

# Developing an effective kindergarten-prep transition program

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## Background information

In responding to research indicating that children's social and academic outcomes are impacted by the ease with which they make their transition to primary school, I identified the need to review our current Kindergarten-Prep Transition Program and to develop innovative strategies and processes that exemplified 'best practice'. The need to develop a program that provided continuity between the educational sectors, developed rich, collaborative relationships between stakeholders and further enhanced the well-being of our students and their families, was of paramount importance.

## Key findings from the research and implications for both schools and kindergartens:

- Often, too much emphasis is placed on isolated Kinder-Prep Orientation sessions, rather than viewing them as an important component of the overall transition program. By adopting a more holistic view of transition as a process that has the capacity to develop within children and their families a sense of belonging to the school community, I believe that we would provide a more enriching experience for stakeholders.
- I discovered the importance of undertaking a comprehensive audit of the current program that incorporated many of the guidelines espoused in the literature as being elements of an effective transition program. Data gathered as a result of 'The Starting Schools Research Project', (undertaken by a team from the University of

Western Sydney, 2000) has informed the development of guidelines "that underpin effective transition to school programs" (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p5)

- It is crucial that we document the Transition Program so that it can be effectively implemented. A written plan should clearly articulate the program's goals and desired outcomes, delineate roles and responsibilities of specific personnel and provide a detailed timeline for implementation.
- It would be beneficial to establish a Transition Team comprising representatives from all stakeholder groups that would assume responsibility for planning the intricacies of the program, overseeing its implementation and evaluating its effectiveness. (Having completed the research with a collaborative group had enormous advantages.)
- The importance of carefully analysing enrolment information in order to recognise and ascertain the possible needs of enrolled families was highlighted during my study.
- It is imperative that the development of strong collaborative relationships between the preschool and school sectors is fostered, thus allowing staff to enjoy open, honest "reciprocal communication" (Dockett & Perry, 2002, p9).
- The importance of accommodating the needs of parents by being creative in the strategies offered to them when disseminating information about the school should be acknowledged.

- 'The Adjustment To School Project' (Margetts, 1994) highlighted the factors that impact upon a child's adjustment during their first year at school with results indicating that "transition programs with multiple opportunities for children and parents to familiarise themselves with the school environment and expectations" (Margetts, 1996, p5) were the most successful. As a result, it was important that we ensured that the strategies/processes offered were linked closely to the guidelines underpinning best practice.

It was essential to gather information from the children regarding their beliefs about the experience of 'starting school'. By understanding children's concerns and their *perceptions* about the challenges encountered, we are able to make informed decisions about the strategies required to address their needs.

Surveys were distributed to Year One students for completion while a random sample of Prep and Kindergarten students were interviewed. The Primary students answered the following three questions with the Kindergarten students only responding to the initial two:

- What was (will be) the best thing about starting school?
- What was (will be) the scariest thing about starting school?
- What would you tell a Kindergarten child about St Joseph's that would help them to have a happy time when they start school?

Results were categorised according to



the principle areas that affect transition to school as identified and defined by Dockett and Perry (2002) on completion of the Starting School Research Project.

100% of Kindergarten respondents felt that the 'best thing about starting school' would be the various activities they would be undertaking. Thus, the attainment of *Knowledge* and the completion of stimulating activities were perceived to be important by this age group. This confirmed my belief that it is valuable to engage the students in a variety of exciting activities during the transition process so as to further develop their positive attitudes towards school. On analysis of Prep responses, 80% of answers were classified into the *Knowledge* category and 20% into *Disposition* (which incorporated attitudes towards school, often in the context of having friends).

However, the trend shifted significantly when the students reached Year One with 84% of responses able to be classified into the *Disposition* category. It became increasingly evident that once children had commenced school, their attitudes were more positive when they had made new friends or had maintained existing friendships. As a result, I believe that it is critical that when we are planning transition activities, we are strategic in providing opportunities for friendships to be developed.

When Kindergarten children were invited to respond to the question, "What will be the scariest thing about starting school?" it was

interesting to note that 70% commented that they were *not* afraid of coming to school. It would be fascinating to undertake the interview again after the children have visited the school during the Transition Program.

Whilst we need to consider the results of the interview and trust their integrity, we need to be aware of the possibility that the children wanted to appear as though they do not have any concerns or they may not even be aware of them due to their limited experience of schooling.

This was in sharp contrast to the results of the Prep students who indicated that 67% were most concerned about a lack of friends and the thought of having to meet new people (including the teacher!). As one student commented, "I only had two friends and that is not enough!" Results of Year One interviews were similar with 49% claiming that "making friends" was the most difficult aspect of starting school.

Concern about being able to adjust socially "on the playground" was also prevalent with 33% of Prep students and 40% of Year One students noting that "the big kids might be rough!". Fear of the older students may be diminished if Year Six buddies were allocated prior to the Orientation sessions and opportunities were provided for the buddies to "get to know one another". It may also be beneficial to evaluate the area where Prep children may play during the transition process. A more confined area may result in their confidence being heightened.

Anecdotal data was collected from a feeder Kindergarten regarding the concerns expressed by parents of children preparing to start school. The majority of concerns related to the issue of 'School Adjustment' and in particular, the larger playground area where children may not be in the direct view of the supervising teacher. Parents also felt anxious as to whether their child would adapt to a more structured, formalised classroom environment.

It is therefore critical that we consider how we facilitate the development of friendships with research demonstrating that "the presence of a familiar playmate in the same class at school correlated significantly with adjustment to school" (Margetts, 1996).

With research indicating that a child's ability to make a successful transition from preschool to school can be a critical factor in future school success (Thompson 1975, cited by Margetts, 1996), the provision of a well-planned, documented program based on principles of 'best practice' is essential. As a direct result, the impact of undertaking an honest appraisal of our current approach to transition and the formulation of strategies and processes that will expedite the adjustment of families to the school environment has been significant. We hope that the implementation of these strategies and processes will ensure a successful transition for all Prep students at my current school in the future.

continued ►

# Audit of Current Preschool-Prep Transition Program

|   | Yes | To Some Extent | No | Unsure/ N/A |
|---|-----|----------------|----|-------------|
| <b>PHILOSOPHY</b>   |     |                |    |             |
| The program is based on the philosophy that children's adjustment to school is easier when children are familiar with a new situation, parents are informed about the school and teachers have information about children's development and previous experiences. |     |                |    |             |
| The Program differentiates between an 'Orientation To School' and 'Transition' program.   |     |                |    |             |
| The program is flexible and responsive to the needs of participants.  |     |                |    |             |
| Staff recognise the challenges facing children and the adjustments they need to make as they move from preschool into primary school.   |     |                |    |             |
| The program establishes positive relationships between the children, parents and staff.   |     |                |    |             |
| The program is based on mutual trust and respect (between staff, parents and children).   |     |                |    |             |
| The program is tailored to address the needs of stakeholders in our specific context.   |     |                |    |             |
| Comment:  |     |                |    |             |
| <b>Organisation</b>   |     |                |    |             |
| The program is documented and includes a plan that outlines clear goals, expectations and strategies.   |     |                |    |             |
| The program is developed by a range of stakeholders.  |     |                |    |             |
| The program's effectiveness is evaluated by a range of stakeholders.  |     |                |    |             |
| The program draws upon a dedicated budget and resources.  |     |                |    |             |
| Parents (and child) are interviewed at time of enrolment.   |     |                |    |             |
| Comment:  |     |                |    |             |
| <b>Preparation Of Children</b>  |     |                |    |             |
| The program provides multiple opportunities for the children to participate in classroom activities and to practice new skills.   |     |                |    |             |
| The program prepares children for school by providing them with opportunities to familiarise themselves with the school environment.  |     |                |    |             |
| The program allows children to meet new friends and develop support systems. (eg: Buddy system)   |     |                |    |             |
| Comment:  |     |                |    |             |
| <b>Communication Between Staff</b>  |     |                |    |             |
| Relevant information (from enrolment forms/enrolment interviews) is provided to Prep Teachers and support staff by the school's Administration.   |     |                |    |             |
| Records are transferred from the various preschools to our primary school.  |     |                |    |             |
| Time is allocated for relevant primary staff to meet with preschool staff to discuss individual needs of children.  |     |                |    |             |
| The program provides continuity between preschool and primary school.   |     |                |    |             |
| Primary staff are members of a local Early Childhood/Transition network.  |     |                |    |             |
| Comment:  |     |                |    |             |
| <b>Parent Involvement</b>   |     |                |    |             |
| The program provides verbal and written information about the school to the parents.  |     |                |    |             |
| The program provides opportunities for reciprocal communication between parents and staff.  |     |                |    |             |
| The program provides opportunities for the parents to engage in social activities prior to and after the commencement of the school year.   |     |                |    |             |
| Comment:  |     |                |    |             |

Categories and Guideline statements incorporate key elements articulated by Dockett and Perry, 2001 and Margetts, 2004

Audit proforma developed by Deanne Vessey, 2005

## about

Deanne Vessey is currently on Maternity Leave from St Joseph's, Hawthorn where she is Deputy Principal and Prep Classroom Teacher. She has just completed her Postgraduate Diploma In Educational Studies (Student Welfare) at The University of Melbourne and is completing her Masters in Education in 2006, where she will continue to research the issue of 'transition'. To contact Deanne, please email [dvessey@bigpond.com](mailto:dvessey@bigpond.com).