

## When the return isn't straightforward.

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A practical guide to noticing what a pupil may need as they settle into a new term, year or setting.



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## The first few weeks tell us a lot.

A new academic year brings change for every pupil or student, even when they are returning to a familiar setting. There may be new people, routines, expectations, relationships and responsibilities to navigate. For those moving to a new school, college or university, almost everything may be unfamiliar at once.

Most children and young people will gradually find their feet. Things that require thought and effort at the beginning become more familiar, routines establish themselves and confidence grows. For others, the return can reveal that something is proving harder to manage. That might show up in attendance, behaviour, learning, relationships or an increased need for support. Sometimes it is obvious within the education setting. Sometimes the pupil appears to be managing well during the day, while parents or carers see the impact before or afterwards.

The early weeks are therefore not simply something to get through. They give us useful information. They can show us where a pupil is settling well, what is taking more effort, what helps, what has been lost or changed during the transition, and where a difficulty may need more attention.



**This resource is designed to help education professionals make use of the information available to you.**

**It isn't intended to turn every difficult start into a concern, or to suggest pupils should be protected from the ordinary challenges involved in moving forward. It provides a way to look more closely when something doesn't seem to be settling as expected.**

**You can use it with an individual pupil or student, as part of a conversation with parents or carers, within pastoral or SEND discussions, or when reviewing how a group or cohort is adapting to a new setting or stage.**

You don't need to complete every section or arrive at a definitive explanation. The aim is to bring together what you are noticing, look at how things are changing as familiarity grows, and decide whether the pupil simply needs more time, whether something small could help, or whether a difficulty needs closer attention.



## What has actually changed for this child or young person?

A new academic year can look like one change from the outside. Year 6 to Year 7, returning after summer, starting university - but it is usually made up of lots of smaller changes.

**For this child or young person, what is different?**



**People:** New teacher, form tutor, support staff, classmates, friendship group, lecturers or other adults?



**Place:** Different classroom, larger site, moving between rooms, new travel arrangements, unfamiliar spaces?



**Expectations:** More independent working, increased academic demand, different rules, homework, deadlines, equipment or responsibility?



**Routine:** Different start time, timetable, breaks, lunch arrangements, lesson length or structure of the day?



**Support:** Has somebody they relied on changed? Do they know where to go now? Have previous adjustments or informal ways of helping followed them into the new year?



**Life outside education:** Has anything else changed over the summer or alongside the return?

### WHAT MATTERS MOST?



*The biggest change on paper may not be the biggest change for the young person. Moving school may matter less to one young person than losing a familiar teaching assistant; moving into a new year group may matter less than a friendship group changing over summer.*

## What are you noticing as they settle in?

Don't look only for obvious distress. Changes may appear in:



### Attendance and arrival

More difficult mornings, lateness, reluctance to attend, increasing absence.



### Learning

Reduced concentration, work taking longer, avoidance, increased reassurance-seeking, difficulty starting or completing tasks.



### Behaviour

Irritability, conflict, withdrawal, disruption, unusual passivity or changes that seem out of character.



### Relationships

Friendship difficulties, spending more time alone, increased reliance on particular peers or adults.



### The school day

Difficulty at particular points — transitions between lessons, breaks, lunch, PE, independent work, busy periods or the end of the day.



### Outside the setting

Parents reporting exhaustion, distress, sleep changes, physical complaints or a child who appears to “hold it together” during the day and struggle afterwards.

**What has changed from what you would normally expect from this pupil, and importantly, what is not difficult?**

The exceptions can be useful. If a child or young person struggles to arrive but settles once the day begins, that is different from struggling throughout the day. If they manage structured lessons but find lunch difficult, that points us somewhere else. If school sees very little difficulty but home sees a significant impact afterwards, both experiences matter.



*Look at the differences between the situations that are going well and those that aren't. What changes?*

## Is this settling in, or is something getting harder?

Transition takes time. A difficult first week does not necessarily mean something is wrong. So instead of treating every difficulty as a problem to solve immediately, look at direction of travel.



### **Finding their feet**

Things that were difficult are becoming easier. They need less reassurance. Familiarity is increasing. Difficult moments still happen, but recovery is becoming easier.



### **Managing, but at a cost**

They appear to be coping, but require significant effort or support. They may be exhausted afterwards, increasingly dependent on particular adults, or struggling elsewhere.



### **Getting stuck**

The same difficulties continue with little change. Particular parts of the day or week remain consistently difficult.



### **Finding things increasingly difficult**

Distress, avoidance, attendance, behaviour or reliance on support is increasing rather than settling.

These are not fixed categories or an assessment. A child/young person may move between them, and different parts of their experience may be moving in different directions.



*The important question is whether familiarity appears to be making things easier over time.*

*Then, which best describes what you are seeing at the moment - and what tells you that?*

## What is helping them settle?

Before introducing something new, notice what is already making the transition easier.



Perhaps they manage better when they know what is happening in advance.



Perhaps one lesson works because the routine is predictable.



Perhaps they are more settled on days when they arrive early.



Perhaps a particular member of staff has helped them understand how the new setting works.



Perhaps a friend, visual timetable, quieter space, clear written instructions or regular check-in is making a difference.



*What seems to be different when they manage well?*

*What might that tell us about what they need while other parts of the transition become more familiar?*

*Is there anything from those successful situations that could usefully be carried across elsewhere?*

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## Has the support travelled with the child or young person?

A child/young person can move successfully on paper while losing many of the small things that previously helped them manage.

Formal information may have transferred. Plans and adjustments may be documented, but some of the most useful knowledge about them is often less formal: how they show that they are becoming overwhelmed, what helps them re-engage, how they prefer to ask for help, which routines make a difference, or what a familiar member of staff has learned through knowing them over time.

A new setting - or even a new year within the same setting - may need time to learn about the child or young person as well.



What did previous staff know about this young person that new staff may not yet know?



Were there informal strategies that worked but were never written down?



Does the young person know how to get help in this year/setting - not simply how they got help last year?



Are we relying heavily on one trusted person? What happens when that person isn't available?



*The aim isn't to recreate the previous year. It is to make sure useful knowledge and support are not accidentally lost during the move.*

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## Is anything harder than it needs to be?

Some discomfort is part of transition.

A child or young person may need time to learn a new timetable, develop independence, build relationships and become confident navigating a different environment.

The answer cannot be to remove every demand, but it is worth distinguishing between something they need time and support to learn to manage and something that is creating unnecessary difficulty.



What does this young person need time, practice or support to become more confident with?



Is anything making this harder than it needs to be?



Could something reasonably be clarified, made more predictable or approached differently without removing the challenge the pupil needs to learn to manage?

## What do we do with what we're seeing?

By now, the question isn't simply:

*“Is this child or young person coping with the transition?”*

You should now have a clearer sense of how the transition is unfolding: what has actually changed, where difficulties are appearing, whether they are reducing as things become familiar, what already helps and whether something important has been lost along the way.

That does not always mean an intervention is needed.

The appropriate next step might be to give something more time and continue to watch it. It might be to make a small practical change. It might be to strengthen something that is already helping, gather information from somebody who sees them in a different context, or recognise that the difficulty is not settling and needs a more formal response.



*What appears to be settling naturally, and can be given more time?*

*What remains difficult or appears to be getting harder?*

*Is there something specific we can do differently based on what we now know?*

*What will we keep watching, and what would tell us that further support is needed?*

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## Transition doesn't finish on the first day.

Starting a new term, year, school, college or university is an event.

### Settling into it is a process.

The first few weeks give us information that induction days, transition records and handovers cannot always provide. They show us how a child or young person experiences the new environment in practice: what they manage easily, where they need more time, what helps and where something may need to change.

Most will gradually find their feet.

Some will need relatively small amounts of additional help while unfamiliar things become familiar, and for some, the return will reveal a difficulty that needs closer attention.

The task isn't to remove every challenge or interpret every difficult day as a sign that something is wrong. The task is to pay attention to what happens next.

- Is familiarity making things easier?
- Are they finding their feet, even if it is taking time?
- Are they managing, but at a cost that others may not immediately see?
- Has something that previously helped been lost?
- Or is a difficulty becoming more established rather than gradually resolving?

The transition itself gives us information.

Used well, that information can help us distinguish between those who need time to settle, those who would benefit from a relatively small change, and those whose difficulties need closer attention.



*The aim is not to make assumptions from a difficult day or week. It is to notice what the return is showing us, and respond to that well.*

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