

A close-up photograph of a young child's face, wearing a blue knit beanie. The child has light blue eyes and is looking slightly to the right. The background is dark, making the child's face the central focus.

# facing changes

**Cath Hunter** explores the role practitioners must play in supporting children through disruption to the nursery day...

**E**arly years staff play a crucial role in ensuring children feel safe and secure by managing any upheaval in the nursery day as calmly and smoothly as possible. Nursery life consists of constant changes, including staff and child absences and disruption in routine. For some children this can be very confusing, and can result in unsettled and challenging behaviour as they struggle to manage their feelings and understand what is happening. Children need structure and consistency to feel safe in their world, and when these are absent some find it difficult to cope.

The following examples illustrate two instances of difficulties caused by changes that I've encountered, and the ways in which staff responded successfully to them.

## Managing PPA time

For children whose lives outside of nursery consist of frequent changes and inconsistencies, even small differences can result in huge tension. If change in your life hasn't always been a positive experience, the same feelings of apprehension and foreboding will be reactivated around any future changes taking place.

When a member of staff is absent during their planning time, it is essential that the remaining members of staff, including the person who is covering for them, are able to manage their own feelings and anxieties around this. The children will be more sensitive to any other changes occurring at this time and will notice, for example, that 'Miss Richards is always more cross when Mrs Smith isn't here.'

For staff in primary schools, covering PPA can mean working across nursery up to Y6. Some of those I have provided consultations for have confided that they find the nursery the most challenging to cover, as it can be harder for children of this age to express in words how they feel. If stress chemicals are being aroused in the adults at this time, they will be absorbed by the children, resulting in an increase in anxiety feelings about not being safe.

### Trish

Trish is a very experienced teacher who covers PPA in the nursery one afternoon a week. She says it feels like the longest afternoon of the week and that her anxiety starts at lunchtime with her sometimes being unable to eat her lunch. She loves the children at that age but says it's very disheartening when some of them burst into tears as soon as she appears at the door, whilst others avoid her and cling more to the other members of staff.

We discussed the background situations of some of the children and explored what this change might feel like for them, as on some days they don't know even know who is going to collect them at the end of the day. This enabled Trish to gain more insight into their experiences and to depersonalise her experience – to see that the children are reacting to yet another change rather than her as a person.

I suggested some strategies for her and the other nursery staff to work on together as a team so there is a consistent approach to dealing with the situation. Children of this age have some concept of time, but as they are unable to actually tell the time that fact can be overlooked. I suggested that all the nursery staff talk to the children about the change on the Tuesday, just before home time; to remind them again on the Wednesday morning first thing; and then again just before lunch, so they are fully prepared. I also suggested that staff send a letter home to parents to let them know and encourage them to remind their child. I asked the nursery teacher to return to the nursery at the end of the day so the children



could see her before they left and be reminded that she would be back with them tomorrow, and suggested the other staff give the children gentle reminders throughout the afternoon: "When the big hand gets to '3' on the clock, Miss Selvan will be back to see you all".

I recommended having a selected activity out only on a Wednesday afternoon, to provide a more positive association for the children and staff, and encouraged Trish to bring a special nursery bear with her each week that could sit on the chair next to her and be shared among the children during the afternoon. The bear became another positive association for the children, along with the return of the nursery teacher and the clear and frequent explanations offered. Trish said she felt much happier working in the nursery and noticed that the children's anxieties had reduced as hers had subsided. The children were now always pleased to see her when she arrived, although she thinks they are more pleased to see the bear!



## Deal with differences

### Help your children cope with change...

- Always explain any changes, no matter how small, with reassurance and support.
- Offer clear reasons about what is happening and why.
- Remind, remind, remind – children are always in the moment and need up-to-date reminders about changes.
- Be a positive role-model by managing changes in a professional manner without moaning and groaning.
- Be consistent in your approach, both as an individual and a team member.

## Acknowledging feelings

There are endless opportunities throughout the nursery day to acknowledge, validate and name children's feelings, and it is the combination of these actions that will provide them with the emotional vocabulary they need. Nursery staff can try and recognise how children are experiencing each event throughout the day and find age appropriate words to name it. For example, "I can see you look really excited now it's your turn to play the drum" or "It can feel sad when you're the last one waiting to be collected at the end of the day." It is useful to use the appropriate tone and facial expression when acknowledging the feeling as it helps the child to recognise both verbal and non-verbal ways of understanding emotions.

As children of nursery age haven't developed emotional language themselves yet, they need the help of a sensitive and caring adult to express the words for them at regular intervals throughout the day. This will enable them to link up the feelings they are experiencing in their bodies with the appropriate words. For example, butterflies in their stomach meaning they are excited or scared. Children have highly complex emotional reactions to things and can be overwhelmed by these if they are not supported.

### Zoe – aged 3

Zoe experiences any form of change as difficult. If any member of nursery staff is absent, especially her teacher, her behaviour regresses and she starts sucking her fingers and talking in a baby voice. This is her way of communicating how vulnerable she feels and letting the staff know that she still has baby needs. Her mum has been in hospital several times during Zoe's life and her dad feels overwhelmed on these occasions caring for her and her two brothers; both parents had felt she was too young to understand, so hadn't offered any explanations to her.

I suggested that her teacher offer her a small finger puppet which she can name and keep in her drawer and look after when she is absent. This was designed to keep the connection between them strong, and also affirm to Zoe that her teacher was coming back. I encouraged the other staff to help her name and acknowledge the feelings she was having when she missed her teacher. I explained to all the staff the importance of them managing her anxiety so she wouldn't feel alone and overwhelmed with this.

I encouraged the staff to talk to Zoe's



parents about the benefits of discussing any changes with her and also letting the staff know so they can support her in nursery. The teacher reported a positive change in Zoe and she's noticed that she has been more settled since the introduction of the 'Chloe the Clown' finger puppet. She is now playing with her puppet rather than sucking her fingers and is reassured that her teacher will return.

### Be consistent

A consistent adult response to children's behaviour is essential for young children developing a sense of security and trust in themselves and their world. As such, nursery staff have a huge responsibility in ensuring they have a clear, structured approach to managing behaviour and are all responding in a similar way – it can be hard enough for children to manage the rules at home and nursery without having to understand different reactions from members of staff.

There are many reasons why a child may misbehave: they may be tired or hungry, or there may be a whole range of emotional reasons such as difficulties at home. Children need the structure of clear routines and boundaries, as it can be very frightening for them if they feel the adults in their lives are not in charge. They need a model of discipline that is assertive, firm and clear. If children lack, or have inconsistent, boundaries around their behaviour at home, they may test you out repeatedly and look for stronger boundaries.

Children's emotional pain must be taken seriously and nursery staff need to be calm, emotionally warm and in tune with children's emotional needs. Life is a constant struggle and very stressful if we are unable to manage change easily. We have a responsibility to young children to model and help them manage this, so they are able to grow into emotionally healthy adults.

### find out more

Cath Hunter is a therapeutic consultant, trainer, play therapist and supervisor with more than 30 years of experience working in early years settings and primary schools. Visit [therapeuticfamilyinterventions.co.uk](http://therapeuticfamilyinterventions.co.uk)

