Family transitions as children start school

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Becoming a parent is a significant event. As children grow and develop, parents make adjustments related to the changes in their children’s development. One of the major adjustments parents make is in response to children starting school. Even when children have attended prior-to-school settings, starting school “involves adjustments by the entire family, including altered schedules and changing expectations of parenting ... School entry therefore represents a potentially stressful normative change for parents as well” (DeCaro & Worthman, 2011, p. 441).

While families “provide the social, cultural, and emotional supports that children need to function successfully at school” (Pelletier & Brent, 2002, p. 46), family life itself changes as children start school. At the same time, what happens within and around the family has an effect on how children experience the transition to school. A great deal of research has focused on what families do for children as they start school, emphasising practices and strategies used to promote children’s readiness (Walker & MacPhee, 2011). There is agreement that family readiness—the ability to support children at school—is a contributing factor to children’s school readiness (Langford, 2010). Often, assessments of family readiness focus primarily on the presence or absence of risk factors within families or communities and the effect of these on children’s readiness for school. Alternative approaches acknowledge that most families have positive educational aspirations for their children, and recognise protective factors, such as family strengths and their commitment to supporting children as they start school (Langford, 2010).

This paper describes a qualitative study of children’s transition to school and the ways in which family members experienced this change in their lives. The study analysed the perceptions, expectations and experiences both within and across families, identified factors contributing to enabling practices, processes and policies, and examined the potential for these to contribute to appropriate
and relevant support for families as children make the transition to school.

**Family contexts and the transition to school**

Children’s experiences of the transition to school are shaped by their families as well as their own experiences and expectations. The transition to school, like other transitions, is embedded within social contexts and enacted through relationships and interactions. Over time, families develop particular ways of approaching experiences, setting priorities, and establishing and responding to expectations. These dispositions to act in particular ways are referred to as the “family habitus” (Bourdieu, 1997). They are important because they frame approaches to situations and events, including connections with school, by providing “a sense of reality, of possibility and limits within which decisions are taken” (James & Beedell, 2010, p. 34). Within families experiencing the transition to school, habitus is often influenced by parental experiences of school (Barnett & Taylor, 2009), or family stories that have been handed down and that illustrate particular views about school, education or transitions (Turunen, 2012). In some instances, parents are keen for children to have school experiences similar to their own; in other situations, they are eager for their children to have a quite different and wider range of educational experiences than they had at school.

Children’s experiences at home influence their preparation for, transition to and engagement in school. Evidence suggests that the resources provided at home (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011), home routines (Wildneger, McIntyre, Fiese, & Eckert, 2008) and the nature of the home learning environment are strong predictors of educational and behavioural outcomes for children until well into the primary years (Melluish et al., 2008). For example, growing up in poverty can restrict children’s access to resources and learning opportunities, and generate anxieties that affect the nature and quality of family interactions (Magnuson & Shager, 2010) that, in turn, can influence how children and parents engage with school. However, it is important to acknowledge that many children living in poverty can, and do, achieve positive educational outcomes. Often this is due to positive parenting and a rich home learning environment (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Melluish et al., 2008).

As children start school, families are often urged to support them by becoming engaged with the school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). How families engage with school varies considerably, and may include helping children with homework, discussing school at home, volunteering at school or adopting active roles on school committees. The role and purpose of family engagement at school is contested, with Barton, Drake, Perez, St Louis, and George (2004) concluding that, particularly in disadvantaged communities, parents are rarely considered as equal partners or decision-makers in educational endeavours. The nature and extent of family engagement in schools is influenced by factors such as socio-economic status, cultural and language diversity, community expectations, and school, parent or family characteristics (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Some families are hesitant to become involved in schools if they do not feel confident in the tasks asked of them by schools, or if the culture of the home is different from that of the school (Barton et al., 2004). In these cases, the responsiveness of teachers is a key element in promoting family engagement at school (Peters, Seeds, Goldstein, & Coleman, 2008). Positive home–school relationships are important at all times, but particularly so at points of educational transition when families often seek specific input from educators and other professionals (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Family contexts influence children’s experiences of the transition to school. Family members contribute to habitus and to children’s views of their future, including their school experiences and educational outcomes. Children’s access to resources, participation in routines, engagement in the home learning environment and interactions within the family all influence their engagement with school. Patterns of family engagement with school establish ongoing patterns of interactions that tend to persist over time. At the same time, families also experience change as they respond to their own and their children’s participation in school.

**Changes in family life as children start school**

The transition to school involves a major change for children and families and requires adjustment at all levels. Starting school places a specific set of demands upon children and families, and the nature of the transition is characterised by how each responds to these demands. Three levels of change during the transition to school have been identified for both children and families (Griebel & Niesel, 2009): the individual, relationships and contextual levels.
Changes at the individual level

At the individual level, children experience a change in identity when they become a school student. This is evident as they adopt the symbols of school (such as the uniform), the language and habits of school, and new patterns of behaviour, and develop new skills. These changes may be accompanied by strong and mixed emotions, as children celebrate “getting big” and feel concerned about what getting big might mean (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Adults also experience change at the individual level. Becoming a parent of a school student can be an anxious time, as other adults become influential in the lives of children and there are increased opportunities for those others to make judgements about parents and their parenting. Parents, particularly mothers, also report growing concern for their role in promoting children’s academic achievement, partly through making sure that children are well prepared for school, have the requisite resources, complete homework and generally reflect the expectations of the school (Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

Changes at the relationships level

All those involved in the transition to school experience changes at the relationships level. Just as children encounter new peers and adults, so do families. There is a process of losing relationships, as family contact with educators and other professionals from the prior-to-school years is reduced and often lost. For families with children who have special education needs, the transition to school is often a time when support accessed through early childhood services ceases and other support is sought (Janus, Cameron, Lefort, & Kopechanski, 2007). Relationships with other families may also be lost as children move to different schools. Families report that the move to school requires new strategies for communicating with the school and teachers, as well as new responsibilities for parents. Some of these have legal ramifications, such as the requirement for children to continue to attend school, and others result in changes in the parental role, such as supervising homework. Building new relationships in the school context involves getting to know the child’s teacher, and possibly other teachers or professionals, as well as forming connections with other parents. For some parents, avenues such as parent councils, the school canteen and voluntary class support are available. For many parents who work, or who feel vulnerable in such situations, these options are not necessarily available (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Relationships within families also change, as children seek greater autonomy and independence to accompany their new status as school students (Walker & MacPhee, 2011). Parents report mixed emotions as their children start school: a sense of achievement as the milestone is reached, and a sense of loss as one part of their lives has changed. The involvement of other adults in the education of their children also brings mixed emotions. On the one hand, parents are often happy that someone else assumes some responsibility for their child's education; on the other hand, the level of expertise accorded to the teacher, as opposed to parents, can be disconcerting for parents (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

Changes at the contextual level

Change at the contextual level concerns efforts to integrate family life with work responsibilities as well as school. Where children attend different schools, or some children attend early childhood services and others school, families seek to integrate multiple contexts within their lives. For example, the requirement for children to be at school at specific times often results in parents making adjustments to their own schedule or that of other children. Changes also occur as parents aim to identify and meet school expectations about family engagement (Barton et al., 2004).

Families with complex support needs and the transition to school

During the transition to school, most families experience change across the levels discussed above. Where families are already managing challenge and change, the transition to
school can be a turning point—a time of both opportunity and additional vulnerability.

Families with complex support needs experience “multiple problems, which may be problems for the parents, for the children, or for the whole family” (Katz, Spooner, & Valentine, 2007, p. 33). While many services and supports are offered for families with young children or families facing specific challenges, far fewer supports are available for families experiencing multiple problems. This is partly related to the nature of their complex support needs and a general lack of coordination of support from different agencies and personnel. For example, families may access specific support for one area of need, such as support with parenting, but this may be quite separate from support provided to assist parents to manage their own health concerns. The availability of limited coordinated support, combined with a sense of geographical and social isolation, can contribute to the vulnerability of such families, with long-term consequences. “The cost of failing to provide timely support to these families is considerable—as problems worsen, they become more difficult and expensive to remedy, and the families become more marginalised” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2010, p. 1). It is not uncommon for families with complex support needs to be characterised as both vulnerable and hard-to-reach. This can be attributed to many factors, including difficulties in accessing support that addresses the multiple challenges in their lives. Isolation can be exacerbated when families who do not access community supports also have few social supports.

Families with complex support needs are less likely than other families to have positive relationships and engagement with schools (Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). Despite this, these families have positive aspirations for their children and a desire for their children to have the best education possible (Langford, 2010).

The transition to school represents both a time of opportunity and challenge for these families. It can be a time when access to services and support is sought and promoted; it can also be a time when the support that is available is not relevant for the complex needs of the family. Recognising this transition as a potential turning point for families with complex support needs provided the impetus for an investigation of:

- the decision points, issues and concerns for families; and
- the supports required, available and accessible for these families as children started school.

The research in this paper draws on ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to emphasise the importance of people, processes and contexts over time. Ecological models of transition to school respect the perspectives and experiences of all involved, recognise the influence and interaction of various contexts, and regard times of transition as spaces in which to build meaningful and responsive relationships (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The importance of interactions, experiences and expectations over time is emphasised. The research is also underpinned by strengths-based principles, which emphasise the capacity of families to identify and make positive changes within their lives (Munford & Sanders, 2003).

The study employed qualitative methodology, aiming to access the understandings of family members and explore the ways in which they experienced their children’s transition to school. Analysis of their perceptions, expectations and experiences both within and across families identified factors contributing to enabling practices, processes and policies, and the potential for these to contribute to appropriate and relevant support for families as children make the transition to school.

Research focus and approach

The study was undertaken over the period 2007–10, in partnership with two organisations in NSW responsible for the delivery of early childhood intervention and support programs for families. Invitations were extended to families involved in existing programs with these organisations who were recognised as
having complex support needs and had a child about to start school. While details of individual families were not shared with researchers, family members themselves disclosed a range of complex support needs, including chronic poverty/unemployment, isolation (geographic, social, cultural), violence/trauma, alcohol and/or drug misuse, and mental health and dependency issues.

Participant families resided in several diverse communities across NSW. Forty-one of the 44 participating family members identified their residential area. Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) indicated that the majority of the families lived in areas associated with high levels of disadvantage (that is, areas classified as deciles 1–4 in each of the SEIFA indexes). For example, 30 families (73%) lived in areas classified as falling within deciles 1–4 of the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage.

Community profiles from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) provided information about the proportions of children rated as being developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains for the areas in which participating families lived. Across Australia, the average proportion of such children was 11.8%; across NSW, this average was 10.3% (Centre for Community Child Health & Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009). Almost half the participant families (49%) lived in communities where the proportion of children considered to be developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains exceeded this average.

The majority (n = 41) of participants were mothers. Data for the study were generated through face-to-face conversational interviews with family members over the year before children started school and into the first year of school. The number of meetings with individual families ranged from 1–6, over periods of 1–24 months. Over 70% (n = 31) of the families participated in at least three interviews. A total of 155 interviews were conducted in locations of the participants’ choosing, usually their homes.

Interview data were analysed using the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008) and through the construction of case studies (Stake, 2008). In the first instance, open codings were generated from the initial reading of interview transcripts, leading to the identification of broad descriptors, and then sub-categories, of issues discussed. The second phase of analysis consisted of the independent coding of transcripts by at least two of the researchers, with a third researcher checking for consistency. Inconsistencies were regarded as opportunities to review the codes and categories and to revise the emergent coding framework. When consistency had been attained, data were entered into qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. The final phase of the analysis consisted of identifying connections between the codes and, from these, generating an organisational framework that offered some explanations of the issues and concerns identified by families as well as the supports available for them at the time of transition to school. Interview transcripts provided the base for 13 case studies. Data from three of these case studies are reported in this paper.

Case studies reflected the characteristics of the families, the contexts of their lives, and their challenges and strengths. While each is a bounded case (Stake, 2008), many of the issues identified had relevance across the sample. Case study methods focus on in-depth investigation of phenomena. In this instance, case studies provided rich information about the experiences of families as they considered, planned for and then responded to their children’s transitions to school. As researchers engaged with families over periods of up to two years, the generation of case studies provided opportunities to record the effects of transition processes in real contexts. The aim of utilising both interview analyses and case studies was to prompt analytical rather than statistical generalisation, contributing to the development of theory which, in turn, helps to understand and explain similar cases (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

Case study examples

In keeping with the strengths-based position (Munford & Sanders, 2003) that we have adopted throughout the research, and in an effort not to further marginalise families with complex support needs and their children, we have chosen to report the data and analyses in terms of the strengths exhibited by families, as well as the issues they identified. In order to achieve this when reporting results, we share some of the contextual background of families, as well as their experiences.

The results reported here are drawn from three case studies of young mothers who attended an early intervention service support playgroup with their children in a regional centre of NSW. At the beginning of the project, each had a child attending the playgroup who was about to start school. On three occasions, the mothers chose to meet with researchers as a group. In follow-up interviews, they each met with researchers on two more occasions, either separately or in
pairs. Excerpts from the case studies illustrate the levels of change experienced by these mothers and their families as one child from each family started school. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Case study 1: Sarah

Sarah was a young, single mother with three children aged 2, 5 and 7 years. Nick (aged 5) started school during the project. He had been identified as having some behavioural problems and speech difficulties. Sarah indicated that she had struggled with depression for some time—a situation that continued during the study. She had experienced domestic violence and was worried that Nick may be demonstrating some of the same violent behaviours as his (now absent) father. Sarah was frustrated that she had no way to manage Nick’s behaviour and was afraid that it would stigmatise him when he started school. In interviews prior to Nick starting school, Sarah struggled to speak about him positively, despite the obvious affection she had for him. Their relationship appeared strained by his behaviours and her reactions:

[With] Nick … he’s disobedient, he won’t listen … looking at him I see a lot of his dad’s temper in him … [I’m] trying to teach him that if he’s got a problem, to talk about it, instead of using his fists or yelling or throwing something … He has been very disobedient. It’s like he’s got selective hearing—he won’t listen.

Starting school changed their relationship:

The bond was there but it wasn’t as strong. It’s getting stronger now because we’re away from each other and the more he changes the more I learn about Nick. It’s like any relationship … it’s like re-learning all over again … the relationship isn’t strained like it was before and I go up to school, I pick him up, he runs into my arms and he says “Yay!”.

It’s like, he’s a really good kid, he’s a fantastic kid. I think school has done a marvellous thing for him and me because it’s helped our relationship a lot … His going to school gives me time to myself … And I appreciate him more at the end of the day when he comes home. It’s like I miss him, at the end of the day. It’s like … Yeah. It’s just really weird, I never thought I’d miss him at the end of the day, but I do.

Sarah’s relationship with her own mother, though always reported as positive, also seemed strengthened by the change in Sarah’s relationship with Nick:

My mum is a great woman. You realise. You don’t think it when you’re growing up, but … my mum just kept telling me to be patient with Nick … She kept saying, “He’ll change when he goes to school”, and I never believed her. But my mum is a great support, because my mum will talk to me and listen to me, but she won’t give a great deal of advice … She’ll say to me, “I’m very proud of you, those kids have been raised beautifully”. You know what I mean? So that’s what encourages me … She just said, “Just be patient and take it easy and go slow”.

With support from her own mother, and others around her, Sarah recognised the challenges in her relationship with Nick and was proud of the way they had forged a new type of relationship when he started school.

Case study 2: Selena

Selena was a young single mother with six children aged 3–12 years. She had lived in the same area all her life and attended the same schools her children attended, or were soon to attend. Jasmine (aged 5) started school during the project. Selena identified her own relationship with school as having been problematic. Some of Selena’s former teachers were still at the school and remembered her in a not-very-positive light. Selena felt that her children were being judged according to her own behaviour at school. On several occasions, Selena sought to enrol her children at a different school. For a range of logistical reasons (such as transport), as well as organisational reasons (the schools in the area operated a strong zoning policy), this had not been possible.

Selena’s own school experiences influenced her interactions with the teachers as well as her expectations of her children. She responded positively to Jasmine’s kindergarten teacher, but was concerned about her older children and their teachers, particularly Brayden (aged 12, Year 6).

Brayden has got Mr F, and he was one of my teachers. Because Brayden knows me and Mr F didn’t get along too well, now [Brayden’s] showing that in his face. When [Mr F] goes hard on Brayden, [Brayden] says “You’re only hard on me because you don’t like my Mum”. I’m like, “Brayden, lose the attitude”. I even said it to him in front of Mr F … [Some teachers], they just look down at you … Yeah, but I still feel like a kid, do you know what I mean. When you’re going up to a teacher who was your teacher, it puts me back to … I feel weird when I talk to him … but I just feel weird talking to him about my son and my son’s attitude, because it reminds me of my attitude that I had with him.

Having had four of her children already start school, Selena was eager to prepare Jasmine for school and sought out a number of resources to help her “write her name” and “remember the alphabet”. At the same time, she was worried about Brayden, who was about to start high school, and the ways in which each of her other children engaged with school. Throughout the interviews, she sought
advice about educational transitions in general, clearly focused not only on one child, but on accessing strategies for supporting all of her children in their various transitions.

When Jasmine started school, Selena described a number of contextual changes:

I'm lost. Because Tuesday and Wednesday, Heidi (aged 3) goes to day care, so I've got two days to myself. And she goes to preschool on Friday for half a day. So I'm going to start TAFE [Technical and Further Education] next year, because I'm already bored … Thirteen years of having the kids here, and how it's just sort of gone to two and a half days.

Selena and her family experienced a number of changes as Jasmine started school. She was very conscious of supporting Jasmine as she made the transition to school and able to draw on her experiences with her older children. At the same time, she was well aware of the ways in which family (and parental) reputation affected the interactions between herself, her children and teachers at school.

Case study 3: Shelley

Shelley was a young mother with three sons aged 2, 5 and 7 years. John (aged 5) started school during the project. Shelley’s partner worked long hours and was not often available to help with the children. She was constantly aware of the importance of preparing John for, and supporting him at, school. At the same time, she was worried that she did not know how to achieve this. Shelley had limited support, choosing not to have much contact with her family because of what she termed a “difficult childhood”. She had experienced post-natal depression and, with limited friends and no driver’s licence, spent a great deal of time at home.

Shelley had been hospitalised for several months during her last pregnancy and felt that she had “abandoned” John during this time. She commented, “John was 2 when I was pregnant with Ben … [When in hospital] it was like I pushed him aside for this baby … I didn’t feel we’d got that tight knit [connection]”. In describing John, she noted:

He’s been having trouble for a while at preschool with a few things … like counting and alphabet and recognition and stuff like that … [I think] it was because … with the last pregnancy I had complications and I ended up in hospital for three months … Before I left home, I actually thought he wasn’t doing that bad at all. I thought he was doing pretty great myself, like with letters and numbers and counting and stuff like that. But in between having like a new baby and that, I kind of lost track of keeping that up … Like, we lost that for a while, so we’ve got to start back up again with learning a few things.

When John started school he settled quite well and seemed happy. Shelley had decided
to change the way she managed her own life by trying to become more organised, and she worked on routines for herself and the children. She reflected on the changes in her life with only one child left at home during the day:

I have no idea [what I will do] … I left home at 16. I fell pregnant at 16. I’ve been with Anthony … Left home, got an emergency house, partied and didn’t worry about school. And from there I’ve had babies ever since … It’s like I’ve never changed from a caterpillar to a butterfly. I’ve got to try and do that now, with little butterflies attached.

Shelley described herself as “not very confident” and seemed daunted by the prospect of doing something outside the home: “Like with most jobs and stuff you need your résumé and what experience you have, and mine is just motherhood, so … “. Her confidence was shaken even further by the news that, with John starting school, she would be ineligible to access the early intervention service support playgroup and the workers connected with this, upon whom she had come to rely:

I’ve been here nearly five years. John was 6½ months. My mum … she was no help at all, so this is it. And once they’re gone … I have no idea [what I’ll do] … This is the only social, this is the only time I socialise.

Shelley recognised both the challenges and opportunities for herself and her family as John started school. While on the one hand welcoming the opportunities for change, on the other hand, she was shaken by the loss of support and scared by her own lack of confidence. As the parent who spent most time with the children, she related her children’s ability to her own ability as a parent. The learning challenges identified as John started school were attributed to her being in hospital and not being available to prompt his learning.

Discussion

These three mothers experienced a great deal of change as their children made the transition to school. While changes were noted at the individual, relationship and contextual levels (Griebel & Niesel, 2009), several changes involved multiple levels, or affected changes at other levels. While the specific nature of the changes varied according to each family, they illustrate some of the changes experienced by families as children start school.

Each of the parents experienced changes at the individual level. Shelley and Selena, in particular, noted that with John and Jasmine at school, there was only one child left at home during the day. There were mixed emotions for these parents, as they were happy to see their children start school, but also aware of what that might mean for them and their opportunities to engage in activities outside the home, such as TAFE or work.

With Selena’s children attending the same school she had attended, and being taught by some of the same teachers, her identity as a “parent of school children” often intersected with her identity as a “difficult school child”. Indeed, on several occasions, she noted that going to the school to talk with teachers made her feel like she was “back at school” herself. She was well aware of the power of reputation, yet felt unable to change the effect this had on her own children. At the same time, she was aware that particular strategies were required to communicate with teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2007), and her exercise of these was influenced by her own experiences. In keeping with the view that habitus is influenced by parental experiences of school (Barnett & Taylor, 2009), Selena’s experiences influenced her own, as well as her children’s, engagement with particular teachers.

All three mothers described the importance of preparing their children for school. They each acknowledged this as one of their responsibilities as a parent. One avenue for this was to attend the supported playgroup with their children. In addition, each of the school starters attended some form of early
education setting. However, this responsibility seemed to weigh heaviest on Shelley, who attributed John’s difficulties to her own absence from home when she experienced pregnancy complications. While expecting school to have a major effect on John’s achievements, Shelley’s comments marked her identity as the parent of a school student, with responsibility for “safeguarding the scholastic sense of [her] child” (Griebel & Niesel, 2009, p. 62).

The major change noted for Sarah occurred at the relationships level. What had seemed to be a tense relationship between her and her son Nick changed notably as he made the transition to school. Sarah attributed this to having some time away from each other and, in her case, learning more about her son. Strong relationships form the basis of a successful transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007). In this case, the relationship between mother and son provided a solid basis for the development of new relationships, including those with teachers and other children (Langford, 2010). While she did not mention it explicitly, the involvement of another important adult in Nick’s life (the teacher) seemed to ease some of the tension reported by Sarah, possibly by offering another adult role model who eschewed violence.

All of the mothers experienced a loss of support as their children started school and they were no longer eligible to attend the supported playgroup. This had the strongest effect on Shelley, who had not been warned of this outcome. For Shelley, the loss of this support linked to her concerns about moving outside the home for work or study. Her social isolation, compounded by lack of confidence, made the time of school transition one where she felt vulnerable. The process of losing relationships that provide professional support has been consistently identified as an issue in the transition to school for children with special education needs (Janus et al., 2007). Each of the children starting school in these families attended an early intervention service support playgroup. Access to the playgroup and staff ceased when the children started school. None of the parents indicated any arrangements for ongoing support at school. While opportunities for the review of services and support are necessary, discontinuities in the provision of support, or the cessation of support, can leave families frustrated and isolated (Dockett et al., 2011).

Each of these parents had some expertise in managing the different contexts of home and school. They each had at least one child already at school, and other children attending playgroup and/or other early childhood services. In this sense, managing the contextual level of the transition to school was something that was already a feature of their lives. For these families, communication between home and school varied in form and efficacy, though there was a general sense from each of the mothers that teachers did not particularly value their knowledge, or recognise that they may have expertise. Specific mention was made of their young age and the ways in which this reduced their expertise in the eyes of teachers. None of the mothers indicated that they felt like partners in their children’s school education (Barton et al., 2004).

All of the women had children at an early age and were full-time parents. As their children progressively started school, there were opportunities for employment or study outside the home. On the one hand, this was greeted with anticipation; on the other hand, there was also trepidation about what this might mean and how it might be achieved. Despite contemplating such role changes, there was no specific sense of what this might mean for these participants. For example, Selena mentioned going to TAFE, but without a clear idea of what that might mean or in what course she was interested. The aspirations of these women are important. However, it is often the case that without appropriate support and encouragement, aspirations of joining the workforce or studying when children start school are not achieved (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

The changes experienced within these families illustrate the complexity surrounding children’s transition to school. It is not just a time of change for the children, but also a time of change for families. Providing appropriate support for families with complex support needs is important at all times. However, it is particularly important as families experience changes at the individual, relationship and contextual level across transition points such as the transition to school. Analysis of outcomes from this project contributed to theory-building around the research questions of the nature of family experiences and the supports required for these families as children started school. Implications from this study support the extant literature (Centre for Community Child Health, 2010; Cortis, Katz, & Patulny, 2009; Katz et al., 2007) that emphasise the importance of providing enabling environments. In such environments, practices, processes and policies work together to recognise both the strengths of families and the challenges they face. Key elements of enabling environments identified from this project include:

Providing appropriate support for families with complex support needs is particularly important as families experience changes at the individual, relationship and contextual level across transition points such as the transition to school.
Potential outcomes from enabling environments include recognition of the ways in which all families, with appropriate support, can promote a positive start to school for all concerned.

Conclusion

All families encounter times of challenge. Sometimes, points of transition contribute to these challenges; at other times experiences over the transition signal positive changes. The transition to school offers both opportunities and challenges as families navigate changes at the individual, relationship and contextual levels. Opportunities are afforded when children, parents and educators recognise the changes as children start school and as families seek and are responsive to intervention. It is a time when new relationships are constructed and when the involvement of other adults and other learning environments can create opportunities for interaction where the focus is on promoting positive outcomes for children and families.

Change is also an inherent aspect of transition. At the time of transition to school, children and families experience change as they move from known contexts, supports and relationships to unknown contexts, uncertain supports and changed relationships. Children and parents forge new identities across the transition to school—as school children and as parents of school students. New identities bring new challenges in relation to expectations, experiences and agency: “transitions combine turning points, milestones, or life events with subtle, complex processes of ‘becoming somebody’ personally, educationally and occupationally” (Ecclestone, 2010, pp. 12–13).

Transitions are also characterised by continuity. One of the major aspects of continuity resides within the family. The contexts across which children and parents move and interact change as children start school, and families can provide a source of continuity for them.

Strengths-based approaches to studying the role of families in the transition to school acknowledge the inherent opportunities afforded by times of transition, while at the same time recognising potential challenges that accompany change and discontinuity. These approaches advocate for support during the transition to school that assists families to take active roles in managing the transition and its outcomes. Such support recognises that:

for a parent, the transition of his/her child to school means supporting the child’s transition, plus coping with his/her own transition towards becoming a competent parent of a school child. (Griebel & Niesel, 2009, p. 66)

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