3. Key components of quality transition

The key components to consider when designing and supporting effective transitions are the principles underpinning a positive start to school; ways to meaningfully involve children, families and educators in the transition process; and the importance of community engagement.

Research highlights that when families, schools and communities work together in positive and collaborative ways, a child’s capacity to achieve their learning potential is significantly enhanced – and so are their general health, wellbeing, positive outlook and sense of purpose in life. When planning transition-to-school programs it is important to consider the significance of:

- pre-existing relationships when fostering new relationships
- local knowledge about the needs of local children and their families (e.g. common languages spoken other than English)
- ensuring, rather than assuming, that all the relevant information is provided to families and understood by them
- the need to be flexible to meet the individual needs of children and families
- allowing programs to evolve in line with the needs of families, individual children and school staff, as well as in terms of logistics, dates, etc.
- being mindful of making the program a part of, rather than additional to, the things already being done.

Principles of learning and development

The Victorian Framework identifies six practice principles for learning and development. They reflect Victoria’s commitment to develop a holistic approach to children’s health, learning and development from birth to age eight.

These principles form the foundations of professional practice for early childhood professionals working with children from birth to eight years in Victoria. They are based on the understanding that when professionals establish respectful and caring relationships with children and families they are able to work together to construct effective health, learning and development experiences relevant to children in their local contexts. These experiences gradually expand children’s knowledge and understanding of the world as well as promoting their health and wellbeing.

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16 Family–School and Community Partnership Bureau, see [www.familyschool.org.au/](http://www.familyschool.org.au/)
The six principles reflect three major areas of the early childhood professional's work:

- **Collaboration:**
  - family centred
  - partnerships
  - equity and diversity

- **High-quality teaching and learning:**
  - responsive engagement
  - a holistic approach

- **Continuous professional improvement:**
  - reflective practice.


**Involving children**

Involving and listening to young children is a central part of understanding what they are feeling and what it is they need from their early childhood experience. If young children feel their views are respected and valued by adults this will have a positive effect on their self-confidence. This can really help those children who find it hard to share their opinions, or who have had limited experience of adults who listen to them.

We need to involve and listen to children because:

- it acknowledges their right to be listened to and for their views and experiences to be taken seriously
- it can make a difference to our understanding of children's priorities, interests and concerns
- it can make a difference to our understanding of how children feel about themselves
- listening is a vital part of establishing respectful relationships with the children we work with and is central to the learning process
- involving children in transition planning can trigger early childhood educators and Prep teachers to think about how routines and activities can be improved.

It is important to value children's views equally, as they can be very clear about what is important to them. They may have thought about things that adults have not. It is useful if adults do not assume they know everything a child is thinking about, as this shows children we respect them for who they are and what they believe.

**Children's perspectives on transition to school**

Research has highlighted common issues children raise:

- they can find it hard to learn and follow school rules
- they find that making and keeping friends can ease their transition to school

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their sense of wellbeing and their positive engagement in learning depends on positive relationships with their educators
• they find it hard to deal with the longer days and the new responsibility for their own care associated with starting school
• they often prefer free-play programs to more formal learning and associate more formal learning with being at school
• they realise that going to school requires a morning routine.

How can children be involved?

There is a range of ways to listen to young children and more than one approach can be used at the same time. Choosing the approach or approaches to use will depend on the adult’s skills, the child, and the time, space and resources available. It is important to remember that listening in imaginative ways can support children as they adjust to change, such as starting school. Suggested approaches include:

• asking children to draw or paint what they think school might be like
• asking children to add their explanations to these paintings or drawings and then discussing what has been included and why
• reading stories about starting school and discussing the various elements and expectations raised in these
• using modelling materials (dough, clay, box construction, sand, etc.) to create what children expect their school to be like
• providing a range of materials in play areas to stimulate discussion about school
• promoting role plays or scenarios that relate to school.

With all of these approaches, allowing time for children to talk about school is really important. They may want to talk about their experiences of transition programs or visits; the things their older siblings tell them; their expectations of what school will be like; and how school will be the same or different from their current early childhood service. Making time for children to think about what information they want to share with their Prep teacher at school and how they prefer to do this is also important.

Involving families

What is a family?

In this kit, the term ‘family’ incorporates the widest definition of family, recognising the broad range of family structures and members that exist in Victorian society. It is important to respect that there may be different interpretations of what a family is. Children may also perceive their family in many ways, even to the point of including much-loved pets or toys.

Children may have a range of carers, from parents, siblings, grandparents, to extended family members and family friends who look after them and support their learning and
development. For children in out of home care, their legal guardian may still be their parent, but their sense of belonging to a ‘family’ may revolve around who cares for and supports them on a day-to-day basis, for example foster families.

Why do families need to be involved?

Families know their children very well. Sharing some of the knowledge they have about their child with early childhood services and schools can help the transition to school. Families who actively support their children during transition to school, and who build positive relationships with staff, are likely to continue their positive engagement with school. This, in turn, supports children’s longer-term positive engagement with school. The research\(^a\) consistently demonstrates that families have a major influence on all aspects of learning and a wide range of educational outcomes. When families and schools work together to support their child’s learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.\(^b\)

In the northern suburbs of Melbourne early childhood services have been working with families of children making the transition to school to complete statements. A greater feeling of empowerment among families in the transition process has been achieved through providing the opportunity for families to work with their child’s early childhood educator to share information about their child with their new school.

Family perspectives on transition to school

Research\(^c\) into families’ experiences of, and perspectives on, transitions to school highlights that:

- families have diverse views about what matters when young children make the transition to school
- many families are concerned about how their child will adjust to school, asking, ‘Can my child fit in, be respected, be happy and safe?’
- families living in rural and remote areas of Australia share the concerns of other parents, but many have additional concerns
- families of children with disabilities or developmental delays share the concerns of other parents, but may have additional concerns
- many families want contact with the school prior to their child’s attendance and to understand how their child’s school works
- some families, but not all, want their children to receive formal academic instruction in their first year of school
- families’ level of confidence in managing the transition to school affects their child’s subsequent engagement with school.

Families’ own experiences of school may influence the messages and levels of encouragement and support that they provide children. If a parent, for example, had a negative school experience, they may find it difficult to provide support and

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\(^{a}\) Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood.
\(^{b}\) A Henderson & K Mapp, A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement, National Centre of Family & Community Connections with Schools: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, TX, 2002.
\(^{c}\) Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood.
encouragement to their children about going to school. Similarly, it may be many years since a family member has stepped into a Prep class when their first child starts school. This may lead to misconceptions prior to starting school.

It is important for families to have an accurate view of how early childhood learning and development is supported in schools today, as many things will have changed for the better since adults attended school. Families with older children may be more comfortable about the transition process and can provide a good support network to other families experiencing it for the first time.

Providing opportunities for families to meet and get to know each other informally, particularly with families of older children who have already experienced the transition to school, is a good way to support ‘first-time’ families. For example, schools and early childhood services might like to organise picnics, BBQs, family fun days, children's cultural festivals or library events.

**Involving educators and teachers**

Families are children's first and most enduring educators; however, early childhood educators can provide professional insight into a child's learning and development.

They observe children's learning and development, and actively supported each child to develop skills, knowledge and learning dispositions. This means they have specialised knowledge and insights about how a child's learning and development has progressed prior to starting school. Importantly, they also understand what sorts of teaching strategies work best for individual children. This information is important to share with to those who will help children settle into school, and who are responsible for building on the learning and development that has occurred before children start school.

**Educators’ perspectives on children’s transition to school**

There is a diverse range of perspectives on children's transition to school among early childhood educators, school teachers and OSHC carers.

The research\(^\text{22}\) indicates some common perspectives from these educators:

- many children have no difficulty making the transition to school
- socio-emotional and interpersonal development assist a child's transition to school
- family participation assists a child's transition to school
- children who have attended an early childhood service make the transition to school more easily than those who haven't
- children who require additional support (such as those with disabilities and delays), or those that face cultural or linguistic barriers, can face additional challenges in their transition to school that may require additional planning.

Additionally:

- some school teachers have concerns about whether children have appropriate academic skills prior to entering school
- the ways in which early childhood educators support young children's transition to school varies.

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\(^\text{22}\) One pilot helped early childhood educators and school staff to better understand transition issues through professional development forums where keynote speakers highlighted the importance of early learning and development and explained local transition programs and approaches. These collaborative forums generated lively cross-sector discussions about supporting children and families in their transition to school.
In many of the transition pilots, early childhood educators and Prep teachers found that getting to know more about each other’s practice and learning environments was invaluable. This information was often gained through reciprocal visits across a period of time, so that each professional developed a better insight into individual children’s strengths, as well as a deeper appreciation and knowledge of the pedagogical differences and similarities between those used in early childhood services and schools.

**Facilitating involvement through transition networks**

A transition network is a professional group of people with an interest in improving transition experiences and outcomes for children and their families in a certain geographical area. Transition networks exist in many places across Victoria, informal or formal, with or without designated resources. Those who participate in transition-to-school networks are usually from early childhood services (such as child care centres, long day care, family day care or kindergartens), early childhood intervention services, maternal and child health services, private practitioners, municipal officers with a focus on early childhood, OSHC carers, and school staff.

Networks foster the development of mutual understandings about the needs of local children and families. They cultivate a richer understanding of the contribution everyone involved in educating and supporting children and families can make to children’s long-term outcomes. In developing common approaches to transition, networks support early childhood educators, Prep teachers and other professionals to share ideas, issues and promising practices.

**Why are networks important?**

Networks have a range of important functions, and provide opportunities for:

- strengthening community partnerships at both a formal and informal level
- deepening knowledge about practice
- practical support and problem-solving
- developing local agreements and resources, thereby reducing workloads on individual services
- communicating about individual child and family needs
- developing leadership skills and fostering change champions
- critical reflection and review of practice and service delivery.
How do transition networks function?

There is no one formula for successful transition networks, but positively maintaining regular communication, often through face-to-face meetings about key issues, is critical. An evaluation of the transitions practices in Victoria has highlighted how these networks can function successfully.

When establishing or reviewing a network, it is useful to:

- identify a key person who has organisational or leadership responsibilities in relation to developing, maintaining and enhancing transition networks
- uncover assumed understandings and beliefs between early childhood professionals and school staff about programs in early childhood services and in schools; as well as identify perceptions about transition to school in order to air any difference in views, and develop common understandings
- allocate time to develop partnerships and build trust – regular meetings and contact with educators from all services facilitate the establishment of common ideals about roles in transition
- establish common approaches, philosophies, processes and programs for transition planning based on locally identified and understood needs in the community
- plan a professional development calendar that includes all educators and other professionals
- develop a process where families are encouraged to enrol their child into their chosen school during particular periods to assist in school planning.

Transition networks are an important way of establishing and enhancing communication, providing opportunities to identify positive and constructive solutions to any issues, as well as developing new approaches to working together.

An effective transition will improve children’s experience of starting school by:

- empowering families to work in partnership with professionals and provide them with information about their child’s learning and development
- enhancing the development and delivery of transition programs
- improving collaboration between early childhood services, schools and other services (such as early intervention and OSHC) to support the continuity of learning and development for a child
- developing a more consistent approach to the sharing of information between the early childhood and school sectors.