

Creating A Welcoming Environment:

How to support new children in your program

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Moving to a new country is overwhelming, especially for a young child. They are just beginning to learn routines and to express themselves in their familiar surroundings when, suddenly, everything changes. Thankfully, there are many things you can do to help ease this difficult transition for the newcomer children in your program. This resource sheet will give you some guidelines to follow.

Create a calm, nurturing setting.

Use these ideas to create an environment for children, parents and staff that embraces new learning experiences and reduces stress, preserving everyone's mental health.

- Turn off all background noise. If you want to play children's music, choose one time during the program for it. Too much background noise increases stress levels, which can make children irritable.
- Use natural, sensory-based items. Use wood blocks, sticks, mud or sand in the sensory bin. Include familiar items from a child's culture in the dramatic play area and throughout the room. Not all children will be familiar with North American plastic toys. Introduce them gradually.
- Teach children how to use items that are new to them such as paper cups, forks, paint, glue brushes, etc.
- Demonstrate how to play with a new toy at children's developmental level, with or without words.
- Add props to the literacy areas. Make story bags or boxes. Add concrete items from a book, such as a ball or purse. Expand props by one item every day (i.e., what goes in the purse?)
- Use visual strategies to promote independence. For example, tape a photo of a toy on a toy shelf so the child knows where to put the toy when tidying up.
- Use visual schedules and clear, simple pictures to give children clues about what to do. This not only promotes independence, but also reduces stress for children and teachers.

Imagine how it would feel to be a newcomer child...

“Wow. Where am I? What were my parents thinking, bringing me here? New sights, sounds, smells, place to live, people talking with weird sounds that make no sense to me. What is this food? And what are these plastic things? Toys? That lady keeps smiling at me, but I want nothing to do with her. It's all a little too strange.”



Build a foundation for language learning.

In the first few months, communication will consist of ‘survival language’—the early stage of expressing basic needs and starting to understand classroom routines.

When a new language is being learned, children may also stop speaking in both languages for some time. This is called the silent stage, and it is normal and important. Young children do not translate words from one language to another, and during the silent stage, the brain is creating and establishing pathways for both languages.

Here are some guidelines for helping children to communicate:

- Speak slowly. Pronounce each syllable clearly.
- Use body language. Children may not understand your words in English but will respond to gestures.
- Use single sounds, then words in English. English sounds may be unknown in a child’s home language, and a foundation of strong letter-sound awareness will emerge.
- Use short sentences. It is easiest for children to imitate basic, three-to-five-word sentences.
- Make it functional. Use key phrases: “I want...” “Help me...” “Mine.”
- Make it concrete. Saying the word ‘ball’ while holding a ball gives the child more information. Try not to focus on abstract concepts, such as manners. Avoid using too many descriptive words. Using only nouns and verbs in your sentences is effective for early learning.
- Face the child(ren) when talking. They need to watch how your lips form new words and sounds, along with your facial expressions, just like they did when moving from a babbling stage to words and sentences in their home language.
- Maintain a child’s home language through the initial adjustment period as much as possible. Use dual-language books or apply a few key word strips to book pages in other languages.
- Play sound and word games. Have children listen to a sound tape and provide a choice of pictures that identify the sounds. Try telling stories with only props and no books. Use books that have no words, but have colourful pictures or illustrations.

Let children adjust at their own pace.

Remember that adjustment will be different for each child. Some are natural risk takers, while others are shy and reserved. Some will learn the new language quickly, while others will need more time. By taking a patient approach, building a calm learning environment and using strategies to build a child’s foundation for language learning, you will help them to manage this difficult transition.

