


Continuity of support: A critical issue for hard to reach families as their children start school

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Policy context & background

- ▶ National & international recognition of importance of investing in early years;
 - ▶ COAG commitments including recognition some families are vulnerable, disadvantaged &/or hard-to-reach
 - ▶ Family involvement key factor in children's successful engagement with school.
 - ▶ While “parental involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school ... reality is that disadvantaged families are least likely to be involved and listened to in school environments”. (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2007)
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Project overview

- Work with families w/ complex support needs & other stakeholders across NSW (6 sites) to:
 - identify decision points as their children start school;
 - assess availability of support for these families at these times;
 - generate strategies to enhance the transition to school.
 - 50 families; participating between 6-18 months; multiple interviews
 - Combination of needs inc child w/disability; chronic poverty/UE; violence/trauma; geographic, social or cultural isolation; children exhibiting behavioural difficulties; family members face mental health/dependency issues
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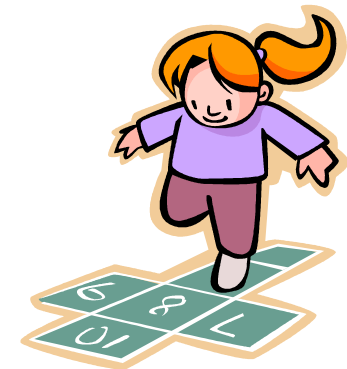
Some of our participants

- **Barbara:** single mum, 7 children aged 2 – 25; moved to regional area w/ children for emergency housing; no family/social support. Terry, 5 has oppositional defiance disorder, possibly ADHD. 'Phased' transition to school, 2 hrs/day.
- **Puno & wife:** f-time care for g/daughter Ivy, but not guardian. Puno from Philippines, recently undergone heart surgery & retired to care for Ivy who has Down Syndrome. Ivy's mum retains custody but mental health issues & intermittent presence.
- **Julie:** single mother w/3 adult sons, 6 yr old son & daughter Maddy, eligible to start school. Julie has depression & had poor experiences at school. Has lived in rural NSW for 25 yrs. Supports are case worker, friend & her children.

Starting school...

- All families have concerns & decisions to make as children start school
- Families w/ complex needs - nature of choices available to them often differs, info/resources they access & confidence re decisions; others may lessen their agency
- Education seen as important & means of changing life experiences.

I'd be proud of my kids for doing the HSC because it's something I never did...neither did A so we push them to do the best they can...



Starting school: Decisions & processes

- Variation in how families approached decision – all wanted best education possible.
- Some parents assumed child would go to local school; others ‘shopped’ around to find ‘best’ school for their child
- Some parents believed they had no choice, others worked to create choices
- Families with a child w/special needs surprised placement in special school/additional \$ support not guaranteed
- Many parents surprised not all schools were the same, even though part of the same education system

Starting school...concerns & hopes

➤ Children:

- being happy

I was worried he wasn't going to have any friends...& he's got heaps of friends & I go back & see he's really happy there...

- fitting into school routines

- being labelled (reputation & 1st impressions)

I have to send these little 5 year olds to school...to go down the same track as their older brother, not fitting in, being sort of pushed out...they need to go to a different school....

- their behaviour

➤ Changing role for parent-family-child

it's deeper than just a separation from mum...because he's had so many tests...it's always been me...mum has always been there for all the other harder stuff...

➤ Parent – school engagement - drew on experiences +ve/-ve of siblings

Starting school...issues

- Parents own experience of school

I went to that school, I had trouble reading & writing...so like I went through cruel school days...I can't do it...I'm not sending those kids to the same school...I don't care if they take all my money from me, class me as an unfit mother, I'm not sending my children to that school

...I don't think I could relate to a teacher because they know too much of my background


...we probably didn't do a great deal of preparation because we know the families quite well...(teacher)

- Access to ongoing support esp for children with a disability

- Financial costs

It costs heaps and the government gives you 50 bucks... doesn't cover uniforms let alone bags, shoes, & stuff

Starting school...decisions

- Choosing the 'right' school
 - For many families with limited resources (inc transport) 'local' school may be only choice
 - Variation in application of zoning 'rules'
 - School reputation
 - I've heard about the school...just from people around, like friends & whatever. But I don't know whether it's true or not.*
 - Parents sometimes 'chose' school only to be not 'accepted' (esp children with special needs)
 - Parents' level of engagement varied – from a lot to not much ➡ assumption from professionals parents will be proactive & if not obvious may assume disinterest
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Starting school...decisions

- 'School readiness' part of decision - age seen as v important.
My biggest fear was Kayla's age, but apparently the cut-off is August...She'll be 5 in June...when I got told that I kind was a bit more confident to send her...

He asks every day when I he going to be 5. 'Tomorrow can I go to big school?'

- 'Readiness' often defined socially rather than academically.
I was thinking he probably wouldn't be ready because socially I though he would really struggle because other kids, he just didn't think about them at all...

- Where focus academic, tended to be skills based.
He can write his own name...he counts...he knows the alphabet...stop signs...I think he'll do alright.

Starting school...decisions

- Advice for some parents came from multiple sources & was sometimes contradictory or hard to access


...the school teachers think she's ready for school. But the preschool said M has got social problems & the lady at the canteen said it didn't look like M has any social problems because she talks to all the kids at the canteen. So what does 'social problems' mean?

It's really hard because they'll say 'no you've come through to the wrong person. You need to call that person.' Then you try calling that person for the next 48 hours until they finally pick up.' Oh you haven't come to the right dept'..And it's really hard because you have to fight for yourself.



Starting school...supports & processes

➤ Transition programs

- Varied in duration, intent, focus, who involved, onus of responsibility
 - Some involved children visiting school over several weeks; others single orientation day
 - Some involved children & parents; some parents only
 - Intent of some to build relationships between children, families & schools; others to assess children & determine class placement
 - important opp for parents to access teachers & others such as counsellors; 'legitimate' opp to visit school, ask ?, seek info. Number of parents uncomfortable 'dropping in'.
 - some parents used to help decide if child should start
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Starting school...supports & processes

➤ Transition programs

All the new Kinders...got a little buddy...all the kids are there together...it's really good, so I think he really will feel that it's his school...

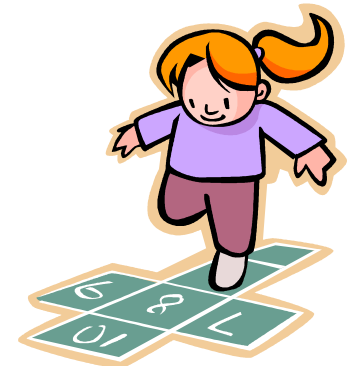
he'd go to the classroom & draw and paint & they can see where he's at, like a level so they know what class to put him in...

One of the workers from the school told me a few times that Maddy could start the transition program this year and it doesn't matter if she didn't go to school next year...I was very confused whether she was going or not and they said it didn't matter...



Starting school...supports & processes

- Transition programs particularly important for children with special needs
- Often occurred over longer period and wider range of people
- Where certainty which school a child would attend programs built relationships & familiarity w/ school.
- Where uncertainty, transition more complicated eg some parents loathe to engage autistic children in transition programs for schools they 'might' be attending.



Starting school...supports & processes

- How school staff reach out & engage families thru transition programs sets tone for ongoing interactions.
- Easy for parents/children to feel overwhelmed/out of place.
- Simple actions & welcoming approaches by staff can help children & parents feel valued & welcomed.
- Some parents deeply engaged in school – eg providing info about Downs Syndrome, thru P&Cs, reading groups etc
- Invitations for specific events; school as *the teacher's job*



Summary

- Transition: time of stress for many families (\$, social & emotional);
- Families successful when they have strong & complementary supports;
- Many families demonstrate a range of strengths & capabilities

eg Family with disposable income of \$7/ fortnight:


*We've just done a funeral plan for all of us ...
Anthony is a truck driver so you always think, like
when he doesn't come home and he doesn't
answer his phone, I start to get worried...*

Summary


- Program support varies in relevance for these families
- Service providers act as mediators as families navigate services, inc schools;
If I have any concerns with Kellie I always go to [case worker] & she will ring up ... & she have a talk to them, because I said to her "They're not listening to me" ... So she gets up on their back and then they'll tell her something
- Much support limited (by time or \$) - & w/drawn thru transition
- When support lost, -ve consequences can affect engagement at school, progression, confidence & achievement. Withdrawal at critical times can lead to poor return on earlier investment

[Families] feel lost and alone. They've had this support and now because a child has reached a certain age or funding has run out or ... They just think "Where do we go from here? What do we do?". It just becomes overwhelming to them and they just really don't know what to do.

And it's frustrating for us, as service providers who have been able to get them that far, and then we have to watch all that good work go down the drain again and it's really a double whammy because it's a smack for the families and it's a smack for our services too. I don't know how else you'd explain that really, but we have to watch it. Build up then fall down.




I don't think they [education systems] are realising, these kids that are mild that don't get the funding are the ones that fall behind, then they're the ones that become disruptive in class while they're in junior schooling. Then when they get to high school they're the early school leavers. They're the ones that don't kind of go to their full potential... if they could have been given that bit of extra help when they first started school ... maybe we wouldn't have the high incidence of early school leavers, not going on to tertiary education... there's no reason Walt can't go to uni, there's no reason why he can't do anything else that anyone else can ... but he's going to fall behind ... he just needs a kick start to get him going so he can get up there with the rest of the kids ... (Abby)



Initial policy recommendations

- 1. Transition to school should be recognised as a time of additional stress for families.**
 - Transition programs that focus on building relationships to support children & families & coordinate integration of services & support should be supported & resourced appropriately.
 - For some programs will need to be long term.

 - 3. Range of complementary supports to be available to families over transition period.**
 - Effective support focuses on whole family unit
 - Support should be coordinated across systems & agencies – inc medical & educational systems, government and NGO providers.
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Initial policy recommendations

- 3. Support programs should recognise & build on strengths of families.**
 - Should help families develop skills & capacities to become own advocates & access info independently.

- 4. With support programs 'one size does not fit all'.**
 - Support personnel to work with families to identify what is most appropriate.
 - Prescriptive parenting programs can add to perceptions of 'poor parenting'.
 - Balance between universal & targeted supports provides flexibility to respond to individual children & families.

Initial policy recommendations

5. **Staff within support organisations play key roles in facilitating +ve transition to school.**
 - Effective mediators manage family access to \$ & resources. Effectiveness is ↑ if able to use \$ & resources flexibly.

 7. **Support provisions should be retained across transition**
 - Current inconsistencies in support are creating hardship.
 - Support programs operating before school should lead smoothly into those operating after the child starts school.
 - Greater collaboration across services & sectors needed to provide greater consistency in support.
 - Schools need to have an active role in planning for this ongoing support.
 - When there is a change in a program of support, there should be an 'exit' strategy.
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Final word...

From a parent where support has been ongoing

We've had some help ... [now he's settled into school] ... now it's just little moments like that now that are starting to... [build up] the relationship ... The bond was there but it wasn't as strong and it's getting stronger now because we're away from each other and the more he changes the more I learn about Nathan. It's like in any relationship when you really ... It's like re-learning all over again.

(Stacey)



A project report will be released later in 2010.

Our thanks to the many families who've participated in this project.

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