School readiness and transition to school

By Sonja Tansey

Starting school can be an exciting, though often anxious experience for young children and their families. When children move from a familiar child care environment, with established relationships and routines, a larger more structured school setting can be overwhelming even for very confident children. Child care services play an important role in preparing children and families for school and easing their transition from child care to the school setting.

The value of effective school readiness and transition

Positive early school experiences through sound preparation and smooth transitions create good short and long term outcomes for children. Effective school readiness experiences and transition programs help child care professionals and families to identify when individual children are ready for school and to prepare them with the skills and qualities they need for a fruitful school experience. Constructive school readiness and transition experiences also create links between the service, families and schools.

Child care services are well placed to contribute to the foundations for children's long and short term success at school. By supporting all areas of children's development and focusing on building strong, responsive relationships with young children, services provide children with the skills and confidence to continue along a path of life-long learning.

Foundations for success at school

Child care services are ideal environments for children to develop the qualities needed to succeed in all areas of life, including school. Child care services do not need to turn into school environments 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. Children's social competence is at the core of their readiness for school and effective school transitions. Social skills such as sharing, turn taking and playing well with other children are essential in assisting children's short and long term success at school. Responsive, positive relationships between children and their carers are also crucial in building children's self-esteem and resilience which further assist them to make effective transitions from early childhood settings to school environments.

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 each child's school readiness, child care professionals can help families to understand the factors other than the child's age[1] that are important foundations for school. Ongoing observations of individual children by child care professionals will provide invaluable insights for families making decisions about their child's school readiness.

When considering a child's readiness for school, families should be encouraged to make decisions based on their child's skills, needs and interests. This will help families to decide when their child is best placed to begin school. Communicating with families about the benefits of child care in preparing children in all areas of their development

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[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.

can reassure families that their child's participation in the child care program is an important aspect of preparation for school.

Families may believe that children require some reading and writing skills to be ready for school. Child care professionals can reassure families that these 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 can be reminded that the essential social skills needed for school are being fostered through the early childhood program. Child care professionals can explain how participating in play with others helps children to develop the skills to take turns, build relationships and express thoughts and ideas.

Families may seek advice from child care professionals about which school would be most suitable for their child. Services can encourage families to consider factors such as the school philosophy, location, cost, facilities and resources, religious orientation and how these may suit their child and family needs.

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.rasingchildren.net.au).

Children's relationships and social skills

Being socially competent maximises children's opportunities to engage with learning and to 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. Child care services 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 that children can be supported to develop.

Services can also prepare children for school by encouraging the development of strong relationships with others. This is essential to children developing self-confidence and resilience to enable them to cope and thrive in the school environment.

The service's program

School readiness does not need to be a separate part of the program. Services can prepare children for school by promoting all areas of their growth and development. A program that closely observes

Early childhood 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 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.

and responds to children's needs and interests will provide opportunities for encouraging the skills and attributes needed for starting school.

Services should focus on assisting children to become confident learners rather then 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.

Child care services that support and encourage children's overall growth and development provide the essential preparation that children need to start school.

School preparation activities

Along with the experiences that services provide, specific activities can be used to prepare children who are about to start school. Services 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.

School readiness for children who have additional needs

Child care services need to work with families and with any specialists or professionals who are involved in the care of a child with additional needs to support the child's transition to school. When considering the child's readiness for school and transition issues, it is important to clarify the support that will be needed to assist the child to have positive school experiences. Child care professionals

Effective school transition experiences:

- Give children a positive understanding and experience of school as a safe, enjoyable place.
- Acknowledge that children have individual needs, interests and skills.
- Involve the community of children, families, child care, school and relevant others.
- Allow and encourage positive communication between children, families, child care professionals and school educators.
- Allow children to spend plenty of time in the school environment before starting.

can help families to carefully consider the child's individual needs and how these will be met in the school environment.

It is essential that families talk to the prospective schools as early as possible to discuss the needs of their child and how these may be accommodated at school, to allow schools time to prepare for children who have additional needs. Many schools have specialist teachers for special education, English as a second language, Aboriginal liaison as well as education assistants that can be called upon to support children who have additional needs.

What if a child is not ready for school?

If a child is considered to be not yet ready for school, services can reassure families that all children develop at their own pace and, with continued support and involvement in the early childhood program, they will be ready at a later date. Child care professionals can work with families to assist children's ongoing development that will contribute to their readiness for school in the following year. Continued participation in a good quality early childhood environment will allow the child to continue to mature and develop the wide range of skills that will prepare them for school. Families can also be encouraged to continue to support the child to develop in all areas.

Working collaboratively to support children

Preparing children for school and facilitating good transitions is a joint community responsibility that includes child care services, families, schools and sometimes other parties such as religious communities. Child care services can contribute to good outcomes for children by being aware of the role of all involved in children's preparation and transition to school and by creating links between all stakeholders. Positive relationships between children, families, child care professionals and school educators will also enable children to progress from child care to school smoothly.

Child care - school partnerships

Child care services can work with teachers from surrounding schools to find out about and develop transition programs. It may not be possible to build links and relationships with all the schools that children will be attending. However, child care professionals and local school teachers can exchange information about the needs of children in early childhood and school environments and develop ways of bridging the gap between the two.

A good transition program will involve more than an orientation morning and a walk around the school. Finding opportunities for children to visit and spend time with others at their prospective school is an important strategy. For example, regular visits by children from child care settings to the local school for assemblies or open mornings can help to familiarise children with the environment and routines. Conversations between children, families and staff in preparation for and after school visits will further create connections between child care and school and ease transitions.

Including families

Families can have concerns about their child starting school and can experience a sense of alienation when their child first commences. School transition programs should put families at ease by giving them clear information and opportunities to discuss issues and ask questions of school teachers and child care professionals.

Communicating information about school readiness and transition verbally or through newsletters or information sheets can provide concrete information to help families prepare their children for school.

Child care services can communicate upcoming transition and orientation events at local schools. Schools often have social events for new families and offer opportunities for them to become involved in the school. This can help families to get to know other families and teachers at the school and open valuable lines of communication.

Child care professionals 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 ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System
Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 2.1 and 3.3

References and further information

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Useful websites

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