

# Educators' Views on Parents' Contribution to the Transition to Nursery of Children Under the Age of 3

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## Abstract

The transition of a child from home to the nursery marks the passage to a new phase of life not only for the child, but also for the whole family. In this process, family is the most important factor in the child's smooth and successful transition to the new environment. In particular, the characteristics of parents and their behaviour during transition seem to have a direct impact on children and the way in which they will face this new challenge. In this context, many nurseries are implementing transition programmes or practices to prepare children and parents to cope with challenges that may arise from this process. The aim of this study is to investigate the views of educators working in nurseries in Attica (Greece) on the characteristics-behaviors of parents that can influence the smooth transition of children under 3 years of age. In addition, the study examines the transition practices, including parental involvement, that are usually put in practice in nurseries in Attica, Greece. The results of the research show that parents' anxiety and their thoughts on transition issues influence their children's adaption to the nursery environment. Finally, the practices that the educators apply more frequently are mainly related to providing information to parents about the transition process, about the possible behaviours that the child may display and also about issues associated with the operation of the nursery. Implications for practice are also discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** transition to nursery, children under 3 years of age, educators-parents collaboration during transitions, Greek ECEC

## 1. Transition and Parental Contribution

It is widely accepted that one of the most important periods in a child's life is the transition from the family environment to the nursery. In fact, it is the first contact that a child has with an organised environment that provides education and care and at the same time one of the strongest socialisation settings. For this reason, many researchers (e.g., Jensen et al., 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2010; Wittenberg, 2008; Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006) agree that the way in which children cope with the entry into the new environment is decisive for their emotional and social development, but also their successful transitions later in life.

Regarding the term transition, a multitude of definitions can be found in the literature as it has a particular importance and many dimensions and is influenced by various factors. For instance, Brooker (2016) perceives it as a transition from something familiar and known to something new and unknown that brings about changes which are capable of affecting the individual's life. Rous & Hallam (2006) define it as the process of moving from one environment to another, while Harper (2016) describes it as the events and experiences that an individual experiences when moving into an environment of uncertainty and changing roles.

From the above definitions, it can be seen that the process of transition is a major change for the child and for the whole family. In fact, the way it is dealt with is not the same for all children (Dunlop, 2018; Nathanson et al., 2009; Marcon, 2002). For example, children who have a smooth transition from home to nursery experience pleasant emotions such as joy, satisfaction and pleasure. In this case, the result is an increase of the child's self-confidence and independence, as well as the ability to successfully manage later life changes (Dunlop, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Giebel & Niesel, 2002). On the other hand, a child may not cope positively with the transition process. In this case, the child experiences negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, distress, denial, annoyance, upset and uncertainty (Nathanson et al., 2009). These emotions seem to have long-term effects on children creating insecurity, fear of facing new situations in their lives, and possibly result in academic failure in school (Brooker, 2016; Langston, 2014; Langston & Doherty, 2012; Johnson, 2009).

It seems that various factors can influence the process of children's transition. Family is probably the most important factor and therefore parental cooperation with the nursery is considered essential. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that the interaction between family, school and society and the relationships that the children develop within these environments have a significant impact on the formation of their personality, the development of their abilities, their socialization and the learning process (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Kalavasis, 2007; Duda & Minick, 2006; Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

In order to understand the crucial role of the family in the smooth transition of young children, we should start from the fact that during the transition, parents -along with children- experience certain changes concerning their roles and expectations. More specifically, parents are confronted with new emotions and needs as their child changes environment (from home to nursery) and are required to manage any difficulties that may arise. They may also have high expectations of their children in terms of how they will behave and consequently experience with them the stress and anxiety of adjustment, expressing their own concerns and worries

(Pianta et al., 2001; Hanson et al., 2000).

Furthermore, the social, economic and cultural background of the family plays an equally important role. Families with low educational level, low income, single-parent families and ethnic minorities are variables that affect a child's smooth transition, as they are often associated with low levels of cognitive, social and emotional skills and emotionally charged and distressing environments (e.g., Silva et al., 2011; Nathanson et al., 2009).

Thus, the time the family spends with the children to discuss their concerns, thoughts and feelings is of crucial importance. An environment in which children will learn to express themselves and their negative thoughts, one where parents will listen to them and be there for them, ensures that the children will rarely have difficulties in transition (Hanson et al., 2000). On the other side, even young children under the age of 3 years old, when growing up in an emotionally charged and distressing environment, where parents do not discuss with them their fears and anxieties tend to experience emotions excessively, are incapable of managing and expressing their feelings and they feel alone in such a life changing process (Spieker & McKinsey, 2009). Therefore, all of these affect how the children will cope with their new environment (Nathanson et al., 2009; Margetts, 2002).

However, in order to achieve the smoothest possible transition for the young child, many nurseries design and implement transition programmes or practices. The aim of these programmes is to build positive relationships with parents and to continue and support the transition process at home. Parents are informed about ways in which they can get involved (e.g. activities, volunteering, etc.) to facilitate the transition, and how to support their child's mental health and well-being in this new beginning (Dockett et al., 2016; Dunlop, 2013; Rous et al., 2010).

Essentially, these are child-centred practices implemented to ensure a smooth adaptation to the nursery life and to bridge the gap with the home environment. Research results (e.g., Harper, 2016; Rous et al., 2010; McIntyre et al., 2007; Rous & Hallam, 2006; Margetts, 2002) show that parents who participate in transition programmes and are informed about the expectations of the nursery are less anxious about the difficulties their children might face and can help them overcome the fear and anxiety they might experience. As a result, children gain a greater degree of confidence and are more likely to have a smooth and successful transition (Shields, 2009; Rous & Hallam, 2006).

Considering all the above, this study attempts to explore the views of 195 educators working in nurseries in Attica (Greece) on the family characteristics-behaviors that influence the transition of children under 3 years old from home to the nursery.

More specifically, the study aimed to identify:

- Which family characteristics-behaviors affect the smooth transition of children under 3 years of age from home to nursery?
- Which parent-engaging practices do educators believe can contribute to a smooth transition from home to nursery?

Additionally, the researchers assume that the views of educators are influenced by their demographic characteristics (research hypothesis).

To address the research questions, a sample quantitative research method using a closed questionnaire was chosen. This method offers the researchers the opportunity to approach a large part of the population to investigate specific hypotheses and questions, as well as to identify causal relationships between variables (Cohen et al., 2012).

In summary, this study hopes to address the research gap in the Greek literature on the transition of children from home to nursery and the practices implemented by educators in collaboration with parents. Although this is a critical issue in children's lives, the available research in Greece mainly concerns the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school (e.g., Didachou, 2016; Sakellariou & Mpesi, 2014), while research on the transition of children from home to nursery is limited (Anagnostopoulou, 2017).

More specifically, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has investigated the transition of children under the age of 3 years old in Greek nurseries regarding the family characteristics-behaviors and family involvement (practices) in this process.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 The Sample*

The sample in the present study consists of 195 educators working in Attica in Greece. The method by which educators were selected was simple random sampling. This is a probability sampling method, in which the probabilities of selecting units from the population are equal. In this case, the sample was randomly selected from lists of numbers corresponding to educators (Creswell, 2016).

Regarding the social and demographic characteristics of the sample, the educators were asked to answer about (a) the gender, (b) the age, (c) the years of work experience, (d) the type of educational degree, and (e) whether they have attended a seminar on the smooth transition of children from home to nursery.

In addition, all participants in the survey were informed about the purposes of the study and about issues of anonymity and confidentiality. More specifically, at the beginning of each questionnaire there was information on: the purposes of the survey, the reasons why their participation was necessary, the voluntary nature of their participation, the possibility to withdraw from the survey at any time they wished and withdraw with them any unprocessed data and finally, the ways in which the researchers would ensure their anonymity and the confidentiality of the data (Cohen et al., 2012).

**Table 1.** The Social and Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

| <b>Gender</b>                        | <b>N%</b> | <b>Age</b>                            | <b>N%</b> |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Male                                 | 9.2       | 20-30 years old                       | 20        |
| Female                               | 90.8      | 31-40 years old                       | 43.5      |
|                                      |           | 41-50 years old                       | 23.2      |
|                                      |           | 51 years old and more                 | 13.3      |
| <b>Years of work experience</b>      | <b>N%</b> | <b>Type of academic qualification</b> | <b>N%</b> |
| 0-5 years                            | 33.3      | Vocational training                   | 34.9      |
| 6-10 years                           | 20        | University degree                     | 59        |
| 11-20 years                          | 26.7      | Postgraduate degree                   | 6.1       |
| 21-30 years                          | 13.3      | Ph.D degree                           |           |
| 30 years or more                     | 6.7       |                                       |           |
| <b>Seminar for smooth transition</b> | <b>N</b>  |                                       |           |
| Yes                                  | 67.7      |                                       |           |
| No                                   | 32.2      |                                       |           |

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Data Analysis

The educators who participated in the research were asked to answer using a five-point Likert scale; 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree.

**Table 2.** The Means of Statements about the Factors That Affect the Smooth Transition

| <b>A. Characteristics-behaviors of parents</b>   | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. Dev.</b> |
|--|----------|-------------|------------------|
| A1. High educational background of the family  | 195      | 2.77        | .971             |
| A2. High socio-cultural background of the family   | 195      | 3.13        | .819             |
| A3. Previous experience of the family in nursery school (older children)                   | 195      | 2.93        | .961             |
| A4. Parental anxiety   | 195      | 4.73        | .450             |
| A5. Participation in a transition program  | 195      | 4.27        | .740             |
| A6. Parents thoughts on transition issues  | 195      | 4.47        | .571             |
| A7. The way parents manage their children's emotions                                       | 195      | 4.47        | .629             |
| A8. High expectations of parents (learning, behavioral, etc.)                              | 195      | 4.65        | .854             |
| A9. Overprotective parents   | 195      | 4.57        | .796             |
| A10. Time parents spend preparing their child for the transition                           | 195      | 3.47        | .698             |
| A11. Single-parent families are more anxious   | 195      | 2.27        | .868             |
| A12. Foreign families are more anxious   | 195      | 2.43        | .971             |
| <b>B. Practices for involving parents in the transition</b>                                | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. Dev.</b> |
| B1. Inviting parents before the transition to meet the nursery environment and staff       | 195      | 4.03        | .890             |
| B2. Interview with parents before the transition   | 195      | 3.97        | .798             |
| B3. Informing parents about operational issues of the nursery                              | 195      | 4.50        | .777             |
| B4. Informing parents about the transition process and the possible behaviors of the child | 195      | 4.70        | .535             |

|   |     |      |      |
|---|-----|------|------|
| B5. Instructions for parents to manage their anxiety  | 195 | 3.13 | .752 |
| B6. Instructions for parents on how to cooperate with the educators   | 195 | 2.67 | .693 |
| B7. Instructions for parents on how they can help their children at home  | 195 | 3.16 | .796 |
| B8. Send newsletters and e-mails on how their child's transition is progressing   | 195 | 2.80 | .714 |
| B9. Personal meetings with parents during the transition  | 195 | 4.07 | .944 |
| B10. Trying to build a trusting relationship with parents   | 195 | 4.02 | .846 |
| B11. Asking parents to continue discussions about nursery at home   | 195 | 3.14 | .635 |
| B12. Inviting parents to participate in activities  | 195 | 2.90 | .796 |
| B13. Creating a connection with home through objects and photos   | 195 | 4.13 | .819 |
| B14. Creating a story about the transition to the new environment of the nursery, to be narrated by the parents to the children | 195 | 2.77 | .659 |
| B15. Discussing any changes in services available to parents  | 195 | 3.89 | .696 |

### 3.2 Research Hypothesis

To investigate the research hypothesis of this study, a statistically significant difference between the demographic and social characteristics of the sample (gender, age, years of work experience, type of academic qualification, seminar training on transition) and statements about the characteristics-behaviors of parents (A1-A12) and practices for involving parents in the transition (B1-B15) was measured.

The results showed that there is a statistically significant difference between the gender of the educators and the effect of the high socio-cultural background of the family to the transition ( $F = 12.156$   $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.024$ ); 58.8% of the female educators disagree (Likert 2) that high socio-cultural background of the family positively affects the smooth transition, while 71.3% of the male educators agree (Likert 4) with this statement.

Also, the age of educators influences their views on the smooth transition of children. First correlation is found in the family's previous experience in nursery school ( $F = 17.518$   $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.017$ ); 83.1% of the educators who are 51 years and older agree (Likert 4) that the family's previous experience in nursery school positively affects children's smooth transition, 51.1% of the group between the ages of 31 and 40 neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3), 88.2% of the group between ages 41 and 50 and 86.7% of the educators between the ages of 20 and 30 years old disagree (Likert 2) with this statement.

A second correlation was found between the age of the educators and the effect of sending letters and emails to parents on how their child's transition is progressing ( $F=21.898$   $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.035$ ); 67.3% of the educators between the ages of 20 and 30, 66.2% of the educators between the ages of 31 and 40 and 62.5% of the educators between the ages of 41 and 50 agree (Likert 4) that sending letters and emails to parents positively affects the transition. However, 83.6% of educators who are 51 years and older disagree (Likert 2) with this practice.

Another factor that was studied is the educators work experience. A correlation was found between the years of educators' work experience and the influence of the family's high

educational background on the transition ( $F=25.173$   $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.022$ ); 63.1% of educators with 0-5 years and 59.8% of educators with 6-10 years of work experience disagree (Likert 2) that the family's high educational background positively affects the transition. However, 50.7% of educators with 11-20 years and 51.9% of educators with 21-30 years neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) and 66.9% of educators with 30 years and more agree (Likert 4) with this statement.

Another correlation was found between the educators work experience and their views on the effect of instructing parents on how to cooperate with them on the transition ( $F=26.394$   $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.037$ ); 58.1% of educators with 0-5 and 66.3% of educators with 6-10 years of work experience disagree (Likert 2) that instructing parents on how to cooperate with the educators positively affects the transition. In contrast, 53.2% of educators with 11-20 years, 53.6% of educators with 21-30 years and 51.3% of educators with 30 years and more agree (Likert 4) with this statement.

A third correlation was found between the educators work experience and their views on the effect of instructing parents on how to manage their anxiety on the transition ( $F=31.716$   $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.011$ ); 60.1% of educators with 0-5 years of work experience, 57.8% of educators with 6-10 years disagree (Likert 2) that instructing parents on how to manage their anxiety positively affects the transition. The majority (48.6%) of educators with 11-20 years and 50.3% of educators with 21-30 years neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3). Also, 76.4% of educators with 30 years and more agree (Likert 4) with this statement.

Additionally, the type of academic qualification influences the educators' perspectives. A correlation was found between the type of academic qualification and their views on the effect of discussing with parents any changes in nursery services on the transition ( $F=14.373$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.019$ ); 78.3% of the educators with vocational training disagree (Likert 2) that discussing with parents any changes in nursery services positively affects the transition, while 65.1% of the educators with a higher education degree and 64.8% of educators with a postgraduate degree agree (Likert 4) with this statement.

Also, a correlation was found between the type of academic qualification and their views on the effect of asking parents to continue discussions about nursery at home on the transition ( $F=28.934$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.031$ ); 49.1% of the educators with vocational training disagree (Likert 2) that asking parents to continue discussions about nursery at home positively affects the transition. However, 71.5% of the educators with a higher education degree and 69.8% of educators with a postgraduate degree agree (Likert 4) with this statement.

Finally, there is a statistically significant difference between the views of the educators who were trained through seminars on the smooth transition and the effect of the time which parents spend on preparing their child for that process ( $F=19.894$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $sig.=0.043$ ); 91% of the educators who attended a training seminar strongly agree (Likert 5) that the time which parents spend on preparing their children positively affects the transition and 49.1% of the educators who did not attend a training seminar neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) with this statement.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the study showed that the family characteristics-behaviors and the family engagement with transition practices-programs can influence the smooth transition of children under 3 years of age. Moreover, the researchers' initial hypothesis that educators' views are influenced by their social and demographic characteristics is confirmed.

More specifically, the educators believe that the characteristics-behaviors of parents that most influence children's smooth transition are: parental anxiety, parents thoughts on transition issues and how they manage their children's emotions, the high expectations they may have and their tendency to be overprotective of their children. These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Brooker, 2016; Pianta et al., 2001; Hanson et al., 2000) showing that children's successful transition is directly dependent on their parents' attitudes. It appears that parents' personal concerns and expectations are factors that can make this process more difficult for children.

However, the finding that contrasts with other studies (e.g., Silva et al., 2011; Nathanson et al., 2009) is that educators do not consider a family's educational, economic-cultural background, single parenthood and families belonging to ethnic minority groups as factors that can make the child's transition more difficult.

Regarding practices to involve parents in the smooth transition of children, the ones most frequently implemented by educators are: informing parents about the transition process and the possible behaviours that the child may exhibit, informing parents about operational issues of the nursery, trying to connect with the child's home through objects and photographs, personal meetings with parents during the transition, inviting parents, before the child starts attending the nursery sessions, to meet the staff and get familiarized with the facilities and trying to build trusting relationships with the parents.

On the other hand, practices that previous research (e.g., Rous et al., 2010; Griebel & Niesel, 2002) has highlighted as important, such as involving parents in nursery activities, sending information to them via letters and e-mails on how their child's transition is progressing, and instructing parents to manage their own anxiety, do not seem to be frequently implemented.

Regarding the relationship between the social and demographic characteristics of educators and their views on factors and practices that engage parents and can contribute to a smooth transition for children, differences between variables seem to be found.

The first difference concerns the gender of the educators. Men working in the nurseries in Attica consider that socio-cultural background influences the transition of children, in contrast to female educators who disagree. However, it is important to emphasize that we cannot generalize the differences between male and female educators, because men are significantly fewer than women in the sample. This is because, similarly to international contexts in the Greek one as well, male educators are much fewer than the female ones.

There are also differences in relation to the age of the sample. More specifically, older educators do not believe that sending information letters and e-mails to parents on how their



child's transition is progressing can help them to ensure a smooth transition for their children. In contrast, the younger the educators are, the more they support the use of this practice. On the other hand, older educators tend to believe that parents' previous experience with nursery (older children) can help with the child's successful transition. In contrast, young educators (20-30 years old) disagree with this factor.

Additionally, educators with fewer years of work experience do not believe that the family's educational level can influence the child's transition, unlike educators with more years of work experience who believe that the family's educational level is an important factor. Furthermore, educators with fewer years of work experience do not consider it important to instruct parents on ways to cooperate with them and to provide instructions on how to manage their stress, unlike educators with more years of work experience.

Another difference is that educators with a higher level of education degree consider discussing with parents about possible changes in the services provided by the nursery as an important practice for a smooth transition for children, as well as continuing to talk to their children about the nursery at home in order to make connections. In contrast, educators with vocational training do not agree with these practices.

Finally, educators who have attended a training seminar on the smooth transition of children from home to nursery consider the time parents spend preparing their children for the transition to be an important factor.

## **5. Research Limitations and Implications for Practice and Further Research**

Regarding the limitations of this study, the small number of male educators who participated to the project, and the fact that only the views of educators working in Attica were investigated should be mentioned. Therefore, future surveys could include a larger number of male educators, as well as cover more geographical areas both in Greece and internationally.

Moreover, the results of this study could be the starting point for further research that will either use qualitative research tools for an in-depth study of the issue or that will explore parents' views on their children's transition. In this way, a better understanding of the factors that influence the smooth transition from home to nursery settings of children under 3 years of age will be achieved.

On the other hand, this study's findings could contribute to changing altering the practices followed by nurseries in relation to young children's transition. For example, although the educators who participated to the study acknowledge that parental stress is the most important factor affecting children's smooth transitions, they do not seem to focus on implementing practices that will help parents manage their emotions. According to educators' responses, they are mainly informing parents about the transition process and the child's possible behaviours. Therefore, it is suggested that future transition programmes implemented by educators in Attica to pay more attention in supporting parents during this process. After all, practices that

aim to reduce parental stress, also achieve a smooth transition from home to nursery for the child (e.g., Pianta et al., 2001; Hanson et al., 2000).

Furthermore, findings of this study stress out the importance of inviting parents to regular meetings before and during the transition and focusing on parents feelings, fears and anxieties. Additionally, educators could implement a guide which would focus on describing the child's transition process and provide parents with information on strategies for managing their own anxiety. Finally, involving parents in nursery activities (e.g., cooking, reading stories, etc.) could reduce parents' anxiety as they would be involved into the life of the nursery.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study attempted to address the existing research gap in Greek research regarding the transition of children under the age of 3 years old from home to nursery. The results of the study show that the attitude of the family and their thoughts on transition issues are important factors influencing the child's adaption to the nursery environment. Additionally, the findings of this study show that the practices that the educators apply more frequently are mainly related to providing information to parents about the transition process but without focusing on implementing practices that will help parents manage their emotions. Therefore, since the family's cooperation with the nursery can positively influence children's transition, it is proposed to the educators to identify and implement appropriate practices that enhance parent-educator partnership and communication and reduce parental stress in order to facilitate the transition process.

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