the Department of Children, Young People, Education and Skills, Health and Community services, the Best Start Partnership and the Jersey Safeguarding Partnership Board. The programme is funded by UBS Optimus Foundation UK.

The context

There is no doubt that the current global Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented and nothing has been experienced like this before in our lifetime. During this crisis, young children have experienced a myriad of new and different situations:

- International lockdown and national lockdown in Jersey
- Not attending their childcare setting or school for a long period or attending a setting that is very different to usual i.e. only open for key worker's and vulnerable children
- A very different routine and home life
- Separation from family and friends with no prior warning
- Social distancing measures
- None or very limited socialising and playing with peers of their own age.
- Limited access to outdoor space/physical activity.
- Returning to a setting that is very different to the one they left

For adults, the crisis and lockdown feels like it has been going on for a long time and what was considered 'normal' now seems strange and unusual. For young children, it will seem even longer and routines and life before lockdown may seem a distant memory. Whatever our situation and experience during lockdown, all of us will emerge from this crisis changed in some way.

This raises questions about the impact of the crisis on young children, both now and longer term, and how we adapt and move forward as children retransition back to settings within the context of a new normal. The short answer is: no one currently knows as we are dealing with a unique situation where the ramifications are still unknown, the future uncertain and the discussion ongoing.

As part of this ongoing discussion, this briefing paper aims to:

- Consider the emotional and psychological impact of Covid-19 lockdown on young children
- Identify and address challenges as children return to provision, exploring how to retain key principles of Early Childhood Education within the context of retransition following the pandemic
- Provide a range of further resources to explore the topic

The emotional and psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young children

The world changed suddenly and with little warning as national lockdown came into force. Usual routines and everyday experiences ceased and life became very different for all. Depending on their circumstances and home life, children will have had very different experiences of life in lockdown, but all will have experienced disruption and change to structure and routines, new 'rules' to learn and different ways of being, including the loss of freedom and the opportunity to physically meet with family and friends.

During this time, children will have experienced a range of emotions and may have different feelings regarding returning to settings, with some being confident and excited to return and others less so. Furthermore, although lockdown is easing in many places, the pandemic is far from over and there will be continued uncertainty and disruption to our lives for some time to come.

The early years are a unique and important time for children, where their brains are being shaped by their experiences and interactions, with many important foundations developing which contribute to well-being throughout life (Conkbayir, 2017). This is particularly relevant in terms of mental health, well-being and social and emotional development which research and evidence show are important indicators of later success (Pascal, Bertram & Rouse, 2019).

Young children develop positive attachment relationships, social skills and learn to identify and regulate their emotions through their experiences at home, with wider family members, in early years settings and within their community.

Lockdown and social distancing rules have restricted the usual contexts in which children develop these key skills, with disruptions to all typical experiences for children. Instead of being encouraged to play and interact, children have been learning that in order to keep safe, you should stay away from others; they will have picked up that 'social distancing' is the new norm.

This is of particular concern for young children who are starting to understand and make sense of the world around them and who are at early stages in developing their social and emotional skills. It must be recognised that young children are experiencing a context that is not normal, and are currently living in a radically different world, which will impact their understanding of the world and their social, emotional and mental well-being and development.

As practitioners think about children returning to settings, it is crucial that this is kept continually in mind, and that provision is planned to address the impact and support children's social and emotional development following their experiences and learnt behaviour during lockdown.

What are the challenges of retransition?

A very different environment

Due to ongoing concerns with regards to Covid-19 and cross-infection, learning environments in early years' settings and schools are being organised to minimise this as much as possible. This includes thinking about the way space is organised and which resources can be made available for children to use. For children beginning to return to settings, not only has it been a long period of time since they last attended, but the environment they return to may be very different to the one they left.

Changes to structure, routine and organisation

For many settings, the structure, routine and organisation of sessions will be different, with a greater emphasis on hygiene and personal safety and new rules and routines to learn.

Children being kept in a particular 'bubble' means they may not be with their friends or familiar staff member.

Different routines will need to be in place for arrival and collection of children, with social distancing measures in place and parents/carers not allowed into the building. Organisational arrangements may mean children do not attend their setting for their regular number of sessions/days, with an ongoing blended provision of home-learning and attending provision.

Anxiety

Children may experience different emotions as they return to settings, with some being confident and excited to return and others more hesitant and reluctant. Many children will have spent much of the last three months spending time at home with their immediate family and primary caregivers. This experience will vary greatly for different children depending on their family situation but for all children, this has been different to what might be called 'normal experience'.

Many children will return and settle quickly without so much as a backward glance, whereas others will find being back in provision difficult and may experience separation anxiety from their parent or caregiver. Parents and caregivers may also be anxious about the safety of their child as they return to settings and will need reassurance from practitioners on the steps being taken to ensure children's safety and well-being.

A new mind-set

The context children are currently experiencing is not 'normal' and yet it is contributing to their understanding of the world and to their developing sense of how they should be and act within it.

Children may return to settings with a new understanding and new thinking of how they should be with other children and adults in terms of playing, socialising and interacting. The emotional and psychological impact of Covid-19 on individual children must be recognised; a child may not behave or be the same as the one who left provision at the start of lockdown.

How can practitioners address these challenges and support children back into provision whilst retaining the core principles of Early Childhood Education?

The impact of Covid-19 and the challenges arising around retransition can seem overwhelming and daunting. However, being flexible and adaptable is something early years practitioners are adept at, as the very nature of working with young children requires this on a day to day basis. Children themselves are also resilient and often surprise adults with how well they cope and adapt in new situations.

On returning to settings, children and staff need to be kept safe with regards to the health and safety concerns of Covid-19, yet at the same time the environment and experiences children are offered need to be appropriate provision, which addresses the potential impact of lockdown and contributes to their recovery and development. With careful consideration of core principles of Early Childhood Education within the current context, it is possible to determine a way forward that can reconcile this tension and support practitioners and children as they return to settings.

The opportunity to play

Play has a crucial role to play in the early years and has long been held as the means through which young children learn and develop (Nutbrown, Clough & Selbie, 2008). Play is essential to children's holistic well-being and development, and its value for young children must not be undervalued or disregarded.

Through play, children develop their emotional, social, communication, physical and cognitive skills, as well as contributing to other areas such as imagination, creativity and problem-solving.

The central role of play is recognised in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS):

“Play is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, think about problems and relate to others.” (DfE, 2017, p9)

It is through play that children make sense of the world, enabling them to make connections and develop their understanding of events and experiences. Play also provides the opportunity for children to explore, to be active in their learning and to develop their creativity and thinking skills, referred to in the EYFS as the characteristics of effective teaching and learning (DfE, 2017). For young children, play is fundamental and has a central place in ECE provision.

As settings reopen, it is vital that play is prioritised as this will be crucial for children’s well-being, social and emotional recovery and development as they retransition. Play will give children the opportunity to act out their experiences and, as practitioners skilfully interact and join children in their play, help them to understand and make sense of the unusual world they are experiencing. It is widely recognised that young children cannot socially distance and that the long-term impact of this would further damage their recovery and development.

Current [guidance](#) from the Jersey government reflects this and young children are not expected to be kept at individual tables/spaces, with little play or interaction with peers and adults. Rather the idea of having a consistent ‘bubble’ is that practitioners can allow children to play and socialise within their ‘bubble’ as they usually would, interacting with each other, the environment and resources in as close to normality as current restrictions allow. Children learning through play in a fun and engaging environment can, and should still be, at the heart of ECE provision despite the current challenges presented by Covid-19.

A carefully planned and organised learning environment

The learning environment plays a crucial role in children’s learning and development as recognised in the EYFS, where one of the overarching principles is that “children learn and develop well in enabling environments” (DfE, 2017, p6).

An enabling environment is one in which children feel safe and secure, where their needs are met and they can explore their interests through engaging with a range of resources and activities. Due to increased hygiene, health and safety practices during Covid-19, learning environments will need to be reviewed and carefully planned.

This does not mean it is not possible to provide an enabling environment, but it will be different to a pre-pandemic environment. Children can still access a range of resources and activities within their ‘bubble’, providing practitioners have carefully considered how and when the resources will be cleaned. Resources that harbour the virus for longer or ones that cannot be cleaned easily should be avoided. It may be that settings decide to use a limited amount of resources which are regularly cleaned and rotated.

How the environment and resources are organised will vary depending on each setting, but you can be encouraged by recognising that children will still learn and develop, as it is how children and practitioners interact with resources that is the important factor rather than the actual resources themselves.

An appropriate curriculum

It is important to remember that this pandemic is a new experience for all and as children return to settings, the curriculum must reflect and respond to this and be appropriate for children’s needs post Covid-19. It is not possible to return to settings expecting the curriculum to be the same as before lockdown or even what would usually be expected in the summer term.

It must be adapted to address children’s experiences and needs at this point in time, as we start to come out of lockdown, and priority must be given to children’s well-being.

Children have experienced a confusing time, with many of their usual routines and experiences disrupted by Covid-19 and have learnt new social behaviours and ways of behaving that are not the 'norm'.

As they return to settings, children need to be able reflect on, process and make sense of their experiences in this unusual time and opportunities should be given for children to talk about their experiences, to explore their feelings and emotions and to support the reestablishment of social interaction and friendships. This will provide children with a secure emotional and social base for moving forward and it is crucial that practitioners ensure the curriculum is clearly centred on the appropriate areas to provide opportunities for this, as suggested below.

We need an ECE Curriculum that focuses on:

Self-care, hygiene and keeping safe

- Explaining the importance of handwashing and self-care, ensuring that is it part of the routine
- Understanding the importance of being safe outside the classroom, and explaining the reasons for the current arrangements within it

Wellbeing and Emotional literacy

- Opportunities to talk about, enact and communicate anxieties, fears and questions about what is happening
- Introducing and reinforcing the language and terminology required

Social Development

- Supporting and promoting social interaction with peers, re-establishing friendships and friendship groups
- Reinforcing routines and expectations within the classroom and the rhythm of the day
- Discussing the changes and differences within the environment and why

Language Development

- Opportunities to talk and develop new vocabulary to describe and express specifics of the situation
- Opportunities to story tell to re-enact and process experiences
- Opportunities to express ideas, thoughts, fears, anxieties, hopes and frustrations through drawing and artwork

Physical development

- Gross motor opportunities in the outside area
- Reinforcing and discussing the need for exercise and healthy eating

The importance of the Characteristics of Effective teaching and Learning

- Supporting effective learning behaviours through all activities and experiences

Jan Dubiel, June 2020

Practitioners who know their children

A key factor in supporting children's emotional well-being is for a child to develop secure attachments, which the EYFS recognises through the overarching principle of *positive relationships* and advocating the 'key person approach', which aims to

"ensure every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs, to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship with the child and build a relationship with their parents." (DfE, 2017, p22).

Following lockdown, as children return to settings that look and operate differently to usual, the role of practitioners in meeting children's needs and helping them to settle back in is more important than ever. Practitioners will be at the forefront of guiding and supporting children back to provision, with new rules, routine and structure to become familiar with.

Children will have had a range of different of different experiences during lockdown and will arrive at settings with varying needs and emotions. It is imperative at this time as children begin to return, for practitioners to observe and identify individual children's needs, offering reassurance and support through sensitive and timely interactions and in ways appropriate for each child.

Parents will also be reassured by practitioners who know their child well and have their safety and well-being as the top priority as settings begin to open up.

Final thoughts

Early years practitioners are professionals who know the children in their care, know what is best for them and are experienced in being flexible and adaptable to meet children's needs in different circumstances and contexts.

There is no denying that the Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented, with many new challenges and experiences for all. However, it is important that practitioners are confident and trust they know what is right for their children as they welcome them back to settings.

It is possible to retain core principles of effective early years provision with careful rethinking and a modified approach to implementing them in practice, with practitioners being best placed to do this. Practitioners can and will rise to this challenge and, as always, will put the needs and well-being of children at the heart of all they do.

Further Resources

Read:

[Guidance](#) produced by the Government of Jersey for reopening of schools and early years settings

A message from [NCB](#) to the early years sector, with further resources signposted, including [Emotional Well-being - 'what works' for young children and their families](#) (KMC Seminar with Professor Iram Siraj)

[Nurturing Healthy Minds Together](#) – a report published by NCB exploring the published literature and policy developments around prioritising and supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of young children

Information and resources on the [Best Start Partnership](#) website to support during Covid-19

Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) report [Adverse childhood experiences: What we know, what we don't know and what should happen next](#)

Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) report [Covid-19 and early intervention: Understanding the impact, preparing for recovery](#)

[Support for Early Years](#) during Covid-19 produced by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Information on the [importance of connection](#) by Connected Baby

Research article [Attachment theory, cortisol and care for the under threes in the 21st century: constructing evidence informed policy](#)

Watch:

Interview with Jan Dubiel on [Building a meaningful curriculum for every child](#)

Interview with Mine Conkbayir on [Re-opening with Trauma-Informed practice](#)

[Free online events](#) hosted by Connected Baby on Attachment Theory; Early years after lockdown

Listen:

Podcast with Ruth Swailes [Covid-19 and the early years](#)

Study:

The Open University (OU) has a number of free courses available relating to early childhood education and child development. The Education and Development section provides a range of courses each specifying the level - introductory, intermediate and advanced - and how many hours are involved. Courses include:

- [Attachment in the early years](#)
- [Play, learning and the brain](#)
- [The role of play in children's learning](#)
- [Children's perspectives on play](#)
- [The family at the centre of early learning](#)
- [Understanding early years environments and children's spaces](#)

Resources to share with parents:

The World Health Organisation has provided [Tips for healthy parenting](#) with [free posters](#) to download including [Learning through play](#); [Keep calm and manage stress](#); [Talking about Covid-19: Keeping it positive](#)

Monthly KMC Newsletter:

If you do not currently receive the monthly KMC Newsletter and would like to, you can sign up to it by emailing kate@jcct.org.je (Jersey Child Care Trust) and requesting to be put on the mailing list.

Local Services

[Psychology and Well-being service](#) help and support for children, young people and parents in Jersey during Covid-19

Family health visiting services and advice provided by [Family Nursing and Home Care Parenting Support Services](#) within the Children, Young People Education and Skills department offer services to local children and families.

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Briefing paper by Sarah Creek, Senior Development Officer, NCB