

KNOWLEDGE HUB

RESOURCES

Something's changed.
What might be going
on?

A practical guide to
understanding what your
child may be finding
difficult.

INSIGHTS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE.



The first few weeks tell us a lot.

A new school or academic year brings change, even when your child is returning somewhere they already know. There may be new teachers, routines, expectations, friendships or responsibilities. If they are starting 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 take thought and effort at the beginning become more familiar, routines settle and confidence grows.

But sometimes something doesn't seem to be settling.

Your child may be more tired or irritable. Mornings may become difficult. They may complain of headaches or stomach aches, need much more reassurance, struggle to sleep or start saying they don't want to go. Sometimes the education setting sees the difficulty too. Sometimes your child appears to manage well while they are there, but you see the impact before or afterwards.

It can be difficult to know whether this is simply part of adjusting to something new or whether your child is genuinely struggling.

The first few weeks can give us useful information.

They can show us what is becoming easier, what continues to take effort, what helps and where something may need more attention.



This resource is designed to help you bring together what you are noticing without turning family life into an assessment.

You don't need to complete every section, diagnose your child or arrive at a definite explanation. The aim is simply to understand a little more about what may be difficult, whether things are changing as your child settles in, and what might be useful to do next.



What has actually changed?

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

For your child, what is different?



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



Place: Different classroom, larger school or campus, moving between rooms, a new journey or unfamiliar places?



Expectations: More independence, harder work, different rules, homework, deadlines, equipment or greater responsibility?



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



Support: Has somebody they previously relied on changed? Do they know who they can go to now? Have things that helped last year continued into this year?



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



What changes seem to matter most to your child?

The biggest change on paper isn't necessarily the biggest change for your child. Moving school may matter less than losing a familiar teaching assistant. Starting a new year may matter less than a friendship changing over the summer.

What are you noticing?

Don't look only for obvious distress. Changes can show up in different ways.



Mornings and attendance

More difficult mornings, lateness, reluctance to go, asking to stay at home or increasing absence.



Learning

Worry about work, homework taking much longer, difficulty concentrating, fear of getting things wrong or avoiding particular tasks.



Mood and behaviour

More irritability, tears, anger, withdrawal, reassurance-seeking or behaviour that seems out of character.



Relationships

Friendship difficulties, spending more time alone, worries about other children or young people, or becoming very dependent on one particular person.



Physical signs

Headaches, stomach aches, feeling sick, changes in appetite or other physical complaints.



Sleep and tiredness

Difficulty getting to sleep, waking during the night, difficulty getting up or being unusually exhausted after school.



After school

Holding things together during the day and then becoming upset, angry, exhausted or overwhelmed once they are home.

What has changed from what you would normally expect from your child?

And importantly: **What is not difficult?**

The times when things are going well can be useful too. If mornings are difficult but your child settles once they're there, that tells you something. If most of school is fine but lunchtime is consistently difficult, that tells you something different.



What's different when things are going better?

Is this settling in, or is something getting harder?

A difficult first week doesn't necessarily mean that something is wrong. Starting somewhere new - or returning to something that has changed - takes time. So rather than judging everything from one difficult day, we can look at **which way things are moving**.



Finding their feet

Things that were difficult are gradually becoming easier. Your child needs less reassurance. They're becoming more familiar with what happens and what is expected. Difficult moments still happen, but they recover more easily.



Managing, but at a cost

They appear to be coping, but it seems to take a lot out of them. They may be exhausted afterwards, need a great deal of reassurance or support, or struggle more at home.



Getting stuck

The same difficulties continue with very little change. Particular mornings, lessons, situations or parts of the week remain consistently difficult.



Finding things increasingly difficult

Worry, distress, avoidance, problems with attendance or reliance on support are increasing rather than settling.

These aren't fixed categories and they aren't an assessment. Your child may move between them, and one part of their experience may be getting easier while another remains difficult.



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

Which best describes what you are seeing at the moment, and what makes you think that?

What seems to help?

Before looking for a completely new solution, notice what already makes things easier.



Perhaps your child is more settled when they know exactly what is going to happen.



Perhaps mornings are better when everything is prepared the night before.



Perhaps one particular lesson or part of the day feels easier because the routine is predictable.



Perhaps arriving a little earlier helps.



Perhaps knowing who they can ask for help makes a difference.



Perhaps a friend, familiar adult, quieter space, clear instructions or regular check-in helps them manage.



What seems to be different when things go well?

What might that tell you about what your child needs while other things become more familiar?

Is there anything that already works that could help somewhere else?

Does school or the education setting have the whole picture?

Sometimes parents and education settings see very different things.

School may say your child appears absolutely fine while you are seeing exhaustion, distress or difficult behaviour at home. Or school may be noticing something that you haven't seen.

Both experiences can be true.

Getting through the school day tells us that your child managed it. It doesn't necessarily tell us how much effort that took. Equally, becoming distressed at home doesn't automatically mean that school is causing the problem.

Putting the different pieces together can give everybody a better picture.



What are you seeing before and after their school, college or university day?



What is the school, college or university seeing?



Are there differences between the two that might tell you something useful?



If you haven't already spoken to the education setting, you don't need to have worked everything out first. You can simply share what you have noticed and ask what they are seeing too.

Could something be made a little easier?

The answer isn't to remove every difficult thing.

Your child may need time to learn a new timetable, become more independent, build relationships, manage new responsibilities or get used to an unfamiliar environment.

Some challenge is part of moving forward, but there is a difference between something your child needs time and support to learn to manage and something that is harder than it needs to be.



What does your child need time, practice or support to become more confident with?



Is anything making this harder than it needs to be?



Could anything reasonably be made clearer, more predictable or easier to understand while they find their feet?



Sometimes a surprisingly small practical change can make a meaningful difference.

What if they don't want to go?

When your child starts saying they don't want to attend school, college or university, it can become difficult very quickly. You may be worried about their distress and, at the same time, worried about what will happen if they stay away.

There isn't always a simple answer.

Staying away from something frightening or overwhelming can bring immediate relief. But longer periods away can create new difficulties: missed work, disrupted friendships and routines, uncertainty about what has happened while they were absent and increasing worry about returning.

At the same time, repeatedly pushing a very distressed child into a situation without understanding what is wrong may not solve the problem either.

If attendance is becoming difficult, involve the education setting early. Try to move the conversation beyond:

“How do we get them in?”

towards:

“What is making it hard for them to go in, and what might help?”



What appears to be making attendance difficult?



Is there anything that makes going in easier?



Who needs to be involved in working out what happens next?

What do we do with what we're seeing?

By now, you may have a clearer picture of what has changed, where difficulties are appearing, whether they're becoming easier as things become familiar, and what seems to help.

That doesn't always mean something needs to be "fixed".

The next step might simply be to give something more time and keep an eye on it. It might be to make one small practical change. It might be to share what you're seeing with school and find out what they're seeing too, or you may recognise that things aren't settling and your child needs more support.



What seems to be settling naturally and can be given more time?

What remains difficult or appears to be getting harder?

Is there something specific we could try based on what we now know?

What will we keep watching, and what would tell us that more help is needed?

When should I ask for more help?

There isn't a precise number of difficult mornings or tearful evenings that separates ordinary adjustment from something that needs additional support.

Look at the overall picture and whether it is changing.

It is worth asking for additional advice if your child's distress is becoming more intense rather than less, difficulties are continuing without improvement, attendance is becoming increasingly difficult, or you notice significant changes in their sleep, eating, relationships, mood or everyday life.

You know your child. If something feels significantly different or you are worried, you don't need to wait until things reach crisis point before asking for help.

For school-aged children, you might start with their teacher, pastoral team, SENCO, school nurse or GP, depending on your concern. College and university students can also contact student support or wellbeing services, as well as their GP.

If you are worried about a child or young person's immediate safety, seek urgent professional help via NHS 111 Option Mental Health.

The return can tell us something.

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

Settling into it is a process.

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, and for some, the return will reveal something that needs closer attention.

You don't need to understand everything immediately. Pay attention to what changes, what doesn't, which way things are moving and what seems to help.

The aim isn't to make assumptions from a difficult day or week. It's to notice what the return is showing you, and use that information to decide what might help next.

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