

# Starting right

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## BIG TRANSITIONS

It’s that time of the year. Most four-year-olds are getting ready to start school. Parents have decided on the school. Schools are planning for new arrivals. Preschools and child care centres are preparing children for the big transition.

**Preschoolers need support and encouragement to make the move a positive experience. Big school can be a scary place. The buildings, grounds, children and teachers are huge through five-year-old eyes. Classrooms, toilets and routines are unfamiliar. And there can be additional pressures. Some children must take a bus to school; some have to attend before and after school care; many will not know a soul on that first day.**

## READINESS

While there is some debate about what constitutes ‘school readiness’ or whether such a ‘concept’ or label is appropriate (Elliott, 2007), research indicates there are qualities, characteristics and skills that help smooth the path to school. For example, continuity and linkages between the preschool and school environments support successful transitions to school (Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson, 2003).

**Kindergarten/reception teachers say that good language and listening skills, a positive attitude, social competence and confidence and the ability to focus on one activity for a while, are most important. Teachers also say that participation in high-quality early childhood programs advantage school beginners (Australian Education Union, 2004).**

## AN INNOVATIVE IDEA BASED ON THE EYLF

At SDN Paddington Education and Care Centre, the 27 children in the 2010 preschool class participated in a series of school familiarisation activities planned as part of a final-year Action Research project designed to track children’s changing attitudes to starting school and the effectiveness of the *Early Years Learning Framework* as an organising structure.

**The *Early Years Learning Framework* addresses the importance of children developing a strong sense of identity (Outcome 1) and exploring and learning by feeling safe and supported. Outcome 2 states that children are connected with and contribute to their world. They broaden their experiences by moving between different settings and connecting with others. Children’s attitudes and expectations around transitioning to school closely relate to Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing. They will experience pride in their success and achievements and feel confident discussing their emotions and responses to events with those they trust. Outcome 4 states that children should be confident and involved learners. By forging connections between preschool and school settings they can make sense of new experiences and transfer knowledge from one context to another. Finally, Outcome 5 envisages children as effective communicators. It focuses on children’s verbal and non-verbal interactions with peers and adults and their growing literacy and numeracy skills. In building confidence around starting school, children also develop abilities to express ideas, feelings and understandings about themselves and their world.**

Central to the program was a play ‘School Room’. It included school uniforms for dress-ups, pencil cases with sharpeners, erasers and pencils, lots of typical early literacy and numeracy materials, including books. Every child had a journal—a School Book—in which to record ideas and events and to do ‘school work’.

The School Room also contained a large map of the surrounding suburbs with information and photographs of the schools which children would attend the following year. An older sibling who attended the closest school visited to talk about her school.



## ASSUMPTIONS

Before commencing the school familiarisation activities, comments about why children were looking forward to attending school were recorded. They included:

*'I will get to learn and write more and I will play with lots of new toys.'*

*'I will be big when I'm five and I will be there every day.'*

*'I can learn about trains.'*

*'Because I've never been there.'*

*'There will be lots of friends.'*

*'Because I like to do learning and writing.'*

*'Because they will ring the bell.'*

While most children were positive about starting school, there was some apprehension:

*'I think it's scary because it's new.'*

*'The teachers won't be nice.'*

## REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

At the end of the nine weeks of 'playing schools' all children except one were positive and excited about school, but more realistic in their expectations and understandings of what school might entail:

*'... I'll meet new people. I will learn how to read and the teachers will show me how to read and write.'*

*'I will bring my own lunch box and learn lots about books and reading.'*

*'I will get to sit at the desk and write things for homework.'*

*'I get to play with new toys. There will be a new playground.'*

One child, who had previously been positive, was now a little apprehensive, perhaps overwhelmed, saying:

*'I want to go but I don't think I can write yet and I don't know how to do it all.'*



## NEW COMPETENCIES

The School Room was a particularly engaging play area. Children dressed up in school uniforms, did 'school work', sat in desks, ate from lunch boxes, used school-like language and took the roles of teacher and students. The visit from the school-aged sibling prompted a range of 'school play' using ideas shared by the presenter. As suggested by Brostrom (2005), when new knowledge and skills are played out, they enable higher mental functioning as well as aiding in the familiarisation of the new concepts.

One girl who was playing the part of the teacher was quick to remind her 'students' to raise their hand if they wanted to speak and to 'sit quietly or you are all going to the office'. Such play has a developmental function, enabling children to 'achieve new competencies'. It can also be used as an effective 'bridging tool to school' by helping children become familiar with the various roles and how they differ from preschool (Brostrom, 2005, p. 19).

## AFTERTHOUGHT

In reality, there is a considerable age, experience and developmental range at school entry. Importantly, development, experience and maturity—rather than age *per se*—predict successful transitions to school. Rich language, social and intellectual experiences, together with positive attitudes and familiarity with school are critical. As much as children benefit from specific school familiarisation experiences, general maturity and positive, supportive parenting are critical.

**Preschools and child care centres have a responsibility to ensure that parents are provided with relevant information about children's learning profiles and outcomes that they choose to make available to schools. Early learning 'passports' or portfolios are ideal for this purpose. Most importantly, schools must be ready for children. Schools must cater for all children, whatever their prior experiences, by ensuring that early learning programs are designed to capitalise on each child's strengths.**

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### References

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