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**Author(s):** Lucas Revilla, Yaiza; Rutanen, Niina; Sevón, Eija; Raittila, Raija

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# Children Under Two As Co-constructors of Their Transition From Home Care to Early Childhood Education and Care

**Yaiza Lucas Revilla**

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

E-mail: [yaiza.y.lucas-revilla@ju.fi](mailto:yaiza.y.lucas-revilla@ju.fi)

**Niina Rutanen**

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

E-mail: [niina.a.rutanen@ju.fi](mailto:niina.a.rutanen@ju.fi)

**Eija Sevón**

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

E-mail: [eija.sevon@ju.fi](mailto:eija.sevon@ju.fi)

**Raija Raittila**

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

E-mail: [raija.raittila@ju.fi](mailto:raija.raittila@ju.fi)

## Abstract

Only by observing and listening to children can we learn about their unique ways of understanding the world. This study explored the ways in which children under the age of two contributed to co-constructing their own transition process to an early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting and how their contributions were constructed by the space. Video-recorded arrivals of four children under two during their first months in ECEC were scrutinized following the principles of interaction analysis, supported by socio-spatial theory. The recordings were made on seven observation days over seven months. The results show that young children contribute to co-constructing their transition arrivals by creatively drawing on the opportunities available in the ECEC space during the transition period and by creating new ones. The results also illuminate how the space mediates children's contributions.

**Keywords:** *children under two, transition, early childhood education and care, socio-spatial approach*

## Introduction

Upon entering into early childhood education and care (ECEC), young children begin a new phase in childhood. In Finland, ECEC is oriented toward peer relations, play, care, and learning, and is organized through group-based activities and routines (EDUFI, 2022). As young children access this new environment, they are faced with multiple demands and encounter experiences and opportunities for developing, learning, and forming new relationships (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Thus, the transition from home care to ECEC is a moment of intense change and development in young children's lives.

Many studies have addressed the challenges that young children face during this transition (Bernard et al., 2015; Datler et al., 2010; Nystad et al., 2021; Pursi & Lipponen, 2021) and the role of adults in supporting and promoting positive transitions (Dalli, 2000; Fein et al., 1993; Hostettler Schärer, 2018; Rutanen & Laaksonen, 2020). Most studies in this area underline the role of secure adult-child relationships, thus framing the transition as a threat to secure attachment (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Fein et al., 1993; Nystad et al., 2021). These studies focus on psychological and socio-emotional aspects, continuity of care, and secure relationships. However, less is known about how young children actively take part in the transition through their own initiations, explorations, and actions toward others and the environment. Moreover, the physical and material aspects of the new space are seldom the focus of transition research, since adults are seen as the main actors in supporting the child's transition.

With the aim of scrutinizing young children's contributions to co-constructing their transition processes from home care to ECEC, this study explores arrivals during the children's first months of attendance through a socio-spatial lens (Massey, 2005). In taking a socio-spatial approach, the research positions transition as intertwined with and inseparable from the ECEC space and highlights the space's role in mediating children's contributions. The *ECEC transition arrival space* encompasses a variety of socio-spatial aspects, such as the presence of others, the physical environment, and materiality (objects, furniture, and toys), as well as the goals, activities, and organization pertaining to ECEC, the transition, and arrivals. In terms of socio-spatial construction, arrivals are intense moments as children come into contact with the new space for the first time each day. Moreover, transition research highlights arrivals as sensitive moments during the transition period (Brooker, 2014; Klette & Killén, 2018; Pursi & Lipponen, 2021). The following research question guided this study: How are young children's contributions to co-constructing their arrivals in ECEC during the transition mediated by the space?

Longitudinal data gathered on the daily arrivals of four transitioning children under two in ECEC were analyzed, focusing on the children's (inter)actions with others and the environment. The data are comprised of video-recorded naturalistic observations and field notes of the children's arrivals at the ECEC center on seven observation days over seven months. The video data were analyzed following the principles of interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995), supported by socio-spatial theory (Löw, 2016; Massey, 2005). The results show that young children are competent actors who contribute to

co-constructing their transition processes through their practices and (inter)actions. The results yield key insights for practitioners seeking to better understand young children's (inter)actions and ways of participating in their transitions to ECEC.

## The transition of children under two from home care to ECEC

Educational transitions are defined as a person's move from one educational context to another (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). Educational transitions have been studied as the experiences, processes, and outcomes connected to the changes and novel aspects a child encounters during their first months in a new educational setting (Nystad et al., 2021; Thyssen, 2000). In this study, the transition process is understood as the child's journey toward becoming comfortable with and deriving joy from ECEC participation (Dalli, 2000; Datler et al., 2010). However, ECEC transitions are not solely an individual process; they also lead to change and novelty for the ECEC community that receives the child (Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Vuorisalo et al., 2015).

Research has shown that during children's transitions from home care to ECEC, difficulties linked to separation from parents are central, often triggering children's negative emotions and separation anxiety (Klette & Killén, 2018). During this transition, young children have been shown to have higher levels of negative emotions and lower levels of activity and involvement in the ECEC setting (Fein et al., 1993). This has raised researchers' interest in better understanding children's negative emotions during this sensitive period (Pursi & Lipponen, 2021). Being in ECEC creates heightened demands on the child, such as adjusting to new routines, coping with a noisy, busy environment (Bernard et al., 2015), and being cared for in a group (Datler et al., 2010). All in all, for the child, the transition process requires continual adaptation and learning (Brooker, 2014; Dalli, 2003; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Thyssen, 2000).

Having possibilities to influence aspects related to their arrival can have a positive impact on children's transition processes (Brooker, 2014). On arriving at the ECEC center, children may experience strong negative emotions and despair when separating from their parents (Klette & Killén, 2018) and need support from the teacher to calm down and direct their attention away from the departing parent (Pursi & Lipponen, 2021). Separating from parents may continue to be challenging for some children after the transition period as well (Salonen et al., 2016).

Although most research has focused on the role of adults in supporting young children's transitions, the literature has also suggested that young children actively shape and advance their transition process in various ways. On the one hand, they regulate themselves and their environment, for example, by showing emotions (Fein et al., 1993; Klette & Killén, 2018; Pursi & Lipponen, 2021) and self-soothing (Datler et al., 2010). On the other hand, they position themselves within the new environment, for example, by finding connections between the home and ECEC settings (White et al., 2021), negotiating places and accessing materials (Dalli, 2003; Lucas Revilla et al., 2023; Simonsson, 2015), connecting with others, and building relationships with peers and teachers

(Dalli, 2000, 2003; White et al., 2021). Furthermore, from the beginning of their attendance, young children begin to master their new environment and participation in it by learning about the rules, materials, routines, and ways of being with others in ECEC (Dalli, 2003; Simonsson, 2015).

## The ECEC transition space

In this study, young children (under two) are viewed as active actors who contribute to shaping society, thus co-constructing their own and others' lives (James & Prout, 1997; Löw, 2016). This perspective is widely agreed on in the field of childhood studies (James & Prout, 1997). However, much research continues to explore young children's voices (Elwick et al., 2014; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009) and seek methods and approaches that enable adults (researchers) to better understand children's perspectives (Atkinson, 2019; Correia et al., 2023; Gräfe & Englander, 2022; Sevón et al., 2023). In this regard, this study adopted a socio-spatial approach (Löw, 2016; Massey, 2005) that serves as both a theoretical and a methodological tool for exploring young children's active participation in co-constructing their own transition process (Raittila, 2011; Raittila & Vuorisalo, 2021).

Socio-spatial theory assumes that space is constantly under production, being (re)produced by actors. Thus, the spaces we inhabit do not exist independently of actors. However, institutional spaces, such as ECEC settings, precede and extend beyond actors, through the goals and practices inherent to the institution (Löw, 2016; Massey, 2005). In this way, the ECEC space is constantly under (re)production by its actors' practices and interactions (Pairman & Dalli, 2017; Raittila & Vuorisalo, 2021; Rutanen, 2012; Vuorisalo et al., 2015; Ylikörkkö et al., 2023), which both draw on the space and (re)produce it simultaneously (Massey, 2005). Therefore, during transitions, children's and teachers' practices are constructed by the transition space, and co-construct it at the same time (Lucas Revilla et al., 2022).

In this way, the ECEC transition space emerges in the interplay of interpersonal, material, and symbolic aspects inherent to the actors, ECEC, and the transition period (Lucas Revilla et al., 2022; Ylikörkkö et al., 2023). These socio-spatial aspects are connected to the ECEC pedagogical environment, the overall ECEC goals, the organization of activities, and the provision of care and education, such as child–adult ratios (Duhn, 2012; Hostettler Schärer, 2018; Øygardslia, 2018; Rutanen, 2011; Vuorisalo et al., 2015). Furthermore, they include aspects linked to the objectives and organization of the transition, such as introducing newcomers to the new environment and supporting their well-being and adaptation (Dalli, 2000).

To summarize, the *ECEC transition arrival space* is both the context for and the result of the practices and (inter)actions of the newcomers, their peers, and teachers during the transition. Arrivals, the transition, and the ECEC contexts provide a frame, create demands, and pose constraints that shape newcomers' practices and (inter)actions. Nevertheless, the children actively and creatively (re)shape and co-construct the space.

## Methodological and ethical considerations

This study is part of the longitudinal project “Tracing children’s socio-spatial relations and lived experiences in early childhood education transitions” (hereafter referred to as the *Trace in ECEC* project), which is ongoing at the University of Jyväskylä (Rutanen et al., 2019). This project follows five children and their changing ECEC groups during their transitions in ECEC over several years, from the age of one to six. In this study, we scrutinized the arrivals of four children under two years of age during their first seven months of attendance in an ECEC setting.

To ensure sound scientific practice, the *Trace in ECEC* project follows the ethical guidelines of the University of Jyväskylä and Finland’s National Advisory Board on Research Ethics. Written informed consent to participate in the study was sought from the adult participants. Consent for the children’s participation was obtained from their guardians. Guardians were also asked if they would permit video recordings. The children’s own assent was considered during data collection. Their verbal and non-verbal signs of hesitation were noted by the researcher, and video recordings were limited to times when all the children and adults agreed to be filmed (see Quinones et al., 2023; Rutanen et al., 2021). In reporting the research, all participants and settings were carefully anonymized. The selection of participants for the study was based on the interest and consent of both the ECEC centers and parents.

## Data and participants

The data set (Rutanen et al., 2019) is comprised of five case studies, four of which are included in this report. The fifth case was excluded because the arrival videos did not cover the full arrival situation. These cases concern four children, their families, and their Finnish ECEC settings (including other children and teachers). The children, Oliver, aged 9 months, Isla, aged 12 months, Elias, aged 13 months, and Helmi, aged 18 months, were observed in their ECEC centers on seven occasions over a seven-month period. These included the child’s first day of attendance without parents, after one/two weeks of attendance, and after one, two, three, four, and seven months of attendance.

Overall, the data set is comprised of 29 days of observations, including video recordings of selected moments during the day, along with written field notes and structured observations covering the full day, approximately eight hours, from arrival to being picked-up. This study analyzes the data from the morning arrivals for the 29 observation days, which include six to eight arrivals per child. The arrival videos of the four cases, totaling 4.5 hours, form the data for this report. The field notes and structured observations were used to clarify and complement the videos. During data collection, arrivals were systematically recorded from the moment the family approached the center until some time after the parent had left. The arrival endpoint was decided on each data collection occasion. Some arrival videos ended when the group’s activity changed and others when the child had settled in after the parent’s departure. The videos ranged from between 5 to 25 minutes.

## Analysis

The analysis followed an abductive approach (Graneheim et al., 2017) informed by the assumption that children are active actors who construct their own and others' socio-spatial worlds (Löw, 2016; Massey, 2005). First, the arrival videos were transcribed, focusing on the time when the parent was leaving and after the parent had left. The transcripts, or arrival episodes, form a chronological narrative of the multiple (inter)actions of the focus child with their parent, teacher(s), peers, and physical environment.

Following the principles of interaction analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995), attention was paid to the different (inter)actions present in the data. First, the children's (inter)actions with others and the physical environment were noted. These (inter)actions revolved around the parent and/or what was going on in the ECEC space. (Inter)actions focused on the parent included clinging to the parent, crying and looking for the parent, calling for the mother when she was not present, smiling at the parent, asking the parent for help, and showing objects to the parent. (Inter)actions focused on the ECEC space included exploring materials and the physical environment, observing others, and interacting with peers and teachers. Overall, even when the children cried and clung to the parent, they also observed and showed interest in the ECEC space.

Interaction analysis tells us that in order to understand interactions, we must examine the context in which they occur (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). The present data capture the children interacting with and acting upon the materials, persons, and activities that constituted their immediate context, comprised of the parent, the teachers, peers, the physical environment, objects, and arrival activities. Moreover, the children's (inter)actions depended on the activity at hand. For example, conversing with the teacher and observing the teacher were common during breakfast preparations. One-on-one interactions in which the teacher focused on the child and fed the child were common during breakfast eating, and (inter)actions in which the child observed peers, played, and explored materials were common during playtime.

Overall, the children's (inter)actions had two main foci and varied in relation to the activity at hand. The children focused on either the persons present or the materials. Based on this, we concluded that the children co-constructed their arrivals through four key social-spatial practices intrinsically connected to the material, social, and activity aspects of the space: (1) exploring the space's materiality; (2) exploring peer relations; (3) spending time with teachers; and (4) resisting their parent's departure. This meant that the children's practices were constructed by the available material, social, and activity opportunities of the ECEC transition arrival space.

## Results

From their first day of attendance, the four children actively advanced their own ways of participating in ECEC. They engaged with the new space's physical, social, and activity opportunities, actualizing them and creating new ones. In the following sub-sections, the children's arrival practices of exploring the space's materiality, exploring peer relations,



spending time with teachers, and resisting the parent's departure are discussed and exemplified, thus illustrating the children's contributions to co-constructing their transitions.

## Exploring the space's materiality

Through their exploration of the space's materiality, all the children advanced interactions with peers and teachers, and explored the physical environment. For example, they investigated the qualities of objects, took toys from peers, offered/showed them toys, exhibited joy when presented with a material, and moved around carrying objects. Some objects repeatedly gained the children's attention over the months, eventually becoming central to their arrivals. Below are examples of how two of the children gained access to the new space by exploring its materiality, and how materiality related opportunities mediated the children's arrivals.

***Elias's arrival over time.*** Except on his first day, Elias invariably arrived at playtime in the outdoor playground. Each time, Elias went around the playground, digging with a spade. While carrying the spade, he explored the playground, and observed and approached the other children. During two observations, a spade was not available, and on those days, Elias had difficulty separating from his mother. On one occasion, when the playground was almost empty and no toys were out, Elias clung to his mother, refusing to let go. Another time, when toys but not spades were out, Elias kept returning to his mother, seeking a spade. Although his separation difficulties cannot be attributed to not having a spade, the combination of the availability of a spade, playtime, and being in the outdoor playground promoted Elias's interest in the ECEC space and his engagement during arrivals.

***Helmi's arrival over time.*** During her first four observations (up to her third month), Helmi arrived at breakfast time. Her mother or a teacher would put her in a high chair, and her arrival activity was having breakfast. From her three-month observation point onwards, she arrived during morning play. In the playroom, Helmi gravitated toward the sofa, seeking physical contact with it. On some arrivals, Helmi left her mother behind and walked directly over to the sofa, saying goodbye to her from there. On other arrivals, she went to the sofa after her mother left. From the sofa, Helmi closely observed what was happening in the playroom. She either leaned against it with her back or her arms and belly or sat on it. She also leaned and rhythmically bounced her back against the sofa. Arriving in a space that contained an interesting, familiar, comforting material was thus important for Helmi.

Through their engagement with materials, Elias and Helmi actively participated in and developed the activities available at their centers. The availability of places and materials that interested the children and the flexibility to engage in ways that were attractive to them were key aspects in promoting their engagement. Overall, through their exploration of



materials, the children became engaged with the new space, actualizing existing opportunities to interact with others, play, and participate in the ongoing activities while also participating in creating new opportunities and thus fostering a space of active involvement. Furthermore, over time, they developed increasing familiarity with the space's materiality and built routines around it.

## Exploring peer relations

Through their various ways of being with peers, the children actively engaged with the new space, explored its materiality, advanced peer relationships, and expanded their repertoires of ECEC activities. During arrivals, approaches and interactions, such as gazing at each other, attentively following a peer's manipulation of materials, or joining a peer's activity, were fleeting but frequent. This is illustrated in the following transcript from Elias's first day of attendance.

*Interacting with peers.* Elias observes a peer playing with two cars at a nearby low table. He approaches and takes one of the cars. The peer tries to take it back and the teacher intervenes, asking the peer to give Elias one of the cars. Elias takes the car and observes how his peer plays with the other car. Elias cheerfully runs his car over the table while making a car-like noise. [...] Another peer hugs Elias, Elias falls, and the car goes flying. [...] Standing, with the car in his hand, Elias approaches the glass door that leads to the corridor and stares at a peer who is showing her face from the other side of the door. Elias observes her, interested, with his mouth open. [The teacher encourages his looking through the glass by saying, "Hello, who is there?" and the name of the peer on the other side.] Another peer trots up next to Elias, smiling and vocalizing, and presses his face to the glass. Elias observes him. Two other peers join them. Elias observes them all. Two of the peers start cheerfully pressing their bellies and faces to the door, looking through the glass and saying "hello." Elias smiles and joins in. The three of them smile, observe each other, look through the glass, and slide up and down the door, exchanging positions.

In this example, Elias creates new opportunities for peer interactions as he contributes to the morning play. His interest in his peers and the space's materiality, in this case a peer's cars and the door, combined with the teacher's encouragement, promotes the initiation of new games, creating a space of joint peer play. Elias is skillful in both activating peers and following their lead.

In this study, peer presence and activities provided children with important opportunities during their arrivals. They interested the children, thereby promoting engagement and fostering interest in the daily practices and social and material aspects of the ECEC space. The children's active involvement and their initiations toward peers forwarded a space of joint peer play. The type of center, the group, the peers' schedules, and the center's spatial organization determined who was present during the children's arrivals, thus mediating peer-related opportunities.

## Spending time with teachers

In addition to their exploration of materials and peer relations, the children gained access to the ECEC space through their interactions with teachers, such as when the teacher introduced and engaged the child in an activity with peers. Teachers had a central role during arrivals, receiving the child and communicating with the parents. Moreover, they introduced children to the new space's socio-material aspects, activities, and routines, thus promoting and facilitating their engagement. Below are examples of how two of the children advanced and took advantage of arrival opportunities connected to spending time with the teacher, and how these opportunities mediated the children's arrivals.

***Oliver's arrival over time.*** Oliver's arrivals involved conversing and interacting with the teacher during breakfast preparation time. His center had a kitchenette, where teachers prepared food next to the tables. Oliver always arrived during breakfast preparations, when the children were allowed to play until breakfast was served. However, during the first five observations (up to his fourth month), the teachers kept Oliver in their arms (he was very young) while preparing breakfast. On these occasions, Oliver and the teacher talked. Oliver was interested, followed the teacher's actions, and focused on the interaction, participating by pointing and vocalizing. At the four- and seven-month observations, Oliver was no longer held; instead, he crawled and walked around, finding and exploring toys. However, despite having freedom of movement, Oliver stayed close to the teacher, observed her, and initiated conversations with her. He sought and advanced spending time with the teacher, interacting with her amid her breakfast preparations. This activity supported him in taking part in the morning activities and was engaging and interesting to him. Thus, it constituted an important arrival opportunity for Oliver that he profited from and actively fostered, even when he was free to explore.

***Isla's arrival over time.*** During her first day of attendance and after one week, Isla arrived at playtime. On these occasions, Isla and the teacher played together in a small playroom and engaged in close, one-on-one interaction. They talked and interacted with the play materials. Isla advanced their interactions by handing and showing materials to the teacher, pointing with expressions of surprise and joy, replying to the teacher's comments, and accepting the materials the teacher gave her. During the following months, Isla's arrival times varied, with none occurring at playtime. During her seven-month observation, Isla arrived at playtime, which was held in a larger playroom. She stood where her father had set her down, observing what was going on. After a moment, she chose a play material. When her father left, she approached the teacher and handed her the toy. Thus, Isla actively profited from and created new opportunities to play and interact with the teacher, which promoted her engagement in the ECEC space during her arrivals.

Through their active involvement in their interactions with teachers, Oliver and Isla advanced their emerging relationships with the teacher and fostered their engagement and interest in the new space. Overall, teachers were an important element during arrivals: they greeted and invited children to come in; they modeled and introduced arrival opportunities to the children, for example, by offering them the chance to join in activities; and they encouraged and promoted the children's interest in materials, activities, and routines, thus showing the children varied ways of engaging with the new space. During the children's arrivals, the teachers made themselves available, a practice that was reflected in the children's disposition and enthusiasm for sharing activities with them, thereby creating a space of reciprocated closeness.

### Resisting the parent's departure

Through their interaction with their parent, for example, by holding on to their parent's legs, and through crying and language, the children communicated their reluctance to separate from their parent. The children's language repertoires included repeating "Mom" and uttering negation sounds and sounds of despair. In doing so, the children induced the parent and/or teacher to offer them both comfort and support in accessing the space. This is illustrated in the following transcript from Helmi's arrival after two weeks of attendance.

*I want Mom.* Helmi's mother takes her into the dining area and puts her in a high chair. Helmi smiles, handing her the bib lying on the table. When her mother kisses Helmi goodbye, she starts to cry. She turns toward the door to watch her mother leave. [...] The teacher puts her hand on Helmi's shoulder, mixes the food on her plate and makes a clanging sound. Helmi stops crying, looking alternately at her plate and her surroundings. She points at the door, vocalizes, and looks at the teacher. The teacher offers her a spoonful of food. Helmi refuses, moving her head backwards and frowning slightly. Helmi looks at the door, points again, says "Mom," and looks at the teacher. [...] Helmi starts to repeat "Mom" in a quiet, high-pitched voice, shaking her head and pointing. [...] She again points at the door, says "Mom," and starts crying. As she cries, she looks at the different teachers and at the door and keeps pointing. The teacher talks gently to her and alternates between trying to feed her and caressing her. Helmi cries harder. [This cycle is repeated several times. Helmi calms down and then looks at the door and starts crying again.] Helmi begins eating, although she still seems upset, swinging her legs and touching her face and ears with her hand.

Helmi communicates by crying, asking, pointing, and searching for her mother, and she actively seeks responses from the teachers by looking at them and making eye contact. Through her (inter)actions, Helmi delays eating her breakfast until she is calmer, momentarily reshaping the spatio-temporal organization of the space. Moreover, Helmi obtains emotional support and close one-on-one interactions with the teacher, increasing the teacher's sensitivity to her and the amount of comfort she receives.

Overall, separation from the parent during arrival was sometimes difficult for the children in our study. In their distressed emotional state, they created a space of emotional separation. The children's expressions of negative emotions and resistance enhanced the teachers' and parents' sensitivity to them and induced comforting interactions. This also afforded the children new opportunities for accessing the space with parental and/or teacher support, for example, exploring new activities and materials with the teacher and sustaining close interactions with the teacher, thereby creating a space of active involvement and of reciprocated closeness with the teacher.

## Discussion

It has been argued that young children's opportunities to influence aspects related to their arrivals can have a big impact on their transition processes (Brooker, 2014). However, this research shows that young children not only influence their arrivals but also creatively contribute to their co-construction (Pairman & Dalli, 2017; Rutanen, 2012). Studying transitions through a socio-spatial lens offers a rich opportunity for exploring young children's lived worlds. According to Massey (2005), space and society are mutually constituted and constantly (re)produced by actors. In this study, applying a socio-spatial lens enabled us to shed light on young children's active contributions to co-constructing their arrivals and shaping their own transition process, while also illuminating aspects inherent to the *ECEC transition arrival space* that mediate the children's contributions.

The study results show that from their first day of attendance, children actively co-constructed their arrivals by profiting from and actualizing existing opportunities to engage with the ECEC space, as well as by creating new ones. Furthermore, over time, they developed their own arrival routines and became more knowledgeable about the space and its possibilities, thereby strengthening their own creativity and resourcefulness in finding and creating arrival opportunities, for example, initiating peer interactions. First, as the children explored the new space's materiality, they created a space of active involvement (Simonsson, 2015; White et al., 2021). They skillfully explored the space's materiality, as they not only took advantage of materials that were visible, easily accessible, or offered to them but also explored, requested materials, and found places and materials that were not readily available to them. Moreover, by repeatedly seeking the same material, they created routines forwarding predictability in their arrivals.

Second, as the children initiated and reciprocated interactions with peers and teachers, they created a space of joint peer play and reciprocated closeness with teachers (Dalli, 2003; Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Thyssen, 2000). They did this as they observed others, followed others' gestures and gazes, made eye contact, looked directly at others, initiated new conversations, and communicated using gestures, sounds, and words. Moreover, they took advantage of their peers' and teachers' activities by observing, joining in, learning from them, and imitating them.

Finally, by expressing negative emotions and resisting their parent's departure, the children created a space of emotional separation (Dalli, 1999; Klette & Killén, 2018; Lipponen

& Pursi, 2022; Pursi & Lipponen, 2021). They resisted their parent's departure by staying close to their parent, asking for their parent's lap, holding on to their parent's legs, crying in their parent's absence, seeking and calling for their absent parent, and uttering negation and despair sounds. These practices afforded them encouragement and support from the teacher and parent in accessing the space. As the parent left, expressing negative emotions fostered teachers' proximity and attuned one-on-one interactions, creating novel opportunities for (inter)action with others and engagement with the ECEC space, hence creating a space of active involvement and of reciprocated closeness.

The transition arrival space is both the result of children's and teachers' practices and (inter)actions and the context of these practices and (inter)actions (Löw, 2016; Massey, 2005). Thus, the children's arrival practices of exploring the space's materiality and peer relations, spending time with teachers, and resisting the parent's departure co-construct and are constructed by *the ECEC transition arrival space* (Massey, 2005; Raittila, 2011). In this study, each child's arrivals differed in place and activity, as these depended on the child's arrival time and on their center's socio-spatial configurations, such as its timetable and physical spaces. These and other socio-spatial aspects determined who was present/available, what activities were possible, the characteristics of the physical space, and what materials were present/available to the children, thus, mediating what opportunities were available during arrivals. Hence, children's practices can be channeled by offering them materials and (group) activities that support them in getting to know the new space and promote emotional security (Hyson, 2004).

Teachers have an important role in transition arrivals as guides and companions for children (Datler et al., 2010), as a parent substitute and safety anchor (Fein et al., 1993; Pursi & Lipponen, 2021), and in acting as a bridge between the home and ECEC (Dalli, 2003; White et al., 2021). During transitions, children's practices and (inter)actions are interpreted by teachers, parents, and researchers through a transition lens (Dalli, 1999). For example, crying is not attributed to hunger or pain but to negative feelings linked to loss and separation (Pursi & Lipponen, 2021). During transition arrivals, teachers may seek to avoid children's displays of negative emotions (Pursi & Lipponen, 2021), which are often seen as constraining participation in the new setting (Fein et al., 1993; Larsen & Stanek, 2015). However, as shown here, new opportunities can also emerge, even when children show distress and unwillingness to leave the parent upon arrival. By displaying negative emotions, the children in this study elicited teachers' sensitivity, creating new opportunities to join in, engage with materials, and emotionally regulate with the teacher's support.

Given that opportunities are only meaningful when actualized (Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Pairman & Dalli, 2017), deeming crying as detrimental may impede the emergence of new opportunities. Resonating with the current research on childhood studies (Busch et al., 2023; Yates et al., 2022; Ylikörkkö et al., 2023), this study proposes that efforts should be directed toward observing children's practices as their way of participating (Bae, 2009; Raittila, 2011; Rutanen, 2012). As Øygardslia (2018) suggests, it is important for teachers

to utilize the possibilities that the space offers to promote children's own practices and ways of approaching it.

This study explored children's ways of approaching their transitions to ECEC by investigating their arrival practices. Such an in-depth exploration allows for the voicing of young children's perspectives in the ECEC context (Alasuutari, 2014). However, this method does not resolve the gap between children's ways of experiencing and understanding the world and researchers' interpretations (Atkinson, 2019; Elwick et al., 2014). Moreover, the present sample was small and homogeneous; hence, the results are not meant to be generalized to all situations and cultures. Instead, they offer insights into issues regarding the complexity of the transition process and young children's participation in institutional spaces. In addition, as the data did not cover every day, but only recorded the children's transition processes at pre-selected points, some specific and even significant moments may have been missed.

Further research is needed on children's previous experiences before they start attending ECEC, for instance, by including data from children's visits to the center before their first transition day and/or data from children's homes. Moreover, the present study could be extended by collecting data daily for an extended period. Finally, research focusing on older children's practices during their transition from home care to ECEC would be beneficial in revealing how they co-construct their transitions, thus illuminating the role of age and maturity.

## Conclusion

This study's results show that from the beginning of their attendance in ECEC, children under two are competent and active participants in the new space. Using a socio-spatial lens foregrounds young children's active role in shaping their own and others' socio-spatial worlds, presenting a view of young children's possibilities to co-construct their transitions as intertwined and inseparable from the socio-spatial constraints and configurations of transitions, arrivals, and ECEC. On the one hand, children contribute to co-constructing their transition process by finding, taking advantage of, and creating opportunities to engage with the new space. On the other hand, the space mediates children's contributions by shaping their opportunities to become engaged with the new space.

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## Author biographies

Yaiza Lucas Revilla is a PhD researcher with a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Master's Degree in Educational Sciences. Her main research interests are young children's educational transitions, ethnographic research and socio-spatial relational research approaches.

Niina Rutanen is Professor in Early Childhood Education in the Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her main research interests are focused on childhood studies, children from under one year to three years of age in early childhood education and care, and the application of relational and spatial approaches in research on early childhood institutions. Her most recent project "Tracing children's socio-spatial relations and lived experiences in early childhood education transitions" (2019–2023, Academy of Finland) explores children's transitions in ECEC.

Eija Sevón is an associate professor in the Department of Education at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her present research interests are focused on children's rights and participation in ECEC and beyond, young children's socio-emotional well-being, the power in children and young people's close relationships, and parenting from gender and generational perspectives.

Raija Raittila, PhD, is a senior lecturer in Early Childhood Education in the Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests are focused on the pedagogical environment in early childhood education, the quality of the pedagogical environment, and children's experiences and spatiality from relational perspectives.