Week 4 of 6: 4 November 2026



Is the Barrier Within the Child — or Around Them?

What's Getting in the Way? · Notice. Understand. Respond.

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Is the Barrier Within the Child — or Around Them?

Over the past three weeks, we have been challenging ourselves to think differently about barriers to learning.

We have established that every child can experience a barrier. We have explored why what we see is not always the barrier itself, and last week we looked at the impact that changes within children's lives — large and small — can have on their capacity to participate, regulate, communicate and learn.

This week, we are turning the lens in another direction.

Back towards ourselves.

Because when a child is finding something difficult, our natural instinct can be to ask:

“What does this child need help with?”

But perhaps there is another question we should ask first:

“Is there something around this child that is making success unnecessarily difficult?”

If you're joining the series here, our original article provides the starting point for our thinking:

Understanding the Barriers to Learning in the Early Years

Where do we locate the barrier?

Language matters.

Consider some phrases that might be heard in an early years setting:

“He can't cope with transitions.”

“She doesn't like group time.”

“He struggles at lunchtime.”

“She can't concentrate when we're reading.”

“He doesn't follow instructions.”

“She finds the room overwhelming.”

Each statement places the difficulty, to some extent, within the child.

Now let's shift the language slightly.

“Our transition currently requires him to stop what he is doing, process several verbal instructions and move quickly into a busy space.”

“Our group time requires her to sit within a large group and process language for fifteen minutes.”

“Our lunchtime environment becomes particularly noisy when all of the children are eating together.”

“Most of our instructions are given verbally to the whole group.”

Suddenly, we have something different to think about.

The child's needs haven't changed.

But we have stopped looking only at the child and started examining what we are asking them to navigate.

A barrier doesn't always belong to the child

This is particularly important when thinking about SEND and additional needs.

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A child may have a developmental difference, sensory need, physical disability or communication need.

But that does not automatically tell us what their barrier to learning is.

Imagine a child who requires additional processing time.

If an adult asks a question, gives the child time to process it and waits for their response, there may be very little barrier to participation.

If the adult asks the question, waits two seconds, rephrases it, asks another question and then answers for the child, the experience becomes very different.

The child's processing hasn't changed.

The environment around their processing has.

Or consider a child who communicates using visual support alongside spoken language.

If visual communication is embedded naturally within the environment, the child may participate successfully throughout much of their day.

Remove those visual supports and rely solely on lengthy verbal instructions and suddenly the child experiences a much greater barrier.

Again, the child hasn't changed.

The accessibility of what we provide has.

The environment is more than the furniture

When we talk about an enabling environment, it is easy to think about resources, displays and room layout.

But the environment a child experiences includes far more.

It includes:

the noise level;

the number of people in a space;

the pace of the day;

how often children are interrupted;

how much waiting we expect;

the language adults use;

where resources are stored;

whether children can access what they need independently;

how predictable routines are;

how many transitions take place;

whether children have somewhere quieter to be;

how adults respond when things don't go to plan;

and the expectations we place upon children.

The adult is part of the environment too.

That means when we consider barriers, we have to be willing to examine our own contribution to the child's experience.

“They don't cope with transitions”

Let's take a familiar example.

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A child is deeply engaged outdoors.

They have spent twenty minutes constructing something with crates, planks and tyres.

An adult announces:

“Right everyone, tidy up! We're going inside now. Put everything away, get your coats off, wash your hands and sit on the carpet.”

For many children, that transition might be manageable.

For another child, we have just asked them to:

stop something highly meaningful;

manage the disappointment of leaving it;

process several instructions;

participate in tidying;

move from outdoors to indoors;

manage a significant sensory change;

remove clothing;

wait to wash their hands;

and then sit within a group.

All within a few minutes.

If that child becomes distressed, we might say:

“They really struggle with transitions.”

But what exactly are they struggling with?

Stopping?

The lack of warning?

The amount of language?

The number of instructions?

The sensory change?

Waiting?

The group expectation at the end?

The loss of something they were deeply engaged in?

Until we understand that, “difficulty with transitions” isn't really an identified barrier.

It's a description of when we notice the difficulty.

What if we changed the transition?

Now imagine the same child.

A familiar practitioner approaches while they are playing.

“You've built a really long bridge. In five minutes we're going inside. What do you need to do before we go?”

Perhaps the child is given an opportunity to photograph what they have created.

Perhaps they are told what is happening next using language they understand.

Perhaps the transition happens in a smaller group.

Perhaps they aren't expected to sit immediately once they get inside.

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Perhaps the adult gives one instruction at a time.

Suddenly, the child manages.

What does that tell us?

It doesn't necessarily mean the child has now learned how to transition.

It may tell us that we reduced the barrier.

That distinction is important.

When group time becomes the barrier

Group experiences can provide wonderful opportunities for stories, songs, shared thinking and connection.

But they can also demonstrate how easily adult expectations create barriers.

Imagine a child who finds it difficult to sustain attention during a fifteen-minute whole-group story.

We might say:

“They can't concentrate.”

But perhaps they can spend thirty minutes investigating water flow outdoors.

Perhaps they can build an intricate structure with blocks.

Perhaps they listen intently when an adult shares a book with three children.

Perhaps they sustain a long conversation while preparing snack.

So is the child's capacity for concentration the barrier?

Or is there something about this particular expectation, in this particular environment, delivered in this particular way that isn't working for them?

That doesn't mean abandoning stories or shared experiences.

It means getting curious about how children access them.

“But everyone else manages it”

This phrase deserves some attention.

Sometimes when one child finds something difficult, we reassure ourselves that the expectation must be reasonable because everyone else can manage it.

But accessibility isn't determined by majority vote.

Imagine a building with ten people standing outside.

Nine can walk up the steps.

One uses a wheelchair.

We wouldn't conclude:

“The steps can't be the problem because everyone else manages them.”

The barrier becomes obvious.

In early years, many barriers are less visible.

The noise level may be manageable for most children.

The amount of spoken language may be manageable for most children.

The transition may be manageable for most children.

The group size may be manageable for most children.

But that doesn't tell us whether it is accessible for this child.

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Equal doesn't always mean identical.

Are our expectations developmentally appropriate?

Sometimes the barrier isn't an additional need at all.

Sometimes we are simply expecting something that is difficult for many young children.

Long periods of sitting.

Waiting while adults organise something.

Queuing unnecessarily.

Moving repeatedly between adult-led activities.

Listening to instructions that contain multiple steps.

Stopping meaningful play because the timetable says it is time to do something else.

Completing tasks in an adult-prescribed way.

Managing resources that adults keep out of reach.

Being repeatedly told to wait for help with something they could potentially learn to do themselves.

If large numbers of children are struggling with the same part of the day, professional curiosity shouldn't begin by asking:

“What's wrong with these children?”

It should perhaps begin with:

“What's happening within this part of our provision?”

Adult language can remove a barrier — or increase one

Consider a child who is trying to put on their coat.

An adult says:

“Come on, put your coat on because we're going outside now and everyone else is ready, so find your sleeves, put your arm in there, no, the other one, turn it around, that's it, come on.”

There is a lot happening.

Now imagine:

“Coat.”

Pause.

The child picks it up.

“Find the hood.”

Pause.

The child turns it around.

The adult waits.

The task hasn't changed.

The expectation hasn't changed.

But the amount of language the child needs to process has.

Sometimes supporting a child requires us to do less, not more.

Less language.

Less prompting.

Less rushing.

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Less stepping in.

More time.

More observation.

More trust.

Are we helping — or accidentally creating dependence?

This links closely with independence.

A child hesitates while pouring their drink.

An adult takes the jug and does it for them.

A child struggles with their zip.

An adult immediately fastens it.

A child cannot find a resource.

An adult retrieves it.

A child pauses when asked a question.

The adult supplies the answer.

These responses usually come from kindness.

We want children to succeed.

We don't want them to become frustrated.

We are busy.

It is quicker.

But if adults consistently step in at the first sign of difficulty, adult help itself can become a barrier to learning.

The child loses the opportunity to problem-solve.

To persevere.

To practise.

To experience manageable difficulty.

To discover:

“I can do this.”

Support should make success more accessible without unnecessarily taking ownership away from the child.

Mealtimes provide a useful lens

Think about a child who rarely pours their own drink.

Is the barrier:

“They can't pour.”

Or:

Is the jug too large?

Is it too full?

Is it stored somewhere inaccessible?

Does an adult automatically pour before the child has an opportunity?

Are we worried about spills?

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Has the child ever been shown how?

Do we allow enough time?

The same principle applies across practice.

Before concluding that a child can't, we should ask whether we have created the conditions in which they genuinely can.

Sensory barriers aren't always obvious

A setting can look beautiful to an adult and still feel overwhelming to a child.

Music playing.

Adults talking.

Children playing.

Chairs scraping.

Bright lighting.

Displays hanging from ceilings.

Resources covering every surface.

Movement everywhere.

Strong smells around food or changing.

For some children, this is simply the normal rhythm of a busy setting.

For another child, processing all of that sensory information may require enormous effort.

We might see the child cover their ears.

Or leave the area.

But we might also see something much less obvious.

They become quiet.

They follow an adult closely.

They repeatedly choose a small enclosed space.

They become increasingly dysregulated as the day progresses.

They struggle particularly at lunchtime.

Again, we shouldn't immediately decide:

“sensory need.”

We observe.

We get curious.

And we ask what changes when the environment changes.

Change something and observe what happens

This is where professional curiosity can become wonderfully practical.

We don't always need a complicated intervention.

Sometimes we can change one variable and watch.

What happens if the child transitions with a smaller group?

What happens if we reduce the amount of language?

What happens if lunch happens in a quieter space?

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What happens if we give a five-minute warning?

What happens if the resource moves to child height?

What happens if the adult waits five seconds before stepping in?

What happens if the child can observe the group before joining?

We aren't trying random strategies.

We are using what we have noticed to test our understanding.

And then we review.

Did it make a difference?

One child's adjustment may improve things for everybody

This is one of the benefits of thinking carefully about barriers.

Sometimes something introduced for one child improves practice for many.

Clearer transitions.

More accessible resources.

Less unnecessary waiting.

Reduced adult language.

Smaller groups.

Greater predictability.

More opportunities for independence.

Quieter spaces.

Better use of visual communication.

These things may begin as a response to an individual child, but they can improve the quality of experience for everyone.

That doesn't mean every child needs exactly the same support.

It means inclusive practice can often reveal ways in which our universal provision could be stronger.

This isn't about blaming practitioners

Turning the lens onto adult practice can feel uncomfortable.

It shouldn't become an exercise in blame.

Practitioners work within busy environments. Routines evolve. Habits develop. Something introduced for a sensible reason several years ago may continue long after anybody remembers why it began.

Professional curiosity should apply to systems too.

Why do we do it this way?

Who does this routine work for?

What are children learning through it?

Does it still need to happen?

Could we do it differently?

Strong reflective practice isn't about proving that everything is already right.

It is about being sufficiently confident to examine what could be better.

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The adult can be part of the solution

If adults can inadvertently increase a barrier, the opposite is equally true.

A practitioner can transform a child's experience.

The adult who notices that a child needs ten seconds longer.

The adult who gets down to the child's level.

The adult who recognises that less language will help.

The adult who prepares a child for what is happening next.

The adult who knows when to scaffold.

The adult who knows when to step back.

The adult who notices the environment is becoming overwhelming before the child reaches crisis.

The adult who changes what they are doing rather than repeatedly expecting the child to change.

That is skilled early-years practice.

Notice → Get Curious → Understand → Respond → Review

Let's apply our framework again.

NOTICE

A child regularly becomes distressed when it is time to come indoors.

GET CURIOUS

What exactly happens during that transition? When does the distress begin? Are there occasions when the transition works well?

UNDERSTAND

The child manages when given advance warning and moving indoors with a familiar adult, but struggles when the whole group moves together following a general verbal instruction.

RESPOND

We adapt the transition. We provide clearer preparation, reduce the amount of language and allow the child to transition within a smaller group.

REVIEW

Is the child now able to manage the transition more successfully?

If yes, something important has happened.

We haven't necessarily changed the child.

We have changed what was getting in their way.

A challenge for your team this week

Choose one part of your day where a child — or perhaps several children — regularly experiences difficulty.

Instead of beginning with:

“Why can't they manage this?”

ask:

“What are we asking them to manage?”

Look at the environment.

Look at the routine.

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Look at the language.

Look at the pace.

Look at the expectations.

Look at what happens immediately before and afterwards.

And look at the adults.

Then ask:

“If we changed something around the child, would the barrier become smaller?”

Because sometimes the most inclusive intervention isn't another strategy for the child.

Sometimes it is changing what we do.

This blog is part four of Marathon Early Years Consultancy's six-week series, What's Getting in the Way? – Barriers to Learning: Notice. Understand. Respond.

The series builds on our original article:

Understanding the Barriers to Learning in the Early Years

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