

Transition to school

Literature review

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



The NSW Department of Education has developed resources for educators and families to support the transition to school process. These resources explore how educators and families can lay strong foundations for year-on-year improvement. These can be accessed on the Early Childhood Education, Early Learning and CESE webpages.

Introduction

In 2020, approximately 100,000 students started primary school in NSW, including 70,610 children at government schools (ABS 2020). For many of these children, the transition will be a positive experience. However, some children may find this transition challenging, and this can have lasting impacts on their educational outcomes.

The importance of a successful transition to school is well recognised across the literature. It is considered a significant event for both children and their families, and one that can have a considerable impact on a child's longer-term academic, social and wellbeing outcomes (OECD 2017; Sayers et al. 2012; Schulting et al. 2005). The transition to school is also a significant event for the educators in a child's life.

This paper updates the 2016 Transition to school literature review by the NSW Department of Education's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). It can be used by early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹ services, schools and families to expand understandings of the transition process and inform practices that can support successful transitions for all children. It examines the existing literature on the transition to primary school from home and/or ECEC settings. This encompasses a number of issues, including:

- what constitutes a successful transition to school
- how the concept of school readiness is defined and what school readiness incorporates
- the key factors which support a successful transition to school for children, their families and educators.

Although there is a significant amount of literature on this topic, there remains a lack of clarity surrounding how to measure a successful transition to school.

The impact of COVID-19 on transition to school practices

Transition to school practices have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to school closures and social distancing regulations, however there is limited research on the impact of these disruptions. Initial research from the United Kingdom (Bakopoulou et al. 2021) suggests they have caused a number of challenges for children, their families, schools and ECEC services. This research also suggests that there has been a greater negative impact on children with special educational needs, disabilities and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Many challenges have been caused by a lack of face-to-face contact, uncertainty around social distancing restrictions, and constant changes in guidance and advice. This has affected the building of relationships as there have been reduced opportunities for children and their families to visit the school and meet with teachers and peers. It has also limited collaboration between schools, ECEC settings and support services. Educators have been unable to observe children in their ECEC setting, and access to intervention services (such as speech and language therapy) has been restricted.

This research (Bakopoulou et al. 2021) identified a number of key facilitators for successful transitions during periods of disruption caused by COVID-19, such as moving transition practices online, having an extended or longer orientation period and ensuring contact lists for staff in ECEC and school settings are accurate and up-to-date. However, it also noted that clearer expectations for all stakeholders are needed to support a more successful and smoother transition process.

¹ Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in this paper refers to formal settings such as preschool and long day care. The transition to school can also involve children starting outside school hours care (Dockett and Perry 2014). This is outside the scope of this paper.

Defining the transition to school

The transition to school is an exciting and challenging time for children, their families and educators that involves navigating and adjusting to a number of changes as children move into their first year of school. This includes adjusting to new environments, identities, relationships, interactions and expectations (Krakouer et al. 2017; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000; Vitiello et al. 2020; Webb et al. 2017).

The transition to school is not a single event, but can be thought of as a dynamic process of both change and continuity of learning that occurs over time (Dockett et al. 2017; Moyle 2019; OECD 2017). This process begins well before children start school and extends to the point that children and their families feel settled and develop a sense of belonging in their new school (Dockett et al. 2011b; Dockett and Perry 2014; Moyle 2019; Sayers et al. 2012).

The transition to school can be thought of as 4 interconnected stages (Victorian Auditor-General 2015):

- Preparation: preparing for the transition to school by reviewing the social, emotional and developmental skill levels of children, providing guidance to children and families on the transition experience, and introducing children and families to the new learning environment.
- Transfer: transferring the child and their family from one setting to another, and ensuring that the child, their family, the school and ECEC settings have all the information required to facilitate a successful transition.
- Induction: settling the child and their family into the new learning environment, and identifying and providing necessary support that the child and their family may need.
- Consolidation of the transition: continuing to monitor the learning, development and engagement of the child and their family as they transition, and providing additional support to the child and their family as needed.

It is important to bear in mind that children's experiences and attitudes during the transition process may change. Some children may find the initial transition difficult but settle in without problems, whereas others may not have any problems initially but find the longer-term transition difficult and may take longer than others to settle into the new environment (Krakouer et al. 2017; Maher and Bellen 2015; Peters 2010). Accordingly, children are best supported when the transition is seen as a long-term process (Lincoln et al. 2016).



What a successful transition to school looks like

The diversity of children's experiences and contexts makes it difficult to establish a single notion of a successful transition to school (Fane et al. 2016). Additionally, what constitutes a successful transition may vary depending on whose perspective is being considered (for example, a child, a parent, a teacher) (Hugo et al. 2018).

Nonetheless, the literature consistently identifies a number of core elements that are considered to be part of a successful transition process for all children (Boyle et al. 2018; Dockett and Perry 2014; Margetts 2014; NSW Department of Education 2020c; OECD 2017; Warren and Harden-Thew 2019), including:

- collaborative practices between ECEC settings, schools and families that facilitate shared views on the transition, mutual respectful relationships, effective communication and the transfer of information
- ECEC services and schools having high expectations of all children, and engaging with families to encourage them to hold high expectations of their children
- ECEC services and schools ensuring equity and adapting to the needs of individual children, families and communities by being flexible, proactive and responsive
- ensuring respect for diversity by fostering inclusion and a sense of belonging, and creating a welcoming atmosphere in the school environment for all
- children and their families achieving a sense of belonging in the new school environment
- having continuity of learning between ECEC settings and schools, where children experience familiarity in how and what is taught and have opportunities to build on, apply, transfer and adapt their learning in a new context
- having shared understandings between educators at ECEC settings and schools on how individual children learn and differ
- ensuring educators² are provided with opportunities for ongoing professional learning, training and reflective practice.

For children, positive outcomes of a successful transition to school may include feeling comfortable and safe, making friends, attending and participating in school, separating easily from parents, asking for help when needed, feeling a sense of belonging in the school community, and displaying positive attitudes and dispositions towards learning (Victoria Department of Education and Training 2017; QCAA 2015). It has also been suggested that children who have settled into school well are comfortable and engaged in the environment:

Children who are adjusting well have a sense of belonging to the new school – they feel comfortable, secure and relaxed rather than anxious, fearful or upset. They listen to and follow instructions, interact well with others, share and take turns, cope with normal day-to-day conflicts and are able to manage their feelings and emotions appropriately. They are interested in learning and are motivated to take part in school activities. (Margetts 2015: n.p.)

For families, outcomes of a successful transition may include being involved with the school, being partners in their child's learning, receiving access to transition information from ECEC services and the school, and having mutual and collaborative relationships with educators (Victoria Department of Education and Training 2017; QCAA 2015; Webb et al. 2017).

For educators, outcomes of a successful transition may include feeling that they can confidently prepare and plan for each child starting at school, that they provide opportunities for families to be involved in learning, and the relationships between educators in ECEC and school settings are respectful, reciprocal and responsive (Victoria Department of Education and Training 2017; QCAA 2015).

2 The term 'educators' includes teachers in school and ECEC settings, as well as other adults with the responsibility for the care and education of young children in these settings.

Measuring the transition to school

The contextual nature of the transition process and the range of perspectives and stakeholders involved make it challenging to accurately measure the transition to school.

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development commissioned research to support a greater understanding of how to measure the outcomes and indicators of a successful transition to school for children, parents and families, and ECEC and school educators (West et al. 2012). The research involved developing and trialling 4 targeted surveys as measurement tools to use with early childhood educators, Prep teachers,³ parents and children. The questions in the surveys were mapped to outcomes which had been developed to measure indicators of a positive start to school – for example, ‘children separate easily from caregiver’ and ‘children attend and participate in school’. The study found that the early childhood educator, Prep teacher and parent surveys were appropriate and accurate measures of a positive transition to school, while the child survey required further trialling. The researchers noted that further work is needed to increase understandings about how to improve accessibility, inclusivity and the ease of completion of the surveys.

More generally, a variety of formal and informal tools are used to measure children’s development, capabilities and skills, and to support a successful transition to school. These vary in format, scope and purpose – from educators’ in-class observations to monitoring the development of a national or statewide cohort (Forster 2009). Some are broad in scope and measure several areas of development, while others focus on a specific skill (for example, phonemic awareness). Two tools currently used in NSW are the Best Start Kindergarten Assessment and the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). These tools are discussed in the following text boxes.

Best Start Kindergarten Assessment

The Best Start Kindergarten Assessment is used by educators in NSW schools to identify children’s literacy and numeracy knowledge, skills and understandings at the beginning of Kindergarten. The assessment is conducted within the first 6 weeks of Term 1 and is intended to help educators develop effective learning programs to build on what children currently know to support a successful transition to school. The literacy assessment tasks are designed to identify whether children can recall details about a story that has been read to them, write their name, and recognise and use sounds and letters. The numeracy assessment tasks are designed to assess skills such as how well children count, which numbers they can recognise and whether they can recognise simple patterns. (NSW Department of Education 2020a). The Best Start Kindergarten Assessment has been mapped to the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions and is now conducted using the Best Start Kindergarten online assessment tool.



³ Each state and territory has a different name for the first formal year of schooling. In Victoria the first formal year of school is called ‘Prep’.

The Australian Early Development Census

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a nationwide data collection of early childhood development at the time children commence their first year of school. Data for the AEDC is collected every 3 years. It involves first-year-of-school teachers using the instrument to assess their students' development in 5 broad domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge (Table 1). These domains have been shown to predict later health, wellbeing and academic outcomes (AEDC 2018).

AEDC data can give an indication of how successfully children may have transitioned from prior-to-school settings into the school environment, while also reflecting the learning and development that occurs for children in the years before they reach school (AEDC 2018). It can be used by schools, services and the community to inform practices that will support children in their community to make a successful transition to school (Clanchy et al. 2021).

Results from the 2018 AEDC show that more than 75% of children were developmentally on track for each domain at the time of data collection (Table 1).⁴ The results also show that approximately one-fifth of children in NSW were vulnerable on one or more of the domains and almost one in 10 were vulnerable on 2 or more domains (Table 2). These proportions have remained relatively stable since 2012.⁵

Table 1

AEDC results for NSW and Australia by domain, 2018

	New South Wales			Australia		
	On track	At risk	Vulnerable	On track	At risk	Vulnerable
Language and cognitive skills	87.2%	7.6%	5.2%	84.4%	9.0%	6.6%
Communication skills and general knowledge	76.8%	15.3%	8.0%	77.3%	14.5%	8.2%
Emotional maturity	80.2%	13.0%	6.8%	77.1%	14.5%	8.4%
Social competence	77.1%	13.7%	9.2%	75.8%	14.4%	9.8%
Physical health and wellbeing	78.5%	12.9%	8.5%	78.1%	12.3%	9.6%

Source. Australian Early Development Census National Report 2018.

Table 2

AEDC results for NSW and Australia by vulnerability, 2018

	New South Wales	Australia
Vulnerable on one or more domains	19.9%	21.7%
Vulnerable on 2 or more domains	9.6%	11.0%

Source. Australian Early Development Census National Report 2018.

⁴ Children who score above the 25th percentile are classified as 'on track'. Children who score between the 10th and 25th percentile are classified as 'developmentally at risk'. Children who score below the 10th percentile are classified as 'developmentally vulnerable' (determined using the cut-off points established in 2009) (AEDC 2019a).

⁵ In 2012, 19.9% of children were vulnerable on one or more domain, and 9.2% were vulnerable in 2 or more domains. In 2015, 20.2% of children were vulnerable on one or more domain, and 9.6% were vulnerable in 2 or more domains (AEDC 2019b).

School readiness: a shared responsibility

The concept of school readiness is central to discussions about the transition to school as a lack of readiness can impact on the success of the transition, student learning, outcomes and later skill development, and school completion (Çökük and Kozikoglu 2020; UNICEF 2012). Traditionally, the concept has focused on a child's age as the main indicator of being 'ready' for school. However, research has found that a child's age at school entry is not a reliable predictor of a successful transition to school and continued success throughout their schooling (Meisels 1999; Snow 2006). As a result, attention has turned to other measures of school readiness that extend beyond the age of the child. In NSW, the average school starting age has risen slightly since 2012 (Figure 1). Over the same period, there has been a decline in the proportion of children starting school aged 4 or below (Figure 2).

Measures of a child's readiness for school also include their maturity level, ability to get along with other children, willingness to separate from their primary caregivers, capacity to sit quietly and attentively in class, independence in activities such as going to the bathroom, and cognitive and academic skills that would enable them to participate in the primary school curriculum (Cullo and Miller 2018; Rouse 2020; UNICEF 2012; Zubrick et al. 2015). Increasingly, however, there has been a move away from such a child-focused approach. School readiness is now widely accepted to be a multi-dimensional concept that incorporates not only a child's readiness for the learning environment, but also the learning environment's readiness for the child. School readiness also includes the capacity of families, communities and services to provide the necessary opportunities, conditions and support to optimise children's learning and development (Christensen et al. 2020; Dockett, Perry and Kearney 2010; Hugo et al. 2018; Krakouer et al. 2017; OECD 2017).

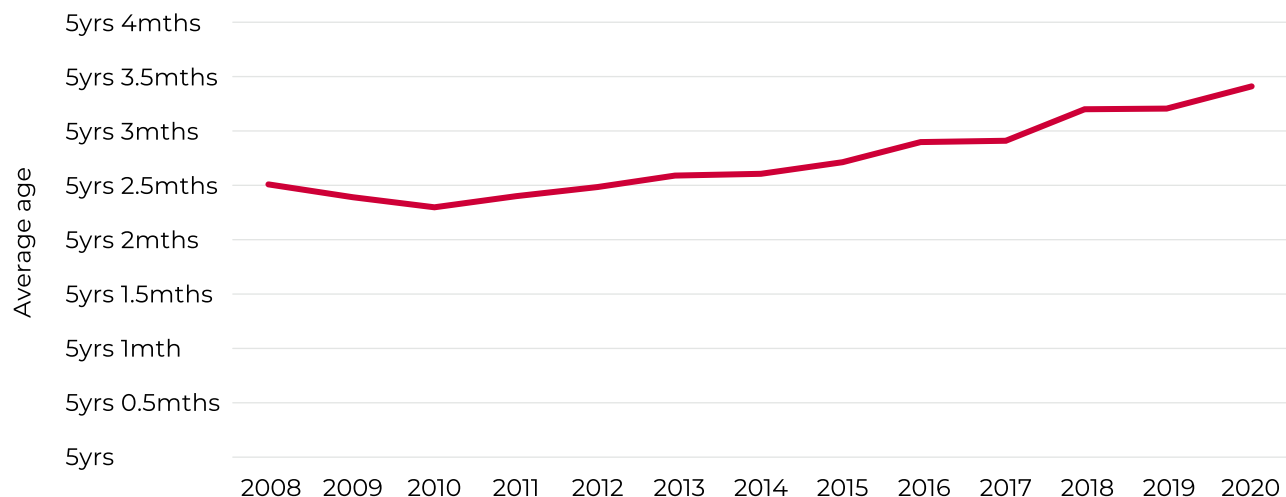


Trends in school starting age in NSW Government schools (2008 to 2020)

Overall, the average starting age in NSW Government schools has been increasing since 2012, from an average of 5 years and 2.4 months between 2008 and 2011 to 5 years and 3.4 months in 2020.

Figure 1

Average age of students starting school in months, 2008-20



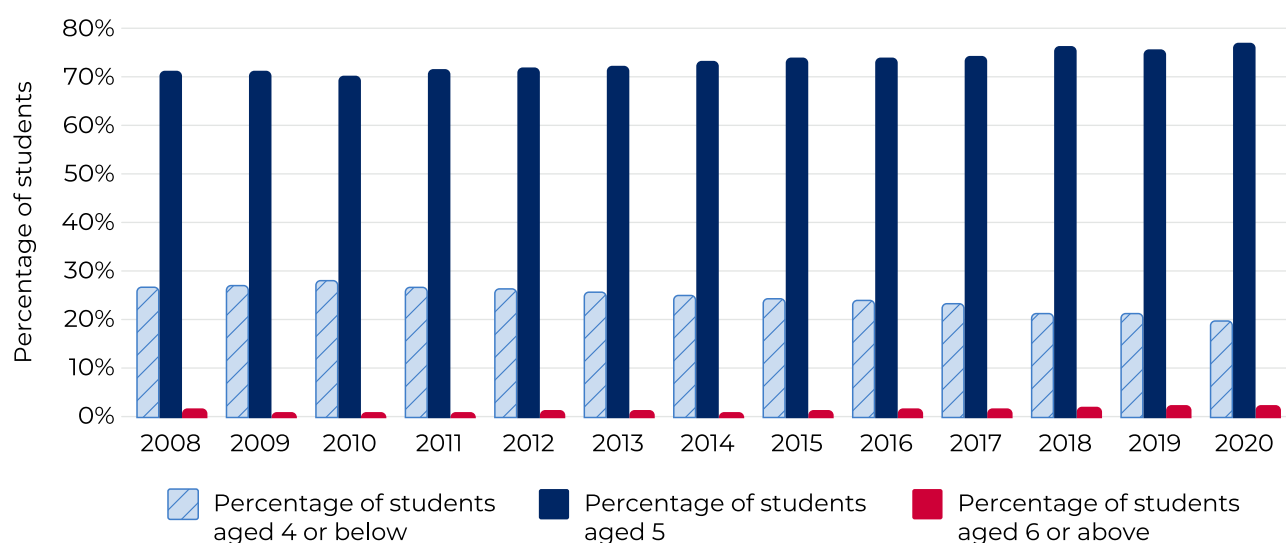
Source. Unpublished CESE analysis, 2021.

Note. Age calculated as at 1 February each year and excludes students repeating Kindergarten. Average age has been calculated based on age expressed in years and whole months, rather than in years, months and days.

While the change in the average starting age might be small, there has been a 7.2 percentage point decline in the proportion of children starting school aged 4 or below from 2012 (from an average of 27.4% between 2008 and 2011 to 20.2% in 2020). Conversely, over the same period, the proportion of children starting school aged 5 increased by 6.0 percentage points (from an average of 71.0% between 2008 and 2011 to 77% in 2020). The proportion of children starting school aged 6 or above increased by 1.2 percentage points (from an average of 1.6% between 2008 and 2011 to 2.8% in 2020), almost doubling over that period.

Figure 2

Student age when starting school, 2008-20



Source. Unpublished CESE analysis, 2021.

What supports a successful transition to school?

A number of key factors have been found to contribute to the success of the transition to school. These include the home learning environment, high-quality ECEC, the classroom and the school environment, and effective collaboration between ECEC services, schools and families. It is important to recognise that these factors are inextricably linked.

Home learning environment

The home learning environment plays a significant role in helping children prepare for and transition to school. It includes all aspects of a child's home which may influence their learning, including the frequency and quality of reading to a child, playing games to support learning, and family members demonstrating the value they attach to learning (Niklas et al. 2018). The home learning environment can be seen as where the transition to school process begins (Graham 2019) and can have a significant impact on a child's development, which may impact on school readiness and their transition to school (Korucu et al. 2020; Puccioni 2018; Puccioni et al. 2020; Rispoli et al. 2019; University of Melbourne 2016; Yu and Daraganova 2015).

Longitudinal research from the United Kingdom found that activities performed in the home learning environment, such as teaching children songs and nursery rhymes, visiting the library and playing with letters and numbers, had a positive impact on children's intellectual, social, and behavioural development. The home learning environment was more strongly associated with children's intellectual and social development than the education or occupation of a parent. The impact of the home learning environment had a continuing effect and was still evident at ages 17 and 18 (Taggart et al. 2015).

The attitudes of families about the transition to school can also impact on the success of the transition (Bérubé et al. 2018; Margetts 2015). Children can be sensitive to their parents' or carers' feelings, and are more likely to have difficulties adjusting if their parent or carer is stressed or anxious about the transition (Margetts 2015). Research also shows that children who have a more positive emotional response when starting school have families who feel better prepared for the transition to Kindergarten (Bérubé et al. 2018). Graham (2019) found that parents felt more positively towards the transition to school when school-led transition programs were in place and there were opportunities for families to become familiar with the school and associated school routines.

Families can support their child in the home learning environment in a number of ways, including talking about school and what to expect with their child, using play and activities to explore the transition, attending orientation activities at the school, driving past or visiting the school, and practising school activities (such as trying on their school uniform, using a lunch box, drinking from bubblers) (Niklas et al. 2018; NSW Department of Education 2020b). Families can also support their child's development of social and emotional skills by providing opportunities for children to socialise with other children and playing games that involve sharing or taking turns (NSW Department of Education 2020b; Peters 2010).

ECEC services and schools should be aware of the diversity in home learning environments and family characteristics, and the influence this may have on a child's learning and development during the transition to school. The home learning environment can be supported by ECEC services and schools through actively and authentically engaging families during the transition process, which builds positive relationships and leads to a sense of belonging for families within the school community (Webb et al. 2017).

Resources for families to support learning in the home environment

The NSW Department of Education has developed resources for families to support learning at home. These include activities such as playing games with others, and music and movement (NSW Department of Education 2021a). A five-part animation series explores the learning that happens in the early years of a child's life at home and at early childhood services, the important role families play in their child's learning and how this supports a child's lifelong educational journey. This includes an animation on the transition to school (NSW Department of Education 2021b). The department has also developed transition to school resources to support families, including a storybook, 'Daisy's First Day', to help facilitate conversations with children about starting school, and a guide on getting ready for starting primary school (NSW Department of Education 2019; NSW Department of Education 2020b).

High-quality early childhood education and care

Attending high-quality ECEC has a positive influence on children's early development and it can improve their school readiness (OECD 2017). High-quality ECEC is particularly beneficial for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who in the past have been underrepresented in ECEC enrolments and attendance due to factors such as the access to and cost of services, child health, and access to culturally appropriate learning environments (AIHW 2018; Gialamas et al. 2015).

The research shows that the effects of ECEC are contingent upon, and proportionate to, both their quality and duration (Melhuish 2016; Siraj et al. 2016; Taggart et al. 2015). For example, the Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE) longitudinal study in the United Kingdom⁶ found that attending a high-quality preschool for a longer duration had a positive impact on children's education outcomes (Taggart et al. 2015). At school entry, children who had attended preschool had better attainment in language, pre-reading and early number concepts than those who had not, even after controlling for the influence of background characteristics.⁷ Children who had attended a high-quality preschool for 2 to 3 years also had higher scores for independence, concentration, cooperation and peer sociability, suggesting the preschool group were better socially adjusted than those who were not in the preschool group.

In ECEC, quality is typically divided into the structural domain and the process domain. Structural quality comprises characteristics of an ECEC provider, such as student-teacher ratios and teacher qualifications (Blau and Currie 2006). Process quality is more difficult to define and measure as it refers to 'the interactions between children and their caregivers, their environment and other children', up to and including such measures as the frequency of smiling, responding to questions, asking open-ending questions and encouraging independence (Blau and Currie 2006:1184).

While much of the ECEC research focuses on the consistent finding that children who attend high-quality ECEC for longer durations tend to perform better than children who do not, it is important to recognise that these effects can grow weaker over time. Some studies show that investment in high-quality ECEC can set children up on a path to ongoing success in school and beyond (McCoy et al. 2017; Sylva et al. 2012), however other studies show that it is common for gains from high-quality ECEC to diminish over time (Bailey et al. 2015; Cooper et al. 2010). As a result, further research is needed to understand which changes to ECEC are effective in achieving lasting results, and also how schools can sustain and build on initial gains from high-quality ECEC.



- 6 To investigate the effects of pre-school education, the EPPSE team collected a wide range of information on 3,000 children. Children were assessed on their cognitive/academic and social-behavioural development at entry to the study and their parents were interviewed to obtain social demographic and background information.
- 7 Background characteristics such as gender, age, family socioeconomic status and mother's qualification level, and the quality of the home learning environment experienced before school (Sammons et al. 2004).

Early learning frameworks and curricula

Most OECD countries now use some sort of curriculum⁸ or learning framework in early childhood services, although there is variation in terms of focus, age range and length. Some focus on the academic content of the curriculum such as literacy and numeracy, whereas others take a more open and holistic approach, focusing on areas such as health, wellbeing, and ethics and citizenship values (OECD 2017). Some cover the entire ECEC age group (0 to 5 years) and cease at the beginning of school, others start later (2.5 to 4 years), and some start at birth and go well into primary school. In some jurisdictions there is alignment and continuity between ECEC and primary education curriculum. In total, 32 out of 59 OECD jurisdictions thematically align their ECEC curriculum, for at least the last year of ECEC, with primary education curriculum through common goals, values, labels or learning areas. This facilitates continuity in instructional techniques and strategies (OECD 2017).

In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2019) has been developed to guide early childhood educators to create quality early childhood education programs. It has been implemented nationally under the National Quality Framework (NQF). The aim of the document is to 'extend and enrich children's learning from birth to 5 years and through the transition to school' (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2019:5) so that all children have a strong start in life. The EYLF is structured around 3 interrelated elements: principles, practices and learning outcomes.⁹ It does not prescribe what children should know or be able to do at certain stages, nor does it state what educators must teach. Rather, it provides examples of how children may demonstrate the competencies within each learning outcome and what educators can do to promote this learning.

The EYLF does not provide any explicit advice on the alignment between early childhood and primary education, but it does highlight the importance of a smooth transition between preschool and primary school. Although they are not explicitly linked, the Australian Curriculum is aligned with the EYLF and builds on the 5 key learning outcomes contained in the EYLF (ACARA 2020). Priority is given to the development of literacy and numeracy skills in the Foundation – Year 2 Australian Curriculum as these skills are seen as laying the strongest foundations for further learning (ACARA 2020).



8 The term curriculum has been defined as 'the contents and methods that substantiate children's learning and development' (OECD 2012:82).

9 The 5 key learning outcomes of the EYLF are: children have a strong sense of identity; children are connected with and contribute to their world; children have a strong sense of wellbeing; children are confident and involved learners; and children are effective communicators.

The classroom and school environment

Some aspects of the classroom environment are particularly important for the positive engagement and skill development of children during the transition to school. Schools can also support the transition to school by ensuring that the school environment is ready to meet the individual needs of all children.

The relationship between children and teachers (CESE 2020) is one critical aspect. Research shows that the relationship between children and teachers when children start school is important to the success of the transition and adjustment to the school environment (Berger et al. 2017; Lee 2015; Pratt 2019; Suntheimer 2020). In particular, the relationship between a child and their classroom teacher has been found to be associated with improved behavioural outcomes and learning engagement of children from low income families (Lee 2015). Research suggests that emotional support from teachers (Aydoğan 2015; Lee 2015) and effective, proactive classroom management (Broekhuizen 2016; Mokrova et al. 2015) are also important for a successful transition as they promote engagement with learning, as well as social and behavioural skills of children.

The use of age-appropriate pedagogies is important for ensuring that schools are being responsive to the learning needs of children, and that children are engaged during their early years of learning. While there is not a one-size-fits-all model to using age-appropriate pedagogies in the classroom, the Queensland Department of Education and Training (2015:20) has drawn on findings from a selection of influential longitudinal studies¹⁰ about learning and teaching in the early years of school to produce a list of key messages for schools to consider. These key messages include (though are not limited to) the need for:

- high quality verbal interactions for sustained thinking and collaborative learning
- adult leadership and scaffolding to support cognitive challenge and the development of higher order thinking

- positive personal relationships between teachers and peers to foster motivation to learn, social collaboration, engagement and enjoyment, and
- support for the professional demands, including lead-in time to establish new approaches.

Together, they provide a platform for reflection about how age-appropriate pedagogies can be implemented effectively to ensure that teaching responds to both the needs of children and curriculum goals.

Oakhill Drive Public School recognises the important role that wellbeing plays in providing a strong foundation for learning, so they begin the first 3 weeks of Kindergarten with a 'soft start' to school that focuses on helping Kindergarten children establish strong relationships with their teachers and peers, and adjust to their new environment, expectations and routines.

“Our primary aim is to make connections with every child, and their family, so when they begin the transition process – and during the transition process – they feel a sense of belonging.”

Principal, Oakhill Drive Public School

All children also receive a social storybook about starting school using 2 characters in the Oakhill Drive Public School environment. Students with additional needs receive custom social stories. The school also provides targeted professional learning for Kindergarten teachers to support the transition process.

For more information about how Oakhill Drive Public School is supporting a successful transition to school, refer to CESE's [case study series](#) on effective transition to school practices.

¹⁰ For the details of the longitudinal studies read [Foundation paper: age appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling](#), Queensland Department of Education and Training (2015:10-20).

Collaboration between early childhood education and care, schools and families

There is agreement across the literature about the importance of collaboration between schools, ECEC services and families during the transition process (Cook and Coley 2019; Dockett 2018, Nolan et al. 2019; OECD 2017) as it supports continuity of learning between settings for children and sharing information (OECD 2017). Collaborative partnerships with families and communities is a quality area in the NQS¹¹ (ACECQA n.d.). This quality area notes that collaborative partnerships promote continuity of learning and support transitions for all children (ACECQA n.d.).

There are a number of suggestions in the literature for how to achieve links between stakeholders including: implementing processes and opportunities for sharing information between ECEC services, schools and families; ensuring greater alignment between early childhood and school curricula; and establishing transition programs and activities to support children and their families before, during and after they start school (Dockett 2018; OECD 2017). The OECD recommends establishing continuity of learning by ensuring high-quality education in both ECEC and schooling, acknowledging the differences between the sectors and building on their strengths (OECD 2017).

Research conducted by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2015) found families who were comfortable with their child's transition to school valued conversations with trusted teachers, both prior to and soon after starting school, as well as school transition programs. Families who were less happy with their child's transition expressed concern about a lack of communication, including unclear processes and lack of personalised attention to their child's needs. When asked about what types of information parents would like, responses included more detailed information about the curriculum and expectations, as well as how parents can incorporate learning at home.

In Australia, the Family School Partnerships Framework (the framework) has been developed to promote and guide partnerships between families and schools (Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2020). This is particularly important in the school setting, where parent-educator communication is lower compared to ECEC settings (Murray et al. 2015). The framework has 7 key dimensions¹² and each dimension includes a list of strategies and practical advice to build and improve family-school partnerships (Australian Department of Education and Training 2018). Examples include identifying the links between home learning activities and learning in the classroom, and assessing the effectiveness of current school practices in supporting family and community engagement (Australian Department of Education and Training 2018).

Sharing information facilitates a successful transition (Hirst et al. 2011; Hopps-Wallis and Perry 2017; OECD 2017), and ECEC services and families can help facilitate a child's transition by sharing written information with schools about the child's existing knowledge, skills and strengths (Hopps-Wallis et al. 2016). The literature identifies a number of challenges highlighted by educators when transferring written information between settings. These include the information being received too late to be useful, differences in the way information is written between settings, and concerns about the interpretation of information about children when received in written form (Hopps-Wallis and Perry 2017; Hopps-Wallis et al. 2016). To overcome these challenges, written information can be used in combination with other transition practices such as verbal conversations and site visits to give educators from both sectors the opportunity to clarify information and ask additional questions (Hopps-Wallis and Perry 2017). Such discussions need to be carried out with the full and open agreement of parents and carers of the children, and the children themselves.

11 Quality Area 6 of the National Quality Standard.

12 The 7 key dimensions of the framework are: communicate; connect learning at home and at school; build community and identity; recognise the role of the family; consult on decision-making; collaborate beyond the school; and participate (Australian Department of Education and Training 2018).

Boambee Public School allocates time and resources for visits to local ECEC services in Term 3 each year to ensure the school is prepared for incoming children. Last year, school staff visited 14 different services.

“It’s an informal observation – our staff are making connections with staff and students. They observe the students engaging in their learning and play and are also having discussions with the preschool teachers about each individual student’s needs. They’re gathering as much information as they can in that time. As we continue to improve our processes this will include more targeted and specific observations where appropriate.”

Principal, Boambee Public School

The school also focuses on fostering a sense of belonging from early in the transition process. For example, the principal, staff and current students greet new children arriving for orientation visits at the gate and make an effort to learn each child’s name to ensure that every child feels known and valued.

For more information about how Boambee Public School is supporting a successful transition to school, read CESE’s [case study series](#) on effective transition to school practices.

Transition to school programs

A transition to school program is a set of planned activities, practices or processes established collaboratively by ECEC services, schools, families, children and sometimes other community services that occur prior to, and during, the transition process. Transition programs help children become familiar with the school environment and ensure continuity between ECEC and school settings (Margetts 2002). They also support the development of secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships between the school, the child and their family (Dockett and Perry 2014).

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to transition programs and they should be adaptable to suit local community needs (Bohan-Baker and Little 2002; Victoria Department of Education and Training 2017; NSW Department of Education 2020c). Transition programs should cater for the diverse needs of children, families, and educators, including those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds or language backgrounds other than English, or those with additional learning needs. Examples of practices that can form part of transition programs may include parent information sessions and workshops, social activities for families, buddy programs, orientation days, school tours, children and families being introduced to educators, and personalised communication between all stakeholders before starting school (Dockett and Perry 2014; NSW Education Standards Authority 2021).

The use of a number of transition practices supports the social adjustment of children when starting school (Cook and Coley 2017), but children’s academic achievement is influenced by the type, not the number, of transition practices (Cook and Coley 2017; Little 2017). Transition practices, when enacted well, have a positive effect on the academic outcomes of children, in particular for children from average or low-income families (Schulting et al. 2005). Furthermore, research findings show that transition practices which are aimed at engaging parents have a positive impact on the academic outcomes of children (Cook and Coley 2017; Schulting et al. 2005).



Marsden Road Public School carefully plans its transition program to ensure that language barriers do not prevent families from engaging fully in their child's transition to school. The school offers translation services and employs an off-class transition teacher who works collaboratively with families to ensure that the learning environment is ready for all children before the first day of Kindergarten.

“I think that if you're going to run a transition program, you need to know your community and you need to know your school priorities, what's important to your school. There's things that are general that are important for all kids who transition to school, but there's some things that you might specifically want as a school to make sure it is known.”

Teacher, Marsden Road Public School

The school's transition program involves twice-weekly orientation sessions in Term 4 to cater for a cohort of incoming children and their families who have limited experience of school-like settings, such as ECEC. These sessions help children and families become familiar with the school environment, expectations and what learning looks like in the classroom.

For more information about how Marsden Road Public School is supporting a successful transition to school, read CESE's [case study series](#) on effective transition to school practices.



Transition Statements

Transition statements have been introduced across some Australian jurisdictions to improve information sharing and communication between schools, ECEC services and families. Transition statements are currently used in NSW, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. These statements aim to support the transition process by providing schools with a snapshot of each child's strengths, interests, background and learning preferences that can then be used to plan for the individual needs of incoming students. In NSW, the Transition to School Statement (the statement) was introduced in 2014. The statement is completed by ECEC educators in the term before a child starts school and sent to their new school. ECEC services are required to get written consent from parents or carers of enrolled children before sharing information about them with schools.

An evaluation of the statement (CESE 2015) found that both parents and Kindergarten teachers who had received statements felt better informed about the child's strengths and interests as well as ways to help their transition to school than respondents who did not receive statements. Most families surveyed felt that their child made a smooth transition to school, but families with statements were slightly more likely than those without statements to feel that their child was well supported in their transition. The evaluation found that the statement was seen as a valuable resource by early childhood educators, but that workload and time constraints made it challenging to complete. To improve the experience for schools and ECEC services, in 2020 the NSW Department of Education piloted a digital transition to school statement accompanied by targeted professional learning. The department is currently incorporating feedback from the pilot to improve the digital statement before it is made available to more NSW services (NSW Department of Education 2021c).

Responsiveness to individual and diverse needs of children and their families

Any child has the potential to make a successful or a less successful transition to school due to their individual characteristics and contexts and the compatibility of these characteristics with the school environment (Fane et al. 2016; Peters 2010). However, the literature suggests that the transition to school is likely to be more challenging for certain groups. These include children with disability and additional needs, children from a language background other than English, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. It is important to recognise that not all children from these groups will find the transition to school more challenging. The support children and their families need will depend on individual need and context. ECEC services and schools can ensure all children experience a successful transition to school by adapting to the diverse needs of each child and their family (Victoria Department of Education and Training 2017).

ECEC services and schools can actively prepare for the transition of children with disability and additional needs through observation and interactive visits by school staff to ECEC settings with professional dialogue between staff, use of individualised transition plans, use of dedicated funding for support and resources, and joint collaborative meetings between all stakeholders (Dockett et al. 2011a; Dockett et al. 2011b; Lillvist and Wilder 2017; Trembath and Starr 2017).

ECEC services and schools can also ensure they are providing a culturally supportive environment, meeting the cultural and language needs of children and families. This can be achieved by building cultural competency among staff, employing and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, and incorporating culturally appropriate approaches to teaching and learning (Department of Social Services 2015; Dockett et al. 2010; Moyle 2019; SNAICC 2013; What Works 2013). ECEC services and schools can also ensure they have an awareness of and are responsive to children's English language proficiency, mediate the cultural differences children might be experiencing, and use translation services, interpreters and bilingual staff to ensure clear communication between families, ECEC settings, and schools (Balduzzi et al 2019; Victoria Department of Education and Training 2017; Northern Territory Department of Education 2017; Petriwskyj et al. 2014; UNICEF 2012).

Coonamble Public School focuses on identifying the needs of children before they start Kindergarten by using speech and occupational therapy screening assessments, and allocating resources to healthcare services. This enables differentiation and planning to support a successful transition to school. The school also recognises that the experiences of families during the transition process is likely to impact the way they engage with their child's learning throughout their whole time at school, so they start building strong relationships with families when children are in preschool.

“A good transition also allows the students and parents and the teaching staff that may be interacting with these students the next year to start to build some relationships as well to get a real gauge of what the kids might be needing and where they're sitting developmentally, just so that everyone feels comfortable leading in to the start of Kindergarten.”

**Assistant Principal,
Coonamble Public School**

For more information about how Coonamble Public School is supporting a successful transition to school, read CESE's [case study series on effective transition to school practices](#).



| Conclusion

The importance of a successful transition to school is well recognised across the literature. It is considered a significant event for children, families and educators that can have a considerable impact on a child's longer-term academic, social and wellbeing outcomes. A successful transition can also lay strong foundations for positive partnerships and relationships with families that are important not just for the transition process, but also for families' ongoing engagement in their child's learning.

While there is no single definition of what a successful transition to school looks like due to the diversity of children's experiences and contexts, the literature in this area is increasingly employing a more holistic approach to the transition to school. Definitions of school readiness now incorporate not only a child's readiness for the learning environment, but also the learning environment's readiness for the child. There is increasing emphasis on the role of families, early childhood services and schools in facilitating successful transitions to school. There remains a lack of clarity surrounding the key concept of how to measure a successful transition to school.

A wide variety of child, family, school and community factors can influence a successful transition. The transition to school can be supported through factors including the home learning environment, high-quality early childhood education, the classroom and school environment, and effective collaboration between early childhood services, schools, and families. The literature also recognises that ECEC services and schools can ensure all children experience a successful transition to school by adapting to the diverse needs of each child and their family.



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