



Ava arrives at nursery for her first day away from her mother; she is feeling apprehensive; key person Claire gets down for a child-level chat

Claire talks to Ava about the pictures on her lunchbox; Ava starts to feel more at ease and blows kisses through the window as her mother leaves

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Bye bye!

Starting daycare away from home can be a daunting experience for a young child – and their parent. *Anne O'Connor* looks at the case of two-year-old Ava and considers how settings can take the tension out of settling in at nursery

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

AVA'S FIRST DAY

Ava, who lives with her mother Molly, attends a small local nursery for two and half days a week. As part of the settling-in process, she and her mother had visited the setting several times so that they were able to begin building a relationship with Ava's appointed key person, Claire. This familiarity meant that Claire could tune in quickly to Ava's needs on her first day.

Despite being familiar with the setting, Ava was hesitant and uncertain when she arrived on the first day and looked to her mother for reassurance.

Claire stayed close by and talked to both of them. She then got down to Ava's level and talked to her, gently welcoming and encouraging her.

Sensing Ava's anxiety, Claire continued to talk to her in a soothing way and got her attention. Claire was aware that Ava loved her food, so used the lunch bag to engage her in conversation. Ava became more animated and talked about the food in her bag.

As Molly left, Claire lifted Ava up so she could watch through the window as her mother waved goodbye. Claire encouraged Ava to blow her mother a kiss and reassured her that mother would return. Ava was able to smile happily through the window at Molly.

As Ava's secure base in the nursery, Claire was available to her throughout the session, remaining sensitive to her needs and motivations. She let Ava take her own time settling in and

didn't make her join in with the group activity. She observed her play, helped her interact with other children and had lots to tell Molly on her return.

Claire reassured Molly that Ava had coped well with the session, which helped the transition for both mother and child, from nursery to home, at the end of the day.

HELPING CHILDREN SETTLE

Starting daycare can be a difficult time for a young child, but practitioners can ease the settling-in process by providing the child with:

Time Schedule accompanied visits, arrange for key people to visit the child at home and avoid hurrying or pressuring a child into settling. Joining in with activities or interacting with others at the setting needs to be done according to the child's timescale.

Flexibility Offer a flexible set-up that allows 'settling' children to follow their own motivations rather than rigid routines, such as carpet times, registrations and group activities.

Key people Assign one or two practitioners to the child and their parents, not just for administrative purposes and record-keeping, but also to be available to the family as much as possible, so that family and practitioners can build a strong relationship and attachment. A key person is soon able to tune into a child's needs and be the bridge between home and the setting.

Reassurance Reassure the child that their parent will return, that their needs will be met and that they will be safe while their parent is not there.

Familiarity Provide family photographs, taped songs and rhymes from home. Offer toys and follow routines that the child will have become familiar with on their previous visits. Remember that some children need 'transitional objects', such as a blanket, soft toy or other comforter from home, which they should be allowed to keep with them as long as they need.

Sensitivity Careful observations of the child by key practitioners enable them to respond appropriately to the child's needs, offering help when needed, soothing anxieties and adapting routines where necessary.

Warmth Warm interactions between practitioner and child are essential in building secure attachments. Tone of voice, smiles, responsive body language and sensitive physical contact all contribute to a warm welcome for a child settling into nursery or school.

2 To ease parents' anxiety about their child's first day at nursery, early years practitioners should provide them with:

Time Although work or home commitments may put some parents under pressure to settle their children quickly, it is important that the setting doesn't add to this pressure. A home visit and

some accompanied sessions matched to the child's and family's needs will benefit everyone in the long run.

Making time to listen to parents, to answer their questions, and to share news and information helps build good relationships and reminds the parents that you value them and their contributions.

Flexibility A settling routine that suits the needs of the parent and child, rather than the timetable of the setting, is likely to be more successful in the long run.

Key people All parents are anxious when first settling their children and benefit from being able to build a relationship with the key people. This is particularly important when exchanging information at the beginning and end of sessions.

Reassurance It seems obvious, but taking time to call a parent to reassure them that their child has settled well can make a world of difference to an anxious parent, allay further worries and helps build good relationships.

Familiarity Parents, just as much as children, feel reassured by familiar routines, so think carefully about your procedures for greeting parents and sharing information with them, particularly at the start and end of the day.

Sensitivity Put yourself in the parent's place and avoid being judgemental. Be sensitive to their anxieties. Some parents may feel so anxious that they appear aggressive or uninterested.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Life at Two – Attachments, Key People and Development', a DVD tracking the life and development of two-year-old Ava, at home and in the nursery. For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

Warmth The warmth of your welcome and subsequent interactions will make a big difference to an anxious parent.

3 Where children are still unhappy to separate from their parent, in spite of a setting's best efforts, practitioners should:

- Keep in mind that being upset at separating from a parent is a reasonable reaction for a child.
- Demonstrate to both parent and child that you are not stressed or inconvenienced by the situation.
- Stay calm and relaxed around the child, be sensitive to their need (or otherwise) for physical contact, and let the warmth of your body language and voice help soothe and reassure them.
- Offer distractions, but don't force the child into any activity that they may not want to do.
- Stay close. Be receptive to the child and their distress and ready to respond to them.
- Look at ways in which you can adapt the settling procedure to make it work for the child. ■

LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- UC1.4 Emotional Well-being
- PR 2.4 Key Person
- EE 3.2 Supporting Every Child