Week 3 of 6: 28 October 2026



What's Getting in the Way?

Notice. Understand. Respond.

This blog is part 3 of a Marathon Early Years Consultancy's 6-week series.

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Over the first two weeks of this series, we have started to broaden our thinking about barriers to learning.

In Week 1, we explored a fundamental principle: every child can experience a barrier to learning.

In Week 2, we considered why what we see isn't always the barrier. Behaviour, withdrawal, frustration or a sudden change in participation may be what first catches our attention, but professional curiosity asks us to look beyond the presentation.

This Week — Week 3

This week, we want to explore something that can be much easier to overlook:

What happens when ordinary life changes?

Because not every barrier is developmental.

Not every barrier is associated with SEND.

Not every barrier requires specialist intervention.

Sometimes, something has simply changed in a child's world.

And when life changes, learning can change too.

If you're new to this series, you can revisit the article that started the conversation:

Understanding the Barriers to Learning in the Early Years

Children don't leave their lives at the door

We know this.

Yet it can be remarkably easy to separate what happens at the setting from what happens at home.

A child arrives at 8am and we see the child who is standing in front of us.

We don't necessarily see the night they have had.

We don't see the argument at breakfast.

We don't see that Dad left for work before they woke up when he usually gets them dressed.

We don't see the empty dog bed in the kitchen.

We don't see the boxes stacked in their bedroom because the family is moving house.

We don't see the grandparent sleeping in the spare room.

We don't see the new baby who cried through the night.

We don't see that the child spent yesterday moving between two homes.

But the child brings those experiences through the door with them.

This doesn't mean that every experience at home becomes a barrier to learning.

It means that children's capacity to participate, communicate, regulate, concentrate and feel secure can be influenced by what is happening in the rest of their world.

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Temporary doesn't mean trivial

When we think about barriers to learning, there can be a tendency to look for something substantial.

Something that can be named.

Something that is likely to persist.

But some barriers are temporary.

That doesn't mean they are insignificant.

Imagine that a child's family dog has died.

To an adult, we might understand what has happened within the wider context of life and death.

For a three-year-old, this may be their first experience of something they love being there one day and gone the next.

They may not fully understand death.

They may ask repeatedly when the dog is coming back.

They may begin asking whether other people will die.

They might worry when Mum leaves the room.

Their sleep may change.

They may become angry.

They may repeatedly include death or disappearance within their play.

Or they may apparently show no response at all.

There isn't one correct reaction.

And there isn't necessarily an intervention required.

But there may be a temporary barrier affecting what this child needs from us right now.

Even happy changes can unsettle

This is an important part of professional curiosity.

We can inadvertently divide children's experiences into things that are positive and things that are negative.

But children don't necessarily experience change in such simple terms.

Consider the arrival of a new baby.

It's wonderful news.

The child may be excited to become a big brother or sister.

But perhaps Mum is suddenly less physically available.

There are new noises during the night.

Visitors keep arriving.

Adults repeatedly ask the child about the baby.

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There is new furniture in the house.

Morning routines change.

Perhaps Dad now completes routines Mum previously did.

Perhaps the child is expected to be “a big boy now” or “a big girl now” at exactly the moment they need reassurance that they are still little enough to be cared for.

A positive family event can still represent an enormous change.

The same is true of moving house.

A holiday.

A parent getting a promotion.

An older sibling starting school.

Grandparents visiting.

A family celebration.

A new bedroom.

Starting toilet learning.

Stopping a dummy.

None of these experiences is inherently a problem.

But any of them could temporarily change what a particular child needs.

When Grandma comes to stay

Consider something as ordinary as a family member staying in the home.

Grandma comes to stay for three weeks.

Everybody is delighted.

There is no crisis.

There is nothing concerning about the situation.

Yet the family rhythm changes.

Perhaps bedtime becomes later because Grandma wants to spend time with the child.

Perhaps there are more treats.

Perhaps Mum usually holds a particular boundary but Grandma responds differently.

Perhaps morning routines take longer.

Perhaps the child is sleeping in a different room because Grandma has theirs.

Perhaps the adults are talking later into the evening and the child isn't sleeping as well.

Perhaps Grandma does more for the child because she wants to look after them.

Then the child arrives at the setting.

They are tired.

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They begin testing familiar boundaries.

They become frustrated when a practitioner expects them to do something independently that Grandma has been doing for them.

They find it harder to regulate when told no.

We could conclude:

“Their behaviour has really changed.”

And it has.

But professional curiosity encourages us to think about the context around that change.

The important point isn't that Grandma has somehow caused a problem.

It is simply:

Something in this child's familiar world has changed.

Family breakdown and changing relationships

Some changes are much more significant.

Parents separate.

A parent leaves the family home.

A child begins moving between two households.

A new partner enters family life.

Contact arrangements change.

A sibling lives elsewhere for part of the week.

There may be disagreement between adults.

Or there may be a very positive, carefully managed separation where everybody is working together in the child's interests.

We cannot assume what the child's experience will be simply because we know the circumstances.

But consider the amount of change a young child may be processing.

Where am I sleeping tonight?

Who is collecting me?

Are my toys at Mummy's or Daddy's?

Why isn't Dad at breakfast?

Why does Mummy look sad?

Why can't I take this toy to the other house?

When am I going back?

Young children may not be able to articulate those questions.

Instead, we may see changes in play, sleep, toileting, eating, separation, emotional regulation, relationships or behaviour.

Again:

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The presentation isn't necessarily the barrier.

Boundaries can become blurred without anybody doing anything wrong

This is another area where we need sensitivity.

Children can manage different expectations in different environments. They learn very quickly that home, grandparents' houses and the setting aren't identical.

Consistency does not mean every adult in a child's life must respond in exactly the same way.

But significant changes in familiar boundaries and expectations can require additional effort from a young child.

Perhaps Dad has gone away for work and Mum is managing bedtime alone.

She is exhausted and chooses not to challenge something that would normally be a firm boundary.

Perhaps grandparents are visiting and understandably want to spoil their grandchild.

Perhaps following a family separation, adults are trying to compensate for what the child has experienced.

Perhaps a parent is unwell and familiar routines have simply become difficult to maintain.

This isn't an opportunity for practitioners to judge parenting.

It is an opportunity to understand context.

There is an enormous difference between saying:

“There are no boundaries at home.”

and thinking:

“There has been a significant change in this child's routines and expectations. Could that be contributing to what we are seeing?”

One closes down professional thinking.

The other opens it up.

What about the things we don't know?

Of course, settings won't know everything happening within a child's family.

Nor should they.

Families have a right to privacy.

The key person relationship isn't permission to investigate family life.

Professional curiosity must always sit alongside respect, sensitivity and appropriate professional boundaries.

Sometimes parents will tell us about significant events.

Sometimes they won't.

Sometimes they may not recognise that something relatively ordinary could be connected to what practitioners are seeing.

A parent might casually say:

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“He's exhausted. My sister and her children have been staying with us for the last fortnight and they're all sharing a bedroom.”

That small piece of information might help us make sense of why the child has been struggling towards the end of the day.

It doesn't require us to interrogate the parent further.

It helps us understand the child.

How we ask matters

There is a significant difference between curiosity and interrogation.

Imagine saying:

“She's been really difficult this week. Is something going on at home?”

Now compare it with:

“We've noticed that Isla has needed a little more reassurance from us this week, particularly around transitions. We wanted to check in with you and see whether you've noticed anything similar.”

The first starts with judgement and asks the family to explain it.

The second shares an observation and invites information.

Or:

“He's suddenly started pushing other children. Have there been any changes at home?”

compared with:

“We've noticed that Noah has found it harder when other children come into his play over the last few days. That's quite different for him, so we thought it would be useful to share that with you. How have things been at home?”

We don't need to diagnose.

We don't need to have an answer.

Sometimes we simply need to open the conversation.

The importance of the key person

This is where the key person relationship can be incredibly powerful.

A practitioner who genuinely knows a child is much more likely to notice subtle change.

Not because they have completed an assessment.

Because they know them.

They know how they usually enter the room.

They know which friend they look for.

They know how they communicate when they need help.

They know whether they usually eat enthusiastically.

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They know what happens when they become tired.

They know which transitions they normally manage confidently.

They know the difference between:

“This is how this child usually responds.”

and:

“Something is different.”

That knowledge cannot be replaced by paperwork.

But good systems can help us make sure what practitioners know doesn't remain only in one person's head.

A barrier can last a morning

Imagine a child whose morning has gone badly.

They woke late.

Breakfast was rushed.

Their favourite jumper couldn't be found.

Dad became frustrated because everyone was going to be late.

The child cried in the car.

By the time they arrive at the setting, everybody is stressed.

There isn't necessarily a family issue.

There isn't necessarily a developmental concern.

There may be nothing to “record” in any formal sense.

But at 9am, that child might have a temporary barrier to accessing what would normally be expected of them.

Perhaps what they need first isn't:

“Come on, everyone is waiting for group time.”

Perhaps they need connection.

A familiar adult.

A few minutes.

Something predictable.

Then the barrier passes.

That is still responsive practice.

And a temporary barrier can become longer term

We also need to avoid assuming that because something began as temporary, it will necessarily resolve quickly.

A bereavement may affect a child for a significant period.

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A family separation may initially be understood as a short-term change but develop into a much longer period of uncertainty.

Temporary housing may continue longer than expected.

An illness may result in extended absence.

A period of poor sleep may become established.

This is why review matters.

We shouldn't decide:

Temporary barrier ✓

and then stop thinking.

We should ask:

Is this still affecting the child?

Has the barrier reduced?

Has it changed?

Has something else emerged?

Does our response still match what the child needs?

The status of a barrier can change because children's lives change.

Several small changes can become one significant barrier

Sometimes there isn't one major event.

Imagine:

A parent starts a new job.

Morning drop-off changes.

Grandad now collects twice a week.

The child's older sibling has just started school.

Bedtime has become later because family evenings are busier.

None of those changes individually appears particularly significant.

Together, they represent a substantial change to the child's familiar rhythm.

This is another reason professional curiosity matters.

We can spend too long looking for the cause.

There may not be one.

Sometimes several small factors interact and temporarily reduce a child's capacity to cope with something they previously managed comfortably.

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We don't need to fix children's lives

This distinction matters enormously.

Early years practitioners are not there to solve family separation.

We cannot remove bereavement.

We cannot make a parent stop working nights.

We cannot change housing circumstances.

We cannot ensure grandparents follow exactly the same boundaries as parents.

Nor should we try.

Our responsibility is to ask:

What impact, if any, is this having on the child while they are with us?

And:

What can we reasonably do within our role to reduce that barrier?

That might mean greater predictability.

A visual reminder of who is collecting.

Additional connection with the key person.

A quieter arrival.

More preparation before transitions.

Temporarily reducing unnecessary demands.

Providing language for emotions.

Making space for play that allows children to process experiences.

Maintaining secure, predictable boundaries.

Working in partnership with the family.

Sometimes, the most valuable thing we provide is simply consistency when other things are changing.

Support without lowering expectations

Recognising a temporary barrier doesn't mean removing all expectations.

If home routines have become less predictable, the child may actually benefit from the setting remaining particularly predictable.

If boundaries have shifted elsewhere, secure and calm boundaries within the setting may provide reassurance.

If the child is experiencing strong emotions, we can acknowledge those emotions without accepting behaviour that hurts somebody else.

Support isn't the absence of expectation.

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It is creating the conditions that make success possible.

Avoid creating permanent labels from temporary experiences

This is particularly important if settings begin formally recording barriers to learning.

A child whose parents are separating should not become:

“the child with family problems.”

A child experiencing grief shouldn't become:

“emotionally dysregulated.”

A child struggling because their sleep has been disrupted shouldn't acquire a permanent narrative of:

“poor behaviour.”

The language we use matters.

The barrier belongs to a point in time and a particular context.

It does not become the child's identity.

This is one reason we believe barriers need to be reviewed.

Sometimes a child should no longer be identified as experiencing that barrier because it isn't there anymore.

That's a positive outcome.

Notice → Get Curious → Understand → Respond → Review

Let's apply our series framework to a temporary barrier.

NOTICE

A child who usually participates confidently has begun withdrawing during the afternoon.

GET CURIOUS

When did this begin? Is it every afternoon? Is the child tired? Has something changed? What does the family notice?

UNDERSTAND

We learn that a parent's shift pattern has changed and the child's sleep routine has been disrupted. They are particularly tired later in the day.

RESPOND

We think about the demands of the afternoon, provide greater connection and consider whether particular routines can be made more manageable while sleep settles.

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REVIEW

A fortnight later, sleep has improved. The child is participating as before.

The barrier has reduced.

We don't continue treating the child as though it is still there.

A question for your team this week

Think about the children in your setting.

Not only the children currently receiving additional support.

All of them.

Ask:

Has anything changed in this child's world recently?

Then resist the temptation to immediately decide what that change means.

Instead ask:

Have we noticed any difference in what this child needs from us?

That distinction is important.

We're not searching for problems.

We're making sure we know our children well enough to recognise when something gets in the way.

Because sometimes a barrier is long term.

Sometimes it requires specialist support.

Sometimes it originates within our own environment.

And sometimes...

Life has simply changed.

Our job is not to judge that change.

It is to notice the child within it.

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