

# Transition to School

By Angela Owens

Starting primary school is a significant event in your family's life. While it is a very exciting time for both you and your child, starting school can also be an emotional and anxious experience. Research indicates that experiencing a positive transition to school will benefit children's success at school in the long term. It is therefore important that the transition process is balanced and responsive to your child's individual needs.

## What is 'school readiness'?

Families will often hear the term 'school readiness' in relation to children's transition to school. When assessing a child's readiness to start school it is important to consider a range of factors, including the child's age, their maturity, their social skills, their physical wellbeing and their ability to undertake simple self-help tasks independently.

Each state and territory has age range criteria that dictates the earliest and latest ages that children can commence school. However, these age ranges can result in a 11 to 18 month age difference between children who are starting school. It is important that families consider more than the child's age when deciding upon the right time for the child to start school.

When assessing whether their child is ready to start school, families will find it helpful to consider their child's skills and personality. This will help them to determine whether their child will be able to adjust to the school environment.

It is important to think about what will be new or different about school for the child compared to the early education settings they may have previously experienced. This will assist families to decide whether their child is ready to adjust to school. Issues to consider include:

- Adult to child ratios will usually be much lower in school than in the child's previous child care experience, and group sizes will generally be much larger.
- The outdoor environment may be minimally supervised and it may also be unfenced.
- Children will be required to follow verbal instructions and school rules, and there may be a focus on formal educational learning experiences and routines.
- Children will often need to interact with many other children of varying ages, sometimes who are much older than them.



- Some children may need to travel to school by bus and some children may also need to attend before and/or after school care.

Some of these issues may present challenges for individual children in the transition to school. These new experiences may be particularly difficult for children whose social and emotional skills still require high level of adult support.

Where children already attend a child care service, it will be helpful for families to talk with child care professionals about their view of the child's skill readiness for school.

## How can I support my child's transition to school

### *Talk about school with your child*

It is important that families talk with children about school, discussing what it might be like and what will happen during the school day. To do this effectively, it may be helpful to talk to

the school, and preferably the teacher who will work with the child, to find out what will happen in the classroom, and the words that will be used. For example, do children have 'mat time', 'news time', 'recess' or 'play lunch', do they watch Playschool or other television shows, do they have library and sports days? It can also be helpful for adults to share their own positive memories and experiences about school with children.

However, it is important to avoid building overly high or unrealistic expectations about what school will be like, as a child's disappointment when the first day is not as they expected may disrupt the settling process. Similarly, saying things like 'you won't be able to do that once you're at school' or 'they don't do that in big school' may increase a child's anxiety about the transition process, and create a negative picture of school for them.

It is also helpful to talk with your child about how they will get to and from school, particularly if the routine or mode of transport will differ from the way to which they may have travelled to and from child care. For children who will be attending before and/or after school care, it may be particularly important to talk about how the child will transition between school and the outside school hours care service.

Other aspects of school that families may talk with children about include:

- what will happen in school holidays;
- the school uniform, if applicable;
- what will happen in school assemblies, if applicable;



Transition to School - a NCAC Factsheet for Families

- who children should talk to if they are worried or upset when at school;
- using the school tuckshop or canteen; and
- where the toilets are.

It is also helpful to allow children to have 'a voice' in the transition process. Asking children to discuss their concerns, and giving them opportunities to ask questions and make decisions, can support them to feel confident and capable in making the transition to school.

### **Visit the school**

It is beneficial for the child to get to know the school environment. Many schools offer opportunities for visits to the school and classroom by incoming students. The more times that a child can visit the school before they start the better. Families may also be able to take their child to visit the school informally on weekends. During visits to school it is important to help the child to become familiar with where things are located, such as lockers/bag hooks, toilets, the library, the tuckshop or canteen, etc.

### **Practice school activities**

Allow the child to try on their school uniform and to practice using a lunch box and drink bottle. Where possible, it is helpful to give the child some opportunities to make some decisions, for example, choosing their own lunch box, drink bottle and school bag. They may also enjoy helping to pack the lunch box. Giving children some ownership over the process can help to build their confidence and feeling of personal achievement in the transition process. Introducing language such as 'play lunch' or 'recess' for snack time may also help these new routines become familiar.

Families will understandably want to ensure that their child is well prepared for school. However, it is important to avoid the temptation to 'over prepare'. For example, while it may be necessary for a child to develop their self-help skills in dressing and toileting, it is helpful to support children to practice these skills as part of their daily routine, rather than pressuring them to master these skills to 'get ready' for school.

### **Encourage your child to spend time with other children who are going to their school**

Children may find it easier to adjust when they commence school with familiar peers. Usually there will be other children in child care moving on to the same school. Where this is the case, it can be beneficial for families to find out which children will be moving on with their child and to provide them with encouragement and opportunities to spend time with these children. Alternatively, families may meet other new families

during formal visits to the prospective school, and there may be opportunities to support their child to become familiar with these children before school starts.

Whether at home, or in child care, it is important that adults remember the importance of valuing what is happening now for the child, rather than focussing on what will happen 'next year' and on 'big school'. While this is certainly an exciting time for both children and families, an overly strong focus on the future may potentially overwhelm children, and cause them anxiety. Focussing on the future may also take away from the value of children's everyday experiences and play, all of which are important to their development and eventual preparedness for school.

## **How can the child care service support my child's transition to school?**

There are a range of transition to school experiences that many child care services can, and do, implement. Examples of these include:

- Talking to children about school, and encouraging them to ask questions or voice their concerns.
- Arranging visits to local schools.
- Inviting school students to visit the service to talk about what school is like.
- Reading stories about school.
- Watching videos about school.
- Including school props, such as uniforms, bags, lunch boxes and chalk boards in dramatic play areas.
- Participate in local school activities such as fetes, open days, end of year concerts or special events.
- Provide lots of reading and writing materials as part of the daily play-based program.
- Supporting children to develop their self-help and social skills.
- Incorporating school based activities as part of the early childhood program. For example, practice using lunch boxes and drink bottles.

Many families will want to know that their child care service provides an effective transition to school program. However, it is important that families understand that an effective school readiness program allows children to develop skills for school within a child focussed setting.

To ensure that the program is relevant to each child's individual abilities and interests, child care services should avoid altering the child care environment to turn it into a 'school' setting. Similarly, learning experiences need



to be implemented in ways that reflect an understanding of quality early childhood experience. For example, learning about letters and numbers should occur as part of the regular play and experience based curriculum of an early childhood setting, in which activities are provided according to children's interests and skills.

## **How can I help my child to settle into school?**

The following suggestions may help families to ease the transition and settling process for both themselves and their child:

### **Saying goodbye**

Plan for how you will say 'goodbye' to your child when you first begin leaving them at school. This can be quite an emotional time for families, but it is important to show your child that you feel happy and confident about leaving them at school. Saying a quick, confident goodbye, even when your child is upset, may help them to feel secure and reassured that you trust that they will be okay. It is also important to remember that many children react quite emotionally to the initial separation, before settling quite happily.

### **Label your child's possessions**

It is important to label everything, including clothes, bags, lunch boxes, drink bottles and stationery. This can not only save a lot of money and frustration, it also reduces anxiety for children, families and school staff.

### **Communicate with your child**

It is important to continue to take time to ask the child about their day, and to find out if they are feeling happy and settled. If a child has ongoing issues with settling in it may be helpful to seek a meeting with the child's teacher.

### **Avoid overloading your child**

Coping with the school environment may leave many young children feeling quite worn out. Families may find it helpful to consider ways to encourage children to have some quiet time to unwind after the school day. For children who will be attending after school care, families may be able to talk to the child care professional about how their child will be able to have relaxation and recreational time while in care. This may be particularly important during the first term or two after they commence school.

It may be worthwhile considering minimising extra curricular activities such as swimming, music or dance lessons during the child's first months at school.

## **Will my child need child care in addition to school?**

School hours and 'pupil free days' and regular school holidays will be significant issues for many families. Families should consider well in advance how they will manage before, after school and vacation care, as well as what they will do on pupil free days. Families may need to discuss these issues with their children as part of the transition process.

## **Conclusion**

Both families and child care professionals play a significant role in supporting children in the transition to school. It is important that each child's individual needs, skills and interests are considered carefully to ensure that the transition process is as positive and effective as possible.

There are many valuable activities and experiences that may support children to get ready for school, and transition to school smoothly. However, it is important that child care professionals and families recognise the importance of what is happening for children in the present, and that school readiness activities take into account children current skills and interests ■

### **References and further reading**

- Farrar, E. (2006). Transition to school. *Childcare and Children's Health*, 9(3), 1 - 4.
- Marghetts, K. (2003). Preparing children for the first year of school. *Rattler*, 65, 14 - 17.
- Sutherland, K. (2008). First day jitters. *Rattler*, 75, 16 - 19.

### **Useful websites**

- Parenting and Child Health: [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)
- Raising Children Network: [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)



**For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.**

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900  
E-mail: [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au)  
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St  
Surry Hills NSW 2010

[www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)