



‘They need to know’: children’s perspectives of starting school

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Starting school is a time when learning and education becomes formalised, when conformity to rules and expectations, and relationships with others become a measure of success. Children’s social and affective wellbeing, identity, and learning are important and can make the difference between a child progressing well or experiencing ongoing difficulties (Fabian 2007; Margetts 2007; Niesel & Griebel 2001).

Becoming a school child involves dissecting information and constructing understandings about school and the role of school children. This includes responding to and taking on the behaviours and expectations of the new environment. The variation in individual development and experiences of each child means that for some children, the new experiences encountered at school will provide minimal challenges and difficulties, while for others, the same experiences will provide heightened challenges and difficulties (Fabian 2007; Margetts 2007).

There is general agreement that the success of the transition to school and adaptation to the new physical, social and academic contexts is mediated on many fronts including: child, family, school and community. It is important for children to contribute to the processes that affect them and to include their perspectives in research about early childhood issues (Dunlop 2002). The reality of the child’s view may differ from that of adults (Heinzel 2000, cited in Griebel & Niesel 2000). Further differentiation of experiences and perspectives occurs through the individuality of personality and experience that each child brings to their impressions and interactions within the school. This view recognises the agency of children as co-constructors of their socio-cultural environments. By listening to and analysing the ‘voices’ of children who have been directly involved in the transition to school process, a third dimension is added to the voices of parents and teachers, and should help inform adult understandings and responses to the complexity of school transition.

Fifty-four Prep children from four metropolitan schools in Melbourne were recently interviewed after attending school for seven months. Children were interviewed in small focus groups of three and asked two simple questions: 'What do you think new children starting school need to know?' and then after each child in the focus group had an opportunity to respond: 'What can schools do to help children who are starting school?' These interviews enabled the 'expertise' of children, who had actually experienced the transition to school, to be expressed and heard.

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Six main themes emerged in relation to what new children starting school need to know about: peer relationships; school rules; general procedures; classrooms; academic skills; and feelings. Responses support the notion that social, affective and learning competencies are important to children as they start school.

Knowing about how to make friends and deal with interactions included establishing friendships, knowing children's names, considering the feelings of others, sharing and taking turns. The number of times not being hurt, or hurting were mentioned suggests that the playground, in particular, places demands on children's social and emotional skills and wellbeing, and assistance is needed for dealing with playground conflict. Children suggested that schools need to help them know what to do when they are hurt, should provide teacher assistance in the playground, and teach children how not to hurt.

Having someone to rely on during the start to school – whether for social, physical or other reasons was recommended. Children suggested this could be the teacher or principal, but it could also be an older more experienced child: "a friend that has already been in Prep ... they could help, they could help you do things."

This included being told or shown how to use the playground equipment safely: "You have to show them how to do that so they don't get hurt."

Knowing about: school rules; consequences of breaking rules; being good (not bad); and avoiding or not getting into trouble were noted often. The suggestions by children on ways that schools could help newcomers suggests that they want clarification about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, or that they are trying so hard to do the right thing that they want this recognised: "give them a reward if they've been good or not if they've been bad, they might give them punishment." "They could tell you if you do something bad."

Knowing general school procedures and ways of doing things was also important. This involved knowing what to do (actions), where to go (locations), and timing of routines. For example, asking for help, doing up shoe laces, lining up with a partner, responding to bells; and playing on the right playground.

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Another distinct set of knowledge related to classroom procedures including information about the teacher, the teacher's name, what the classroom is like, and how to behave in the classroom such as: listening to the teacher; doing what the teacher says; being quiet; asking permission; sitting on the mat; and so on.

Knowing how to learn, doing hard work, and knowledge related to literacy and numeracy was also important. There was a strong focus on the importance of knowing how to write; writing one's name; the alphabet and letter sounds; and maths and numbers. Along with recommendations that teachers could help children sounding letters and words, help them learn and provide easier work, responses suggest that these skills are a challenge to new entrant children but may also be a means of measuring one's competence as a school child.

Fifteen children referred to feelings about starting school with most relating to 'not feeling scared'. "Not to be scared ... Because it's not scarier when you start school. Because it's easy when you get in Prep."

Ways that school could help included helping children 'feel good': "They could make sure that none of them are sad and they're all happy."

Children's responses affirm that relationships and interactions, procedures and ways of doing things are important elements of starting school and appear to provide children with a sense of identity and competence, safety and emotional wellbeing. Familiarity with school, the people in it and acceptable ways to behave gives children a frame of reference by which they can function independently and determine their own competence (and that of others). These initial impressions are important and can become the standard against which future school experiences are measured.

By understanding the challenges articulated by children as they start school, and the skills and competencies and aspirations of them and their families, educators in the early years are better able to support children and implement strategies, both prior to and during the transition period, that enhance development and learning and minimise difficulties as children start school.

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