

School readiness and transition to school

By Sonja Tansey

Positive early school experiences can be achieved through good preparation and smooth transitions to school. These will also lead to good short and long term outcomes for children. Effective school readiness and transition experiences help child care professionals and families to identify when children are ready for school and to prepare them with the skills and qualities they need for a rewarding school experience. Good school readiness and transition experiences also create links between the service, families and the school environment.

Family day care services are ideal environments for children to develop the qualities needed to succeed in all areas of life, including school. Family day care does not need to turn into a 'school environment' to prepare children for school. Supporting children's school readiness is about assisting them to develop their skills in areas such as literacy, numeracy and self-care when they are ready for this, and at their own pace. By supporting all areas of children's development and focusing on building strong, responsive relationships with them, child care professionals can provide children with the skills and confidence to continue along a path of life-long learning.

Foundations for success at school

Family day care services that support all areas of children's growth, including their social, emotional, physical, language and cognitive development, pave the way for children's optimum brain development. By using a holistic approach, family day care services can help children to nurture the abilities needed to succeed in the school environment.

Children's social competence is at the core of school readiness and effective transition. Social skills such as sharing, turn taking and playing well with other children are fundamental in assisting children's short and long term success at school.

Responsive, positive relationships between children and child care professionals are also crucial in building children's self-esteem and resilience which further assist them to make effective transitions from family day care to school.

Helping families to decide when their child is ready for school

Many families rely on feedback from child care professionals to help them make decisions about their child's readiness for school. By providing clear information and discussing the issues that relate to individual children's school readiness, family day care services can help families to understand the factors other than the child's age¹ that are important foundations for starting school.

When considering a child's readiness for school, families should be encouraged to make decisions

¹ State and territory governments have varying legal requirements for the maximum and minimum age of children commencing school. Families can be directed to the department of education website in their state or territory for information about the compulsory school age.



based on their child's skills, needs and interests. This will help families to decide when their child is best placed to begin school. Child care professionals' knowledge of individual children will provide invaluable insights for families when making decisions about their child's school readiness.

Families may believe that children require some reading and writing skills to be ready for school. Child care professionals can reassure families that literacy and numeracy skills are not essential for school readiness. It is more important for their child to have good social skills and to be a confident learner to set the foundations for a lifetime of learning. Families should be reassured that the essential social skills needed to cope at school are being fostered through family day care. Child care professionals can explain to families how participating in play with others helps children to develop skills in turn taking, building relationships and expressing thoughts and ideas.

If a child is considered not ready for school, services can reassure families that all children develop at their own pace and that, with continued support and involvement in family day care, they will be ready at a later date. Continued participation in the family day care environment will support the child to mature and develop the wide range of skills that will prepare them for school.

There are a number of recognised authorities that produce school readiness information for families. The Centre for Community Child Health provides a useful *Parent Information sheet on School Readiness* which can be downloaded from the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne website: www.rch.org.au. The Raising Children Network website also has information for families about children starting school (www.raisingchildren.net.au).

Relationships and social skills

Being socially competent maximises children's opportunities to learn and take on the challenges that school presents. When children struggle to communicate and build relationships with peers and teachers this detracts from their capacity to learn and participate in the school program. Family day care can prepare children to confidently and competently take part in the school environment by encouraging the development of core social skills. Taking turns, sharing, being able to make friends and a degree of independence are some of the skills services can support children to develop.

Services can also prepare children well for school by encouraging the development of strong bonds with carers and good peer relationships. These are essential to children's developing self-confidence and resilience that enable them to cope and thrive in the school environment.

Child focused experiences

It is not necessary to view school readiness as a separate aspect of the family day care experiences provided. Family day care services can prepare children for school by providing child focused experiences that promote all areas of their growth and development. By closely observing and responding to the needs and interests of individual children, opportunities can be created to encourage the skills and attributes needed for starting school.

Services should focus on assisting children to become confident learners rather than on developing specific literacy and numeracy skills. Using children's current skills and interests as the basis for promoting their development will prepare children better than requiring them to complete structured academic tasks.

Family day care programs can promote the following skills to support children's school readiness.

Social skills to support children to:

- positively approach other children and make friends;
- participate in play;
- express emotions and deal with conflict appropriately;
- show interest in others and form friendships;
- express their needs and wants appropriately;
- separate from parents or primary carers;
- take turns in games and activities;
- share toys and equipment;
- follow some directions and understand some rules;
- participate in groups; and
- cope with transitions between routines and experiences.

Cognitive skills to support children to:

- show natural curiosity and interest in learning new things;
- have confidence in learning; and
- be interested in solving some problems.

Language skills to support children to:

- use language to ask questions and communicate their thoughts and ideas;
- listen to others; and
- enjoy books and being read to.

Independence and life skills to support children to:

- cope with a small amount of supervision in a variety of situations;
- toilet and dress themselves independently;
- unpack their lunch box and use a drink bottle; and
- deal with a structured environment.

Physical skills to support children to:

- use pencils, crayons, textas and scissors; and
- balance, run, jump, and use equipment such as balls and climbing apparatus.

Preparing to start school

Along with the ongoing experiences that family day care provides, specific activities can be used to prepare children who are about to start school. Carers can also encourage families to continue these activities at home to create a consistent approach to preparing their child for school.

Useful school preparation activities might include:

- encouraging children's participation in group games and experiences;
- supporting children to cooperate with peers and make friendships in free play situations;
- having regular 'lunch box' days so children can practice opening these and eating their own lunch;
- talking positively with children about starting school;
- discussing school visits or orientation events with children, before and after they occur;
- arranging visits to the local school so children can get used to the environment and activities;
- inviting guest speakers to speak with families about school readiness and transition;
- encouraging children's independence in all areas of self care;
- helping children to use pencils, crayons, textas, scissors and glue unassisted; and
- reading with children regularly.

The role of coordination unit staff

Coordination unit staff can facilitate children's readiness for school and smooth transitions by providing support and guidance to carers and families. By communicating with carers about the value of everyday experiences in preparing children for school, carers can be encouraged to provide planned and spontaneous experiences that promote positive school transitions.

Coordination unit staff can also provide specific information and support to families that will help them to make decisions about their child's school readiness and to prepare them for school.



Strategies for coordination unit staff to support carers:

- Support carers to provide a range of experiences that promote all areas of children's development.
- Provide information to carers and families about the importance of social skills in promoting children's self confidence and resilience to prepare them for school.
- Encourage carers to support families in their decisions about school readiness, preparing children for school and in making the transition.
- Encourage carers to observe individual children and communicate with families about children's readiness for school.
- Find out about the orientation programs of local schools.
- Seek opportunities to create links between local schools and the family day care service, for example, find out when family day care children may be able to visit the school to become familiar with the environment and routines.
- Use home visits and play sessions as opportunities to observe individual children and discuss school readiness issues with carers.
- Arrange for guest speakers to speak with carers and families about school readiness and transition.
- Use play sessions to provide group experiences and games that promote children's ability to listen, take turns and share.
- Provide guidance to carers about school preparation activities that can be incorporated in everyday routines and experiences.

The early weeks at school

Family day care services can provide information to families about the early weeks of school as these are crucial in helping children to make effective transitions. Children vary in how long they take to settle into school. Some will settle well on the first day, others may show distress or withdraw for some weeks before settling happily and confidently. Services can reassure families that the early weeks are a time of adjustment and that it is normal for children to experience some uncertainty and anxiety.

Some carers may continue to care for children when they have started school. Caring for children before and after school provides ideal opportunities to assist children's transition. The family day care home environment can provide much needed reassurance and confidence to children in the early weeks of school. A relaxed environment with positive, familiar relationships

between children, their carers and their peers will help children to get ready for school in the morning, unwind after school and talk about their experiences.

Helping families settle into school

Families may experience differences between accessing and communicating with the family day care service and school. They may be used to an 'open door' environment in family day care where they are invited to visit, discuss concerns and participate at any time. The larger, more structured school environment may require families to make prior appointments with the teacher if they wish to discuss any issues.

Schools are experienced in providing reassurance and suggesting strategies to families to help their child at school. If families have concerns about how their child is settling in they can be encouraged to arrange a time with the school to discuss this with their child's teacher, the principal or the school counsellor.

Child care professionals in family day care services can play a key role in supporting children and families in preparing for and starting school. Effective transitions hinge on collaboration by families, children, child care professionals and schools to determine a child's overall readiness for school, and to plan experiences that will support their transition into the school setting. In supporting children to develop the skills to prepare them for school, professionals and families need to consider the individual child's overall strengths, interests and needs, with a particular focus on the child's interpersonal and life skills j■

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.1, 1.3 and 6.5

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Useful websites

- Child and Youth Health: www.cyh.com
- Raising Children Network: www.raisingchildren.net.au



For more information on FDCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

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