

Supporting children and their families through the transition to school



ECE resources

Starting school is usually an exciting prospect for many children and their families, but it can also be a time that brings feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Research on the transition-to-school process suggests that starting school is as significant to children as many other major life events. In terms of meaningful lifetime transitions, starting school is on a par with the likes of the birth of a sibling, moving to a new house, the separation of parents, or even the loss of a loved one¹. Further research suggests that the success of any major transition in the early years of life has a positive correlation with the success of other transitions people experience throughout their lives². In other words, a successful transition in the early years will help ensure the success children have when adjusting to other transitions in the future. A positive start to school will help give children the confidence to tackle any other significant life adjustment. For teachers, this is a tremendous responsibility: they may only have a child in their care for a snippet of their life span but the actions of ECE and new entrant teachers will impact a child's life well beyond the short time they spend with them.

This research review looks at factors affecting the crucial transition-to-school period and offers practical advice to both ECE and new entrant teachers.

Resilience

As with so much regarding children and their development, the key to a successful transition is resilience³. Resilience is the ability to adapt to change, to work through problems that arise, to look for solutions, and to keep trying even when it is not easy. From a very early age, children will look for ways to build their resilience. Infants don't stop trying to walk just because they keep falling over: our brains are wired for movement and we must be resilient as we learn this crucial component of our survival. There are ways in which teachers can both support and (inadvertently) hinder children's drive to become resilient people. They can help children by allowing them to face some uncertainty and enabling them to encounter new challenges. When teachers know children well because they have developed relationships with them, they understand 'how much is too much' for each child. While children shouldn't face challenges that are insurmountable for them at the time, it is important for them to encounter enough difficulty, where something is just tricky enough for that child that they will need to exercise their resilience muscles a little bit. Conversely, if children are sheltered from adversity too much, and any risk of failure for a child is removed, their natural drive toward resilience goes unsupported and undeveloped.

What does a successful transition look like?

A successful transition will differ from child to child. Naturally, children will participate in school life differently depending on their personalities. More extroverted children might be comfortable getting involved in school activities and be quick to make new friends, whereas more introverted children might be happy to keep to themselves a little more. Some children might adjust to school very quickly, whereas others might take many months before they settle into school life. With so many variables at play, it is difficult to put a time period on the transition. It can require a lot of patience and empathy.

It is also important to remember that it is not just the children who are adjusting to school. This is a transition for parents, too, especially when their child is the first in their family to start school. Teachers

of young children don't just build relationships with the children, but also do what they can to get to know the child's parents and whānau. These relationships take time and effort, and time is something teachers are always chasing. Building these relationships is a challenge, but recalling what the research says about the significance of the transition-to-school experience on children's lives makes these partnerships with parents a worthy investment⁴.

How can teachers help to support a positive transition to school?

There are many other things that teachers can do to help support children and their families during the transition-to-school process.

Consider the child's social and emotional readiness

The first consideration should be whether the child in question is ready to start school. School life requires a lot of children's social and emotional development and, while parents know their child better than anyone else, they should be encouraged to talk to their child's ECE teachers if they have any queries or concerns about the child's emotional 'readiness' before they start school. Teachers can assure parents that children need only focus on developing their emotional capabilities at this age (which will continue to be a 'work in progress' for some time) and that they do not need to worry about where their child is at academically before they start school. Research on brain development shows that most children's academic abilities level out around the age of **seven or eight**, meaning a child who could recite the alphabet at age four is not necessarily any more academically advanced than the child who mastered the alphabet at age seven.

Consider cohort or group entry

Research shows that starting school with a friend makes the process much easier to tackle⁵. Adults know how hard it can be to be the only new person starting a new job, and children have fewer life experiences to draw on than adults, so starting school can feel very daunting. Some schools now allow for cohort entry, which means children start school on the first day of term after their fifth birthday: rather than being the only new child in a classroom, they will be one of several new children entering the classroom together at the beginning of each term. However, most schools in New Zealand have children start on or just after their fifth birthday, so it is useful for ECE teachers and schools to talk to parents about whether there are any other children from their ECE centre that might be starting school around the same time. It might be possible to agree on a coordinated start date to enable several children to start together.

Communication between families and schools

Knowledge and communication are key throughout the transition to school, and parents will want to know what to expect. ECE settings can encourage parents to approach their chosen primary school after their child has turned four and find out that school's specific transition-to-school process. Primary schools should be aware that prospective parents will want to know about the following:

- Who the new entrant teachers will be when their child starts school
- What a typical school day looks like in new entrant classrooms
- How the day and the classroom are structured
- How many school visits children typically have before they start school

Schools should allow parents to ask as many questions as they need in order to feel that they understand what to expect when the transition process starts, and this is where schools and teachers can start building a relationship with parents and families. It is also very important to involve the child in the transition-to-school process⁶. Ask each child how they feel about starting school and what questions they might have about their new school, new classroom, and new teacher. This will help to build trust between the child and their new teachers from the beginning.

Communication between ECE settings and primary schools

Throughout their ECE years, a child's teachers will have worked on making connections between the child's home and ECE centre lives. They will have endeavoured to understand what the child's interests are and what knowledge and skills they already possess in order to help them make children's daily experiences personally meaningful to them. Where there is meaning to a child, there is learning, and when you can connect a new experience with knowledge you already have, there is even greater learning. When a child starts school, they take all that learning and knowledge from home and ECE with them, and they want to see that the learning they have already done will be recognised and valued in their new classroom⁷. This is another example where communication is vital, and parents often play a crucial role in facilitating the communication between the child's ECE teachers and their receiving primary school teacher, particularly when the two environments are in different neighbourhoods. The following suggestions can help build connections between the ECE and primary settings:

- Encourage parents to have their child meet with the new teacher, in the classroom, as often as possible, prior to them starting school. Even if the school arranges for one or two prior meetings, allow for more if the parent or child feels this is not enough. Encourage the child to ask any questions they might have while they are there.
- Encourage the child to bring their ECE portfolio to these meetings so they can show it to their new teacher. These portfolios are invaluable in terms of giving teachers insights into the child's learning⁸. If the child can go through their portfolio with the teacher, they can start building a relationship, the child can start building their sense of belonging to the new classroom, and it might spark some interesting and revealing conversations.
- Be open to a meeting with the other teacher in the transition-to-school equation. The new entrant teacher might be able to go along and visit the child's ECE centre, or the ECE teacher might be able to accompany the parent and the child on a school visit to their new classroom. If distance and time are an issue, the teachers can connect via the internet. This is important because, when a child sees a connection being made between their ECE centre and their new classroom, it really helps to bridge the gap between the two environments⁹. If a child can see their current teacher discussing their learning with their prospective teacher, it shows the child that they matter to these teachers and that their learning is important.
- Be open to visiting the family's home. This also helps to bridge the gap between environments and gives new entrant teachers a valuable insight into the child's life, experiences, and prior knowledge. It makes it much easier for teachers to understand a child and better support their learning.

Children with specific learning and developmental needs

If a child has a specific learning or developmental need, ECE teachers should encourage parents to talk to the child's new school about this as soon as they can. Let parents know that resources can be accessed through the Ministry of Education to further support the transition-to-school process for them and their child, which could include an early intervention teacher. For children who might be feeling particularly

anxious about starting school, it is important to plan ahead so that everyone will know what to expect throughout the process. Arrange meetings between the parents, the child's ECE and prospective teachers, the school principal, an early intervention teacher (if relevant), and the child (again, it is very important to involve them throughout this process). If you decide to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for the child, let the parents know that this will help the teacher support the child's specific learning needs and will give everyone a documented plan to refer to throughout the process.

Monitoring the transition-to-school process

It is important for schools to continue to check in with children and their families after they have started school. Some of the basic questions to discuss with parents and caregivers are:

- Does the child generally look forward to going to school most days?
- Does the child talk about any problems they might be facing?
- Has the child's general behaviour changed since they started school and, if so, in what ways?

When a child indicates that they feel generally content with where they spend the bulk of their week, and that they can trust adults to hear their problems and offer support if approached, teachers and parents can feel confident that a child is adjusting to school well. It is worth looking at any behavioural changes that may have occurred since the child started school. Not all children will verbally articulate a problem, but they will ask for help in other ways. An example of this could be a child who now refuses to get themselves dressed in the mornings, even at weekends. This change of behaviour could be their way of saying 'I'm not happy and I need help'. It is always worth looking for the cause of the behaviour rather than focusing on the behaviour itself.

Parents might not feel comfortable offering up this kind of information to their child's teachers unless they have started to build a connection with them. The trust that teachers worked to build with children and their whānau during the pre-school visits will help them gain valuable insight into how the transition is going for a child and their parents. If there are any potential problems, that trust enables teachers to offer support. Parents are more likely to share valuable information with teachers when they can trust that they will not be judged.

Resilience, again

Remember that one of the aims of the transition-to-school process is to support children as they develop that ever-important resilience. Children need to know that it is okay that they find starting school hard, that it is okay that it is different to what they know, and that it will take some adjusting to. It is okay if they feel nervous about it. The goal is not to make starting school easy, because it is important that children have challenges to learn to overcome, but this challenge should not be too great: that is why we have a transition-to-school process. By including a child in the process, and maintaining open communication with everyone involved (that is, the child, their ECE teacher, their new entrant teacher, and anyone else who may be a stakeholder), teachers will be able to support children and parents through the transition-to-school process, enabling them to make this a challenge that the child can confidently tackle and a success that will help them throughout their life.

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Endnotes

¹ Bröstrom (2005); Niesel & Griebel (2005).

² Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000); Niesel & Griebel (2005).

³ Dockett & Perry (2013); Fabian & Dunlop (2007).

⁴ Dockett & Perry (2002b); Pianta (2006).

⁵ Bulkeley & Fabian (2006); Fabian & Dunlop (2007); Margetts (2002); Yeboah (2002).

⁶ Bröstrom (2005); Einarsdottir (2011).

⁷ Dockett & Perry (2002a); Thomson (2002).

⁸ Hartley, Rogers, Smith Peters and Carr (2012).

⁹ Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, & Robinson (2003).

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