4. Supporting effective transitions in Victoria

Outline of the Victorian transition-to-school approach

The approach outlined in table 4.1 *Outline of the Victorian Transition Approach*, provides guidance for families, early childhood services, OSHC providers and schools on transition planning, through which local arrangements can be further developed. It is important to ensure that these arrangements support:

- children and their families in the year prior to and following entry to school, not just at point in time
- relationship-building between and among children, families and professionals.

Where a child or family is not engaged with an early childhood service in the year prior to school, this approach will need to be adapted. Further information on this is provided in Part 2: Providing additional support. For children in receipt of a Kindergarten Inclusion Support Service (KISS) package, reference should also be made to the *Sharing Our Journey* resources (see section 7).
Table 4.1 gives a planning timeline for transition to school and it has been designed to provide for maximum flexibility. It is recognised that transition activities may commence prior to the dates provided.

### Table 4.1: Outline of the Victorian Transition Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Activity</th>
<th>By*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Options for, and evaluations of, transition program activities and events discussed between local early childhood settings, Outside School Hours Care providers and schools.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School enrolment commences. (Families lodge enrolment form with school).</td>
<td>From May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition planning commences - children and their families participate in their local transition program. Note: Activities and events may start from this point.</td>
<td>July onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood educator commences processes to complete Transition Learning and Development Statement, including engaging families and children</td>
<td>October</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood educator collates final information, and obtains consent from parents/guardians to forward information to school. (This process may involve face-to-face meetings, or similar alternative, with families and the Prep teacher.) Final copy of Transition Learning and Development Statement forwarded to family, Prep Teacher and Outside School Hours Care contact (where appropriate) through agreed method (in person, mail, email, etc.).</td>
<td>November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prep teacher** reviews information in Transition Learning and Development Statement, and uses to inform curriculum planning.*</td>
<td>November onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where appropriate, Prep teacher meets with families and early childhood educator to discuss Transition Learning and Development Statement and identify additional transition program activities that may be required.</td>
<td>November onwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional on-entry Prep assessments of learning commence.</td>
<td>March onwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:* It is recognised that in many areas transition planning may commence prior to the dates provided, particularly for children with additional needs. The timeline has been designed to provide for local flexibility.

** Where the Prep teacher(s) have not been confirmed for the following year, this activity will be referred to an identified alternative who will pass the information onto the Prep teacher when confirmed.

Dockett and Perry have developed some useful guidelines to support the design and development of locally driven transition-to-school process and programs. They suggest that successful programs:

1. establish positive relationships between children, families and educators
2. facilitate each child's development as a capable learner
3. differentiate between ‘orientation to school’ and ‘transition-to-school’ programs
4. draw upon dedicated funding and resources
5. involve a range of stakeholders
6. are well planned and effectively evaluated
7. are flexible and responsive
8. are based on mutual trust and respect
9. rely on reciprocal communication among participants
10. take into account contextual aspects of community, and of individual families and children within that community.

These guidelines may help early childhood services, OSHC providers and schools when planning transition programs.

Identified promising practices for transition planning in Victoria

In many communities across Victoria there is already much good work being undertaken to ensure that starting school is a positive experience for all involved.

Although there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach, it is clear that approaches which have worked in one location may also work in another provided they are adapted to suit local conditions. Establishing a transition network and working together in local partnerships is a good way to tailor promising practices to suit local needs.

Promising practices are defined as strategies, programs, approaches or techniques designed to support positive transitions for children, families and educators that are typically based on educator-focused wisdom and research but are often not yet empirically 'validated' through systematic research and evaluation:

The identification of promising practices (as distinct from 'best' or 'evidence-based' practices) is part of a growing trend in social work, community development, family studies and early childhood development.\(^\text{25}\)

To inform government policy in this area, and expand the local evidence base on what works in supporting children's transition to school, 30 pilots were funded through the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative. The pilots, which ran from October 2008 to May 2009, trialled or extended a range of transition approaches in a diverse range of Victorian communities. They provided valuable insights of how children's transition to school can be successfully supported. An evaluation of the pilot findings\(^\text{26}\) has highlighted the following promising practices reported in table 4.2.

These promising practices emerged from a small-scale evaluation of the pilots. As such, they should be seen as 'good ideas' rather than 'proven' practices that may be included in transition-to-school programs if considered to 'fit' local community conditions. A description of each practice is provided, along with information about how the practices might be usefully combined and implemented in different services.

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\(^\text{24}\) Dockett & Perry 2001.


\(^\text{26}\) Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood.
### Table 4.2: Summary of commonly used promising transition-to-school practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice idea</th>
<th>How it works</th>
<th>Why it works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocal visits – for children</strong></td>
<td>Children attending early childhood services visit the primary school before school starts (e.g. in Term 4). Prep students may also go back to visit early childhood services. Visits may occur on multiple occasions and involve different types of activities.</td>
<td>Children who are familiar with the school environment, expectations, rules, people, etc., prior to commencing school are less likely to be anxious and will adjust more quickly to it. Prep students may gain a sense of self-confidence from attending early childhood services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reciprocal visits – for educators</strong></td>
<td>Early childhood educators and Prep teachers visit each other’s environment to participate in meetings, joint teaching, transition planning, etc.</td>
<td>Ongoing communication between educators improves professional relationships and contributes to curriculum/pedagogical refinements, better supporting continuity of learning and transition. Teachers also get to know each child before they start school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transition statements and meetings</strong></td>
<td>Written information about a child’s learning and development is jointly prepared by early childhood educators, families and the child and is passed on to the Prep teacher.</td>
<td>Provides an opportunity for educators, families and children to talk and engage in meaningful conversations about transition needs/expectations. Helps Prep teachers plan appropriate support incorporating the child’s and families’ perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Joint professional development</strong></td>
<td>Training/information sessions or more formalised professional development between early childhood services and schools.</td>
<td>Helps to build trust, understanding and mutual respect between early childhood services and schools, as well as an opportunity to learn more about successful transition and education practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local transition networks</strong></td>
<td>A diverse collection of individuals and agencies who share a common interest in improving school transition and outcomes for children and families generally.</td>
<td>Builds the capacity of local communities to design and deliver locally responsive transition-to-school programs. Enhances linkages between sectors and agencies and promotes service collaboration for the benefit of children and families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice idea</td>
<td>How it works</td>
<td>Why it works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddy programs</td>
<td>The use of peer-to-peer support strategies for children (and sometimes families) to assist transition to school.</td>
<td>Children worry about losing their friendship groups when the move to school. Having a buddy may improve adjustment to school and educational engagement. Views were mixed as to whether the ‘buddy’ should be similar in age (e.g. Prep/grade 1) or older (e.g. grade 5/6 student).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family involvement</td>
<td>Broad-based, tailored strategies designed to encourage families to become more actively involved in the early childhood services and/or school community (e.g. information sessions, open days, reading programs, social events, etc.).</td>
<td>Increased involvement of families in services is linked to longer-term improvements in the social, emotional, physical and academic development of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning programs responsive to children</td>
<td>Often referred to as ‘play-based learning’, it is widely used in early childhood services and increasingly in schools.</td>
<td>Enhances continuity of learning experience between early childhood services and schools, which helps to smooth the transition for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social story-boards</td>
<td>Social story-boards are documents that visually depict the nature and processes involved in transitioning to school in a way that is meaningful to the individual (e.g. photos of their Prep teacher, school environment, how to get ready in the morning, etc.).</td>
<td>Helps to prepare children for school and relieves their anxiety. Often used for children with autistic spectrum disorders, or children who have not been to kindergarten, etc. who may be more likely to experience difficulties with the change from home to school environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-level transition timetable</td>
<td>An integrated plan describing common sequences of activities (often organised by school terms) designed to support transition, including common orientation weeks, community events, etc.</td>
<td>Promotes awareness in the community of the importance of early learning and development, and school transition. Assists local agencies to coordinate and align services for the benefit of children and families.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Meeting local needs

Throughout Victoria, no two communities are ever exactly the same. Communities are formed for a variety of reasons, but in most cases it is because people have something in common. It may be where they live, the language they speak, or their cultural background or geography that distinguishes them from other communities.

Each community will have its own needs and views about what will work best for them, and it is important that these are taken into account when designing transition activities or processes. Some families may not feel connected to any one particular community. This may also be true for those families who move from one location to another. Processes and programs developed to meet local needs may need to be different for these families.

Planning for local communities must be based on a strong knowledge base about what really matters for children and their families during the transition period, including their beliefs and values. An assessment of local area needs can inform transition planning to ensure that the range and capacity of activities offered are appropriate and accessible for all children and families. Ultimately, any assessment of need should focus on the needs of the children and families making the transition to school. There are many resources available to develop a better understanding of local areas. Resources such as Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) profiles of local government areas can help early childhood services and schools understand how services can be changed to improve the experiences for children.

Community engagement and development

Communities play a valuable role in transition to school because they provide support to families who, in turn, support children. Engaging communities in the importance of transition to school can:

- facilitate children and families locating and accessing services and support in a timely way
- strengthen and highlight the profile of children’s issues in a local context
- assist the communication of key messages across all sections of the community

One community established a shared ‘story-time’ at a local school where books were read aloud by the Prep teacher. This ‘story-time’ was open to any child who would be starting school the following year and current Prep children, one day a week from Term 3. This gave children time to familiarise themselves with the school environment and helped them socialise with peers.
Access to early years services in rural areas was identified as a challenge in one pilot, particularly when only a small number of families in one area required them. The solution found to service and support these families, and overcome geographical distance, was to use a mobile kindergarten to give families a resource package as a tool to discuss their child’s learning and development with the early childhood educator and school.

How to involve communities

Community engagement relies on practices that encourage openness, welcome new ideas and encourage fresh perspectives. The process of developing and maintaining an inclusive and collaborative approach to transition to school should be regarded as an ongoing one. The profile of families, schools and the community changes from year to year, as do the needs within each community. Therefore, it is important to continually understand and reflect on the demographics of each community over time.

The following strategies may be useful to support transition-to-school planning, and in building supportive community relationships and effective collaborations between early childhood services, families, schools and communities:

- identify a shared vision to work towards
- build an atmosphere of working together to achieve the vision
- identify leaders or change champions who can support and develop cohesion within the community
- recognise, use and share the skills, input, knowledge and expertise of all participating community members
- create a locally relevant and evidence-based shared action plan that identifies how community members will work towards achieving their vision
- find ways to communicate the key messages and action plan to the broad community so that everyone knows what is happening and how to get involved
- recognise the special effort of individuals who make a positive contribution to the community’s transition-to-school experiences
- celebrate achievements together.

Practical ways to involve communities include:

- being welcoming and inclusive to all, celebrating diversity and developing culturally appropriate practices
- promoting successful transition experiences
- offering support with venues for network meetings, family support groups, etc.
- having family fun days that bring the community together where informal links can be encouraged and built upon

A regional local government area created a series of birthday postcards for every child in the municipality (for their first to eighth birthdays). The postcards depict cheerful images and have messages for children and families on the back that support children’s health, learning and development and transition to school. For example:

Being 5 is fantastic fun. There are so many things I am learning to do. Take turns. Follow instructions. Play with friends. Dance. Sing. Draw. Count. Mum and Dad can talk to your school and kinder teacher about moving from kinder to prep. If you are in prep the school nurse will visit school to test your eyes and ears and talk to you.
• listening to children and families about what aspects of the community can be improved to support children’s learning and development

• recognising and involving existing children's champions within a community.

Planning transition programs

Building off work undertaken by Dockett and Perry on the cycle of transition planning, it is recommended that the following points are considered when planning a local transition program:

• establish a local network, or revise an existing local one

• identify a key person with responsibility for leading transition planning within each early childhood service and school

• set up a communication system within the network (this might include regular meetings, emails, etc.)

• assess local needs for transition to school

• agree goals for the transition program

• generate program ideas by working out what activities will meet local needs of children, families and early childhood professionals

• identify timelines

• pinpoint local issues and jointly find solutions

• adapt timelines where necessary

• implement the program

• monitor program activities and timelines and engagement of children, families and early childhood educators

• evaluate and revise the program.

Using playgroup sessions at a school in the year before school helped develop children’s understanding of stories and expanded their play skills. These sessions supported positive family relationships and helped children get used to new routines. The children were introduced to stories with a range of multicultural themes appropriate to the group, which blended Aboriginal Dreamtime stories and characters with those from European culture. The program enabled early childhood educators to identify children who might benefit from additional support at school at an early stage.
Evaluating transition programs

Early childhood educators, OSHC carers and Prep teachers in networks should develop strategies to engage in ongoing reflection, review and improvement of their transition programs. Even in the early stages of designing a transition program, it is a great idea to think about how the program might be evaluated. Some possible ideas are outlined in table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Evaluation ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design questions</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the main question?</td>
<td>A ‘how?', ‘who?', ‘what?', ‘where?' or ‘when?’ type question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the purpose of the evaluation?</td>
<td>This will link to the main question, but may be influenced by local needs and audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the evaluation for?</td>
<td>Is it for the transition network, or an individual service, or funding body?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who could be involved?</td>
<td>For example children, families, early childhood educators, school staff or early childhood professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of evaluation will be helpful?</td>
<td>Will it provide feedback on a proposed program, one that is underway, or a completed program cycle?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will the evaluation measure?</td>
<td>For example: effectiveness of program components, impact of the program on participants or stakeholders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| How will information/data be collected?  | • questionnaires  
• focus groups  
• telephone surveys  
• interviews, etc. |

Various evaluation techniques may be used to evaluate transition programs, including quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative research methods capture data that have been categorised or ordered (such as questionnaires that rank responses from helpful to not helpful and numbers of participating children and families in program activities over time). Qualitative research methods are commonly descriptive accounts of participants’ experiences when engaging in a program or reflecting on how programs could be improved.

How to involve children in evaluating transition-to-school programs

The information collected from listening to children can prompt early childhood educators OSHC carers and Prep teachers to think about how transition-to-school programs, routines and activities can be improved.
Where information is collected from a child, there needs to be a clear process of consent/assent so that children understand that they have a choice in whether or not they participate in the evaluation. Formal evaluations will require parental/guardian consent.

Where a child’s views are to be incorporated into the evaluation, their exact words, or as close as possible, should be used. Children see things in different ways to adults. It is important to value their views equally, as they can be 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 – this shows children they are respected for who they are and what they believe.

Suggested ways for seeking children’s views were outlined in Section 3: Involving children.

**Keeping transition programs going**

**What is sustainability?**

In simple terms, sustainability refers to the capacity of a transition program to continue to deliver its desired outcomes to children, families and early childhood educators and professionals.

Although sustainability is a common concern among transition networks and partnerships, many innovations, even effective ones, finish shortly after the initial funding runs out. This is often because those involved in the planning at the start have not actively planned for how to keep the program running.

**How to develop a sustainable transition program**

The lessons learnt from the evaluation of 30 transition pilots provide some insights into various ways of enhancing the sustainability of transition programs. Some of the key factors include:

- building community support for the local approach/program, often achieved by developing and maintaining a diverse and effective range of networks and partnerships
- developing a clear concept or model detailing what the project is doing, why and to what effect
- identifying strong champions of the project and effective leadership
- building on existing initiatives and identifying organisations that could support project activities into the future
- diversifying the funding base (that is, not relying on a single source of funding)
- providing training and professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals
- regularly monitoring and evaluating the program
- sharing and promoting the knowledge gained.

One pilot focused on creating effective, local partnerships between people working with children to help them better understand each other’s practices and to support them in their work during the transition to school process. They did this by finding ways of making their relationships with partner organisations sustainable across the transition process. They found that by identifying a local champion working in childcare, and supporting that person to work with local services, they were able to encourage wide participation in the local transition program.