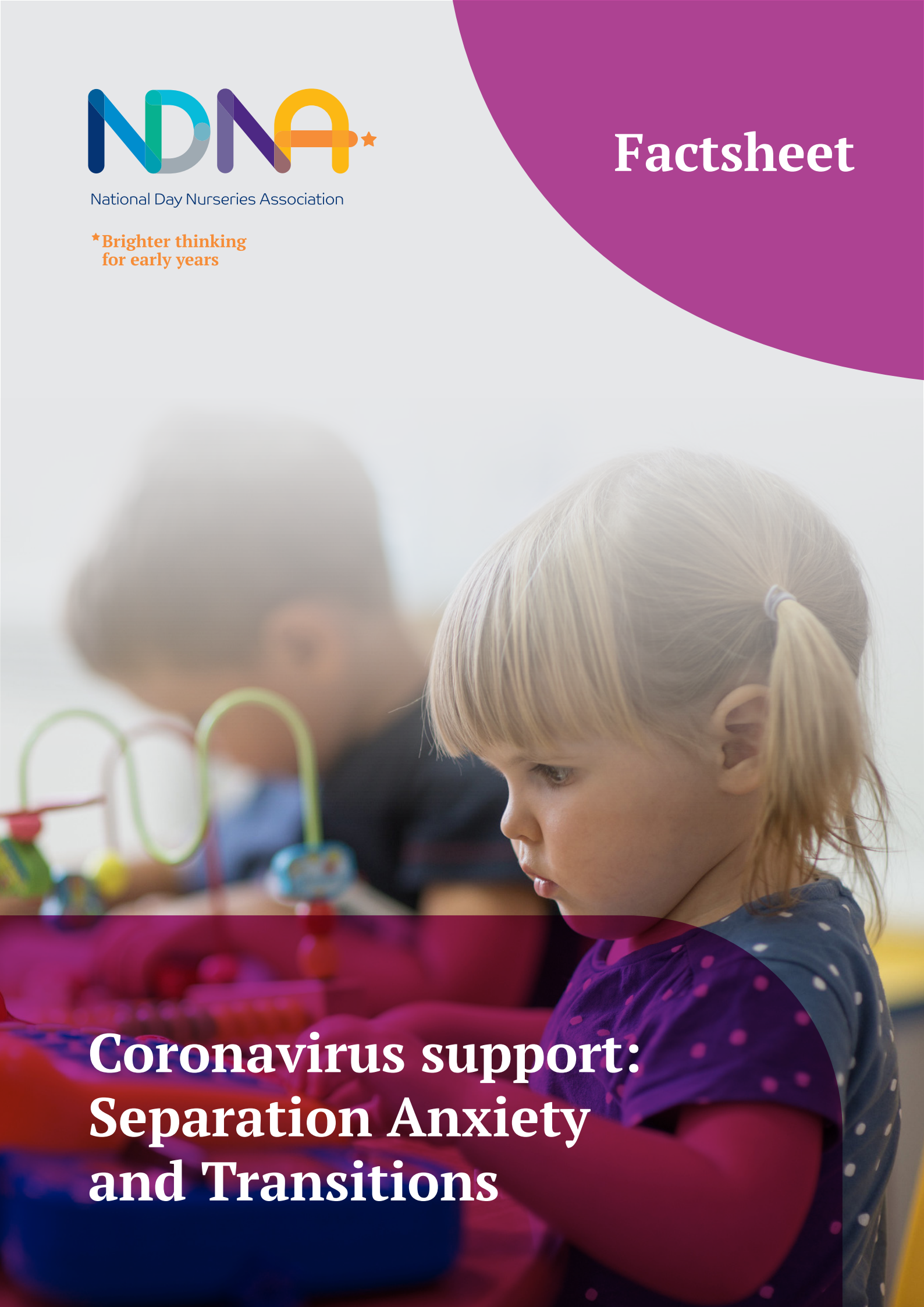




National Day Nurseries Association

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Factsheet

A young child with blonde hair in pigtails, wearing a purple polka-dot shirt, is looking down at a colorful toy. The background is blurred, showing another child and a toy with large green loops.

Coronavirus support: Separation Anxiety and Transitions

Coronavirus support: Separation anxiety and transitions

This factsheet has been developed to support nurseries during, and following, the coronavirus pandemic.

During lockdown nursery children will be having different experiences. Some will have stayed in their nursery with a reduced staff team. They may not have their usual key person to support them and they may be missing their favourite friends to play with.

Children who are in lockdown at home will be experiencing a change to their regular routines and may also be missing the relationships and adventures they have at nursery. Regardless of how children have spent their lock down, they will need supporting in making the transition back into their regular routines and patterns, re-establishing friendships and relationships.

The information and advice in this factsheet is aimed to assist practitioners, children and families during this time and make a smooth transition back to the setting when it is able to fully reopen.

This factsheet should be used in conjunction with all government guidelines which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

What is separation anxiety?

The National Health Service describe separation anxiety as a fear, in young children, of being separated from their primary carers which is most common between the ages of six months and three years. They state that it is a normal part of a child's development and children usually grow out of it. This is often displayed by tearful goodbyes when a primary carer may try to leave them. Although unsettling, with a few support strategies many children will soon settle.

However, separation anxiety can affect anyone at any time and is especially common after significant events for example transitions, divorce, moving house and/or traumas including a death of a close family member or abuse.

The coronavirus lockdown and changes in most children's day to day lives, may see an increase in the amount of children experiencing separation anxiety. This may include some children displaying

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separation anxiety behaviour during the pandemic and/or when they return back to their childcare setting.

Separation anxiety can be displayed through children's feelings and behaviours. These may include;

- Clinginess to primary carer e.g. Mum and Dad
- Tears, upset, extreme tantrums
- Sickness
- Withdrawal e.g. not wanting to join in with activities
- Disruptions around sleep, nightmares
- Food refusal
- Inappropriate behaviour
- Regression, for example toilet accidents.

Separation anxiety and object permanence

Separation anxiety often develops when a baby gains an understanding of the cognitive concept of object permanence usually between 4 - 7 months of age. This is when they begin to realise that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, for example lifting a blanket to locate a hidden toy.

Separation anxiety disorder (SAD)

The main difference between normal separation anxiety and separation anxiety disorder is the intensity of the child's fears, which can often prevent them from participating in normal activities. This is usually more associated with teenagers and is diagnosed by a doctor. If you have any concerns about a child that is displaying a lot of distress and upset for more than a few weeks, talk to their family and advise further support from a health visitors or doctor.

Children's experiences

Children's experiences over the pandemic will be different. Many children will have had lots of learning opportunities and happy memories. The close attachments they have with their primary carers are not a concern. Healthy attachments are very important, especially during this time. Some children may not have had this and their experiences may have been chaotic and perhaps they may have not always felt safe. Whatever the child's experience has been, it is important to take time to support and nurture both the child and the family as they make the transition back to normality. You will need to nurture children's independence and coping skills until they feel safe and secure again in the childcare provision.

It is expected that the Government will provide some notice for when childcare providers can reopen, so that time can be spent gradually reintegrating both staff and children in order to provide the emotional support children and families may need, rather than having all children return on the same day.

How to support children through separation anxiety?

During this lockdown period, for those children staying at home, childcare settings have still tried to keep in contact with children and families to continue the great relationships they have. You might have shared online stories, photos, activity ideas and kept in touch via emails and newsletters. These will all provide a great foundation on which to build when children fully return.

Other ideas to help smooth the transition between home and setting, helping to support any separation anxiety include:

For nurseries:

- Create a welcome back scrap book to send home to families, prior to them re-joining. Include pictures of staff, the environment and activities children can look forward to enjoying when they return
- Revisit children's current learning journals, or send them home (where possible), so children can look at the happy times they had at nursery and what they enjoyed doing when they were playing with their friends
- Replace home visits with online meetings with families for example by Zoom
- Stagger start dates so not all children return on the same day. Having smaller groups will allow time to spend building those relationships
- Encourage families to share lots of photos from home. Display them in the setting for children to look at
- Have opportunities for children to talk about what they have been doing. Find out about current interests so they can be incorporated in to the nursery activities
- Offer parents or carers one to one meetings with their child's key person in the nursery, so any current worries can be discussed and staff can be prepared. For example you might want to discuss whether children have got any particular anxieties or whether anything has happened that the setting need to be aware of including a death of a close relative
- Consider displaying visual timetables so children can see what they are doing next and when it will be home time
- Organise online catch up sessions between children and their key person prior to their return to nursery
- Send images of any changes to your environment so children and parents are prepared for the changes prior to their first visit for example your entry area or any social distancing arrangements in place

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For parents:

- Encourage shorter days to begin with for all age groups and build up again to the full session
- Remind parents and carers to always say goodbye to children when they leave rather than just going (however hard it may be) and telling their child when they will be back
- Encourage families to bring a comfort object for their child from home – one that can be cleaned during the day, where possible
- Ask parents to share key milestones of what their child has achieved. For example they may have learnt to walk, say new words, learnt a new song. All these can be celebrated when the child returns to nursery

The experiences you offer during this transition period should include lots of safe, open ended and sensory activities as well as lots of stories, songs and relaxing time to support children's well-being. You will need to think creatively about how you can do this within the COVID19 government guidance and your environment. Time outdoors will also be really important.

Focused activities around relieving anxiety including mind jars, rain shakers and sensory tubes may also be helpful. As well as lots of activities where children can talk about and express their feelings.

A mind jar is a meditation tool to use whenever a child feels stressed, overwhelmed or upset. Imagine the glitter as your thoughts. When you shake the jar, imagine your head full of whirling thoughts, then watch them slowly settle while you calm down. All you need is a jar, glitter glue, food colouring and warm water. Mix them all together and use with children to help them feel calm.

Supporting families

Parents and carers may have some anxieties and have gone through difficult times throughout the coronavirus pandemic such as being a key worker and having to balance work with childcare, having to work from home as well as home school; uncertainty around future work, financial worries, personal illness or needing to self-isolate. Children, parents and carers may also have experienced bereavement or loss of a loved one. Try to have a one-to-one meeting (this could be a telephone call or an online meeting using platforms such as Skype, Zoom) to explore any concerns they may have.

Try to find out individual circumstances in advance through a phone call, email or a short questionnaire, asking them how they would like to settle back in.

Some options for those unable to have settling visits could include having a video call with their key person, staggered starts, simple story sacks about returning to nursery or key person books for children. Working together and adapting your practice based on individual circumstances and children's individual needs will help to smooth that transition. You may even decide to make up some small gifts for parents with emergency supplies of tissues and teabags!

Transitions

Children may have been ready to transition to another room during the lockdown period. Childcare settings need to decide what the best option is for each individual child. Initially, it may be better for the child to return back to the original room they were in, with their key person, to support a smooth transition. However, this will depend on the child's age and stage of development, and where their peers will be.

Owners and managers will need to factor in additional time and staffing, where possible, to allow settling visits and conversations with families to take place.

Depending when childcare settings fully reopen, some children that are due to go to school in September may only return for a short period, adding an additional transition or may unfortunately not return to nursery at all. It is still going to be important to try and support children with their transition to school, where you can, through sharing information about the school. For example you could request photos of teachers or new classrooms to share with families and with parent permission, you could send information to the school about the child.

With parental permission you may also wish to share information about which schools children's peers are going to, so that children know which of their friends will be going to the same school. This may help to relieve some anxiety both for children and parents.

If you usually hold leavers party days or graduations, it would still be really nice to invite children and families back (when guidance allows) and still have these celebrations where possible. You may want to consider holding an online leavers party, inviting parents, children and staff to a Skype/Zoom party to say hello, share stories, say goodbye and have fun!

You can find a transition template at the end of this factsheet

Children's assessments

Try not to worry about gaps in children's assessment records during the lockdown period. When children return, try to gather as much information from families about children's interests and key milestones so they can be used to help plan a safe, fun environment. Use this critical time to build relationships again with the children by playing, reading stories and singing - all the fantastic things

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that they will have missed from being with you at your setting. Through doing this you will soon learn what children can do and be able to plan effectively. Once this is in place the assessments and learning journeys can follow.

Summary

The coronavirus pandemic has caused change and uncertainty for many of us. However, the work the childcare sector has done to support the key worker children and maintain the relationships with children staying at home has been outstanding.

It is going to take time for staff, children and families to settle again but we know that you will achieve this challenge through the love you provide for the children and the amazing activities and experiences you offer.

Thank you for taking the time to read this factsheet. It is hoped you have gained some new ideas to support children that may have separation anxieties when they return.

Further support and training

- NHS, **Separation Anxiety** (online) UK, 31.8.18, Last accessed 17.4.20
www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/separation-anxiety/
- NDNA blog on mindfulness: <https://bit.ly/35kgWZw>
- NDNA tips on promoting children's well-being <https://bit.ly/3aS2Z5T>
- NDNA's free "Supporting well-being in the early years workforce" online course: <https://bit.ly/3d1nz5g>
- NDNA's publication on Children's Well-being: <https://bit.ly/3f4OPSe>

Disclaimer - Legislation and policy guidance change regularly. It is the responsibility of the setting to review the latest COVID-19 guidance from the Government when undertaking these activities.

The information is relevant as of 28 May 2020. Should changes in legislation or policy guidance emerge after this date, this factsheet may not fully reflect these. It is advised that you continue to review the latest COVID-19 guidance from the Government.

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Coronavirus support: Transition example template form

(Intended for nurseries to amend to suit their individual needs)

Name of child:

D.O.B:

Date form completed:

My current interests are: (Include what they like to play with/any favourite toys/activities/programmes/stories & songs)

Whilst being at home I can now: (Share any key milestones for example learning to walk, learning a new song, being able to ride a bike etc.)

Important information you should know includes: (Share anything that may have happened during lockdown that nursery may need to know about to help with transition, for example not sleeping, clingy, lost a close relative etc.)

Would you like a one-to-one meeting to discuss anything further?

Yes/no

Phone/in person

Preferred time/date

Would you like to plan settling visits again?

Yes/No

Any other information:



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Factsheet

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We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

The information provided in this factsheet is for use by early years practitioners only. It has been written by early years experts but is not intended to be, and should not be relied upon, as a substitute for professional advice. NDNA has endeavoured to ensure the accuracy of the information presented in this factsheet. NDNA assumes no legal liability or responsibility for your interpretation or use of the information contained within it.

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