

# Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

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## Transition to School

Starting school is an important milestone for young children and their families. It's an exciting time, a rite of passage marked by certain rituals, new symbols (such as uniforms) and expectations.

This transition concerns more than just the child and their immediate family. The ecological model (from Bronfenbrenner) emphasises that children's lives are embedded in complex and dynamic contexts that extend beyond family and childcare. Each context has physical and social/psychological



elements. The transition to school is not just from home or childcare, but involves these wider contexts. Relationships are at the heart of these contexts. In many ways, then, the transition is about contexts within communities and the relationships among and between children, families, and early childhood educators.

In focusing on relationships, transition programs are building on existing strengths to pave the way for a smooth, happy transition. While the emphasis should be positive, the transition to school can also be challenging. Leaving a familiar environment behind, and entering a new one where rules (both formal and informal), expectations, activities and even the physical environment is unfamiliar, can be daunting. Even adults with developed skills and resources find similar transitions, such as changing jobs, stressful. For a young child facing the new environment of school, the challenges may be much greater. Transition programs should be planned to reduce any stress and build confidence through positive, supported experiences in which the child's needs and interests are paramount.

Planning a transition that allows the child to enter school with confidence makes sense from an emotional point of view, but a successful start to school has wider and longer lasting benefits. Research clearly confirms that a happy transition to school is important in setting the foundation for a child's future academic and social success. Children learn best when they feel secure and familiar with their surroundings. The reverse is also true – an unhappy, stressful entry to school negatively may impact upon later experiences and outcomes in school. Memory and the capacity to learn are negatively affected by stress and anxiety.

### **Planning an effective transition program**

Transition programs need to be planned with specific outcomes identified. As Dockett and Perry point out, this requires dedicated funding of resources, including allocation of time.

There is no one prescriptive model for a transition program. A flexible approach is needed in which the particular needs of the child and their families are considered. The details of individual transition to school programs will differ, but they should be based on mutual trust and respect and they share some common features.

Successful transition to school programs:

- are informed by and responsive to the needs of the child. How the child feels about the transition is important to the program's success. Listening to children and giving them a voice in the process builds the child's sense of confidence and competence
- recognise that children are capable learners with their own experiences and expectations. Children are likely to have quite distinct expectations of school and these are acknowledged and respected. Children's individual strengths and interests are valued and built upon
- develop positive, reciprocal relationships and communications among and between children, families, early childhood educators and communities
- involve the child's family and support parent-professional partnerships. The importance of the family is highlighted in the transition to school as the family remains the constant in the child's otherwise changing world.

### **General considerations:**

Young children need time to integrate new material. This involves preparation for the change before it occurs, followed by a period of processing and consolidation of the new information, skills and knowledge. Staging the introduction of new learning experiences is desirable. Following up with the child, talking about and listening to their experiences, as well as providing children with opportunities to ask questions are important for a smooth transition.

In relation to successful transition programs, research identifies the importance of: familiarity; continuity; and communication.

### **Familiarity**

Children adjust more readily when they are familiar with the new environment, and their capacity for learning is enhanced.

A Melbourne-based study found that the *number* of transition activities was important in the overall success of children's transition to school. Providing a *variety* of activities is also valuable. Programs that provided multiple and varied opportunities for children and parents to become familiar with the school environment facilitated children's adjustment to school and corresponded with lower rates of problem behaviours later. (Margetts, 1999)

### **Continuity**

The same study emphasised the importance of continuity between the school and children's previous experiences in pre-school or childcare. Continuity refers to expectations between settings: it also involves continuity in programs. In the ecological model, this involves continuity between contexts and relationships.

### **Communication**

Such continuity requires ongoing communication and collaboration between the different settings, with exchanges of information between staff about the programs and the children.

Communication with parents is also needed. Parents should be involved or informed in communications between the childcare centre/kindergarten and the school, particularly when sensitive information is being exchanged.

CALD families may need the additional support of translators/interpreters to facilitate genuine communication. Building relationships of trust and respect with CALD families requires communication and an ability to nurture, rather than just tolerate a diversity of knowledge and skills.

Familiarity, Continuity and Communication are the basis of the following transition to school activities:

- Reading stories, singing and dramatic play from areas related to transitions and/or school.
- Play-based experiences in which school procedures are practiced can help make these everyday routines familiar. Bringing packed lunch boxes to childcare/pre-school and practicing unpacking, opening drink bottles, as well as eating the food according to the order of the school day (play-lunch first, etc), is helpful for children unaccustomed to these small but significant procedures.
- Where the majority of children will be going to the same school, school visits can be planned to allow children to become familiar with the physical layout of the grounds and buildings. Establishing where the toilets are is particularly important. Practice with the drinking taps is needed, too.
- Involvement in special school activities, such as Carols' night or Open days, can help build the pre-school child's sense of ownership with the school.
- 'Preps-for-a-day' in which the pre-schoolers get to practice being a 'prep' (or first-year school pupil) in the school, with a special (small) assembly, playing in the school grounds, meeting the Principal, etc.. The success of this depends largely on the relationship between the childcare centre/pre-school and school, but developing a cooperative, close relationship can be mutually beneficial.
- Children are likely to see other children as a relevant source of information about school. A 'buddy' or 'pal' system of matching pre-schoolers with school children recognises the importance of child-to-child exchanges and support. Some programs intentionally select children from the first year of

school as 'buddies'. Others chose later year pupils who have greater maturity, to play a more nurturing mentor role. Visiting can be two-way, with the 'pals' visiting the pre-school to talk about school and answer questions, as well as pre-school visits to their school 'pals'.

- Visiting children once they have started school.
- 'Memory stones' – those of you who have read *Milo and the Magical Stones* (Marcus Pfister, 1997) will be familiar with the idea of keeping memories in the tangible (and transportable) form of stones. As young children find abstract concepts such as 'next year' difficult to grasp, the stones provide a concrete means of capturing and, later, drawing upon memories that can be a source of comfort or reassurance. Jenny Mayo's article (see References, below) discusses her use of memory stones in a transition to school program.

### **Involving parents**

The child's entry into school is an important rite of passage, and its significance affects the whole family. Even with the pleasure of seeing their child enter this new stage of their life, parents may have mixed feelings at this time. It is a transition for them, and the whole family, too. While the child's needs are paramount, parental concerns may also be reduced when they are actively involved in the transition. If parents are stressed or worried, this is likely to heighten any tension the child may be experiencing. Effectively involving parents in the process therefore, carries many tangible benefits.

Tips for parents are included in the 'Parents' Fact Sheet' included in this edition of *Childcare and Children's Health*.

### **Conclusion**

Getting children off to a good start at school is important for many reasons. A child who commences school with confidence and familiarity with the new environment is likely to learn more effectively. Positive experiences help build the child's self-confidence and lay the foundations for further success. Conversely, an anxious or stressed beginning negatively affects self-confidence and social interactions and compromises the child's capacity for learning.

The best, most effective programs provide many, varied activities that build the child's familiarity with the context of the school community through positive, meaningful experiences. Such programs support children in the various stages of transition. They provide immediate benefits and lay the foundations for long-term gains. Relationships are the core of the transition.

*There is a great potential for children as they start school to relish the challenge and excitement of a new environment.*

*Equally, there is potential for children to feel overwhelmed and perplexed by the changes occurring around them. Relationships play a key role in determining which of these outcomes is likely.*

(Dockett & Perry (eds), 2001: 77)

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*QIAS – Quality Area 3 and 4, Principle 2.1*

*FDCQA – Quality Area 3, Principle 1.3*

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\* These references can be accessed directly from the University of Melbourne transition website:

<http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/>

*The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this article is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website [www.econnections.com.au](http://www.econnections.com.au)*

# Case Study

## Transition to School

According to kindergarten\* teacher and transition expert, Jenny Mayo, we need to be sensitive to the needs of children in the challenges they face in the transition to school. The underlying principle of the transition program, incorporated into the early childhood curriculum that Jenny runs at Box Hill, in Melbourne, is 'reflective practice' centred on the child's perspective. Jenny emphasises that there should not be a prescriptive, inflexible, skills-based program, but one that truly reflects the principle of being child directed.

Looking at transition from the child's perspective with the benefits of our understanding of the developmental capabilities and needs of a young child would have averted a stressful first-day of school experience for 'Rebecca'.

At the morning break, Rebecca's teacher instructed the class to get out their lunch boxes and 'eat your play lunch, but you mustn't eat your lunch'. Dutifully, Rebecca did as instructed: she ate her play-lunch, and didn't eat her lunch that day – ever! Preparing Rebecca for this aspect of school through modelling or practicing appropriate lunch box procedure might have avoided this confusion. Rebecca's experience raises other considerations, too. If the teacher had been attentive to Rebecca, it seems unlikely that she would have been allowed to go without lunch. Encouraging children to ask questions is another practice that could have quickly resolved Rebecca's problem. Instead, the absence of lunch and confusion over the literal interpretation of the teacher's directions, resulted in a large problem for Rebecca, summed up in her mother's comment, 'Rebecca had a difficult start to school'.

A happier case from Jenny's experience that illustrates the value of child appropriate transition, together with continuity through on-going support for children in the induction period at school, concerns 'Jason'.

The transition program run by Jenny begins long before school entry is imminent, and activities include: inviting past kindergarten children in to answer questions such as 'What is school like', 'What have you learned at school?'; inviting key school staff to visit for activities (one Principal came regularly to teach woodwork classes); forming peer-support links such as 'buddy' or 'pal' links between the kindergarten and older



school children. Another activity, creating 'memory stones', allows children too young for developed abstract concepts to retain memories in a concrete (and transportable) form. When given a 'memory stone' the children are asked to fill their stone with memories of kindergarten and told that, whenever they hug the stone and think of Jenny, they'll know that she is thinking of them, too.

This activity was particularly helpful to Jason. A bright, sensitive child, Jason started school without any other children from his kindergarten group. Jason's first school week was unhappy and filled with anxiety. He was distressed and reluctant to return to school the following week. Not knowing what to do, his very worried mother phoned Jenny. Jenny asked Jason's mother to tell him that she missed him and asked him to visit her at the kindergarten. Hearing this, Jason hugged his memory stone and exclaimed, 'Oh, it really worked!' The return visit to the kindergarten further reassured Jason who confidently returned to school. As an added delight (shared by other school-starters), Jenny had arranged with the school to visit Jason (as she does with all her previous kindergarten children), and was the surprise 'Show and Tell' exhibit.

\* In Victoria, 3 and 4 year old kindergarten programs operate separately from the formal school system and kindergartens are normally physically separate from schools. Jenny's kindergarten program is, unusually, located at Box Hill North Primary School.

**Jenny Mayo can be contacted at Box Hill North Primary Kindergarten at: [jennym@bhnp.vic.edu.au](mailto:jennym@bhnp.vic.edu.au)**

## Child Health and the Sun

### The role of early childhood services

Early childhood services are responsible for protecting and promoting the health and safety of children in their care. Protecting infants and children from the harmful effects of the sun is part of that responsibility. Sun protection does not mean no sun exposure, because sun exposure carries health risks and benefits. A balance is required between avoiding an increase in a child's risk of skin cancer and achieving enough Ultra Violet (UV) radiation exposure to maintain healthy vitamin D levels.

### Early childhood workers play an important role in modelling and practicing safe sun habits.

The dangers of excessive sun exposure are well known and include eye damage, sunburn, skin damage and skin cancer. Skin cancer is almost entirely preventable. Unsafe sun exposure in the early years increases the risk of skin cancer. Early childhood workers can have a big impact on reducing Australian skin cancer rates, by creating a 'SunSmart' service. A 'SunSmart' service:

- creates sun safe environments using shade
- encourages the use of a combination of sun protection measures
- role models sun protection behaviours
- establishes sun safe schedules to minimise time in the sun, especially during peak UV periods.

### Facts about the sun, UV radiation and skin cancer

- One in two people living in Australia will develop skin cancer during their lifetime
- Most skin cancer can be prevented
- Too much exposure to UV radiation can cause sunburn, skin damage and skin cancer
- Sun exposure *in the first 15 years of life* adds significantly to the lifetime risk of skin cancer.

UV radiation comes directly from the sun. It can be scattered by particles in the air and reflected by surfaces such as buildings, concrete, sand, snow and



water. UV radiation can also pass through light cloud. Although we can see sunlight and feel the sun as heat, we can't see or feel UV radiation from the sun. It can be damaging to children's skin on cool, cloudy days as well as hot, sunny days.

The Global Solar UV Index is a rating system that indicates the amount of UV radiation that reaches the earth's surface. The UV Index has five categories:

1: Low, 2: Moderate, 3: High, 4: Very High, and 5: Extreme. Daily local and regional UV Index ratings for every Australian state and territory can be found at the Bureau of Meteorology website: <http://www.bom.gov.au/weather/national/charts/UV.shtml>

**The higher the UV Index value, the greater the risk. Whenever the UV Index level reaches 3 and above, UV radiation can damage unprotected skin and increase the risk of skin cancer.**

When the UV Index level is 3 or above, a combination of these five sun protection measures is needed:

1. **Slip** on sun-protective clothing
2. **Slop** on SPF30+ sunscreen
3. **Slap** on a hat that protects their face, head, neck and ears
4. **Seek** shade
5. **Slide** on some sunglasses – but make sure they meet Australian Standards

**Don't expose babies under 12 months to direct sun. A baby's skin is thinner than an adult's skin and is extremely sensitive. It can burn easily, so sun protection should be practised from birth.**

## Sunscreen recommendations

The Australasian College of Dermatologists recommends the use of a sunscreen 'at any age when there is unavoidable exposure to the sun'. Sunscreen is considered safe to use on babies, but many brands of sunscreen provide a formulation especially for infants. Test the sunscreen on a small area of the baby or toddler's skin before using it to make sure there won't be any reaction.

Note that this is only recommended when exposure to the sun is "unavoidable". Shade and clothing provide the best protection, and should be used to limit the exposure of a baby's skin to the sun. Sunscreen should never be used as the only form of sun protection or to extend a child's time in the sun.

## What about Vitamin D?

Some UV radiation exposure is important for a child's vitamin D production. Some children are never or only rarely exposed to sunlight, and their bodies are unable to make sufficient Vitamin D. A lack of Vitamin D can lead to rickets – a bone disease affecting children. Rickets is not common, but there has been a slight increase in the number of cases in Australia. People with dark skin, and those who cover their bodies and faces for cultural or religious reasons, are at greater risk of Vitamin D deficiency. This risk extends to the babies of mothers with low levels of vitamin D.

## How much sun exposure is needed?

Peak UV radiation periods vary between Australian states and territories. Because UV Index levels stay above 3 throughout the entire year in the northern parts of Australia, sun protection is needed every month. In the southern areas, UV Index levels are below 3 during the cooler months so sun protection may not be needed during this time. Children usually receive enough sun for Vitamin D production from incidental sun exposure. The general rule is that a child's face, hands and arms should be exposed twice a day, for about 5 minutes, before and after the peak UV periods. This gives a total daily exposure of approximately 10 minutes. Children with dark skin may need slightly longer periods of sun exposure – about 5 minutes more in the morning and again in the afternoon.

In southern areas (including the south of Western Australia) from May to August, sun exposure to face, hands and arms should be increased when UV Index levels are below 3 during these months.

Keep in mind that some children will have sun exposure before or after they arrive at the service.

**Remember that anytime the UV Index reaches 3 or above, sun protection should be used. Extra care should always be taken when UV Index levels reach their peak, and from 10.00am – 3.00pm.**

## Join the SunSmart Early Childhood Program

This involves completing an application form and developing a comprehensive sun protection policy that meets The Cancer Council criteria. Assistance on policy development is available.

**For further information please contact the Cancer organisation in your state or territory..**

**QIAS – Principles 5.5 and 6.5, FDCQA – Principles 2.1, 4.1 and 4.5**

**OSHCQA – Principles 7.2 and 8.3**

**Justine Osborne. SunSmart Schools & Early Childhood The Cancer Council, Victoria**

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