CAFCA resource sheet

COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES CLEARINGHOUSE AUSTRALIA

Promoting positive education and care transitions for children

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This Resource Sheet is a review of research regarding children's transition from home, to early childhood education and care services and then to school, with a specific focus upon both children and parents' experiences of those transitions. The factors that influence a child's ability to adapt to school are considered and case studies of promising transition programs are provided.

Key messages

- The transitions from home to early childhood education and onto school are important milestones for both children and families. The transition into school is especially significant as "readiness" for school is predictive of long-term academic and occupational achievement.

- A child's ability to transition successfully to school depends upon their own personal characteristics (e.g., temperament, personality), parent characteristics (e.g., attitudes to school, maternal education) and community characteristics (e.g., accessibility and quality of local services).

- In Australia, the transition to school is likely to be more challenging for children from financially disadvantaged families, Indigenous families, families with children who have a disability, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families. Children from these backgrounds are also less likely to attend an early childhood education and care service before they start school.

- For children, successful transitions into and from the early learning environment can be facilitated by a range of approaches such as assisting children to understand the routines and practices of the settings they are transitioning into.

- During both the transition to early learning environments and to school, a partnership between parents and educators/institutions can help parents manage this period of change.

Why are children's transitions to early childhood education and care environments and schools an important issue?

A transition is defined for the purposes of this paper as a change in the self, in one's life roles, central relationships, views of self and the world, and in personal competence to respond to new challenges (Cowan, Cowan, Ablow, Johnson, & Measelle, 2005).

During the early years, children are likely to undergo a range of transitions including:

- moving between home and an early childhood setting;[1]

- moving between different early childhood settings; and/or

- moving from the early childhood setting (or, for those children who do not attend early childhood education and care, from home) to school (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009).

Transitions into early childhood education and care environments and into school are important milestones for both children and families.

The transition into school is especially significant and some children are better prepared for this transition than others (i.e., in terms of cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills) (Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH] and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2007). This "readiness" for school has been shown to be predictive of academic success during the school years (Duncan et al., 2007)[2] and of long-term academic and occupational success (Boethel, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007).[3] Importantly, the transition to school should not be viewed as a point-in-time event, but as a pathway that commences well before school begins and continues on into the first years of school: "Children's long term success in school derives from their learning experiences before school and the ongoing learning environment in the early school years" (CCCH, 2008b, p. 1).

In Australia, the transition to school, has been found to be more challenging for four specific groups:[4]

- *Financially disadvantaged families*: Children from financially disadvantaged families appear to be less well prepared for the transition to school due to the impact of financial stress on family relationships, which affects children's social/emotional readiness (Smart et al., 2008). In addition, the ability of parents in financially disadvantaged families to invest in advantageous experiences and environments is constrained and this can impact upon their children's cognitive outcomes (Smart et al., 2008).

- *Indigenous families*: Children from Indigenous families have historically experienced lower rates of success at school than non-Indigenous children, and are at a greater risk of low school readiness in some cognitive, social and emotional aspects (Anderson, 2010; Smart et al., 2008).[5] In 2009, according to the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), 29.6% of

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1   An early childhood setting is defined by DEEWR as: "long day care, occasional care, family day care, Multi-Purpose Aboriginal Children's Services, preschools and kindergartens, playgroups, crèches, early intervention settings and similar services" (COAG, 2009, p. 45). In this paper, these settings are referred to as "early childhood education and care environments". The terms "preschool" and "kindergarten" are defined differently in different states and territories. In some states/territories kindergarten is the first year of school. In this paper preschool/kindergarten is used to refer to the programs children attend *before* they begin school.

2   In a large study involving Canadian children, Duncan et al. (2007) found that maths skills at the point of school entry were the greatest predictor of later academic performance in school, followed by reading and then attention skills. Socio-emotional behaviours (e.g., social skills) at school entry were not found to be predictive of later academic performance. Further Canadian research largely supported Duncan et al.'s (2007) general findings regarding which skills predicted later academic performance, although in contrast this study did find a relationship between socio-emotional behaviours and later academic performance. (Romano, Babchishin, Pagani, & Kohen, 2010).

3   "School readiness" is a term often used to refer to a child's cognitive, social and emotional skills upon entering school and their resulting ability to cope with the transition (Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). A child's school readiness is a reflection of the environments in which they develop—their family, early childhood settings, schools, neighbourhoods and communities (CCCH, 2008a; Kagan & Rigby, 2003). A holistic perspective of school readiness emphasises that families, early childhood services, communities and schools all have a role to play in ensuring children are "school-ready" (CCCH, 2008a).

4   Another group that may experience difficulties with school readiness are children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Although there is a lack of research in the Australian context to support this, there is solid evidence to demonstrate the relationship between child maltreatment and learning difficulties and poor academic achievement (Gilbert et al., 2009; Mills, 2004; Veltman & Browne, 2001) and some evidence from international literature to suggest that maltreated children in foster care have greater difficulties adjusting to the early years of school than non-maltreated children (Pears, Fisher, Bruce, Kim, & Yoerger, 2010).

5   For more information about school readiness and Indigenous children, see Dockett, Perry, and Kearney (2010) and McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson, and Carapetis (2008).

Indigenous children were developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the AEDI domains,[6] compared to 11.8% of *all* Australian children (Anderson, 2010).[7]

- *Families with children who have a disability*: The transition to schooling environments can be more stressful and demanding for children with a disability, compared to children without a disability (Bentley-Williams & Butterfield; and Curruthers, as cited in Prigg, 2002).

- *Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families*: CALD families may have individual concerns regarding children's transitions to early learning and schooling environments. These may centre on children's proficiency in English conversational skills, their vulnerability to isolation or bullying as a result of their skin colour, accent and/or limited English skills, and a potential loss of cultural and religious values upon exposure to Western cultural values in the school setting (Sanagavarapu & Perry, 2005).

This Resource Sheet explores the research relating to the transition from home to early childhood education and care environments (i.e., child care, preschools/kindergartens) and the transition from early learning environments (or from home) to primary school. The experiences of children and parents during these two transitions are considered, as well as the characteristics that influence children's adaptation to school. In conclusion, two case studies of promising transition programs are outlined.

The transition from home to early childhood education and care environments

In their assessment of data collected via the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Harrison, Ungerer, Smith, Zubrick, and Wise (2009) found that almost 80% of Australian children to the age of 4 years were attending an early childhood care/education setting.[8] The majority of children (59%) commence involvement in early learning and care from the age of 2 years, although around 24% will attend child care from an earlier age (Harrison et al., 2009). Early childhood education programs (as opposed to child care) generally commence from the age of 3 or 4 years.

Research indicates that all children benefit from spending some time in a high quality early childhood education and care program (Elliott, 2006; Farrar, Moore, & Goldfield, 2007; Sammons et al., 2007; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Wise, da Silva, Webster, & Sanson, 2005). An Australian education review by Elliott (2006) found that:

> Access to good early childhood programs … can provide children with social and cognitive experiences that promote independence and positive attitudes to learning. Such quality programs facilitate the transition to school and underpin later academic success. (p. 33)

Attendance at early childhood education and care services is important for a successful transition to school (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2009; Elliott, 2006; Farrar et al., 2007).

The effects of attending a high quality early childhood education and care program are enduring; children who attend high quality early learning and care programs benefit well into adulthood, with higher levels of employment and reduced involvement in crime (Gorey, 2001; Lynch, 2005).

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6   The five AEDI domains are: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive based skills or communication skills and general knowledge.

7   It is important to note, however, that assessing Indigenous children via tests based in non-Indigenous culture may reinforce "gaps" in knowledge and skills, rather than building positive images of Indigenous children as learners (Dockett et al., 2010).

8   This is similar to the proportion of children reported by the AEDI to have been in non-parental care and/or education programs (e.g., family day care, preschool or kindergarten, or care by a grandparent) in the year prior to entering school (i.e., 85.7%) (Centre for Community Child and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009).

High quality early learning and care programs are especially beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cuhna, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006; Sylva et al., 2004). For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended preschool demonstrate much better levels of attainment at the start of primary school when compared to similarly disadvantaged children who did not attend preschool (Sylva et al., 2004).

Historically, early childhood services in Australia have not been equally accessible or equally utilised by all families. For example, in 2008, in those geographical areas of greatest relative disadvantage in Australia, 60% of children aged between 3–5 years not attending school usually attended a preschool or a preschool program, compared to 80% of children from areas with the lowest relative disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). Children whose main language at home is English are also more likely to attend preschool, a preschool program or long day care (ABS, 2009). Furthermore, 75% of Indigenous children between 3.5 and 4.5 years of age do not attend a formal early education service (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009).

In order to address these issues of unequal access and utilisation, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has committed to providing universal access to quality early childhood education programs (i.e., preschool/kindergarten) to all 4-year-old children by 2013 with a particular focus on Indigenous children in remote communities (AIHW, 2009). In order to facilitate the provision of high quality early childhood education programs, The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (COAG, 2009) provides a foundation for quality learning and teaching during the early years, with an emphasis upon three key factors: belonging, being and becoming.[9]

How do children experience the transition to early learning and care environments?

There is a paucity of research pertaining specifically to children's experiences of the transition to early childhood education and care environments. Much of the literature regarding early childhood transitions focuses specifically on the transition to school. The research that does exist suggests that children are particularly vulnerable during this period and may not benefit from early childhood education and care environments if they experience problems making sense of this new environment, adapting to a new role or if they do not develop a sense of belonging in that environment (Belsky & MacKinnon, 1994; Levitt, 2005). During this period children may also struggle with new routines and being separated from their parents (Schmidt Neven, 1996).

The Early Years Learning Framework (COAG, 2009), which was developed to provide a foundation for quality teaching and learning in early childhood education and care settings in Australia, describes the following factors as important to successful transitions:

- building on children's prior and current experiences;
- ensuring children have an active role in preparing for transitions, in partnership with families;
- assisting children to understand transitions, routines and practices of the settings they are moving to and feel comfortable with this process;
- helping children negotiate changes in status or identity, especially during the school transition phase; and
- working collaboratively with each new educator for the child and other professionals to make certain that a successful transition occurs.

Along with these specific practices, the framework's emphasis on factors such as responsiveness to children, cultural competence, and a focus on secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships,

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9   For more information about the three foundational concepts of The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia see *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (COAG, 2009).

highlights the value that these approaches can bring to ensuring young children transition successfully to the early learning and care environment.

How do parents experience children's transitions to early learning and care environments?

As the transition into an early childhood setting is a milestone for both children *and* parents, parents, like children, may experience some anxieties during this period. They may encounter feelings of rivalry for their children's attentions and/or affections with workers or teachers at the early learning environment their child attends (Schmidt Neven, 1996). They may also have concerns about their child's ability to cope with the demands of the environment—learning where things are, what is expected of them, asking for help when needed (Cowan et al., 2005; Sanagavarapu & Perry, 2005).

A partnership between early childhood educators and families would appear to ameliorate some of these potential problems. A partnership helps to establish an understanding between educators and parents about expectations and attitudes, and provides a foundation for building on the knowledge of both parties (i.e., both parents and educators) (COAG, 2009). An environment that is welcoming of parents, and encourages them to collaborate with early childhood educators, is an important part of these partnerships (COAG, 2009).

The transition from early learning environments to primary school

Most children in Australia start primary school between the ages of four and five.[10] When they enter school, almost 24% of Australian children are vulnerable in at least one of the following domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive based skills, or communication skills and general knowledge (AEDI, 2009). Furthermore, research shows that approximately 10–21% of children have difficulty adjusting to the transition to school (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews, & Kienhuis, 2010). These difficulties may be expressed via:

- complaints of being sick;
- increased worries, fears, crying;
- temper tantrums; and
- negative attitudes towards school (Giallo et al., 2010).

Coping well and adjusting to changes brought about by the transition to school is important, as research indicates that a successful start to school is associated with future school success and academic achievement (CCCH, 2008b; Davies, 2011; Sanagavarapu & Perry, 2005). It has also been associated with more stable peer relationships, better behavioural and emotional outcomes, and better school attendance and/or completion (Giallo et al., 2010; Smart et al., 2008). For children who did not attend early learning and care, the transition to school can be even more difficult because they have not had the opportunities to develop many of the attributes that facilitate a smooth transition to school (Elliott, 2006).[11]

How do children experience the transition to school?

The transition from early learning and care environments or home to school is characterised as a:

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10 States and territories in Australia have different school entry cut-off dates. For example, the school entry cut-off date for kindergarten in NSW is 5 years of age by 31st July whilst in Queensland the cut-off date for prep is 5 years of age by 1st January (Taylor, Edwards, & Fiorini, 2009).

11 The AEDI reports that in 2009 6.9% of children entering school had not been in any form of non-parental care and/or educational program (Centre for Community Child and the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009).

> transition… often from small-scale to large-scale interactions, from highly personalised to less personalised relationships, and from environments with a limited range of ages to an institution with children of many ages. (CCCH, 2008a, p. 1)

Contrary to early childhood education and care environments, where there is an emphasis on "play based learning", upon starting school, children are faced with a curriculum that is more structured (CCCH, 2008b). In contrast to early childhood education and care environments, school requires children to sit still for long periods, keep their attention focused and do what they are asked (including understanding instructions) by teachers. Furthermore, teachers in the school setting are more likely to be viewed by children as authority figures than those in early learning environments where a more "caring" approach is common (Cowan et al., 2005; Davies, 2011). The greater the discontinuity between the early childhood education and care environment and school (e.g., the physical environment, peer group changes), the more difficult the transition will be for children (CCCH, 2008b; Margetts, 2002).

Starting school is not a standardised process as children may be at different stages of developmental milestones, such as:

- self awareness;

- peer relationships;

- forming symbolic concepts;

- moral judgments;

- physical skills; and

- self-help skills (Margetts, 2002).

Children will also have diverse skills, abilities, expectations, family cultural backgrounds and early childhood experiences (Margetts, 2002).

Adjustment to school requires children to meet social and cultural standards of personal independence and social responsibility, as well as behave in an acceptable way (Margetts, 2002). They must make sense of differences or discontinuities, new routines and procedures and the demands that they place on them in terms of behaviour.

As their school experience progresses, children become aware of the need to function more autonomously, the demands placed on their cognitive skills, the need to become adept at organised games and sport and the evaluation of the skills they develop (Davies, 2011). Recognition of these demands usually functions as a motivation for children, however some may find meeting the expectations difficult and experience anxiety about performance or lags in development. The strain of trying to meet these demands helps to explain children's high level of activity on the playground and the emotional volatility that may be common at this time (Davies, 2011).

How do parents experience children's transitions to school?

For parents, beginning school symbolises a child's capacity to function independently (Davies, 2011). The transition to school presents opportunities but also challenges (CCCH, 2008b). Parents may be concerned about their child's ability to adjust to starting school, in particular behavioural difficulties, academic skills and their ability to get along with peers and follow instructions (Dockett et al., 2011; Giallo et al., 2010). Parental expectations of their child may also increase in the areas of achievement and behaviour. Due to their own or other family members negative experiences of school, some parents may feel concerned about their child's happiness and safety at school (Dockett et al., 2011). Some parents, particularly those with complex support needs (e.g., having a child with a disability, experiencing chronic poverty/unemployment, experiencing issues related

to alcohol/drugs) may also worry about their ability to provide the resources and support they believe their children will need at school (Dockett et al., 2011).

A key aspect of successful transition into school is the active and positive involvement of families in the home, early childhood and school settings (CCCH, 2008b). Schools can facilitate this process by developing positive relationships with families before school starts, and during and after the transition period (CCCH, 2008b).

What factors influence a child's ability to adapt to school?

There are many factors that influence a child's ability to adapt to school including:

- *Child characteristics*: characteristics such as a child's temperament, IQ, personality, social skills and cognitive ability all appear to influence their readiness for school (Cowan et al., 2005; Smart et al., 2008);

- *Parental characteristics*: characteristics such as parental socio-economic status, relationship status, membership of a minority group, intelligence and psychopathology all contribute to the likelihood of their child being "ready" for school (Cowan et al., 2005; Smart et al., 2008). Parenting practices and style, as well as attachment status, can also impact upon a child's adaptation to these new environments (Cowan et al., 2005).

- *Community characteristics*: the communities in which children live, the services available to them, the schools within their community and the relationships between these and the families in which children grow up all impact upon their readiness for school (Farrar et al., 2007; CCCH, 2008a).

Each of these characteristics is explored further below.

Child characteristics

A child's temperament, IQ, personality, social skills and cognitive ability all appear to influence their readiness for school. Furthermore, their ability to maintain the self-control and concentration needed for schoolwork will be determined by the capacity for levels of self-regulation developed during the early years (Davies, 2011).

The capacity to make and maintain friendships has been found to be a protective factor in the transition to school and if the child has made friends in kindergarten or preschool then they will often experience feelings of security during the transition particularly if these friends then attend the same school. This is especially true for boys (Davies, 2011).

In her study of 197 children, in their first year of primary school, across four primary schools in Victoria, Margetts (2002) found that the key factors that positively influenced children's adjustment to their first year of school were:

- the number of transition program activities attended (the more the better);
- the child's level of developmental maturity relevant to their chronological age ("relative age");
- gender (boys had more difficulty adjusting in the areas of social skills and behaviour);
- children's home language (speaking English at home had a positive influence);
- attendance at preschool transition activities; and
- the presence of a familiar playmate in the same class.

As well as the individual factors of the child, attendance at a quality early learning or care environment is consistently found in the literature to positively influence the transition to school (AIHW, 2009; Elliott, 2006; Farrar et al., 2007). This is most likely due to the fact that the individual attributes (social skills, cognitive ability, self regulation etc.) that assist a child in the transition to school are often developed in these early childhood programs.

The relationship between child outcomes and the number of hours spent in early education and care settings

Research clearly demonstrates that attendance at high quality early childhood education and care services is beneficial for children's school readiness (AIHW, 2009; Elliott, 2006; Farrar et al., 2007). The findings about the relationship between the amount of time children spend in early childhood education and care services and child outcomes is mixed. Margetts (2002) found that those children who spent more than 12 hours per week in preschool services or centre-based childcare had more problem behaviours at school and at home than those who spent 12 or less hours in those services. Research during the 1980s showed an association between long hours spent in child care and insecure mother–child attachments (Belsky, 1988; Brazelton, 1986; Vaughan, Gove, & Egeland, 1980).

Elliot (2006) claimed that research findings about the impact of child care on mother–child attachment were "seized by the media to initiate ideological debates about the damaging effects of child care" rather than used as a way of "highlighting substantial issues such as the quality of child care and how to improve it" (p. 26). Importantly, Margetts (2002) did not measure the quality of the child care her research participants were attending. Elliot (2006) noted that research undertaken since the mid-1990s has found "no significant associations between child care attendance and attachment security" (p. 27).

Harrison et al. (2009) analysed data from Wave 1 of LSAC. They investigated a number of issues pertaining to child care and early education in Australia—including developmental outcomes for infants and children in relation to care education attendance patterns (including the total number of hours spent in care arrangements). Interestingly, Harrison et al. (2009) found no association between children's pro-social behaviour or problem behaviour (as rated by mothers and teachers) and hours of care per week spent in child care. For all ratings (i.e., mother-ratings and teacher-ratings of pro-social and problem behaviours) the most important contributing factors were specific socio-demographic and parenting variables (e.g., maternal age, maternal psychological distress, parenting behaviour).

Research undertaken in Canada has produced similar results (Seifert, Canning, & Lindemann, 2001). Seifert et al.'s (2001) analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth showed that intensity of care did not have a statistically significant affect on children's social development.

Parental characteristics

In addition to the impact of the aforementioned parental characteristics on children's readiness for school, parental attitudes towards school can also have a strong impact on the child's transition to school. If the parent is encouraging and positive the child is likely to enter school more confidently. If the parent is anxious or stressed the child may pick up on these feelings and become anxious, especially temperamentally shy children (Davies, 2011). Strong parent–school relationships may provide shared expectations and support for the child to do his/her best.

Children's behavioural problems in preschool and school can be influenced by their parents' working models of attachment, gained from their own experiences with their parents. These cross-generational influences can potentially also influence a child's academic achievement (Cowan, Bradburn, & Cowan, 2005).

A large Australian study of 763 mothers whose children were starting primary school showed that high parental efficacy to manage transition was associated with better social adjustment outcomes for children as they started school (Giallo, Kienhuis, Treyvaud, & Matthews, 2008). Also, greater levels of parent worry about managing the transition period were associated with poorer academic and social adjustment outcomes for children as they started school, and with children's resistance to going to school (Giallo et al., 2008).

Transition to school, and achieving school readiness has been found to be more challenging for children in lower socio-economic circumstances (Davies, 2011; Smart et al., 2008). However

parenting style, parental characteristics such as maternal education and age, and the home environment appear to mediate the relationship between financial disadvantage and school readiness (Smart et al., 2008).

In a study of data from LSAC by Smart et al. (2008), children from financially disadvantaged families showed lower readiness for school at 4–5 years than the group from non-disadvantaged families, especially in the area of language. Two years later, at 6–7 years, children from financially disadvantaged families were experiencing literacy/numeracy difficulties at a higher rate than their peers from non-disadvantaged families, and showed low engagement in learning. These same children were also more likely to be displaying difficult behaviours such as conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, emotional problems and social problems, and were less likely to show pro-social behaviour.

Community characteristics

A child's ability to adapt to the school environment (their school readiness) is a function not only of their innate characteristics and the characteristics of their parents, but also their family environment, the communities in which they live, the services available to them, the schools within their community and the relationships between all of these (CCCH, 2008a; Dockett et al., 2010; Farrar et al., 2007). This is commonly expressed as an equation:

> Ready families + Ready communities + Ready services + Ready schools = Children ready for school (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).

This equation communicates the way in which children will not be ready for school unless their families, schools, communities and services support their development from infancy right through to the preschool period (Farrar, 2007). The value of the school readiness equation is that it highlights the way in which responsibility for school readiness lies not only with families but also with the broader community (Farrar et al., 2007). As Dockett et al. (2010) pointed out:

> "Lack of readiness" is not a problem of children being insufficiently skilled to learn at school, but instead it is where there is a mismatch between the attributes of individual children and families, and the ability and resources of the school and/or system to engage and respond appropriately (p. 1).

School transition programs

One way of promoting positive transitions to school is to provide "transition to school programs". These programs generally focus on helping children settle into the school environment before they commence school, so as to become more familiar with the new environment, teachers/carers, activities and peers (Giallo et al., 2010). Participation in these types of activities has been shown to be associated with better adjustment to the first year of school, greater self-confidence, fewer behavioural difficulties and higher levels of social skills and academic competence and achievement (Giallo et al., 2010; Margetts, 2002).

Children seem to fare better when they participate in a number of activities rather than single or only a few events (Margetts, 2002) suggesting that one-off transition to school events may be less effective than multiple, ongoing transition activities. Furthermore, to be most effective, school transition programs should create a suitable degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and help children develop strategies to adjust to school. These strategies should be focused on conventional academic skills and the practical "survival" skills necessary for children to face the academic, physical and social and emotional challenges of commencing school. These skills include the ability to work independently, to respond to behavioural expectations, to cope with the length of the school day, to interact with others, accept rules and adjust to the size of a class (Margetts, 2002).

Conclusion

The transitions from home to early childhood education and care and then to school are major milestones in the lives of children. However, these transitions can be challenging for children and also for parents; especially for financially disadvantaged families, Indigenous families, families with children with a disability, families from a CALD background and families who have some involvement with statutory child protection services.

The transition to school is made more difficult for those children who do not attend early childhood education and care and, for this reason, the introduction of universal early childhood education and care programs for all 4-year-olds in Australia is likely to have a positive affect upon children's school readiness.

Although the individual characteristics of children can impact upon their adjustment to school, the development of many of these characteristics is dependent upon the environment in which they develop. Some transition to school programs have been shown to be effective at helping parents to support their children during their transition into school. However it is important to note that because children's ability to adjust to school is dependent upon the environment in which they develop, families, services, communities and schools all share a responsibility to help children become school ready.

What do promising transition programs look like in practice?

There are a number of promising programs currently operating in Australia that aim to facilitate a smooth transition from home to early learning and care, and to school.

One such program is the **Child Care Info-Connect** program currently operating in Broadmeadows, an outer-northern suburb of Melbourne that has a high number of CALD residents. The program provides information on topics relevant to families in the community through parent information sessions and distribution of written materials translated into community languages. Disadvantage indicators are evident for young children in Broadmeadows as well as the surrounding suburbs that are serviced by the program, including higher than average developmental vulnerabilities when children present at school.

Using child care centres as the base for information provision increases the opportunities for working parents to attend information sessions, assists in distributing information to parents of children who are aged under 3, and enables parents from CALD backgrounds to attend sessions with support from trusted and familiar bilingual child care staff.

The program objectives were to:

- provide information to parents of children attending child care centres on the early childhood issues of their choice;
- provide the same information to staff working in those centres;
- increase parental and worker knowledge in a range of parenting issues identified by them as a priority and provide practical strategies to improve outcomes in those areas (e.g., school readiness, toilet training);
- promote positive parent–child interactions and improved child health and development; and
- enhance communication between parents and child care services staff.

Initially focusing on positive parenting, managing challenging behaviour, school readiness and toilet training, 13 information sessions were held at six child care centres. A total of 114 parents and 80 child care staff attended the sessions.

In addition, information kits were developed and distributed to each of the child care centres onsite. Kits were provided in hard copy and as electronic versions, enabling centre staff to distribute information in a manner relevant to parent need and centre operation.

The program's achievements included:

- enhanced parent knowledge in the areas of school readiness indicators and positive behaviour guidance strategies;
- increased parental awareness of early childhood education;
- improved communication between parents and child care staff; and
- greater confidence amongst child care staff to offer parent education sessions.

All of these achievements were measured in self-report surveys following participation in the program.

Another promising project is **Around About**, a project operating in Port Adelaide, SA. Over an 8-week period a specialised program is offered to preschoolers (3- and 4-year-olds) and their families concerned with the transition into child care, kindergarten, or school. This area in SA has been identified as having a high number of children under 5 years of age who have little or no access to early childhood and health services due to the unavailability of services, transport difficulties, and personal or financial circumstances. Concerns have been raised around the high number of children entering school with speech delays and challenging behaviours as a result of little or no exposure to preschool services.

Among other objectives, the project aims to:

- engage parents in their child's early learning and improve their competence and style;
- improve the early identification of and comprehensive response to children's specialised needs;
- reduce the number of children in the region who begin school with challenging behaviours, difficulties in communication and/or poor social skills;
- increase the capacity of children and families to manage transitions and routines;
- improve enrolment, attendance and retention rates at local preschools and schools;
- improve child cognitive, social and emotional development and competence.

Around About accepts referrals from agencies and has been successful as an entry point for hard to reach families, who often require follow up for additional needs. Families who have participated in the program have recognised positive changes in their children's behaviours over the 8-week period—particularly in regard to social/emotional development and communication.

Author

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