

They were fine all summer. Why is everything suddenly difficult?

What the return to education can tell us about how children and young people are adjusting, and when they may need more from us.



The beginning of a new academic year can be a confusing time.

A child who seemed relaxed throughout the summer starts complaining of stomach aches, or suddenly struggles on Sunday evenings despite sleeping well all summer. A young person who appeared ready for secondary school becomes irritable or exhausted, while a student who spent months looking forward to university calls home after two weeks convinced they have made a terrible mistake.

For the adults around them, the change can feel surprisingly sudden and confusing.

They were fine all summer. What happened?

The obvious answer is that school, college or university started again. That answer is more useful than it might first appear. If difficulties emerge, disappear or change significantly when circumstances change, it is worth looking closely at what has changed too.

That does not mean education is causing a mental-health problem, nor does it mean that ordinary apprehension about starting somewhere new needs to be treated. Some uncertainty, nervousness and tiredness are entirely understandable when we are adapting to something unfamiliar. What it does mean is that we should be careful about locating the problem entirely within the child or young person.



Sometimes the most useful place to begin is not with asking “*what is wrong*”, but with “*what has become harder to manage?*”

The things we see are not necessarily the problem we need to solve.

When children and young people struggle, adults usually encounter the response before they understand what is driving it. We see the child who will not put on their uniform, the pupil whose behaviour deteriorates, the teenager who becomes unusually quiet, or the student who stops attending lectures. Those changes understandably become the focus because they are the things causing concern.

The difficulty is that the same behaviour can arise for very different reasons. A child saying that they do not want to go to school might be frightened of separating from a parent, struggling with the noise of the dining hall, being bullied, frightened of being asked a question in front of the class or simply unsure where they are supposed to go when they arrive. A student missing lectures might be struggling academically, socially isolated, sleeping badly, overwhelmed by independent living or frightened about entering a lecture theatre alone.

The labels we give these things, such as ‘school anxiety’, ‘poor attendance’, ‘challenging behaviour’ or ‘struggling with transition’ can describe what we are seeing without necessarily explaining it. If we move too quickly from the visible difficulty to an intervention, we can end up responding to the wrong problem. A more useful starting point is to ask what the child or young person is actually finding difficult to manage.

WHAT WE SEE



- Won't put on uniform
- Behaviour changes
- Unusually quiet or withdrawn
- Stops attending classes/lectures

WHAT MAY BE UNDERNEATH IT



- Separation worries
- Specific situation fears
- Overload (sensory, social, academic)
- Fear, pressure or bullying
- Uncertainty about expectations



Labels describe what we see without necessarily explaining it. The same behaviour can arise for very different reasons.

Unfamiliar things take more effort.

Think about somewhere you know extremely well. You probably no longer have to think about how to enter the building, where things are, which rules matter, what people expect of you or who to approach when something goes wrong. Much of that knowledge has become automatic.

Take the familiarity away and ordinary things require thought again.

For an 11-year-old starting secondary school, the academic work is only one part of the demand. They may also be learning a timetable, navigating several buildings, remembering equipment, interpreting the expectations of multiple teachers, managing different groups of classmates, encountering much older pupils and trying to establish where they belong socially. Even finding somewhere to sit at lunchtime can require thought, and at the same time, many young people are trying very hard not to look as though they do not know what they are doing.

For an 18-year-old beginning university, the scale of change may be greater still. Learning is taking place alongside managing money, shopping and cooking, navigating a new city, living with unfamiliar people, establishing friendships and spending considerably less time with the people who previously knew when something was not quite right.

None of these things needs to be particularly difficult on its own. The challenge is that, during transition, many arrive at once, before the young person has had time to become familiar with them. This helps explain why somebody can appear to manage one part of their life while struggling considerably elsewhere.



Timetables
and routines



Routes and
buildings



Classmates



Finances,
shopping,
cooking



Equipment



Teacher
expectations



Social
belonging



New city and
new people



During transition, lots of ordinary things can require effort at the same time.

Coping doesn't tell us what coping is costing.

Parents sometimes describe a child who appears completely fine at school but falls apart as soon as they get home. Schools may understandably struggle to reconcile this with the child they see during the day. Both observations can be accurate.

A child can attend lessons, follow instructions, navigate friendships, tolerate a busy environment, concentrate, manage uncertainty and inhibit emotional responses for several hours. The fact that they have managed to do those things tells us that they were able to do them; it does not tell us how much effort was required.

Equally, visible distress does not necessarily mean that a child cannot manage something. A difficult morning, tears at the gate or apprehension about an unfamiliar situation may be part of an entirely ordinary process of adaptation.

This is why it is unhelpful to assess adjustment using a single indicator. For example, attendance alone does not tell us that everything is fine, just as anxiety alone does not tell us that something is seriously wrong. What matters is the developing picture: what is requiring effort, whether that effort begins to reduce as the environment becomes more familiar, and whether managing education is beginning to have a significant effect on sleep, relationships, physical wellbeing, family life or functioning elsewhere.

The distinction matters because our goal should not be to remove every uncomfortable feeling associated with change; children and young people need opportunities to discover that unfamiliar things can become familiar and that difficult things can become manageable. The important question is what happens over time: are things gradually becoming easier as familiarity grows, or is the young person continuing to struggle?



Coping tells us that someone managed. It does not tell us what managing cost them.

The same transition doesn't ask the same of everyone.

Educational systems necessarily organise transition around groups - children start Reception, move into Year 7 or arrive at university together. It can therefore be easy to think of them as undergoing broadly the same experience. They are not.

Two children can walk through the same secondary-school gates carrying very different levels of demand. One may already have friends there, know the building from an older sibling, have visited several times and have predictable support at home. Another may know nobody, find noise and crowded environments difficult, struggle with organisation, have experienced previous friendship difficulties and be dealing with significant change at home.

On paper, they have made the same transition. In practice, what each of them has to manage may be very different.



CHILD A

- Supportive home
- Established friendships
- Good sleep
- Clear routines
- Confident navigating new places



CHILD B

- Family under pressure
- Few friendships yet
- Poor sleep
- Unsure of routines
- Finds new situations daunting

This is one reason we should be cautious about reaching too quickly for resilience as an explanation. When most pupils appear to settle and one does not, it can be tempting to conclude that the individual simply needs to become more resilient. A better starting point is to ask what this particular young person is finding difficult about the transition.

The answer may lie partly with the young person, partly in what else is happening in their life and partly in the environment around them. There may not be one cause. The important thing is to understand enough about what is happening to respond usefully.

The first few weeks give us useful information.

A difficult first day or week does not necessarily mean that something is wrong. Settling in takes time, and we would expect some of the effort involved in navigating a new year or setting to reduce as things become more familiar.

A pupil who initially needs considerable reassurance may begin to need less. The journey becomes routine. They stop having to think about where to go next. They learn what different teachers expect. New relationships begin to feel less new.

This is why the direction of travel matters.

Is the pupil gradually finding their feet? Are they managing, but only with considerable effort or support? Does the same part of the day remain persistently difficult? Or are difficulties becoming more pronounced as the weeks pass?

It is also worth noticing where the difficulty **isn't** happening. A pupil who struggles to arrive but settles once lessons begin presents a different picture from one whose difficulties build throughout the day. Someone who manages structured lessons but finds lunch increasingly difficult may need something different again. And if school sees a pupil who appears to be managing while their family sees significant exhaustion, distress or changes in behaviour afterwards, both parts of the picture matter.

We do not need to turn every observation into an explanation. But watching what changes - and what doesn't - as familiarity develops can help us distinguish between somebody who is still finding their feet and somebody for whom something isn't working.



Don't look only at how difficult the start was. Look at which way things are moving.

Support should be bigger than one good relationship.

Relationships are enormously important during periods of change. A familiar and trusted adult can provide continuity when much of the surrounding environment feels unfamiliar, and identifying somebody a child can approach is often a sensible part of transition planning.

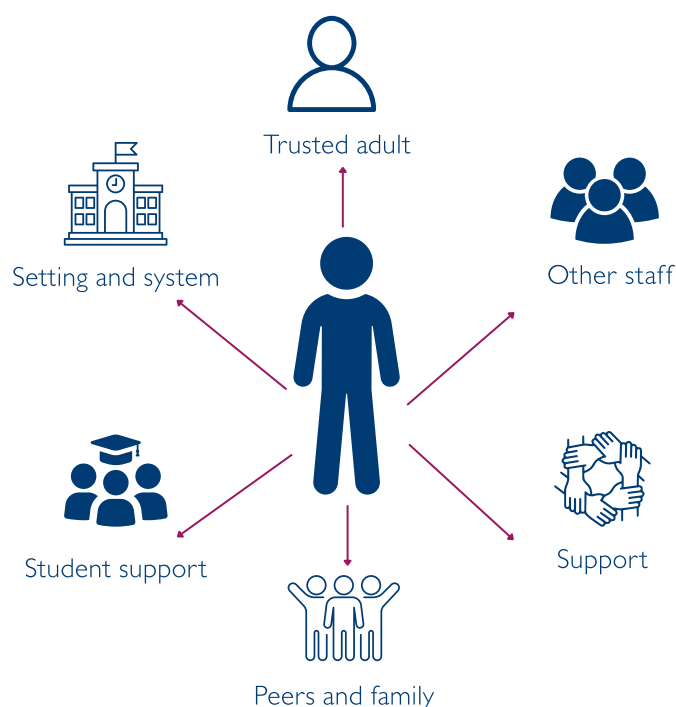
There is, however, a vulnerability in support that depends entirely upon one person; teachers are absent, staff change roles, people leave organisations. A child may be able to function well when their trusted adult is available and feel completely lost when they are not. A support arrangement that works well while that person is available can become very fragile when they are not.

The goal should not be to remove that important relationship but gradually to make the support system larger than it. A child should ideally begin to understand not only who helps them, but how the setting helps them, who else they can approach, where they can go, what they can do when overwhelmed and what happens if the person they usually rely upon is unavailable.

The same principle applies to university. Parents often remain a young person's most important source of emotional support, but they cannot practically provide the whole support infrastructure from another town or city.

Knowing how to access academic support, student wellbeing services, healthcare, disability or inclusion services and accommodation support before a problem becomes urgent can make an unfamiliar system much easier to navigate.

Good support should not depend upon finding one exceptional person. Over time, a pupil or student should be able to trust that there are different people and routes to help when they need them.



The pupil isn't the only one getting to know something new.

There is another side to educational transition that receives less attention. At exactly the point when a child or young person has less knowledge of their new environment, the new environment may also have less knowledge of them.

A nursery practitioner may have spent years learning that a particular child becomes very quiet when overwhelmed rather than visibly distressed. A new Reception teacher cannot automatically know that. A primary school may understand the subtle signs that a pupil is struggling, while a large secondary school initially knows them largely through records and transition information. At university, a young person may suddenly become responsible for explaining needs that parents, teachers or other professionals previously helped to communicate.

Transition can therefore create a double loss of familiarity: the person knows the system less well, and the system knows the person less well.

THE YOUNG PERSON KNOWS THE SYSTEM LESS WELL

New rules and routines
Different people
Unfamiliar spaces
Unclear expectations

THE SYSTEM KNOWS THE YOUNG PERSON LESS WELL

New staff and teachers
Limited history
Unknown strengths
Less contact

This makes continuity of understanding particularly important. The useful question is not simply whether information has been transferred, but whether the next environment understands the things that actually help the person function within it.

- What makes situations harder?
- How do they tend to communicate distress?
- What has worked previously?
- What would the young person themselves like somebody new to understand?

Good transition is not about ensuring nothing changes - that would be neither possible nor desirable. It is about preventing useful understanding from disappearing simply because the setting has changed.



A double loss of familiarity. Continuity of understanding helps both sides adapt safely.

When attendance becomes the problem everybody can see.

This way of thinking becomes particularly important when difficulties begin affecting school attendance. Attendance matters, but once a child starts struggling to get through the door, the understandable urgency around getting them back into school can sometimes eclipse the question of why the door became difficult in the first place.

Avoidance can complicate things further. Staying away from something frightening can reduce distress immediately, which makes avoiding it again understandably appealing. As absence continues, however, additional difficulties can develop such as missed learning, changed friendships, disrupted routines, uncertainty about what has happened while away and increasing anxiety about returning.

This is why neither “they simply have to go” nor “we will wait until they feel completely ready” is enough on its own. We need to understand what has made attendance difficult, what may now be keeping the difficulty going, and what would support a manageable route forward. Current Department for Education guidance similarly emphasises working with pupils and families and putting individual support in place when mental-health difficulties affect attendance.

Understanding the demand on the child or young person does not mean removing expectations. It means giving ourselves a better chance of making the right response.



Understand what is making attendance difficult — then work towards a manageable route forward.

What could education settings be asking themselves this September?

Schools, nurseries, colleges and universities already devote considerable effort to transition. The question is not whether they have an induction day, welcome pack or named member of staff, it is whether the environment becomes progressively easier for the people entering it to understand and navigate. That requires organisations to look at themselves as well as the individual.

- Where are people repeatedly uncertain about what happens?
- Which parts of the day create disproportionate difficulty?
- How easy is it to ask for help when somebody is already overwhelmed?
- Does important knowledge disappear between classes, years or settings?
- Where does support depend upon particularly committed individuals rather than a reliable system?
- What are families seeing outside the setting that staff may never witness within it?



What is uncertain or unpredictable for our students?



How easy is it for young people to access help?



Where are we too dependent on individual staff?



Which parts of the day are hardest?



What knowledge are we missing about each student?



What are families seeing at home?

There is also a harder question worth asking: ***are we sometimes asking a child to become more resilient to something that the academic institution could reasonably make easier?***

That does not mean education should remove challenge - learning necessarily involves effort, uncertainty, relationships, disappointment, increasing independence and experiences that stretch us. Young people need opportunities to discover that they can manage difficult things, however useful challenge and unnecessary friction are not the same thing.

Being expected to develop greater independence is a useful developmental demand, however not knowing how to access help because the system is unnecessarily complicated is friction. Learning to navigate different relationships is part of growing up, whilst having vital support collapse whenever one member of staff is absent is a system problem.

Good transition support means knowing the difference.

Perhaps successful transition isn't really about the transition at all.

Eventually, for most children and young people, the unfamiliar classroom becomes simply the classroom. The journey becomes routine, names are remembered, relationships develop and fewer things require conscious thought. The environment has not necessarily changed; the young person has become more familiar with navigating it.

That process of settling in gives us a more useful way of thinking about successful transition. The question is not simply whether somebody managed their first day, or whether they experienced some anxiety along the way. It is what happens as the days and weeks pass.

Are unfamiliar things becoming familiar? Is the effort beginning to reduce? Are relationships developing? Does the young person increasingly know how the setting works and where to go when they need help?

If so, some difficult days do not necessarily mean that something has gone wrong.

If not, the return may be telling us something important.

Perhaps the most useful thing the first few weeks give us is information. They show us what is becoming easier, what continues to take considerable effort, what helps, what may have been lost in the move between years or settings, and what is becoming harder rather than easier.

Most children and young people will gradually find their feet. Some will need a little more time or relatively small amounts of help while unfamiliar things become familiar. For others, the return will reveal something that needs closer attention.

The important thing is to notice the difference.

About Eleos

Eleos works with education settings to understand and respond to the psychological and emotional demands experienced by children, young people, families and the people who support them. We bring specialist psychological expertise into the realities of education - helping organisations understand what is happening, strengthen the support around people and make informed decisions about what may help.

Putting this into practice

This article is accompanied by our practical resource [When the return isn't straightforward](#), designed for education professionals to use when a pupil or student does not appear to be settling as expected.

It helps you look at what has actually changed, what you are noticing as the weeks progress, what is helping, what may have been lost during the transition and whether something needs more time, a practical change or closer attention.

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