

Settling your child into care

by Lauren Boyle

Settling your child into child care can often be an emotional experience for both you and your child. It is a major transition in your lives where your child will be cared for in a new setting, by somebody other than a family member. It may be that your child is moving to a new room or section of the service, or commencing care in a different service. In any of these situations, children may experience difficulties separating from their family or familiar caregivers.

How well will your child settle?

Each child's reaction to settling into care, and the time it takes to become comfortable in their new setting, is dependant on the individual child, their age, and their past experiences in child care. When starting child care, services should provide you with support to assist you and your child settle effectively into the service. This assistance should help you to develop a sense of security and be comfortable that your child is being cared for in a safe and caring environment.

Children will vary in how long they take to settle into child care. Some will settle easily on their first day, while others may show distress or withdraw for some weeks before settling happily and confidently. Even somewhat confident children can find the adjustment to a care environment, and the related change of routine, difficult at first. It is therefore important to be aware that children who outwardly display confidence during the settling period may be experiencing some difficulties. Talking with children and encouraging them to voice any concerns or anxieties they may have is a helpful strategy.

Children also often experience great excitement at this time, which can make them tired and irritable by the end of the day. Child care professionals should reassure you that the early weeks at child care are a time of adjustment and that it is normal for children to experience some difficulties in settling. If practical, you may like to collect your child earlier from care for the first few days when they start. Once they develop a settling routine, they should be more comfortable. Consistent rituals or routines support children to manage the change and are helpful for settling into care.

What can you do to support your child to settle?

Before your child is due to start care, it is beneficial to visit the service with your child to familiarise them, and yourself, with the service and child care professionals. At this time you can talk with the staff and/or carers at the service about your child's current requirements and routines and how

the service can accommodate these. There may be areas where your child's routines will need to be adjusted at home to fit in with the policies and procedures of the service. This will be necessary where a home routine is not practical for the child care setting, or where it doesn't fit in with the service's health, safety or legal obligations. However, these can be discussed and negotiated with the service to ensure the most positive outcome for your child. There are a number of strategies that you can consider to assist your child during the settling process. These include:

- if possible, gradually building up the length of time your child spends in care when they start
- sending in a favorite toy or comfort item (you will need to check the service's policies regarding items from home)
- telling the child care professionals about favourite activities that may be used to distract or calm your child
- settling your child at a preferred activity before you leave
- establishing a 'goodbye routine'. For example, reading a story and then doing a puzzle before saying goodbye. The child care professionals at the service should support you in this.
- talking about child care with your child, and what will happen there and letting them know that you are happy and confident that they will have a good time and will be cared for
- reassuring your child when you leave that you (or someone else) will be back later to collect them
- asking the child care professionals for updates and advice about how your child is settling
- speaking with other families using the service about how they have helped their child to settle at care.

For your own peace of mind it can be helpful to call the service later to see how your child settled. Children who become very upset when they are left often settle very quickly and happily once the actual separation is over. The service should enable you to contact them throughout the day.

What can you do during enrolment and orientation?

The enrolment and orientation processes are the key times for you and the child care professionals to exchange important information about your child, family and the child care service. The information provided by you at this time will assist the service to develop individualised strategies to help your child settle and to provide positive experiences for your child. It is therefore important that you are open in providing clear information about your child, which should include specific details about their eating and sleeping routines at home, their likes and dislikes, their interests and health needs. This is also a good time for you to get to know the service environment and child care professionals so that you can begin to understand what to expect from the service. It is also important to use this time to let the service know what your expectations are for your child's care.

During the orientation period, it is helpful to visit the service, and to spend time discussing your child's interests, routines and rituals with the child care professionals who will work with your child. Bringing your child on these visits will enable them to establish the beginnings of relationships with the security of having you close by. It can also reassure you to see how your child responds to the child care environment.

The service may also be able to provide you with a family handbook at this time. This should include information about the service's operations and key policies and procedures which may help you to plan to settle your child into care.

How should the service assist your child to settle?

The service should use the orientation and enrolment processes to help ensure that an individualised approach is adopted for settling your child. The child care professionals at the service

should also demonstrate openness and sensitivity in assisting your child and family to settle. Some important ways for them to do this include:

- providing you with verbal and/or written information about what can be expected when your child is settling and giving you settling tips during this process
- keeping you informed about your child's settling, and actively seeking ongoing information from you about your child's needs and interests
- inviting you to call or visit the service
- giving you information about anything that may be happening at the service that may affect your child's settling. For example, the absence of key people who work with your child.
- reviewing the settling process for your child with you to identify how this is going.

Conclusion

As child care plays a major role in your family's life, it is important to feel comfortable to leave your child knowing they are being cared for in a safe environment. It is also important that your child knows you are confident and feel reassured about them being at the service. Exchanging important information and developing collaborative relationships with child care professionals will aid your child's transition from home to care and ensure a smooth settling process is established. In quality child care, your child will have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships and to engage in experiences that will benefit them both now and in the future ■

References and further reading

- NCAC. (2006). Factsheet for Families: Settling children into child care. *Putting Children First*, 19, 28.
- Lawson, N., & Owens, A. (2008). NCAC Factsheet for Families: Preparing for child care. NSW: NCAC.
- NCAC. (2009). Choosing and using quality child care – a guide for families. NSW: NCAC.

Useful websites

- Care for Kids: www.careforkids.com.au
- Raising Children Network: raisingchildren.net.au

For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au