



Welcoming Children and Families to our New Normal

The pandemic pushed early childhood settings into unknown territory as we navigated a drop in utilisation, free childcare, social distancing and learning at home. We have had ample support from the sector about learning at home, but now we need to turn our attention to families and children returning to services as restrictions ease and we find our new normal.

The way we re-engage with families and children will impact the transition from learning at home back to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs. Some families may have been self-isolating with their children learning at home since March. Many circumstances, routines and relationships may have changed, sparking past trauma or new anxieties and changing the needs and level of support families require for their children. Teachers must think about how this experience has affected families, and hear their stories.

Let's think about what we already know about change and transitions for children. Change can be overwhelming and difficult to understand, especially when children thrive on consistency and routine. Services may want to revisit their orientation processes and reflect on how to best support the re-engagement of families and children, in particular families who may have disconnected from the service.

Communication

Having a clear process in place for re-engaging our communities will ensure teachers, families and children are equipped to return to ECEC. Think about the steps you need to follow to ensure families feel safe to return and how you will support children's wellbeing, sense of belonging and identity during this time.

First, we will want to connect with families to ensure they have a clear understanding of the current advice about returning to services. Families will most likely have hesitations or questions around new practices; be prepared for this. What is your service doing differently in regards to health and safety practices to limit contact, reinforce social distancing and embed increased hygiene protocols within daily practice?

To better support multilingual families and children, consider the resources available to you. You may be

able to engage multilingual colleagues, community organisations, or other families to ensure your communication is reaching all families effectively. This is an important time to ensure families feel held, informed and supported.

Orientation

A slow and steady approach to children returning will be key for supporting children's emotional wellbeing and existing social relationships with their peers. If possible, limiting the number of families coming back each day can support the exchange of new information and provide an opportunity for families to spend some time at drop off to touch base with educators.

During this transition, revisiting the goals you have set for children is important. Ask families how the time at home has been for them, and how they wish to reorientate back into your service. It is important to take the families lead during this process to ensure they are heard and their choices are respected.

Routines

Before families and children return it will be important to reflect on your routine. How will you ensure all children, including children who are multilingual, understand their day and new routine? Be patient and set children up to succeed as they re-engage with learning in a formal ECEC environment. Your program routine will be very different to the routine children experienced while learning at home.

It is imperative to ensure transitions prepare children, giving them time to comprehend and understand what is going on around them. Perhaps routines in the first few weeks will differ as you re-establish foundations in your service and reignite your relationships. This may require utilising both existing and new strategies and practices to communicate and relate with all children.

It will be important to remember that the family language is most likely what children have predominantly been communicating in for most of this year. Children whom you once thought could understand and communicate clearly in a language other than their family language, may need more nurturing and understanding while they adjust and settle back in.

Think about the strategies you can use for children who have the added challenge of readjusting to an unfamiliar language environment. If you can't communicate in their language you will need to consider how you will support their re-engagement. You might increase your use of non-verbal and visual communication and engage staff who share the same verbal language as the children. You will need to think about other methods of engaging children and involving every child in your program to ensure they each redevelop their sense of belonging to the kindergarten community. Perhaps you can build on shared experiences from learning at home, music and movement activities, physical and relaxation activities that every child, regardless of verbal language, can engage in.

Lastly something to reflect on is how you will maintain communication with families throughout the process to ensure they feel a connection and can re-establish their sense of belonging, trust and identity within their ECEC community. Services may have developed communication platforms or systems during the learning at home period to stay connected and this might be something that can be continued throughout the orientation process.

How, when and what you communicate with families as they return will impact the re-engagement of children as they transition from learning at home back to ECEC programs.

More Information

To support you in reflecting on re-orientating children and families back into the early learning environment, *fkaCS* has developed an Orientation and Communication Plan and template. Visit <https://fka.org.au/resources/orientating-back-to-ecec> to access this resource and more.

You can also contact *fkaCS* for further support on 03 9428 4471 or via email at culturalinclusion@fka.org.au.