



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services

Starting school is an exciting but also potentially stressful time for children and families alike. It is one of the key transition points during childhood. All such transitions are known to be times of particular vulnerability for young children, when earlier developmental and social progress is placed at risk. A successful transition to school is important for all children. This Policy Brief summarises the research evidence regarding transition to school, including strategies which aim to make it a smooth and successful process for children and their families.

Why is this issue important?

Commencing school presents children and their families with both opportunities and challenges. It requires them to negotiate many changes - in identity, relationships, physical environment, social environment status, learning environment, and rules (Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007a; Fabian, 2007). This can be a positive experience, but the more dramatic these changes are, the more difficult it can be for children and families to make the transition successfully.

There are several reasons why negotiating this transition successfully is important. If the move to school does not go well and children do not manage the demands of the new environment, then their engagement in school activities and even their actual attendance at school can be compromised. This can have long-term consequences (Alexander et al, 2001). As the early years of school are now recognised as being critical for later school success, both attendance and engagement are vital to establishing the attitudes, behaviours and competencies crucial to ongoing achievement (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Pianta & Cox, 1999, 2002). A successful transition to school results in children who like school, look forward to going regularly, and show steady growth in academic and social skills. Successful transitions are also more likely to lead to families being actively involved in their children's education, and in teachers and families valuing each other (Ramey & Ramey, 1994).

Successful transition to school is important because all learning, including the learning of academic skills, is a cumulative process involving

both mastering new skills and improving existing abilities (Cunha et al, 2006).

Children's long term success in school derives from their learning experiences before school, and the ongoing learning environment in the early school years (Dockett & Perry, 2007; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004). If schools fail to build on what children have learned prior to school entry, the benefits of earlier positive learning experiences may fade out in time (Feinstein, 2003; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Kauerz, 2006). A smooth transition between the two settings increases the likelihood of continuous learning and reduces the incidence of fade out.

Currently schools and early years service systems are not well integrated and are therefore unable to provide cohesive support to all children and families during the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Halfon et al, 2004). This puts all children at risk, and is particularly problematic for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006).

What does the research tell us?

Factors affecting successful transition. How easy or difficult children find the transition between early years services and school settings partly depends upon the degree of discontinuity they have to negotiate (Margetts, 2002). Discontinuities include changes in the physical environment of buildings and classrooms, differences in curricula and teaching strategies, differences in the number, gender and role of staff, changes to the peer group, and most significant of all, changes in the relationships between children and the adults responsible for their care and education.

Some discontinuities are expected and generally welcomed by children. Children seek change and challenge and understand that in many ways school will reflect their growing status and independence. However for successful transitions to occur, it is important that discontinuities around learning, relationship-building and support systems are minimised.

One of the major sources of discontinuity is that between the curriculum and teaching approaches used in early years services settings and those used in schools (Margetts, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 2002; Walker, 2007). Whereas programs in early years services use developmentally appropriate play-based learning approaches, traditional school curricula tend to be more structured and teacher-directed. However, as Walker (2007) has pointed out, nothing magical or mysterious happens to children's brains or learning styles in the six week holiday period between finishing early years education and starting school. There are no grounds therefore for abruptly changing the teaching style and content; rather, there is a strong rationale for seeking greater alignment between early years services and school curricula, with a more gradual introduction to structured learning (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Fabian, 2002; Kauerz, 2006).

The sharing of information between early years services and school staff also affects the quality of the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Margetts, 2002; Yeboah, 2002). Teachers in early years services and school settings sometimes have difficulty doing this effectively (Cassidy, 2005; Hopps, 2004; Timperley et al, 2003). Some communication practices (e.g. sending the school a copy of a preschool report) are simply inadequate, and do not provide school teachers with information about the child and family that they find important or useful (Cassidy, 2005). Problems may also arise because the two sets of teachers do not work together, and lack a true understanding and respect for each other's work (Hopps, 2004). Further, while early years teachers and school teachers may agree about the importance of effective communication, they may have very different expectations of what the other sector should be doing to facilitate the transition of children to school (Timperley et al, 2003). This often reflects a simplistic and dated view of 'school readiness' as being a quality in the child. This view assumes that it is the responsibility of early years services to prepare children for school, rather than the collective responsibility of families, early years services, communities, and schools themselves (CCCH, Policy Brief 10, 2008).

How effectively children are supported during the

transition to school affects their school adjustment and academic achievement (Boethel, 2004; Fabian, 2007; OECD, 2006; Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006). The more transition activities that schools conduct, the better children adjust to the school environment (Margetts, 2002, 2007; Schulting et al, 2005). Such activities are particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Schulting et al, 2005), but should be available universally.

Successful transition depends in part upon how well the school culture is understood by the parents and family, and how trusting and respectful families are of the school (Clancy et al, 2001). Parents and caregivers whose own experiences of school were poor may have little understanding of or support for the school. However children make better progress academically and socially when their families are actively and positively involved in their children's learning activities at home, in early childhood settings (Weiss et al, 2006) and at school (Casper et al, 2006/07; Kreider et al, 2007). It is therefore important for schools to build positive relationships with families well before school starts (Perry & Dockett, 2001; Pianta & Cox, 2002), and to maintain these during and after the transition to school (Boethel, 2004; Emig et al, 2001; Gonzalez, 2002; Mangione & Speth, 1998). Special efforts to reach the families of children not attending early childhood services may be needed.

Discontinuity in the relationships between children and those adults responsible for their care and education, particularly in early years services and school settings, is a potential source of great disruption to successful school transition. Children's healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of their relationships with the important people in their lives (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). It is through relationships with parents, other adults and peers that children acquire their key learning and social skills (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Mashburn et al, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Developing ways of maintaining continuity in relationships across the early years / school divide must be regarded as a major priority.

Strategies for improving transitions. Strategies for improving children's transition to school have been identified by Bohan-Baker & Little (2004), Dockett & Perry (2001, 2007), Margetts (2007), Pianta & Kraft-Sayre (2003), and Rous & Hallam (2006).

Transition activities should be built into early years services and school teachers' roles, and can include: home visits before and after children

enter school; visits to early years settings and schools; family meetings to discuss teacher expectations; connecting new families with families currently enrolled in the school; dissemination of information to families on the transition to school; and family support groups (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). In selecting strategies, it is important to take account of the views of parents and caregivers as well as the children themselves (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2007). It is vital that both early years services and schools recognise the importance of these tasks and assume equal responsibility for them.

These transition strategies go beyond those traditional orientation programs that inform families about school programs and familiarise them with the school setting, without necessarily building relationships (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Glazier, 2001). Transition strategies encompass a much wider time span, starting well before school commences and continuing well afterwards. They also recognise that starting school is a time of transition for all involved: children, families, and educators (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Ramey & Ramey, 1994). Therefore it is not just a matter of how children adjust to the changed demands of school, but how families, early years services and schools interact and cooperate to support each other as well as the child through the transition process (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Pianta & Cox, 2002).

Greater alignment of early years services and school curricula can be achieved at the classroom level, by introducing more play-based approaches in the early stages of primary school (e.g., Walker, 2007; Fabian, 2002), and by developing a common curriculum framework across early years services and the initial primary school years (Neuman, 2001). The South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework is an example of this latter process. At the administrative level, greater alignment between the teaching environments and approaches used in early years services and schools can be promoted through the administrative integration of early years services into the education system (Neuman, 2001); this has recently occurred in Victoria with the merging of early childhood and education sectors in a single government department.

The strategies identified so far have focused on transition activities. It has been recognised increasingly that such strategies may not be enough, and that the links between early years services and schools need to be strengthened in more substantive ways (Emig et al, 2001; Gonzalez, 2002; Shore, 1998).

In Australia and overseas, a number of models have been trialled to strengthen the link between schools, early years services and local communities. These take different forms, but include co-locating early years services on school grounds (e.g. De Zen, 2004), developing more effective communication and collaboration strategies across the two sectors (Halfon et al, 2004; OECD, 2006), developing greater alignment between early years services' and early school years' curricula and teaching practices (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Kauerz, 2006), and providing opportunities for early childhood and school staff to work together on a regular basis (Neuman, 2001; Walker, 2007).

“Transition activities encompass a much wider time span, starting well before school...and continuing well afterwards.”

Stronger linkages between services can be achieved by dedicating funding for schools to work with families and early years services before the children reach school (Dockett & Perry, 2001), as has been done by the Tasmanian Department of Education through its Launching into Learning program (Larcombe, 2007). The benefits of this model are that schools develop prior knowledge about the needs of the particular children who are commencing, put in place a range of appropriate classroom and support strategies to meet their needs, encourage family involvement, and are able to build strong links with other relevant services as required (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Emig et al, 2001; Gonzalez, 2002).

Other models have been developed to create school environments that are more supportive and inclusive of families, provide a wider range of family and community services, and establish stronger links with other relevant child and family services (Zigler et al, 1997). These include extended schools (HM Government, 2007; Wilkin et al, 2003), full service schools (Dryfoos, 2002), and community schools (Blank & Berg, 2006; Blank et al, 2003; Edgar, 2001). There is evidence that such models can be effective in ensuring more successful transitions, and in promoting student learning, stronger families and healthier communities (Blank et al, 2003; Cummings et al, 2006).

While even poor transition experiences can be overcome by high quality school programs, the provision of rich transition experiences and support programs can contribute greatly to facilitating engaged children and families, and paving the way for future educational success.

What are the implications of the research?

- The discontinuities that typically exist between early childhood services and schools can compromise children's smooth transition to school and hence their long term academic and social development. The key discontinuities are those involving differences in curriculum and teaching strategies, difficulties in sharing information, and disruptions in the relationships children and families have developed with teaching staff.
- Relationships are central to children's learning and development, and the lack of continuity in their relationships with key carers and teachers in the transition to school adds significantly to the potential difficulty of the move. Relationships are also important for parents and caregivers, and their ongoing involvement in their children's early years and school learning depends upon schools developing positive partnerships with them well before their children start school.
- The provision of a comprehensive range of transition strategies developed in partnership with families, early years services and schools has been shown to be effective in ensuring children's smooth transition to school. However traditional orientation strategies are inadequate to ensure the smooth transition to school of most children. The importance of building stronger links between early years services and schools is evident from the research.
- In addition to the active support they provide during the transition period, schools need to ensure that they know the new children and their particular learning and social needs before they commence school, and have appropriate programs in place to support them and involve their families.
- Transition to school should encompass a much wider time span (starting well before school commences and continuing well afterwards) and to involve a wider range of stakeholders.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Ways of ensuring greater alignment between early childhood and school curricula and teaching strategies should be explored (e.g. by developing common curriculum frameworks, strengthening administrative links, and co-teaching arrangements).
- The development and evaluation of comprehensive child and family service systems that integrate early years programs and schools – including sharing staff, sharing curricula, and sharing premises – should be supported through policy and funding at all levels of government.
- Both early years services and schools should seek to become more family-friendly; creating spaces where families and staff can mingle, and staff can help families support their children's learning more effectively.
- The development of schools as community hubs needs policy and funding support, and different models that are planned and implemented should be trialled and evaluated.
- Children's specific learning needs should be known before they commence school, and appropriate programs put in place to meet these needs.

Policy Briefs

Policy Briefs aim to stimulate informed debate about issues that affect children's health and wellbeing. Each issue draws on current research and international best practice.

A multi-disciplinary team from the Centre for Community Child Health produces these Policy Briefs.

An editorial board of national experts, and an advisory group of international experts in children's policy and service delivery, provide peer review and advice.

References

A full list of references and further reading used in the development of this Policy Brief is available from:

www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm

Next Policy Brief

Policy Brief No. 12 will address Early Years Learning Frameworks.

Subscribe

To receive Policy Brief e-alerts please visit:

www.rch.org.au/ccch/maillinglist.cfm

The Centre for Community Child Health is at the forefront of research into early childhood development and behaviour. The Centre is committed to translating research to inform public policy, service delivery and practice.

Centre for Community Child Health
The Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
PARKVILLE 3052
Victoria Australia

Tel: +61 3 9345 6150
Email: enquiries.ccch@rch.org.au
Web: www.rch.org.au/ccch