



# Transition to Primary School: A Review of the Literature

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## Important Notice

KidsMatter Australian Mental Health Transition to School: Parent Initiative and any other KidsMatter mental health initiatives are not to be confused with other businesses, programs or services which may also use the name 'KidsMatter'.

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# Executive Summary

## KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative

KidsMatter comprises a suite of Initiatives that aim to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, reduce mental health problems amongst children, and achieve greater support for children experiencing mental health difficulties, and their families. It includes KidsMatter Early Childhood and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander KidsMatter Early Childhood designed for implementation in preschools and long day care; KidsMatter Primary and KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative, both of which are designed for implementation in Australian primary schools.

The following literature review focuses specifically on the KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative, which has been developed by the Australian Psychological Society with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. It recognises that a successful transition to school can increase the likelihood of positive social, emotional and academic outcomes for children. The literature review was undertaken to identify current research and effective practices for supporting children during the transition to primary school in order to inform the development of this Initiative.

### Why is the transition to school period important?

Research has identified the transition to school as a time of potential challenge and stress for children and families. It involves negotiating and adjusting to a number of changes including the physical environment, learning expectations, rules and routines, social status and identity, and relationships for children and families. Whilst it can be a time of great excitement, it is not uncommon for children to experience some distress and adjustment difficulties during this period. Given the stability of both academic and social trajectories beyond the early years of school, and the potential for early life transitions to affect future transitions, starting school represents an important time for working with families to support a positive start to school and promote children's mental health and wellbeing.

### Why focus on parents and carers?

Researchers have highlighted that the family and effective parenting are central to children's mental health. Parenting practices and the quality of the parent-child relationship have implications for children's academic and social competence and behaviour in the early years at school, as well as longer term school success and achievement. Providing information and support to parents and carers about the school and the range of changes their child is likely to encounter as they start school, can enhance parental confidence and in turn, also enhance children's confidence. Therefore, working with parents and carers has the potential to lead to better outcomes for children both during the transition period and beyond.

### What can schools do?

Schools have an important role in supporting children and families during transition. This includes not only supporting children, parents and carers to understand the changes, expectations and practicalities (e.g., uniforms, starting and finishing times etc.), but also assisting children and families to adjust to the social and emotional demands of starting school. Helping parents and carers to become more aware of potential challenges and common behavioural responses as children adjust to change, and providing information and practical strategies for supporting children can help to promote positive parenting practices and support children's mental health and wellbeing during this important period.

Working in partnership and developing positive relationships between and among a range of stakeholders including children, parents and carers, early childhood services, school staff and the wider community provides a strong foundation for transition, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community. This sense of belonging is not only important during transition but is also a protective factor for children's mental health throughout school.

The transition to school is influenced by a range of complex factors and interactions within each child's

context. As such, school transition policies and practices that consider, and are adapted to, each particular context and to meet individual needs, are more likely to be effective in promoting a smooth start. A number of strategies and activities that schools can implement to support children and families during transition are discussed in the literature review.

### Promoting parental involvement

Parent and carer involvement in the school community is important not only to support children during the transition to school, but is also associated with long-term school success. Identifying and reducing potential barriers to participation can help to promote parent and carer involvement in transition activities and children's ongoing education. A number of potential barriers have been identified – a summary as well as suggestions of how some of these barriers may be overcome are provided.

### Conclusion

Schools have a key role to play during transition including reaching out and working in partnership with parents and carers and other key stakeholders such as early childhood services. Assisting parents and carers to support their children's social and emotional skills will not only be beneficial during the transition to school, but will also provide children with skills that support their mental health in the short and long term. In order to reach and involve as many parents and carers as possible, consideration should be given to potential barriers to participation and how these can be addressed. The KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative is an evidence-based initiative which aims to support schools and parents and carers during the transition period, and to equip them with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to facilitate a positive start to school for children and their families.

# KidsMatter Transition to School: A literature review

## An introduction to KidsMatter

KidsMatter comprises a suite of promotion, prevention and early intervention Initiatives that aim to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, reduce mental health problems amongst children, and achieve greater support for children experiencing mental health difficulties, and their families. It was developed in response to national concern regarding children's mental health and the need for coordinated and strategic action. The KidsMatter Initiatives include:

- KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) is designed for implementation in early childhood services including preschool and long day care, and targeting children aged birth to primary school age. KMEC is currently being piloted in over one hundred preschool and long day care services across Australia in 2010 and 2011.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander KidsMatter Early Childhood is developing a targeted, culturally appropriate program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services to support the social and emotional wellbeing of the children in their care. This initiative is closely linked with KMEC and is being developed to specifically address the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled early childhood services.
- KidsMatter Primary (KMP) is designed for implementation in primary schools and targeting children throughout primary school.
- KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative (KMT) which targets parents of children commencing their first year of formal schooling and will be the focus of this review.

Each Initiative involves the people who have a significant influence on children's lives – parents and carers, families, early childhood staff, teachers, and health and community groups – in making a positive difference for children's mental health.

## The importance of supporting children's mental health

Good mental health is vital for learning and life. Children who are mentally healthy are not just free from mental health difficulties but also learn better, have stronger relationships with teachers, family members and peers and are better equipped to meet life's challenges (World Health Organization [WHO], 1994). Children who are mentally healthy are better able to enjoy and benefit from life experiences, be productive and fruitful, and contribute to their families, friends and society in ways that are appropriate for their age (Raphael, 2000; WHO, 2004).

Good mental health in childhood also provides a solid foundation for managing the later transitions to adolescence and adulthood, for engaging successfully in education and making a meaningful contribution to society throughout life (WHO, 1994; 2004).

Available statistics highlight the pervasiveness of mental health problems in Australia. Nearly one in five, or more than three million people, are affected by a mental illness in any one year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Recent data has demonstrated that up to 23.5% of Australian children of preschool age are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the Australian Early Developmental Index, putting them at risk for developing mental health difficulties in the future (Centre for Community Child Health & Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009). Findings from the National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being indicate that one in seven children of primary school age has a mental health difficulty, with anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and aggression being among the more common problems (Sawyer et al., 2000). Australia's National Mental Health Plan (2009–2014) (Australian Health Ministers, 2009) has been developed to guide efforts to address Mental Health across the lifespan, with a significant emphasis being placed on promotion, prevention and early intervention for children.

## Children's mental health and schools

Good mental health is integral to academic learning (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; WHO, 2006). Students who are mentally healthy arrive at school 'ready' to learn (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, & Gomby, 2005) and are more likely to achieve academic success in the short and long term (Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Masten et al., 2005). They are more motivated learners, have fewer behavioural problems and show greater commitment to their schoolwork (CASEL, 2003). Conversely, poor mental health reduces students' ability to learn. Information gathered in the United States (US) indicates that children and adolescents with emotional difficulties have the highest rates of school failure with 50% of these students dropping out of high school, compared to 30% of all students with disabilities (United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, 2001).

Schools are more likely to achieve goals related to learning and academic success when students' mental health is prioritised and addressed with the same enthusiasm as numeracy or literacy (CASEL, 2003). Schools that promote mental health are also more likely to reach more disadvantaged students, make fewer special education referrals and achieve higher levels of staff satisfaction (Paternite & Johnston, 2005).

A systematic, population-based mental health approach has the potential to improve the mental health of students (Raphael, 2000). Schools, through their ongoing contact with children and families, are well placed to address several of the risk and protective factors for mental health, including working with parents and carers (WHO, 1994).

The World Health Organisation (1994) argues:

Schools, with the full support of families and the community, are currently the best place to develop a comprehensive mental health programme for children because:

- almost all children attend school at sometime during their lives...
- schools have profound influence on children, their families and the community...
- school mental health programmes are effective in improving learning, mental wellbeing, and in treating mental disorders...
- when teachers are actively involved in mental health programmes, the interventions can reach generations of children. (p. 3)

## The KidsMatter framework

The KidsMatter framework is based on a risk and protective factors model. Research into prevention of mental health difficulties has identified a range of risk factors that are likely to increase the chances of children experiencing poor mental health. A number of protective factors (characteristics or conditions that can improve children's resistance to risk factors) have also been identified. Protective factors act to strengthen children's mental health and wellbeing, making it less likely they will develop mental health problems (Spence et al., 2005). They can be truly protective, by reducing the exposure to risk, or they may be compensatory, by reducing the impact of risk factors (Rutter, 1985).

Even with growing awareness of risk and protective factors for mental health, it is not possible to predict which children will develop mental health difficulties. The presence of risk factors does not necessarily lead to the development of mental health difficulties. However, when multiple risk factors are present this likelihood is significantly increased (Giesen, Searle, & Sawyer, 2007). The interactions between risk and protective factors are complex and dependent on a number of factors that may be identified in relation to children's developmental contexts including: individual skills, needs and temperaments, familial circumstances and relationships, the school context, specific life events and the social environment (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Spence, 1996). As such, children's mental health programs need to target all children and their developmental contexts, with interventions ranging from developing skills for emotional wellbeing to specific mental health interventions. Population health approaches for mental health that incorporate promotion, prevention and early intervention have been shown to be particularly effective at reducing mental health difficulties while also strengthening mental health and wellbeing (Durlak & Wells, 1997).

KidsMatter focuses on areas where early childhood services and schools can make a difference in promoting protective factors for supporting children's mental health and minimising the effects of any risk factors. Using the KidsMatter framework as a guide, early childhood services and schools are provided with key resources and implementation support to put in place a coordinated set of strategies to address the specific mental health and wellbeing needs of children. The flexibility of KidsMatter enables it to build on the work early childhood services and schools may already be doing to address children's mental health



and wellbeing through national, state, territory and sector-based mental health initiatives and policies. The KidsMatter framework acknowledges the critical role early childhood services and schools can play to enhance factors that promote children's resilience, such as a sense of belonging and connection, and emphasises a sense of shared community responsibility for children's wellbeing while promoting partnerships with parents and a range of community services/agencies to improve children's mental health.

In 2006-2008, KidsMatter Primary was successfully piloted nationally in 101 schools across all states and territories of Australia, across all three education sectors (Government, Catholic and Independent), and in metropolitan, rural and remote communities. A consortium based in the Centre for Analysis of Educational Futures at Flinders University undertook an independent evaluation of the two-year trial (Slee et al., 2009). The extensive evaluation demonstrated that KidsMatter Primary helped to improve student wellbeing, reduced mental health difficulties and improved student learning as reported by teachers. KidsMatter Primary is currently being rolled out to a greater number of primary schools across Australia with funding from the Australian Government. Under the "Taking Action to Tackle Suicide" package, the Australian Government will invest \$274 million over four years from 2010-11 which includes funding for the expansion of KidsMatter Primary of \$18.4 million. This funding will enable KidsMatter Primary to be expanded to a further 1700 primary schools by June 2014. Information is being gathered at present for a comprehensive evaluation of the KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot to inform future developments and extension of the Initiative.

(See [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au) for more information about KidsMatter, including resources and information around current developments).

## KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative

A positive start or transition to school has been linked to a range of positive outcomes for children (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The transition to school period has also been identified as a time of risk which can potentially contribute to the development of mental health problems (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative compliments the KidsMatter Early Childhood and KidsMatter Primary Initiatives.

It has been developed with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing under the New Early Intervention Services for Parents, Children and Young People initiative.

The KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative recognises that a successful transition to primary school can increase the likelihood of positive social, emotional and academic outcomes. Working with parents and carers is a core component within the KidsMatter framework and this new Initiative specifically aims to:

- work with school staff, parents and carers to support children in making a positive transition to school,
- increase support for parents and carers during the transition to school,
- promote collaboration between parents and carers and school staff, and to
- promote children's mental health and wellbeing.

The KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative includes the delivery of four information sessions for parents and carers that helps to prepare and support them, and consequently their children, during the transition period. It specifically involves the provision of information and resources prior to, during and after children's commencement of school.

## Transition to school – an important time for supporting children

Transition periods represent times of potential challenge (Turnbull, 2006). While the transition to primary school is one of many transitions that children face in the course of their lives, starting school is one of the most challenging experiences in the early years (Reynolds, Weissberg, & Kaspro, 1992) and is a particularly vulnerable time for children with disabilities (Centre for Equity & Innovation in Early Childhood - Melbourne Graduate School of Education [CEIEC], 2008; Kemp, 2003). KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative recognises that transition is a process that happens over time from when children are beginning to get ready to start school until the time when they have adjusted to school, as opposed to a single point in time such as the day or week they commence.

The transition to school can be an exciting, but also a potentially stressful period for children and families alike. During the critical period marked by the transition to formal schooling (usually between the ages of four and six years of age), children's internal and external worlds simultaneously undergo rapid changes.

For example, children's cognitive development (including their memory span, general learning capacity and cognitive processing speed) proceeds rapidly as children begin to form basic concepts of time, number and logic (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). The commencement of formal schooling is associated with the negotiation of changes or discontinuities in physical and learning environments, rules and routines, social status and identity, and relationships for children and families (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Margetts, 2002a). All of which result in "tensions between change and stability and between adjusting to new challenges and preserving old patterns" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, p. 505).

The discontinuity between prior to school and school settings is one of many complex differences that children must adapt to when they commence formal schooling. For example, primary schools are usually larger spaces, with more buildings and larger play areas than prior to school settings (Margetts, 1999). There are often higher ratios of children to adults, while socially, children may have to make new friends (Dockett & Perry, 2006). There is a shift from a socially oriented educational approach to a cognitively oriented approach to teaching and learning (Ladd, Herald, & Kochel, 2006; Margetts, 2002b). The high level of structure that characterises the school and classroom context demands more from children in terms of their behaviour, social and emotional competence (such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and social and relationship skills), cognitive development (including language and concept formation), physical wellbeing and motor development, and understanding and coping with the school environment itself (including the condition and size of the buildings, the classroom equipment, the location of the toilets, classrooms and play areas relative to each other, the number and ages of the children in the class, the staff to child ratios, and the size and organisation of the classroom) (Ladd & Price, 1987; Margetts, 2002b). Parents and carers are also likely to be confronted with changes, such as more formalised interactions with the school compared with those in early childhood settings, and meeting a new set of parents and carers and teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Margetts, 1999). Difficulties can result from the incongruities that exist between settings (i.e., the differences between home to school, and preschool to school) or even as a result of parental unfamiliarity with the school structure, culture and expectations (Margetts, 2007a).

As such, much of what formal schooling requires of children is relatively new for families. The continuity–

discontinuity continuum is complex, with some degree of discontinuity being inevitable at different stages in a child's education (Podmore, 2001). In light of this, it can be argued that what constitutes a successful or unsuccessful transition to school has less to do with the presence or introduction of discontinuity in itself and more to do with how children, families, schools and communities interact and support each other, how prepared they are for the transition, and how successfully they cope with and adjust to the changes.

The greater the changes that need to be negotiated, the more difficult it can be for children and families to manage the increasing demands of the new environment and to make a successful transition in the early years of school. This can impact on and compromise children's engagement and attendance at school and their later school success (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Centre for Community Child Health - Royal Children's Hospital [CCCH], 2008). Early experiences of school can support children's optimal development and wellbeing as well as for setting the tone for children's future expectations and experiences in the early years of school and beyond (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). Patterns of behaviour and achievement that are established during this period, may have important implications for the trajectories of future academic and social success (Dockett & Perry, 2004b). Given the stability of both academic and social trajectories beyond the early years, and the potential for early life transitions to affect future adjustment (Margetts, 2003), the commencement of formal schooling presents as a critical period in child development (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998).

### What does the research tell us?

For the majority of children, the transition to formal schooling is a relatively smooth process. However, some children experience adjustment difficulties and distress during this period. For example, one US study found 16% of children had difficult entries, marked by serious concerns or multiple problems as reported by teachers (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Another US study found 15% of children exhibited two or more adjustment difficulties (such as pretending to be sick, complaining about school or a reluctance to go to school) while 13% showed one adjustment difficulty, as reported by their parents (Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2000). More recently, research in the US has suggested that approximately one in five children meet the criteria for a "psychiatric disorder with impairment" (p.695) as they make the transition into formal schooling (Carter et al., 2010). These statistics

highlight the vulnerability of children during this period and thus their need for support.

Researchers have examined a range of social and demographic factors that can influence children's early adjustment to school. These factors include a child's age, gender, early childhood education and care experiences, social and emotional competence, primary language spoken at home, socioeconomic status, parental employment and parenting practices (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999; Margetts, 2007a; Monkeviciene, Mishara, & Dufour, 2006). Boys tend to have more adjustment difficulties than girls (Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; Monkeviciene, et al., 2006) while children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those with disabilities are more likely to have difficult transitions (Hausken & Rathbun, 2002). In addition, how children act toward and are treated by their classmates, their dispositions and the types of behaviour they display (in terms of how active, passive, cooperative, argumentative, helpful, positive, negative, anxious, aggressive or demanding they are) all influence the development of children's relationships with their teachers and peers (Ladd, 2003). The quality of relationships with peers and teachers will continue to influence how children engage, participate and achieve at school, as social competency, secure relationships, and a sense of belonging and connectedness are all protective factors for mental health (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000).

It should be highlighted however, that the impact of these factors remains unclear, with further research needed. For instance, studies around children's age when starting school and adjustment are inconsistent with some researchers highlighting that younger children make rapid progress in their first year of schooling (Stipek & Byler, 2001 as cited in Dockett & Perry, 2009) and others demonstrating that older children at school entry do better academically in the short and longer term (Lin, Freeman, & Chu, 2009). It should therefore be acknowledged that it is the complex interaction of the individual child and various contextual factors that influence transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2009) and lead children towards healthy social, emotional, academic and school adjustment – or to possible mental health difficulties.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the transition period and the preparation required of children, families and educators to facilitate a successful and positive transition experience for children as

they start school (CEIEC, 2008). Supporting children as they navigate the transition to primary school has the potential to aid their social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as to equip children with invaluable skills that can help them to deal more effectively with the many additional challenges and transitions that lie ahead in their journey from childhood to adulthood and independence (National Children's Bureau, 2005). Studies show that mental health promotion is critical in early childhood and that effective early mental health intervention can achieve positive outcomes for children (NSW Parenting Centre & NSW Department of Community Services, 2003; Reid, Littlefield, & Hammond, 2008). When mental health problems are present, normal development can be slowed and the achievement of critical skills and understandings can be inhibited (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999 as cited in Rishel, 2007). Early intervention before behavioural and relationship problems become entrenched can reduce their escalation to more enduring, long-term mental health problems and also the possibility of later labelling and stigmatisation (Arnold et al., 2006; Reid, et al., 2008).

While there may be a belief amongst the general population that children will "grow out" of behavioural difficulties, research suggests that many will not. For example, the Australian Temperament Project found that 50-60 percent of children who were assessed at age 11 to 12 years as exhibiting both internalising problems (i.e. inhibited or over-controlled behaviours including withdrawal, worry and emotional responses that primarily affect the individual child rather than having effects on others) and externalising problems (i.e. a wide range of disruptive, impulsive, angry or hyperactive behaviours which are generally readily observed) had shown signs of these behaviours from 3 to 4 years of age (Prior, Sanson, Smart, & Oberklaid, 2000). Assisting children to manage this potentially challenging transition period and make a positive start to school can help to maintain and foster a positive sense of self (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998) and therefore support their mental health and wellbeing. As highlighted earlier, this is integral to children's academic and social learning. It is also an opportunity to identify children who may require additional assistance and ensure they receive appropriate support before problems become entrenched.

## Getting 'ready' for school

Conventionally, a child's preparedness for school, often referred to as their 'school readiness', proposes that successful transition depends on characteristics and qualities that reside within the child; characteristics that are often closely linked with age or maturation. Such child-focused definitions of school readiness place the locus of responsibility for readiness within the child (Noel, 2010) and are based on an assumption that there is a set of capabilities children must achieve in order to start school (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1995). Such views tend to be limited because they do not take account of the multiple competencies that support children starting school including physical and mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, as well as language and cognitive skills (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2010).

Webster-Stratton and Reid (2004) emphasise that the ability to manage feelings and behaviours and to make meaningful friendships are important influences on school success. According to Fabian and Dunlop (2002), children who are socially and emotionally ready for school are better placed to be able to meet the cognitive challenges accompanying the transition to a new educational stage, the associated changes in their status as a learner and the demands of formal schooling. Contemporary views of school readiness take into account the processes that lead children to acquire these competencies or recognise children's dependence on opportunities within supportive settings that foster their development (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). Denham (2006) argues that it is crucial to children's long-term wellbeing and academic success to adequately assess and establish the areas of strengths and weaknesses in children's social, emotional and cognitive competencies and a program's or school's ability to build on and encourage the development of these competencies. Current views of transition recognise that children do not function in isolation and outcomes are influenced by a range of contextual factors.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (formerly the ecological model) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) highlights the complex layers and processes around the child that influence development both directly and indirectly. This includes the child's individual characteristics and their interactions and experiences with peers, parents and carers, school and preschool staff and within the wider community. It also includes social and cultural influences as well as government

policies and legislation. The ecological model evolved to become the bioecological model to incorporate the process of development through the complex interaction between the biophysiological characteristics of a person and their environmental context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). When transition to school is informed from this perspective, rather than viewing the child in isolation, the multidimensional influences that can support or impact on successful adjustment to the school environment are recognised (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

Many researchers informed by this model, emphasise that children's adjustment to school is not simply about a child's specific skill set, but is shaped by the relationships and interconnections formed between key stakeholders (CEIEC, 2008; Margetts, 2007b; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). There are complex interactions between the individual characteristics of the child (e.g., their knowledge and physical, cognitive, lingual, behavioural, social and emotional development and competencies) and their environment (including home, school and the wider community) and these can influence transition and adjustment to school (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Ladd, et al., 2006). These comprehensive, multidimensional notions of readiness for school tend to be what Dockett and Perry (2009) refer to as 'interactionist'; that is, incorporating concepts of relatedness as well as elements of maturational and environmental theory. Such notions recognise multiple aspects of readiness, including children's readiness and the school's readiness for and responsiveness to children, and the support of the family and community.

In keeping with this, Mashburn and Pianta (2006) argue for a model of 'school readiness' that views it as a function of a web of relational processes among people (e.g., children, teachers, parents and other carers), settings (e.g., home, school and child care), and institutions (e.g., communities, neighbourhoods and governments). As such, they identify the social relationships that children form with peers, parents and carers and teachers as the primary mechanisms through which children acquire school readiness-related competencies. When designing interventions to support school readiness, it is essential to take into account the mediating role of the ecological context and then to incorporate strategies that build and strengthen relationships between children and those adults responsible for their care and education (such as parents and carers and teachers) (CCCH, 2008; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006).

From this theoretical standpoint, school readiness is a variable term and one that is culturally and contextually determined (Wesley, 2003). For example, consider the associated benefits of high-quality preschool programs (where 'quality' is determined in terms of the content, intensity and effectiveness of the preschool program, as informed by policy choices around teacher qualifications, program content, length of day, class size and so forth) and the improved 'readiness' of children who have had access to such programs (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). The context, type and quality of care and prior-to-school experiences have been found to influence the development of skills that can make for a smoother transition process (Margetts, 2002a). A review of the research shows a positive association between children who have attended a high-quality preschool and improved academic and social success once those children start formal school (Espinosa, 2002). High-quality preschool education benefits all children, but particularly those from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds who are most at risk of school failure but often least likely to receive the benefits of good early education (Espinosa, 2002). In this example, the opportunities and experiences to which the child is exposed through attendance (or lack thereof) at a high quality preschool program, has a bearing on their "readiness" for school.

Following on from the growing debate around what constitutes 'school readiness', and whether it is more important for the child to be ready for school or for the school to be ready for the child, it is useful to pay attention to what makes for a smooth and successful transition to school. School readiness, or the extent to which a child is deemed by adults to be ready and to have the intellectual, social and personal competencies to be able to be successful at school, can influence a child's transition experience in that children perceived as 'not ready', especially by their teachers in their first year of school, are more likely to struggle to feel suited to the environment or to meet its expectations (Broström, 2000).

Broström (2000) asserts that not only do children have to be helped to be 'school ready', but that schools have to strive to be 'child ready' and be able to adequately support the child's transition from home or preschool to school (by creating a welcoming environment for families and children and providing adequate home-school communication both before and after the child's transition to school) and be able to cater to the child's psychological and physical needs, perspectives and interests in order to create a sense of 'fit' with the new school environment and a sense of

belonging, wellbeing and capacity for success. 'Ready schools' are synonymous with flexible, adaptable, supportive environments, guided by strong leadership and positive relationships, that are responsive to the children attending and facilitate family engagement and connections with local prior-to-school settings and the broader community (Dockett & Perry, 2008). As such, in reality, 'school readiness' is a multidimensional relational concept that needs to consider multiple factors in order to facilitate a child's smooth transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2008).

### Common behavioural and emotional reactions during the transition to school

As children prepare for and adjust to the new expectations and responsibilities associated with going to school, parents and carers often observe related changes in the behaviour of their children. Children may experience stress during the transition period and respond by regressing to behaviours that are more typical of younger children, such as 'fussiness', bed wetting, thumb sucking, and subsequently may need more attention and comfort (Berne, 2003; Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2006; Linke, 2006).

Children may display a range of different emotions prior to starting school. While some children may be excited at the prospect of starting school, others may be anxious or worried and withdraw (displaying 'internalising' difficulties such as, not participating in previously enjoyed activities and appearing anxious, irritable, fearful or sad), whereas others may act out and display aggressive or oppositional behaviour (displaying 'externalising' difficulties that manifest as verbal or physical aggression, tantrums and refusal to comply with rules and routines) (Kostelnik, et al., 2006; Margetts, 2005; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006).

Many children who enter schooling have been identified by teachers in the US as having difficulty working independently and following instructions (Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2000). Other difficulties that may be apparent in the classroom are difficulties with behavioural regulation (such as the ability to delay gratification, follow instructions and rules, and inhibit impulsive or aggressive behaviour) which may also be accompanied by additional related social and academic adjustment problems at school (Von Suchodoletz, 2009). Children may also be reluctant or refuse to go to school (Connor & Linke, 2008; Linke, 2006).

Whilst reactions such as these can be common as children transition to school and have a tendency to

reduce over time, for some children they may be signs of difficulty adjusting to school (Margetts, 2005). When adjustment difficulties do not decrease there may be a risk of continued problems with school attendance (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews, & Kienhuis, 2010). One way of supporting children during the school transition process is through the early recognition of children at risk of adjustment difficulties (Margetts, 2009).

As part of the KidsMatter Australian Primary Schools Mental Health Initiative, KidsMatter has developed a number of materials which support parents and carers and school staff to be able to recognise and seek assistance when children are showing signs of ongoing difficulties. The resources provide useful information that acknowledge how parents and carers and teachers play an important role in supporting children and can observe the signs of when a child may be having difficulty, for example, with managing their emotions (displayed as anger or anxiety), thoughts (possibly engaging in negative thinking about themselves, such as "I'm no good") and behaviour (having difficulties with working cooperatively and/or making or keeping friends).

The available resources present parents and carers with several suggested options for seeking assistance for their child from talking to teachers or others in regular contact with the child to find out if they have any concerns, to also drawing on other potential sources of help such as the school counsellor, school psychologist or a general practitioner who can discuss various options for helping the child at home and at school. Such information is important to provide throughout transition because, as emphasised previously, transition is a process which happens over time and as such, parents and carers and school staff should be aware that it is possible for transition-related difficulties to emerge later on in the school year, not just when a child first commences formal schooling.

These resources can be obtained from the KidsMatter website at: <http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/resources/information-resources/component-4-early-intervention-for-students-resources/>

### How does one know when a child has made a successful transition and adjustment to school?

The literature tends to define the success of children's transition and adjustment to school in terms of the absence of negative outcomes such as significant distress, avoidance and other problematic behaviours (Dockett & Perry, 2004b). Taking a strengths-based

approach, smooth transitions are generally associated with:

- children feeling secure, relaxed and comfortable (rather than anxious, lonely, confused or upset) in the new school environment; liking school; displaying increased academic and social skills and being able to successfully negotiate the daily social and academic challenges they encounter at school (such as being engaged and displaying interest and motivation to participate in class and school activities, achieving academic progress, being able to establish supportive social ties with peers and teachers, and so on); and developing positive attitudes and feelings about school and learning, together with a sense of wellbeing, belonging and inclusion (Astbury, 2009; Broström, 2000; Ladd, 2003),
- increased likelihood of active family involvement in children's education and the development of mutually respectful relationships between families and educators (Ramey & Ramey, 1994).

The importance of applying a bioecological perspective to transition is especially apparent when it comes to determining whether or not a child has made a successful transition to school. Parents and carers and teachers may share some expectations relating to children's transition to school but, as transition itself is contextually bound and experienced in different ways, it is not surprising that parents and carers and teachers have been known to have very different perceptions and expectations of what makes for a successful transition.

Teachers generally place more emphasis on children's adjustment to the school context, and their attitudes and feelings about being at school and learning, whereas parents focus more on children's academic progress (e.g. reading and counting) than teachers do (CEIEC, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2004b; National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 1995). Teachers' perceptions of adjustment problems of children in their class may reflect a 'poor fit' between children's competencies and aspects of the school classroom context (including teachers' expectations and demands) (Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2000). Furthermore, teachers' judgements of whether children have adjusted may also be affected by factors relating to the ethnicity, culture and socioeconomic status of both the teachers making the judgments and the children being assessed (Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2000). Thus, when evaluating what constitutes a successful

transition, it is important to obtain information from multiple perspectives; that is, that of teachers, children and their families. The quality of the parents' or carers' relationship with school staff and parental involvement in their child's education may also be a valid indicator of a positive transition outcome that can serve to sustain and support the child through further transition points over time (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004).

### Why focus on parents and carers?

The transition to primary school represents an optimal time for engaging and involving parents in their children's education. Researchers argue that parents and carers are more likely to be eager to invest intensive time and care in their children's education, to collaborate with professionals, and attempt to understand and guide their children's development while their children are still young (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002; Izzo, et al., 1999).

The family and effective parenting are central to children's mental health and wellbeing (Raphael, 2000; Tolan & Dodge, 2005). A range of family related protective and risk factors have been identified that can influence children's mental health (e.g. Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000).

With respect to protective factors, positive home environments and secure and supportive family relationships have been associated with resilience and children's ability to cope with adversity (Kay-Lambkin, Kemp, Stafford, & Hazell, 2007; Masten et al., 1999; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007; Thabet, Ibraheem, Shivram, Winter, & Vostanis, 2009). Particularly important are environments characterised by warmth, stability, consistency, family harmony, security and safety, as well as strong family norms and morality (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000). Similarly, positive parenting practices and the presence of caring, responsive and warm parent-child relationships which are secure and consistent have been well documented in the literature as supporting children's mental health and wellbeing, and protecting them from a range of mental health issues including anxiety, depression and behavioural difficulties (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Kay-Lambkin, et al., 2007; Maselko, Kubzansky, Lipsitt, & Buka, 2010; Raphael, 2000). The quality of the parent-child relationship, as well as the relationship between parents or carers, also influence children's academic and social competence and behaviour in early schooling (Cowan & Cowan, 2009). There is also

a positive association between positive parenting practices and children's adjustment, later school success and achievement (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Morrison, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2003; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2008).

Conversely, researchers have identified a range of family-based risk factors which can increase children's likelihood of developing mental health difficulties. These include factors relating to parenting (such as over controlling parenting style, harsh or inconsistent discipline, rejection, lack of warmth and affection), distress associated with grief and loss, trauma, parental mental illness; and parental substance abuse (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Côté et al., 2009; Dwairy, 2010; Field, 2010; Kay-Lambkin, et al., 2007). For example, a longitudinal, population-based study in Australia examined child, parenting and family predictors from early childhood associated with externalising and internalising behavioural problems by age 3 (Bayer, Hiscock, Ukoumunne, Price, & Wake, 2008). Parental stress and harsh discipline were found to predict both externalising and internalising problems in early childhood. Other family risk factors associated with externalising problems included low parental self-efficacy, or confidence in their ability to influence their child's behaviour and development, and poor social support. Those associated with internalising difficulties included parental anxiety and overprotective parenting that modelled a style of coping where feared or anxiety-provoking situations are avoided (Bayer, et al., 2008).

Mental health difficulties in parents or carers can be risk factors for children developing mental health difficulties not only due to a shared genetic vulnerability but also because of the potential negative impact of parental mental health difficulties on parenting (Leinonen, Solantaus, & Punamäki, 2003; Wilson & Durbin, 2010). For example, a recent meta-analysis of the effects of paternal depression on parenting found that depression affects fathers' parenting practices through increasing negative and decreasing positive parenting behaviours. The effect, although small, was significant (Wilson & Durbin, 2010). In mothers, a recent review (Field, 2010) described a variety of deleterious effects of maternal depression, including the mothers' reduced ability to be sensitive to the needs of their children. Furthermore, maternal depression has been associated with increased harsh punishment and compromised caregiving, including feeding and sleep practices. These effects did not discriminate based on culture or socioeconomic status (Field, 2010). In addition to the

negative effects of depression on parenting practices, parental depression is a risk factor for depression in children (Tan & Rey, 2005).

The above highlights the significant role parenting and parental mental health plays in children's mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, providing support to parents and carers during periods that may be stressful and challenging and working to promote family-based protective factors and reduce risk factors is likely to lead to positive outcomes for children's mental health and wellbeing. Starting school is not only a time of potential stress for children but also a period of adjustment for parents and carers (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Parents and carers need to negotiate and adapt to the new social setting, routine and changing relationship with their child (McAllister, Wilson, Green, & Baldwin, 2005), and they are likely to experience a range of emotions and reactions during this time (Dockett & Perry, 2006).

Given the above, is it not surprising, that parents and carers have indicated that they need support to help them respond to these challenges (Dockett & Perry, 2007; McAllister, et al., 2005). Furthermore, supporting families as they support children has been cited as an essential aspect of successful transition programs (Dockett & Perry, 2007) because parents and carers play a central role in preparing children (Dockett & Perry, 2004a; Niesel & Greibel, 2007) and providing continuity as children experience new physical, social and educational contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The transition to school period is an opportunity to provide parenting support and information which not only enables parents and carers to assist children's early adjustment to school but also promotes mental health and wellbeing both during this phase and in the longer term. In fact, it has been argued that improving parenting practices is one of the most effective ways of improving the mental health of children (e.g. Sanders et al., 1999).

## What is the school's role in supporting parents and carers during the transition period?

Schools provide an ideal point for families to access information and support. As an established institution, schools provide an appropriate, non-stigmatising, and universal setting for supporting parenting. Furthermore, teachers, having high community visibility, respect and trust are often consulted by parents or carers with child rearing concerns (Sanders, et al., 1999).

Research suggests that parental involvement is likely to be greater in the early years of schooling (Izzo, et al., 1999) and is therefore an opportunity for schools to work with a larger number of parents and carers providing information and activities that promote positive parenting practices and support children's mental health. The research indicates that school-based interventions, particularly during transition to school, that support effective parenting can help to reduce some family-related risk factors for mental health difficulties (Sanders et al., 2008).

There are a number of ways in which schools can offer support during transition which can be categorised in the following four broad areas as follows:

1. Supporting parental confidence through information
2. Building positive relationships between staff, parents and carers
3. Connecting parents and carers
4. Fostering parent and carer involvement

Effective transition policies and practices also give consideration to these areas and how they relate to children, early childhood staff and the wider school community. KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative provides a range of resources and tools to assist schools to work with key stakeholders during transition as well as focusing on how staff can support parents and carers during this period.

Many of these resources can be downloaded from the KidsMatter Transition website: [www.kidsmatter.com.au/transition](http://www.kidsmatter.com.au/transition)

### Supporting parental confidence through information

A growing body of literature refers to the importance of schools supporting parents and carers in preparing and assisting children to adjust to formal schooling. This includes embedding parenting information into transition practices such as information about challenges children face and how parents and carers can support their child (Giallo, et al., 2010; Margetts, 2000). Better informed parents and carers are less likely to be stressed about their child's transition to school and therefore better able to support their children in adapting to a new school (Margetts, 2007a).

Parental confidence has been highlighted as being an important factor during transition. A synthesis of 21 research papers found that parental confidence in managing transition was associated with children's



subsequent confidence and engagement with school (CEIEC, 2008). Parents and carers who received information and strategies as part of a transition program reported greater efficacy in managing the transition to school and it was argued that this greater self-efficacy was likely to be associated with more positive parenting strategies (Giallo, et al., 2010). Conversely, a link has been identified between lowered parental confidence in being able to manage the transition process and children's lowered levels of school engagement and increased resistance to attending school (Giallo, Kienhuis, Treyvaud, & Mathhews, 2008).

Dockett and Perry (2007) emphasise that while providing information is important, some transition programs view parents as needing to be educated "about the ways of school" (p. 82), which can be alienating. Rather, they suggest, it is important to consider what parents and carers want and value from a home-school relationship and using this as the starting point. Therefore whilst an important aim of school transition practices is to provide information in order to increase parental confidence, it is also important to adopt a strengths-based approach which acknowledges and values the resources, knowledge and experiences of parents and carers (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Therefore, transition practices should seek to work with parents and carers to share knowledge and at the same time recognising existing capabilities and nurturing strengths.

### Building positive relationships between staff and parents and carers

Working with parents and carers during transition requires the development of relationships. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) suggest that positive relationships between school staff and parents and carers enable teachers to provide information that is valued and supportive. These relationships can also support schools by increasing their understanding of children's prior experiences, strengths and needs (CEIEC, 2008). Ideally relationships are initiated before the child begins school as some parents and carers have reported that they find it helpful to get to know the teacher before their child moves into primary school (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Arguably it is the relationship between children, families and schools that provides continuity between prior to school and school experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2007). These relationships help foster a sense of belonging, which Dockett and Perry {, 2005 #2174} point out can influence a child's adjustment to school.

The development of positive relationships involves all groups recognising that each has a valuable contribution to make and having a commitment to reducing any issues of power and vulnerability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002 as cited in Dockett & Perry, 2007). Communication also underpins the development of positive relationships (Dockett & Perry, 2006). It is not just about imparting information but is a two-way reciprocal process. Reciprocal communication recognises that both parents and carers and school staff have valuable information and perspectives to share (Dockett & Perry, 2006) which empowers families and can support the development of positive relationships. For communication to be effective, it is necessary to consider the social and cultural context of children and their families. This may include, for example, relying less on written communication, which can be seen as impersonal, and using more personal or face-to-face methods of communication, particularly with parents and carers from disadvantaged backgrounds (CEIEC, 2008). It has been suggested that these high-quality, positive contacts and open communication between schools and parents and carers are the means to supporting successful transition and ongoing learning (Bartholomew & Gustafsson, 1997).

When schools prioritise and encourage the development of positive relationships with parents and carers during transition it has the potential to have long-term implications for family involvement in children's education (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005) which can have benefits for children both academically and socially (Barnard, 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

### Connecting parents and carers

Supporting parents and carers during the transition period is not limited to providing information and building relationships with school staff. It can also include providing opportunities for families to develop support networks with other families. Families who have positive relationships with other families generally have lower stress levels and more positive interactions with their children (Hayden, De Gioia, & Hadley, 2003) and this in turn can lead to children having more positive education experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2008). In contrast, lack of involvement in children's activities and familial social isolation are considered risk factors for mental health difficulties in children (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000).

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) shows that one in four primary carers feels a lack

of social support from outside the home with parents and carers who are younger, single or born overseas particularly at risk (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008). Overall lower levels of community connectedness are associated with higher levels of reported psychological distress in primary carers. Further, primary carers with low levels of community connectedness have been shown to demonstrate a two fold increase in clinically significant psychological distress when compared with those with higher community connectedness (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008).

Positive interactions with support networks can help to build parental capabilities and confidence in supporting their children's social competencies, reduce family stress and have a positive impact on children's wellbeing (Fox, et al., 2002). Researchers also argue that the development of parental support networks are important as they may assist parents and carers to develop helpful responses to their children that can in turn assist in promoting children's positive adjustment (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005). Moreover, such support networks may also enable parents and carers to 'unlearn' less helpful responses they may have learned in their own childhoods (Gaspar & dos Santos e Paiva, 2004).

A meta-analysis by Andresen and Telleen (1992) found that mothers' perceptions of available social support were related to positive parenting practices. There is also substantial evidence that social support acts as a stress buffering mechanism by promoting the perception that one has the resources to cope with demands, which in turn changes the appraisal of a situation and lowers psychological distress (Cohen, 2004; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Social support is also viewed as having a protective function that can have positive effects on parenting, family wellbeing, and children's resilience in families who have a child with serious emotional problems (Armstrong, et al., 2005).

Given the important place schools have within the community and their contact with parents and carers, they offer the ideal context in which to facilitate the development of support networks. Linking parents and carers with others in the school or wider community during transition is likely to provide them with social support and reduce social isolation at a potentially stressful time for families (Margetts, 2007b).

## Parent and carer involvement

It has been emphasised previously that effective transition programs involve input from parents and carers (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Research conducted in the US suggests that transition to school is smoother when parents and carers are actively involved (Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006). It has been argued that when families and schools work together during transition it is particularly beneficial for children experiencing social and emotional difficulties, as it can help to identify additional support such as parent and carer support groups (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005). Furthermore, when the views and knowledge of parents and carers about their child are valued and incorporated into transition practices, it can assist parents and carers and school staff get to know each other (CEIEC, 2008) and support the school's understanding of children's prior experiences, strengths and needs (CEIEC, 2008; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Schulting et al. (2005) suggest that transition practices may encourage involvement because parents and carers feel more comfortable at school, are more aware of school activities and understand the importance of their involvement. Involvement of parents and carers during transition has been found to be associated with greater involvement in the first term (Giallo, et al., 2010) and the first year of schooling (Schulting, et al., 2005). This is important as parental involvement has been found to have a positive influence on academic achievement and adjustment (Desforges, 2003; Zellman & Waterman, 1998).

The term "involvement", however, has not been well defined within the literature (Georgiou, 1997; Lawson, 2003). Traditional models of family involvement for example centre on the school's agenda with staff telling parents and carers the roles they can play, such as volunteering or helping with homework (Niesel & Greibel, 2007). In other instances, parental involvement has been defined more broadly to encompass participation of parents in every facet of their child's education and development (Georgiou, 1997; Niesel & Greibel, 2007).

Parental involvement can therefore take many forms and be promoted under many different rationales. Epstein (1995) provides a framework of the types of involvement schools can promote. Within the framework, involvement can be viewed at an institutional level (e.g. school invites all families to an event) or at an individual level (parent and teacher conversations). Within this model, involvement can include communicating, volunteering, decision making

and collaborating. This framework encourages schools to provide multiple opportunities where parents and carers can support their child's learning. The model also highlights the role parents and carers play in providing a home environment that supports their children's schooling.

While Epstein's model assists schools to view involvement more broadly, it is also important to consider, and incorporate into planning, parents and carers ideas and definitions of what involvement is and ensure there is a shared understanding in the school community (Lawson, 2003). Niesel and Griebel (2007) suggest moving towards a partnership approach during transition where parents and carers and schools work together to promote the academic and social development of children. By viewing parent and carer involvement in this way, relationships are viewed more equally with each party seeing the other as having an important contribution and shared responsibility for children's education and wellbeing. In such models of parental involvement it is essential that teachers view relationships with parents and carers not only as desirable, but as critical and have a positive attitude towards working with families (Baum & Swick, 2008).

Such an approach is likely to have positive implications for children's school success and related positive effects for mental health and wellbeing (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 2000; Spence, 1996). For example, the research has shown that a collaborative approach, where parents and carers, schools and other organisations work together to promote social and emotional competence, is more likely to yield substantial and sustained improvements (Elias, 2003; Fuller, 2001; Sanders, et al., 1999; Stormshak, Dishion, Light, & Yasui, 2005).

## Working with a range of stakeholders during transition to school

Early childhood services, schools, parents and carers all have an important role to play in supporting children's mental health, wellbeing and development during this period and working together with the wider school community and other key stakeholders (e.g. community services) to increase the likelihood of a successful transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2006). In particular, schools have an opportunity to implement transition

practices that bridge the potential gap between prior-to-school and formal school settings, enhance the mental health and wellbeing of children and support parenting.

When surveying the transition activities offered by many Australian primary schools, considerable variation is evident (Margetts, 2002b). However, a compelling literature base has outlined a number of key elements that, when fostered within a school-based transition program, increase the ease with which children adjust to school and the likelihood that this important childhood milestone will be less stressful (see Dockett & Perry, 2001; Margetts, 2002a). These elements include taking into consideration the complexity and diversity of the transition process by reflecting the voices of parents and carers, preschool and school staff (Margetts, 2007a), and children (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Margetts, 2008); gradually preparing and familiarising children, parents and carers with the changes associated with the transition to formal schooling; and using strategies that allow for continuity in terms of peers, programming for children's learning as well as ongoing communication and expectations between home, preschool, child care and school settings (Margetts, 2002b).

Many schools schedule transition activities to welcome new students and their families to the school community to help ease the transition. However, it is important to differentiate between 'orientation' programs and 'transition to school' programs (Dockett & Perry, 2008). Traditionally, school transition programs have largely provided new families with 'orientation-type' information that has been restricted to the practicalities of attending school, such as a tour of the school building and grounds (e.g., classrooms, administration offices, etc.) and an introduction to teaching staff and school protocols relating to uniforms, school starting and finishing times and so on. Although extensive research has demonstrated the importance of familiarising children with their new school setting (Margetts, 2002a) and addressing children's concerns about the practicalities of starting school, i.e., 'knowing the rules' (Dockett & Perry, 2008), children's social and emotional skills are considered by researchers, educators, and parents and carers alike, to be important in supporting children's adjustment to the new school setting (CEIEC, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Giallo, et al., 2010; Gill, et al., 2006; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

Promoting continuity and facilitating children's adjustment is supported by the involvement of, and collaboration between, a range of stakeholders

(Dockett & Perry, 2006). The US National Center for Early Development and Learning (2002) has argued that transition is best understood in terms of the various settings that contribute towards child development and the connections among these settings at any given time, and across time. In this sense, the transition to school is a process that occurs – and a function of the ecological, dynamic relationships between children, family, teachers and the community in both the prior-to-school and formal school settings – rather than an event that just happens to a child (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

As highlighted earlier, parents and carers are an important resource during transition. Children too deserve a voice which gives recognition to their important contribution to the development of school transition programs (Margetts, 2008). Listening to children and spending time conversing with them about what is happening, what will happen and why, to help orient children to the school environment, relationships and interactions they may encounter, will support their adjustment to the school setting (Dockett & Perry, 1999). It can also help to reveal ideas and issues that do not necessarily occur to adults (Dockett & Perry, 2006).

The child's prior-to-school or early childhood service is another key stakeholder in the transition process. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) highlight that just as relationships between schools, parents and carers provide a bridge between children's prior experiences and school, so too can relationships with early childhood services. For example, when early childhood services and schools work together to share information, they are better able to provide children with consistency and continuity, develop an understanding of children's prior learning and experiences, and create programs that build on existing knowledge, needs, capabilities, experiences and skills base (Ashton et al., 2008; Cassidy, 2005; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

It could be argued that one of the primary means of promoting successful transitions is to establish and maintain a healthy ecology of flexible social connections and social support for children. Ideally these relationships are characterised by quality communication and social contexts that mitigate discontinuities (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). This fits well with key elements in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), which is part of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG, 2006) reform agenda for early childhood education and care.

The framework outlines the principles and practices that support children's learning from birth to five years of age as well as the transition to school, and highlights that providing children with continuity in experiences supports successful transitions. Encouraging a greater alignment in the curricula across preschool and school settings, in addition to greater communication and a shared understanding between preschool and school staff, helps to bridge the qualitative differences between these contexts (Ashton, et al., 2008).

It is not only parents and carers, school staff and early childhood services however who can play a role in transition to school. Astbury (2009) highlights that provisions should be made to ensure that transition practices are tailored to fit local conditions. This can be assisted by involving the wider community, for example, Dockett and Perry (2006) point out that schools often have close connections with different communities – such as religious or cultural communities. Members from such communities can provide essential links between schools and culturally and linguistically diverse families (Dockett & Perry, 2006). A commitment to engaging with community members as well as positive involvement of families has been emphasised as central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's transition to school (Dockett, et al., 2010).

While there is a shortage of literature on Australian transition programs specifically focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children there is, however, some evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children have benefitted from specifically targeted programs (Dockett et al., 2008). These benefits are reflected in improved school attendance, retention and attitudes towards school as well as a stronger sense of community (Dockett, et al., 2008). The authors reported that positive relationships within all levels and between all stakeholders were key to supporting transition and learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

A range of professionals can also offer support during transition, for example, health professionals who may be involved in health screening for children or supporting children with additional needs (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Each community will be different and transition practices should be adapted to the needs of each particular context.

When schools involve a range of stakeholders and strive to build positive relationships between and among participants in the transition process, it can not only support children's adjustment to the school setting

but helps families to build a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community. Further, when these relationships are characterised by reciprocal communication, inclusivity, trust and respect among participants, and which are flexible and responsive to individual school communities, families and children, it helps to ensure more successful transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Margetts, 2002a).

## Promising transition practices

While acknowledging that communities will differ in how they implement transition practices, Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) identified several useful strategies for supporting a positive transition. Some of these are aimed at supporting and preparing children for transition; for example:

- providing opportunities for children to begin developing relationships with school staff prior to school entry,
- extending invitations for children and families to visit the formal school setting in the child's pre-school year,
- allowing for some preparation and dissemination of information via home-learning activities, including providing summer booklists and other literacy activities for the summer months prior to school entry.

Other strategies highlighted by Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) focus on involving and engaging parents and carers in the school community; for example:

- periodic telephonic or face-to-face contact with families of preschoolers (to begin sharing information about the child, their routines and the school setting),
- arranging family meetings prior to the commencement of school to discuss parent and carer and teacher expectations,
- talking to parents and carers about how they can be involved in their child's school,
- providing opportunities to connect with other families (new and otherwise) who have children enrolled at the school,
- distributing information to parents and carers about the transition to school and other related topics such as enrolment guidelines, health and nutrition information to ensure that children enter school healthy etc.,
- conducting home visits before and after children enter school,

- running support groups for parents and carers as their children transition to school,
- encouraging early enrolment so that schools and families can initiate contact and relationship-building well before the start of the new school year,
- where relevant and appropriate, having a bilingual teacher, teacher aide or interpreter available to support families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Additional promising practices and suggestions that aim to support a positive transition include:

- supporting and acknowledging the feelings, concerns and questions of parents and carers relating to the transition to school and how best to support their children in adjusting to the psychological, academic and social aspects of the school environment (Broström, 2000),
- allowing children time and opportunities for some form of gentle induction to enable them to orient themselves and adapt to the social and emotional demands of the school environment, as well as to the intellectual, physical and social expectations of their new teacher (Cassidy, 2005),
- the use of 'Buddy Programs' (i.e., peer-to-peer support strategies for children and sometimes for parents and carers) and social story boards (i.e., documents that visually represent the nature and processes involved in the transition to school in a manner that is meaningful to the individual, such as including photos of the prep teacher, the school environment, and how to get ready for school in the morning) to help with the transition (Astbury, 2009),
- addressing the additional and specific needs of children with disabilities or special needs and those children and families identified as coming from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, disadvantaged and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CEIEC, 2008). This may include the use of portfolios for mapping and supporting intensive, individualised transition processes that encourage participation that is appropriate, culturally and linguistically relevant and that fosters relationship-building and community outreach (CEIEC, 2008).

While this is not an exhaustive list, strategies such as those described above can support sustained engagement with children and families across the transition period (Dockett & Perry, 2009). The literature

also emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for participation in multiple transition activities (rather than single events), and parenting support and education over a wide time-span starting well prior to, during, and after the commencement of primary school (Giallo, Baschuk, & Matthews, 2007; Margetts, 2002a). This has been suggested as particularly important for children with special needs (Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer, & Todd, 2004). As emphasised previously, rather than being a single event or point in time, transition is a process requiring, what Turner-Cobb, Rixon and Jessop (2008) refer to as, “an ongoing life-style adaptation” (p.386). Transition practices that begin prior to the commencement of school and beyond the first few weeks ensure that parents and carers are supported when assisting children to adjust to the initial demands of commencing school, and well into, and even beyond, the first year of school.

### How parents and carers can help their children adjust to the new school setting

It is clear from the literature that providing parents and carers with information about transition to school and strategies they can use to support children is an important part of transition practices. There is evidence indicating that parents and carers may benefit from specific information and support around how to:

1. help their child get ready for school;
2. deal with the common reactions to starting school;
3. increase their child’s skills to become more independent at school;
4. manage their child’s fears and separation anxiety;
5. adjust to new family routines; and
6. assist their child with various school homework tasks such as reading (Giallo, et al., 2010, p. 3).

It may, for example, be pertinent to highlight information for parents about some of the challenges children may have to negotiate as they transition to school, and how children’s transition experience may be influenced by multiple issues, such as:

- the school’s physical facilities (e.g., children perceiving the playground as noisy and frightening or having concerns about how to find their way around the school),
- finding it hard to learn and follow school rules,

- making and keeping friendships,
- having to deal with longer school days and expectations of being more independent,
- having a morning routine associated with going to school,
- the shift away from a natural preference for free play programs to having to adjust to a more structured, formal learning environment (CEIEC, 2008).

A child’s adjustment to school depends on a combination of personal or background factors and environmental factors. As a result, it is not surprising that the nature of the transition process varies between children and across schools and communities (Margetts, 2002b). However a commonality across these different transition experiences is the benefit of support from parents and carers.

There are a range of strategies that parents and carers can use in the context of a caring and nurturing adult–child relationship to foster their child’s skill development in areas relating to growing independence, self-care, making friends, separating from the parent or carer and readiness to learn. The literature contains several practical suggestions of positive strategies that parents and carers can use to support their children’s cognitive, social and emotional development, mental health and wellbeing in preparation for the transition to school and adaption to the new environment. These may include:

- setting up visits to the school grounds on weekends to introduce children to the idea of starting school and to familiarise themselves with the physical surroundings of the school thereby making them more comfortable with the new environment (Dockett, Perry, & Tracey, 1997; Margetts, 2002a),
- engaging in active listening techniques that allow children to express their thoughts, feelings and concerns about starting school (Margetts, 2009),
- ensuring that, from the first day of school, children arrive at school on time and have all the necessary equipment and supplies that they will need such as a packed lunch and snacks, water bottle, sun-hat, gym clothes, stationery and so forth (NSW Parenting Centre & NSW Department of Community Services, 2003),
- practising problem-solving strategies with their children to help them cope with the unexpected (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Margetts, 2009),

- supporting children's social emotional development (Ladd, et al., 2006; McIntyre, et al., 2006; Raver, 2002); for example, by assisting children to learn self-awareness, social awareness, self management, decision-making and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003),
- setting up opportunities for children to get to know some of their peers who will be in the same class as links have been found between having a familiar playmate in the same class and increased academic competence, improved social skills and a reduction in behavioural and adjustment difficulties in children in the first year of school (Margetts, 2002a),
- providing a variety of play experiences and activities such as those also provided in early childhood services, for example, art, dramatic play, science, maths, music and movement, and play with blocks, sand and water (Espinosa, 2002),
- supporting the development of children's social and behavioural skills by encouraging them to take turns, to learn to listen to and follow instructions, to ask for help during school if they do not understand what the teacher is asking them to do and so forth (Margetts, 2009).

Parents and carers can also be supported with high-quality information and strategies that aim to assist children's social and emotional learning. Further suggestions for how parents and carers can help to prepare their children for school and to adjust to the new school setting can be taken from the content and recommendations of effective transition-related parenting programs. A brief overview of the programs found to be more effective follows, with important implications for the development of new relevant and informative transition programs that target parents and carers.

### Parenting programs during the transition period

Another way to support parents and carers in assisting their child to make a positive transition to school is through the use of parenting programs. One of the most important objectives of any parenting initiative is to foster a sense of confidence and self-efficacy in parents and carers in relation to supporting their children during the transition period since research highlights this has implications for children's adjustment to school (CEIEC, 2008; Giallo, et al., 2010). These findings highlight the importance of addressing parent and carer concerns

about the transition to school and providing information about evidence-based strategies for dealing with specific parenting issues during this time. It could be argued that the transition to school is a process that is accompanied by a family transition; therefore, preparation and support is needed not only for children, but for parents and carers too (Griebel, 2000). Transition programs for parents and carers should therefore aim to support and empower the family as a whole (Margetts, 2009). Whilst some schools may already provide information and support to parents and carers as part of their transition programs, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there are few Australia wide programs that systematically target supporting parents and carers during transition to primary school. Two of these are discussed in more detail below as they have conducted evaluations of the effectiveness of their programs.

The AusParenting in Schools Transition to Primary School Parent Program outlined by Giallo et al. (2007) and Giallo et al. (2010) is one example of an Australian, multiple-session, multi-pronged transition program aiming to 1) provide families with an opportunity to learn strategies to support children's adjustment to school; 2) promote family involvement in children's learning at home and at school; and 3) facilitate collaborative partnerships between families and schools that promote schools as a resource and source of information and support on the transition process and raising children. The results of the Transition to Primary School Parent Program studies found that attending parents reported lowered levels of worry and concern about their child's transition process compared to families who only participated in routine transition practices (Giallo, et al., 2007). Furthermore, the parents involved in the program reported higher parental self-efficacy in helping their children make the transition to school and reported greater parental involvement at school during the children's first term than the parents in the standard school transition activities (Giallo, et al., 2010).

Another example is that of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program conducted as part of improving the behaviour of children making the transition to school (McTaggart & Sanders, 2003; Sanders, et al., 2008). These studies both reported improvements in classroom behaviour after attending the program compared with the control schools, and a reduction in behavioural and emotional problems in children commencing school (McTaggart & Sanders, 2003). They also reported a reduction in emotional problems and psychosocial difficulties (but not conduct problems, hyperactivity

and peer relationship difficulties) in both children and their parents who participated in the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program, resulting in reduced problems in children and reduced parental distress during the transition to school period (Sanders, et al., 2008).

The promising findings from these studies suggest the usefulness of coordinated parent support programs and multilevel strategies, and hold implications for the development of such programs. As there is currently only a limited number of parenting programs for the transition to school period available and limited access to these programs, this points to the need for the development of widely available transition programs. Key to ensuring accessibility is the consideration of how to engage all parents and carers, from a variety of socio-economic and culturally diverse contexts, so that they and their children can benefit from the information and support provided by transition programs.

## Reducing barriers affecting parental involvement in children's education

To promote widespread parent and carer participation, it is important that parenting programs incorporate specifically designed strategies to combat many of the well-documented barriers to parent and carer participation and parental involvement in early schooling experiences. There can be inequalities in the amount of involvement some parents and carers have or are able to achieve within the school community. One possible reason for this is a discrepancy between one's culture and the culture of the dominant society or institutions within that society (e.g., minority or immigrant parent and carer groups encounter a greater magnitude and number of challenges to participating within schools) (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Turney & Kao, 2009), as there is a clear social advantage when there is agreement between a person's behaviour and the expected practices in a society (Lee & Bowen, 2006). The amount of parental involvement may also be influenced by the compatibility between the values and culture of the teacher and the parent or carer (Keyes, 2002).

It is important to identify both factors that can place parents and carers in a position of inequality and strategies for overcoming these inequalities to ensure that all families have the opportunity to work in partnership with schools during transition. Developing proactive methods for overcoming these challenges is

likely to be not only be beneficial for engaging parents and carers during the transition period, but also for increasing parental involvement in later years (Schulting, et al., 2005). As discussed above, transition programs are not only a means to assist children to adjust to school, they are also an opportunity to establish partnerships between schools and parents and carers that endure beyond the transition period. As such, the following will consider some of the barriers to parental involvement both during transition, and in children's schooling more broadly.

The factors affecting parental involvement can be broadly categorised into:

- factors relating to parents and carers,
- factors relating to children, and
- factors relating to teachers and schools.

Each of these categories and some possible strategies that may reduce barriers to parental involvement are discussed briefly below. It is important to keep in mind throughout the discussion below that "involvement" is often not defined in the same way across studies, furthermore, the way in which schools themselves define involvement will also influence which barriers are likely to be most relevant to their school communities. Therefore, when considering barriers to parental involvement it will also be critical for schools to consider their own contexts and needs.

### Family involvement in children's schooling: factors relating to parents and carers

There are multiple factors relating to parents and carers that affect their involvement in their children's schooling. Those identified by the literature include:

- the impact of resources and opportunities on ability to engage,
- time availability,
- the expectations of parents and carers regarding their children's performance,
- the recollections of parents and carers about the degree to which their own parents were involved in their schooling,
- the level of self-efficacy of parents and carers in feeling able to help with school activities,
- immigration status and ethnicity of parents and carers and whether or not English is their first language,
- parents' and carers' perceptions of who is primarily responsible for educating their children (role constructions).



Some of these factors are examined more closely below.

In terms of access to resources and opportunities, parents and carers with high socioeconomic status (a higher income and educational level) are more likely to be involved in school than those with lower socioeconomic status (Turney & Kao, 2009). However, parents and carers with lower socioeconomic status do consider it important to be involved (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that parents and carers with lower levels of formal instruction and education are more inclined to see teachers as authoritative figures and can sometimes feel intimidated and reluctant to interact with teachers (Keyes, 2002). However, low socio-economic families may also have less access to resources that enable them to participate (Lareau, 1987). For example, the research has found that transportation difficulties and limited access to child care make it hard for families to attend parenting programs (Astbury, 2009). This is also likely to be the case for single parent or carer families, who often fall within the low income and low wealth group in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Consistent with this, the literature suggests that single parents show less involvement than those with partners (Zellman & Waterman, 1998).

This suggests the importance of finding ways to enhance the accessibility of schools to enable increased parental involvement for all parents and carers. This is particularly important for families with lower economic status, educational levels and single relationship status. These families may not be confident about becoming more involved in their children's education or may be prevented or discouraged from being more involved possibly due to a lack of access to supportive structures (such as babysitters for other children or supportive employers who allow parents and carers to take time off to be involved in school activities). They may also be unable to take time off from work due to financial considerations or for fear of losing their jobs.

Being time-poor and lacking time availability is another factor that influences the level of involvement of parents and carers. One of the most often cited logistical barriers to participation is work schedules. Parents and carers who work part time are more likely to engage in their children's schooling than those who work full time (Muller, 1995; Turney & Kao, 2009), and those with inflexible leave from work have restricted opportunities for involvement in their children's schooling (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Keyes, 2002). Although families living in multigenerational households can have more time to

participate in their children's school activities because of the support provided by grandparents (Bengtson, 2001), it can also mean that different members of the family communicate with teachers on different occasions (Keyes, 2002). For example, for children and families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in rural and remote areas, the role of the nuclear family tends to be superseded by extended family networks that support child development. It is therefore important to consider the implications of how Western (or non-Indigenous) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander definitions of family differ and to tailor parenting and transition interventions accordingly in order to address a range of parental concerns and needs (McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson, & Carapetis, 2008).

It has been suggested in the literature that parents and carers with higher (versus lower) expectations for their children's performance at school are more likely to get involved in their children's schooling (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). In view of this, it may be pertinent for teachers to make an effort to share good news about children with their families. If there is something interesting, positive, or amusing about a child, it is a useful opportunity to interact with parents or carers and engage them. This can also help to create a balance for when instances of poor performance may have to be delivered. Parents and carers and children may come to view parental involvement negatively if communications with school staff are repeatedly negative e.g. poor performance or disruptive behaviour (Lawson, 2003).

It is clear that parental perceptions are an important factor in parents' and carers' involvement in their children's schooling. One explanation given by parents and carers in regard to what limits the help they give their children with school is the belief that they do not have the skills or knowledge to do so (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Parents with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to participate in activities directed at shaping their children's development in different areas, including school (Swick & Broadway, 1997). Abidin (1992) also suggests that parental stress, which is influenced by a range of variables including parent and child characteristics, work, marital relationship, life events and so on, can play a role in parents and carers motivation to utilise available resources. Following this theory in relation to transition to school, the level of parental stress may be a factor influencing parent and carer involvement and participation in transition activities.

Unfamiliarity with other attendees and the school context more generally can also present as a barrier to participation (Turney & Kao, 2009). Recollections by parents and carers of their own parents' involvement with their school experience are another factor that has been identified as affecting parental involvement. In relation to transition specifically, parents with memories of positive involvement of their own parents in their schooling experiences reported more engagement in school transition activities with their children (Barnett & Taylor, 2009). Some parents and carers may also not view the transition to school as being important and may not prioritise these activities (Astbury, 2009).

Beliefs regarding roles are another factor. Parents and carers who believe that they have primary responsibility for their children's educational outcome will be more engaged in their children's schooling than those who believe that educational outcomes are primarily a school responsibility (Keyes, 2002). Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of schools, educators, parents and carers and highlighting the importance of parent-school partnerships in benefiting children's education may help overcome this barrier. For example, proactive efforts could be made to encourage parents and carers to understand their role as partners with teachers and school staff in determining their children's educational outcomes (Keyes, 2002). This is particularly important for transition practices, as it has been suggested that the most effective transition to school programs for all children – and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and disadvantaged children and families in particular – are based on building positive relationships between parents and carers, children and teachers (CEIEC, 2008).

Another factor affecting parental involvement is immigration status. One study conducted in the US indicated that, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and barriers for participation, immigrant parents were much less likely to get involved in their children's primary school experience than their native-born counterparts. Among foreign-born parents, increased time living in the country was associated with more participation in school activities, although this was less so in groups that felt more marginalised (Turney & Kao, 2009).

The ethnicity of parents and carers can also play a role, for example, this same study indicated that foreign-born parents (of Hispanic and Asian origin) and native-born African-American parents felt less welcomed at school, which created a barrier to participation in their children's schooling, when compared to their native-

born Caucasian counterparts (Turney & Kao, 2009). Interestingly, being aware of racism has been related negatively with parents' involvement at school, but positively associated to involvement in school activities at home (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003). A review of transition programs in Australia found that transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children tend to focus on changing the parents and carers and children and few on changing the school context (CEIEC, 2008). However, it has been argued that when schools are flexible and responsive to the needs of children (and their families), parents and carers are more likely to be involved in a meaningful way (Dockett & Perry, 2006). For example, schools might implement a meaningful and culturally relevant curriculum from the first days of school and include multilingual learning environments that are appropriate and relevant to local families (CEIEC, 2008).

Having English as a second language is another potential challenge to the engagement of parents and carers in their children's schooling. For example, in the US, foreign-born parents reported language as being a barrier to participation at school in comparison with their native-born counterparts (Turney & Kao, 2009). One way of engaging these parents and carers might be for schools to use specific materials for those with English as a second language and to try to develop networks of parents and carers with the same language background who might help each other understand the functioning of the school system. Within the school, classroom teachers can play a key role in delivering information to parents and carers with language difficulties or who may have problems understanding some information (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

What becomes apparent from all the above findings is that parents and carers want to be treated with respect and as equals by school staff and to avoid a relationship of the 'professional-client' type (Lindle, 1989). With this in mind, Parent Involvement Coordinators could serve to provide leadership to parents and carers (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991), especially to those from minority groups, so that they feel empowered to see themselves as co-owners of their children's schooling process (in Australia this role may have a variety of titles and can differ across states e.g., Parent Liaison Officer, Community Liaison Officer etc. and usually refers to an individual employed by the school community to facilitate effective partnerships among school staff, students, parents and carers, and the wider community).

Possible strategies for maximising inclusivity and accessibility for parents and carers with backgrounds involving potential language and educational barriers, reduced access to resources and opportunities or reduced time availability could take many forms. Some promising practices are listed below:

- In terms of tackling possible low parental educational levels, any material or resource developed should be written simply and avoid educational jargon (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory [SEDL], 2000).
- For full-time workers with lower socioeconomic status, an open-ended consultation approach to planning and organising activities should be considered, giving these parents and carers some sense of control over the process (Coco, Goos, & Kostogriz, 2007), particularly because in most cases their working conditions do not allow them to organise their own time and so be free to participate in school activities like other parents and carers with more freedom within their employment (Trotman, 2001).
- Strategies such as providing parenting programs at various times (i.e., during the day and after school) and arranging access to child care can partly ensure that the sessions are accessible by the vast majority of parents and carers (SEDL, 2000).
- Similarly, involving respected members of the various parent and carer communities in the program delivery, providing access to translated resources and providing relevant information via translators will assist in engaging families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities (SEDL, 2000).

The above discussion highlights some of the barriers that have emerged from the literature, however, the most effective strategies for reducing barriers for parents and carers are likely to be those that take into consideration the individual situations of the parents and carers in each particular school community.

### Family engagement in children's schooling: factors relating to children

In addition to parental factors affecting involvement, the engagement of parents and carers in their children's schooling also seems to vary depending on certain child-related factors, including the child's age and stage of schooling, academic progress and achievement levels. For example, parents and carers are typically more involved in, and receptive to,

parenting support and education leading up to their child's commencement of school (Giallo, et al., 2007; Izzo, et al., 1999). The level of parental involvement then decreases as children move into higher year levels at school (Griffith, 1998; Izzo, et al., 1999). Consistent with this, parents of children in earlier years of schooling tend to rate the importance of being involved more highly than parents with children in the higher year levels (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). However, it is important to note that parent and carer participation in educational activities at home tend to remain stable over time (Izzo, et al., 1999).

The above findings lend further weight to the importance of relationship-building and the introduction of strategies promoting parental involvement during the transition period as it appears that engaging parents and carers early on in a child's education is key in encouraging future parental involvement in their children's schooling (Schulting, et al., 2005). As such, parenting initiatives need to engage parents and carers early, and implement a range of strategies aimed at sustaining their engagement and involvement in the school community across the schooling period (i.e., ensuring the information is highly practical and relevant, providing social activities and opportunities to develop connections with other parents and carers, etc.).

Parental involvement may also be related to children's academic progress. It appears that parents and carers are more likely to engage in their children's schooling when they perceive that their involvement is actually necessary or will benefit their children's academic progress. For example, Drummond and Stipek (2004) found that when parents rate their children's achievement in reading as low, they may be more likely to get involved as it is more relevant to them at that point to help their children learn to read. In contrast, parents and carers may be less likely to get involved when they perceive their involvement to be unnecessary, for example, Zellman and Waterman (1998) found that children with a higher IQ had mothers who were less involved with their school activities. The most common explanation given by parents for not helping their children with school work is that they did not believe their children needed help because they were already doing well (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Nevertheless this relationship is far from clear for it has also been found that when children show higher (versus lower) achievement in an earlier grade, their parents are more likely to be involved with their children's schooling in that grade than in subsequent grades (Englund, et al., 2004; Turney & Kao, 2009).

In the context of the transition to school, such contrasting findings reinforce the value of transition programs that overtly emphasise the link between increased parental participation in children's education and better academic and mental health outcomes for all children regardless of the level of academic achievement. Thus parent and carer involvement includes a broad range of activities (Epstein, 1995). Parents and carers can (and may already) be involved in a range of activities that support children's learning such as providing stimulating activities and supporting their child's social and emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003; Walker & Berthelsen, 2009).

### Family engagement in children's schooling: factors relating to teaching staff and schools

Other barriers to engaging families in children's education that have been identified in the literature relate to specific teaching practices. These include difficulties around communication; the perceptions, attitudes and expectations held by teachers, educators and educational systems around parental participation and involvement; and teachers' sense of self-efficacy around being able to engage parents and carers in school-related activities.

In terms of communication with parents and carers, it appears that parents and carers are more likely to be involved in their children's education when teachers recommend that they help (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). Furthermore regular and effective communication between the school and parents and carers have been found to be associated with increased parental involvement in both primary and secondary school populations (Ames, de Stefano, Watkins, & Sheldon, 1995; Shirvani, 2007).

How teachers interpret parental participation also has a role to play in how much effort they make to engage certain parents or carers. For example, Lee and Bowen (2006) suggested that teachers may perceive a lower level of parental involvement at school as a sign that parents care less about their children's performance. If parents or carers are viewed in this negative light, without considering all the obstacles and different levels and ways of participating, this could reduce attempts to engage those parents and carers – ultimately disadvantaging the student (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). In order to reduce the possibility of this occurring, it is suggested that school staff strive to understand the specific circumstances of each

individual family, remain receptive to their perspectives and endeavour to empower parents and carers by providing information and resources and allowing parents and carers to make the decision as to how they will use the information provided (Centre for Community Child Health – Royal Children's Hospital, 2006). This once again suggests the importance of promoting collaborative home–school partnerships and multiple opportunities for parental involvement both during the transition period and beyond.

The preferences and attitudes held by school staff in regard to parental participation can also influence parents' and carers' involvement in their children's schooling. For example, a US survey of school staff found low support for parental involvement in decision making about the curriculum and the administration and governance of the school and low ratings of current parent involvement in these types of decision (Stallworth, 1982). Conversely the study found high support for parental involvement in home learning and supporting school activities and high ratings of current parent involvement in these areas. This suggests that schools staff involved in this study had more traditional views around the role of parents and carers in the school community (Niesel & Greibel, 2007) rather than recognising a parental role in decision making (Epstein, 1995).

One of the potential reasons school staff may view parental involvement negatively is the belief that the benefits of parental involvement do not outweigh the problems entailed (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). This highlights the need to promote awareness in schools of the potential benefits for both children and the school community of involving and collaborating with parents and carers in a range of ways including decision making. Attempts to increase involvement are unlikely to be successful if staff do not view parental involvement as important or are not motivated to proactively encourage or seek to understand how parents and carers want to be involved. It follows that providing teachers with a clear explanation of the benefits of parental participation, including their teaching programs, and the school as a whole is likely to help motivate teachers to involve parents and carers more (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). It also points to the importance of supporting school staff to work through the challenges or barriers they perceive to parental involvement.

In addition to perceptions about the value of involvement, staff perceptions of their ability to involve parents and carers may also be an important factor.

The literature indicates that some teachers do not have confidence in their ability to engage parents and carers (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Keyes, 2002) and that teachers are perhaps less trained in family involvement than staff in early childcare settings and other education professionals (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). In order to assist teachers in overcoming potential difficulties relating to their perceptions of their self-efficacy in being able to engage parents and carers, Anderson and Minke (2007) suggest that training should be undertaken to develop the specific communication skills that teachers require to engage parents more effectively. Teachers' beliefs that they are effective in teaching has been found to be positively correlated with parental involvement in conferences, volunteering and home tutoring (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1987). Therefore, specific training for teachers could help them to feel more comfortable and confident with different types of interactions with parents and carers. Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman & Cox (1999 as cited in Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004) emphasise a proactive approach to involving parents and carers that entails:

1. 'reaching out' – schools attempting to communicate with families and preschools to develop a relationship and define how to build up effective transition practices
2. 'reaching backwards' – schools attempting to establish links with families before the start of primary school
3. 'reaching with appropriate intensity' – schools developing communication strategies that reflect different levels of involvement, ranging from pamphlet distribution to ongoing or regular personal contact.

Considering the evidence of the positive impact of parental participation in their children's schooling, the importance of schools being proactive in the process of engaging families is clear. Although teachers are the drivers of the home-school partnership (Keyes, 2002), even prior to the start of school, such partnerships need to be a two-way process to be effective. Parental involvement is encouraged when parents and carers and schools have a shared understanding of involvement as playing an active, integral and valued part of children's schooling rather than being something peripheral. The transition to school period is an ideal time to establish parental engagement in children's schooling and sets an important precedent for parental involvement throughout children's years at school.

### Further suggestions for engaging parents during the transition period

The importance of relationship-building, maintaining open communication, encouraging parental involvement and strategies for achieving this as part of a transition to school program for parents and carers have been discussed above. Some additional approaches when making efforts to engage and consult with parents and carers in the school community have been suggested by SEDL (2000). These include the utilisation of:

1. forums – school community meetings with more than 30 participants and one facilitator who leads a discussion on a specific topic making sure that all voices are heard
2. study circles – meetings of 10 to 15 participants representing different sectors of the school community who gather over a couple of weeks to discuss and finally find solutions to a defined issue or concern
3. focus groups – groups used to gather information about the opinion of different members of the community on a given issue, with the data obtained being used to inform policies or written materials.

In addition to consultation, there are many levels at which schools can facilitate parents and carers becoming more involved in their children's schooling once school has commenced (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Consistent with Epstein's (1995) framework discussed above, Greenwood and Hickman (1991) suggest a range of activities and strategies, including:

- Providing opportunities for parents and carers to be involved as an audience, for example, parent-teacher conferences, open school events, parental attendance at classroom activities and events, communication through child-delivered notes, and parent counselling. These classic forms of communication could then be used as the first step toward encouraging parents and carers towards forming a partnership with the school for their children's schooling (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).
- Encouraging parental involvement as volunteers or paraprofessionals by collaborating with parents' and carers' to ascertain their interests, strengths and availability, and then planning and coordinating meaningful tasks so that their skills and the learning opportunities of

the students are optimised (Epstein, 1995; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

- Planning and developing materials for families to use at home with their children (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). This creates continuity between home and school, assists with facilitating families' sense of connection to the school, allows parents and carers to show their children that they value education and provides opportunities for parents and carers who are unable to attend school events to be involved (Izzo, et al., 1999). Furthermore, children's participation in home educational activities with parents and carers is predictive of academic achievement (Izzo, et al., 1999).
- Providing opportunities or links for parents and carers to get involved as learners for example by participating in workshops about parenting, child development, or English as a second language (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Lawson, 2003).
- Inviting parents and carers to be involved in decision making at the school (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Epstein, 1995; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991).

Given the range of constraints placed on parents and carers and their potential uneasiness around how and when to become involved, it is important that schools are welcoming and proactive in supporting parents and carers to engage on a level that is appropriate for them. Ideally, schools communicate with parents and carers to gain an understanding of how they would like to be involved and work collaboratively with them to develop mutually agreeable activities. Regardless of how parents and carers participate, they have an integral role in their child's learning. It is important for all members of the school community to recognise and value the roles that each member plays in supporting children's learning and well-being.

## Conclusion

The transition to school period is an ideal time to develop positive relationships between school staff and parents and carers, establishing a pattern of involvement that can continue as children progress through school. It is clear that a school-based program that focuses on assisting parents and carers in supporting their children's mental health and wellbeing throughout the transition to school period is a valuable practice for schools, families and the community.

The value of transition to school programs is increasingly recognised and many schools already have some resources in place to support transition. Many of these existing programs, however, focus on orientation, whilst a growing amount of literature highlights the complexity of social and emotional factors that influence the success of a child's transition and adjustment (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Giallo, et al., 2010). Transition is also mediated by a multitude of factors, including child and family factors, learning experiences and opportunities, and the school environment. Therefore, taking consideration of a range of factors using a bioecological perspective and being aware of the multiple influences on transition is important in developing transition to school programs.

The evidence relating to effective transition programs suggests that there are several key elements that should be considered when developing and implementing new transition programs; these elements include gradually preparing and familiarising children and parents and carers with the new school environment and the changes associated with the transition to formal schooling; using strategies that ensure some continuity (in terms of peers and programming for children's learning); and establishing ongoing communication between home, preschool, child care and school settings as well as the wider community. The literature also highlights the importance of taking into consideration the diverse needs of each child and family, and the unique setting of each school and community. In addition, the provision of practical and relevant information to parents and carers is essential. Providing parents and carers with information that explains how to support their child in getting 'ready' for school, the common behaviours and issues that children experience during transition, how to identify whether their child is transitioning well or whether there are signs of difficulties that may be cause for concern, will assist families to cope during this time.

Assisting parents and carers to support their child's social and emotional skills will not only be beneficial during the transition to school, but will also provide them with skills that support their mental health in the short and long term. Children with good mental health are better able to learn and develop stronger relationships with teachers at school. One of the advantages of conducting a children's Mental Health Initiative within the school setting is the opportunity to access a large number of parents and carers. To achieve best participation of parents and carers with children at their school it is crucial that schools attempt to address potential barriers to involvement in order to engage all parents and carers. Promoting strategies to assist schools in being inclusive of parents and carers who may have different backgrounds to the majority of the community or have fewer resources to be able to participate is essential.

The literature highlights the important role parents and carers and school can play during the transition to primary school. Supporting parental confidence and enhancing their knowledge and understanding of the school context, as well as promoting involvement and collaboration within the school community, both during transition and beyond, promotes positive outcomes

for children in the short and long term. Schools are ideally placed to assist parents and carers during this potentially stressful period through the provision of parenting support and education. Schools also play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community for children and parents and carers which not only supports children's adjustment during transition, but helps to promote mental health and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000).

The KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative is an evidence based initiative which aims to support schools, parents and carers during the transition period and to equip them with knowledge, skills and resources to enable children to have a positive start to school. Through four information sessions for parents and carers and related resources and materials, the Initiative seeks to promote the development of positive relationships and collaboration between school staff, parents and carers and the wider community, and to increase support for children and their families during this potentially challenging time and thereby also assist schools in the promotion of children's mental health and wellbeing.

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