



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Rethinking School Readiness

This brief focuses on what the research tells us about the nature of and pathways to school readiness. It emphasises the importance of schools, services and communities supporting children and families and providing the conditions and experiences needed to ensure that all children reach school able to take advantage of the academic and social learning experiences that schools provide.

Conceptualising school readiness

School readiness has traditionally been thought of as a simple outcome of maturation or chronological age, and has focused on particular qualities and capacities in the child (Crnic & Lamberty, 1994; Kagan & Rigby, 2003). Once these were demonstrated (or achieved), the child was considered to be ready for school. The implication was that early childhood services and communities did not have any role to play in promoting school readiness, nor did schools have to do anything about getting ready to meet the child's needs.

This "individual child maturation" view of school readiness has been shown to be too limited. Readiness does not reside solely in the child, but reflects the environments in which children find themselves – their families, early childhood settings, schools, neighborhoods, and communities (Kagan & Rigby, 2003). School readiness is now seen as having four interrelated components: children's readiness for school, school's readiness for children, and the capacity of families and communities to provide developmental opportunities for their young children (Emig et al, 2001). This has been represented as an equation:

Ready families + Ready early childhood services + Ready communities + Ready schools = Ready children (Kagan & Rigby, 2003; Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005).

In addition, there needs to be a 'ready society' - a society-wide understanding and acceptance of the importance of investment in the early years of childhood, backed by government programs, policies and funding (Dickens et al, 2006; Lynch, 2006; Mustard, 2006).

Why is this issue important?

School entry involves a key transition for all children. This transition is not just *to* school, but *from* home, childcare, preschool and kindergarten. It is a transition not just from early care and learning environments, but 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. It is a transition to a different learning, education and care paradigm. How well children are prepared for this transition is important as it impacts on their long term outcomes.

In Australia, children enter school with marked differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills needed for success in the school environment (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2007). These initial differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success (Boethel, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007; Le et al, 2006). This is partly because skills develop cumulatively, so that those acquired early form a sound basis for later skill development (Cunha et al, 2006). Children learn from birth (Bennett, 2007; Meisels, 2006).

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What and how they learn depends upon the nature and quality of the relationships they have with their parents and caregivers, and the richness and variety of the experiences they are provided during the early years.

Those children who experience caring and responsive relationships and have been given many stimulating experiences arrive at school with a history of learning behind them and a readiness to continue learning. Children who arrive at school without such experiences are already at a disadvantage that undermines their chances of succeeding at school.

The success of schools is also undermined when children begin without the necessary core skills and experiences. Schools struggle to overcome these initial differences in children (Cunha et al, 2006; Karoly et al, 2005). Schools therefore have a vested interest in ensuring that children arrive at school ready to continue learning. School 'unreadiness' is expensive (Bruner et al, 2005). Later attempts to compensate for unreadiness are less effective and may be more expensive than providing the resources, programs and supports needed to ensure that children start school ready to continue learning (Cunha et al, 2006).

The impact of children arriving at school without the skills needed to take advantage of the learning experiences provided by schools extends beyond the initial years of school; the likelihood of successfully completing school, gaining employment and becoming a productive, socially adjusted citizen can be traced back to a child's skills at school entry (The Future of Children, 2005). Thus the benefits of children beginning school with necessary skills are reaped at both the individual and societal level. Therefore, in common with schools, individuals, families and communities share a vested, though not necessarily recognised, interest in increasing school readiness.

What does the research tell us?

Life trajectories for children become increasingly difficult to change as differences in skills and abilities become entrenched and initial differences between school ready and school unready children are amplified (Cunha et al, 2006). The transition to school is particularly problematic for vulnerable children (Feinstein & Bynner, 2004; Sylva et al, 2004).

The research suggests there are a number of factors that either facilitate or hinder school readiness; these can be at the level of the individual, the family, early childhood services, schools and the community.

The home environment and family background characteristics (including maternal education, single-parent status, and mental health) are important factors that are linked to school readiness. Family resources, including income, the amount of parenting time available, and families' personal support networks also affect the experiences and opportunities available to children and thereby contribute to school readiness.

There are many activities that parents undertake with young children that have a positive effect on their development and promote school readiness (Sylva et al, 2004). These include reading with children, teaching them songs and nursery rhymes, playing with letters and numbers, taking children on visits, and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home. Parents can provide such experiences regardless of their educational or occupational levels: what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are (Sylva et al, 2004). Nevertheless, children from families with limited resources are less likely to experience such activities during the early years.

“Later attempts to compensate for unreadiness are less effective...”

While many family background factors are not in themselves readily amenable to change – for example, maternal education - their effects on the child's development can be modified with family-focused interventions or programs, thereby improving outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children (Boethel, 2004; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005). There are a number of programs that have proven effective in helping parents become more nurturing, manage their children's behaviour more effectively, and promote their children's language and literacy.

Although such programs improve parenting, not all of them result in improved school readiness. Those that do improve school readiness are either focused on aspects of parenting that directly relate to school learning (such as family literacy programs) or are centre-based rather than home-based, involving both parents and preschool teachers (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005).

Participation in high quality early child care and education programs can also contribute positively to children's development during the early years and therefore to their school readiness (Boethel, 2004).

High quality care/education is characterized by adult-child interactions that are responsive, affectionate and readily available; well-trained staff; ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact adequately and appropriately with children; and a developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content (Bennett, 2007; Elliott, 2006; Melhuish, 2003).

The kind of preschool curriculum that benefits all children (but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) is *an effective intentional curriculum* (Klein & Knitzer, 2006, 2007) that involves active engagement with children (Kagan & Kauerz, 2006), provides nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships with early childhood staff (Melhuish, 2003; NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services), integrates child care and education (CCCH, Policy Brief 8, 2007; Elliot, 2006), is responsive to cultural diversity (Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000), fosters social, emotional and regulatory skills (Hyson, 2004; Klein and Knitzer, 2006, 2007), and promotes early literacy and math skills (Duncan et al, 2007).

There is consistent international evidence that children who have participated in high-quality preschool education programs gain significant long term benefits from what has been termed the 'preschool advantage' (Farrar et al, 2007). These include higher levels of completed education and subsequent employment, greater stability in relationships and lower rates of mental illness (Farrar et al, 2007). While the evidence indicates that all children benefit from high quality pre-school education, the gains are greatest for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds (Cunha et al, 2006; Sylva et al, 2004).

Transition programs are important for ensuring that all children make a positive start to school (Dockett, 2001, 2007). School-based transition practices produce more positive academic achievement outcomes, and are particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Schulting et al, 2005). Currently schools and early years' service systems are not well integrated, and this contributes to difficulties in providing cohesive support to all children and families during the transition to school period.

The key factor in promoting children's school readiness in all environments – families, early childhood services, community settings and schools – is the nature of the relationships they experience; the primary mechanisms through which children acquire the underpinning skills are the social relationships they form with parents, care-givers, teachers and peers (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Thompson & Raikes, 2007).

What are the implications of the research?

Children will not enter school ready to continue learning unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development of infants, toddlers and preschool children.

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As indicated in the school readiness 'equation' - **“Ready families + Ready early childhood services + Ready communities + Ready schools = Ready children”** - there are interlinked contributors that share responsibility for children's school readiness.

- *‘Ready families’* refers to children's family context and home environment. There are large differences in family resources, including parenting skills and attitudes. Support is needed to help families provide responsive care and appropriate learning experiences for their children and to develop family well-being during the early years' period.
- *‘Ready services’* refers to the availability, quality and affordability of programs and services that positively support child development and contribute directly and indirectly to school readiness. These include the care and education environments provided in preschools, kindergartens and childcare settings. Linking services and establishing integrated service networks provides additional gains, including continuity and consistency.
- *‘Ready communities’* refers to both informal and formal resources and supports available to families with young children. Examples of informal resources include social networking opportunities for families to meet in family friendly environments, and for their children to socialise – in parks, for example. Formal resources include health services and libraries. Children whose families have easy access to such resources have better developmental outcomes than children whose families lack such access.

- *Ready schools'* describes critical elements of schools that influence child development and school success. These include links established with early years services, transition support programs for children commencing schools, a range of programs and supports available to cater for children with diverse needs during the early years of schooling, and teachers with an understanding of early childhood development.

Improving school readiness requires that we address the environments in which children spend their time and develop their skills and behaviours. Whether in their family or education/care environments, children need engaged, responsive care with organised and purposeful experiences and activities. Children need to be exposed to print, music, the natural environment, languages and the arts, to have stories read to them, and to have regular access to stimulating, play-based learning materials and experiences.

Considerations for policy and programs

The best way of preparing a child for school is to ensure that they have optimal social, emotional and learning experiences and environments during the early years, both at home and in community settings and services. To ensure this, we need to create the conditions under which families and communities can meet the needs of children as they (and we) would wish (Moore, 2006).

Creating those optimal conditions requires collaboration between services and programs to ensure that the children and families receive all the help they need, and that potential barriers to children's learning are removed.

Specifically, policies and programs are needed to:

- Provide all children with high quality early educational experiences. This is particularly important for those children made vulnerable to school 'unreadiness' by their disadvantaged family status or limited community resources and supports.
- Support parents by creating family friendly early childhood environments and opportunities for families to meet other families.
- Help families provide learning resources and experiences for their young children.
- Build opportunities for family involvement in early childhood programs.
- Build strong links and relationships between schools and early childhood services to ensure continuity of care and joint planning of transition support activities. These links are important for transfer of knowledge about the circumstances, needs and interests of individual children and their families. Further, continuity and consistency of the environment have been shown to be important factors underpinning the smooth transition to school. The loss of links between families and early childhood services is wasteful, and disruptive to children and their families.
- Build strong links between families and schools before, during and after transition.
- Provide a variety of supports to help ease children's transition to school (note: these will be described in detail in a forthcoming Policy Brief).
- Establish integrated service networks, linking early childhood programs with other general and specialist child and family services.

Considerable investment is required in the strategies, services and programs that support school readiness, but this investment reaps multiple and enduring gains – both individual and societal – that more than compensate for the financial costs.

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References

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