

Vision paper: EDUCARE / Transitions for 0-6-year- olds

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– Family Department (VGC, Gezin)**

a. Background¹

Young children (0-6 years) grow up in various contexts: at home, possibly in childcare and at nursery school. In Brussels, social challenges such as diversity, social inequality and poverty also have a major impact on their living and learning environment.

In their early years, children go through various transitions in and between contexts – from one moment of the day to the next, but also from home to childcare and/or to nursery school. Children and parents can sometimes have very different experiences of these transitions. There are also differences in the frequency and age at which young children attend childcare and/or nursery school. Research shows that children from vulnerable families who have access to high-quality childcare or nursery-school education almost every day from an early age have more development opportunities and achieve better results.

Young children develop best in a safe and stimulating living and learning environment. A high level of well-being is vital for high levels of engagement and both are crucial for an optimal development process. In order to give all children aged between 0 and 6 access to the best development opportunities, the VGC wants to create a line of continuity in which ‘care’ and ‘learning’ are integrated into Educare practices. A smooth transition is a must for everyone – and the key to achieving this is to ensure continuity through the transitions between childcare and the education system.

With this document, the VGC wants to explain the use of the terms ‘line of continuity’ and ‘Educare’ in the Dutch-speaking network in Brussels and to provide a frame of reference for pedagogical contexts and practices (childcare, schools etc. in the Dutch-speaking network) in order to establish more and better connections and thus to create a natural line of continuity for young children and their parents. The objective is to provide more and better development opportunities for young children, including children from vulnerable families.

1 | Transition: Transition in which changes occur in terms of relationships, environment, space, routine and/or context of care and learning. In the literature, the transition from home or childcare to school is not described as a one-day event, but as a ‘process of continuity and change’.

2 | Line of continuity: A (child’s) route through early childhood services (for children aged 0-6 years) in which key moments (transitions from home to childcare and/or nursery school) are interconnected.

3 | ‘Educare’ (practices): Term referring to early childhood education and care practices where ‘learning’ (education) and ‘care’ are considered inseparable and equal concepts for the development of children between 0 and 6 years of age (= conceptual integration of care and learning).

4 | Smooth transition: Transition in which there is sufficient continuity throughout the change. This ensures the child’s well-being.

b. Framework and vision

The VGC is committed to promoting continuity in the transitions that young (vulnerable) children between the ages of 0 and 6 experience in their living and learning environment. This contributes to a safe and stimulating development climate (pedagogical context) with more and better development opportunities.

For this purpose, the VGC uses factors associated with transitions that have been identified in research. This then provides a basis for creating a recognisable line of continuity in which care and learning coincide across different contexts. They form the frame of reference and guidelines for Educare practices in Brussels.

1. Underlying principle: the child comes first

It is absolutely vital that the child comes first. This child-centered approach means that professionals, early childhood education and care services and the wider environment think from the child's perspective and adapt to suit the needs of the child.

Every child is unique. If the environment (home, community, meeting place, childcare, school and professionals) is adapted to the needs and requirements of the child, there is a greater chance that the child will experience a smooth transition. It is therefore essential that transition processes are tailored to the needs of each child.

2. Continuity between home and school

Parents, carers and teachers are closely involved in the upbringing and care of children and are all concerned about the child's well-being and development. This shared commitment is a prerequisite for smooth transitions.

Parents are best placed to monitor continuity in the development of their child. It is therefore important to build an equal partnership and mutual commitment between parents, carers and teachers, whereby the different partners get to know each other and develop a positive relationship. To achieve this, they must communicate with each other and work together as much as possible.

A strong partnership increases the child's well-being and performance. A number of important elements here include: mutual respect, taking into account each other's views and competences, targeted and constructive communication, the importance of informal exchanges and the establishment of an open dialogue. The professional partners assume a leadership role in this.

5 | The European study on the role of Innovations in the Early Years (VBJK, Vernieuwing in de Basisvoorzieningen voor Jonge Kinderen) in preventing early school leaving (Dumcius, Peeters et al., 2014) conducted a thorough literature review on transitions and listed a number of key factors that are necessary for a smooth transition.

Parents often see the transition to childcare and/or education as a milestone in their lives and that of their child. They may have questions about the physical and psycho-emotional care as well as about the learning and development opportunities of their child. If they get answers to their questions and thus have confidence that the transition will be smooth, this will have a positive effect on the way in which their child – and they themselves – experience it.

This continuity should also be created using the wider home environment (culture, language, etc.). The partnership between parents, carers and teachers develops gradually, and is maintained and developed through cooperation.

3. Pedagogical continuity

During the first six years of their lives, children develop very rapidly in a number of mutually dependent areas. They can only develop optimally if they feel fully and inherently motivated, if they feel understood and respected and if their interests are being pursued. It is therefore very important that children feel at home in pedagogical practice. In order to achieve the necessary pedagogical continuity,

- ‘care’ and ‘learning’ must converge. The needs of each child are fully met from the perspective of the child’s overall development.
- a child-centred approach must be used. Each child is unique, and pedagogical practice ensures that there is a good balance between the child's autonomy and the stimulation and support provided by the carer/teacher.
- the frameworks and concepts used in the different contexts must be aligned: the pedagogical framework, developmental objectives, well-being and involvement, etc.

4. Professional continuity

The professional in a pedagogical practice creates a safe and positive climate. He/she has a sensitive-responsive attitude and offers each child plenty of opportunities to develop. The professional also has sufficient knowledge of the factors involved in transitions, such as the presence of an older brother or sister, or the child’s strategies for dealing with new situations.

In order to guarantee a line of continuity, it is advisable for professionals to exchange or cooperate with each other and with parents. This facilitates joint reflection on the environment and the needs of the young child and on how to make transitions smoother. Exchanges and cooperation between organisations lead to tangible agreements, visions and actions become aligned and/or children continue to be monitored (between 0 and 6 years of age). It also means that those parties involved can get to know each other's worlds better and develop a common language.

5. Continuity in the interaction with the neighbourhood

Being part of a close-knit network in the neighbourhood in which the child grows up and/or goes to school underpins social cohesion in the young child's environment. Wide and close networks (parents, family, carers and teachers) can play an important role in mitigating transitions (Community Schools - *brede scholen*, Regional Childcare Groups - *regiogroepen Kinderopvang*, Children's House - *huisen van het kind* in Brussels, etc.).

Interaction with the wider environment can contribute to a general feeling of safety among children and also offers many opportunities to boost their development. In this way, the wider world can be brought into the child's world. The diversity of Brussels as a large city is such that it is essential to establish a dialogue between the educational and care services, the parents and the neighbourhood and surroundings.

6. Continuity through the practical organisation

Early childhood services, such as day care centres or nursery schools, can reinforce the line of continuity in children's development by taking a number of measures.

The design of and cohesion between spaces have a strong influence on the well-being and engagement levels of their users. When it comes to transitions, a child-friendly (and domestic) infrastructure and space tailored to the child are crucial. The spaces must also be sufficiently stimulating and challenging to create learning and development opportunities. A well-thought-out format facilitates spontaneous encounters between parents, interaction with the neighbourhood and cooperation between the teams (of the different education and care services).

The skills and efforts of the personnel (recruitment policy, training, planning) can play an essential role in mitigating transitions. It is vital that all organisations think about developing a vision and the corresponding skills that their employees need in order to achieve the Educare objectives.

The daily routine can encourage children to discover new things and learn at their own pace and according to their own needs. This can be achieved through broad age groups (learning from each other and mitigating transitions), providing support through changes in a group context (safety), having a clear daily routine (recognisability), and other interventions that provide opportunities for the child to make their own contribution (child-centred approach).

Good partnerships do not arise spontaneously. Efficient and transparent information flows and open dialogue between carers and between carers and parents are the cornerstones of an equal partnership.

c. Further elaboration

This vision paper forms the basis for drawing up an action plan which sets out the strategic and operational objectives and provides information about specific measures and projects. The Flemish **Community Commission – department family (VGC- gezin)** and the Brussels Education Centre (OCB) have joined forces to develop a recognisable line of continuity for young children at Dutch-speaking education and care services in Brussels. In addition to harmonisation in terms of vision, content and pedagogical methods, joint projects are being launched wherever possible and good practices are being identified.

This framework is implemented in practice by the organisations involved, whereby their own pedagogical projects serve as a basis.