

A GOOD START TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Children and parents getting to know the new day care place

The Best for Little Ones project (2006–2007) involved creating a basic model for situations where a young child (under 3 years old) is about to start early childhood education for the first time. Kindergartens and providers of family day care in the care provider's home have structured their own routine practices on the basis of this model. The model can be applied when a child of any age starts the process of getting to know their new day care place.

Child's safe attachment

Early childhood education that supports the well-being and development of a young child starts with an unhurried process where the child and parents get to know the new day care place and the adults and children in them. This process is carefully planned to meet the child and parents' needs.

During the first year, the child has already formed an attachment to his or her parents. Starting day care means that the child will have to bear being separated from these primary objects of his or her attachment and become attached to the adults and group of children at their new day care place. This new attachment is most safely achieved for the child when it is allowed to occur at first with only one adult at the new day care place. This requires the "guardian practice".

In order to support the child's attachment it is important to try to achieve the kind of interaction that meets the child's personality and individual way of experiencing things as well as possible. Success at this requires confidential cooperation with the parents. With this cooperation we are also helping the child to keep his or her parents in mind during the day at the new day care place and supporting him or her in coping with the separation.

Best practice model for getting to know the new day care place

A child starting early childhood education is given their own guardian who is either the kindergarten teacher or nanny of the group of children in question. The early childhood education unit has a practice in place for how parents are contacted after their child has been given a place in kindergarten, family day care or group family day care.

The parents first meet their child's future guardian at the new day care place without the child. Together they discuss the parents' expectations and the child's and family's situation at the time the child begins early childhood education. The guardian tells the parents about the procedures and other matters that are relevant at the beginning of early childhood education. During this first discussion, the details of the child's process for getting to know their new day care place are agreed.

This first discussion can also take place in the child's home if it is an option offered by the early childhood education unit and if the parents so choose. In this situation, the interaction is different in tone, because it takes place on familiar ground for the family and the child is present. Meeting at the family's home may bring positive elements to the child's process of getting to know their new day care place and to forging the cooperation for caring and educating the child. These elements may not be achieved in a discussion that takes place at the day care place.

After the discussion, the child will visit their new day care place a few times with a parent, for example for 1–2 hours at a time within a period of a couple of weeks. During these visits, the parent stays with the child. It's best to time the visits at different points of the day so that the child and parents get a comprehensive understanding of the routine of the day care place. The guardian receives the child and parent and stays with them throughout the visit. The interaction between the child and guardian begins to take shape during these visits. The fact that the adults are already acquainted will make the child feel safer and will lay the ground for safe attachment to the guardian. The guardian will also learn about the best ways to care for this particular child. For example in basic care situations during the visits, the parent will help and care for the child at first and, during the later visits, the guardian will do it while the parent stands by.

Sometimes there is not enough time for the child and parents to get to know the new day care place well. A parent may, for example, have to start work on short notice or there may be some other obstacles. Even then the process should be implemented as thoroughly as possible, and parents and carers should be prepared for various reactions from the child after their early childhood education has begun. Understanding the situation will help both parents and the adults at the new day care place support the child during this transitional phase.