

## **Transition to school. What children think about how it works and how it is going to be different things.**

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### **Abstract**

Becoming a school child involves interpreting information and constructing understandings about school. It is important that the voices of children are sought and used to validate and improve school transition practices. This paper reports the perspectives of 54 children from 4 different schools in Melbourne Australia about what new entrant children need to know as they start school. Children participated in small focus group interviews during the first year of schooling and again in the following year. Children's responses were categorised in relation to emerging issues around peer relationships, school rules, general procedures, classrooms, academic skills and emotions and feelings. Some differences were noted between children's perspectives in the first year of school and in the following year. The playground was a key focus of children's responses including concerns about their own safety and would benefit from deeper investigation. The perspectives expressed in this study can be used to inform understandings about transition to school and issues associated with children's adjustment to school.

### **Starting school**

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

There is general agreement that the success of the transition to school and adaptation to the new physical, social and academic contexts is mediated on many fronts including: child, family, school and community. From the perspectives of young children, starting school '... means learning and achievement' (Niesel & Griebel, 2001, p. 8). It is a time when learning and education becomes formalised, when relationships with others and conformity to rules and expectations become a measure of success. Children's social and affective wellbeing and learning are important and can make the difference between a child progressing well or experiencing ongoing difficulties. As suggested by Niesel and Griebel (2007), it is the coping process that makes starting school a transition and not the event itself.

### **Children's agency**

Becoming a school child involves mastering the intricacies of a complex social environment. The ability to establish relationships and interact with others contributes strongly to children's wellbeing and learning. How well children understand their own role and the ability to interpret and respond to the feelings and intentions of others is important (Fabian, 2000; Porath, 2003). So often, as noted by Johansson (2007) these relationships are constructed by ongoing negotiations between children and between children and adults in their struggles for power. These interactions are reliant on the use of social and affective skills such as cooperation, assertion and self control, and the ability to control one's emotional responses (Margetts, 2004). Skills related to literacy and numeracy are also important (Margetts, 2006) and the tasks requiring these skills are often unfamiliar to children.

Rules are inherent in a complex social environment and for young children commencing school 'conformity to rules and expectations is a major challenge' (Pollard, 1996 cited by Fabian, 2000, p.6). Knowing and understanding school rules empowers children and provides them with a sense of agency, of being in control and able to function effectively within the school (Dockett & Perry, 2002 cited in Einarsdottir, 2007; Johansson, 2007).

The reality of the child's view may differ from that of adults (Heinzel, 2000, cited in Griebel & Niesel, 2000). Further differentiation of experiences and perspectives occurs through the individuality of personality and experience that each child brings to their impressions and interactions within the school. By listening to and analysing the 'voices' of children who have been directly involved in the transition to school process, an important dimension is added to the voices of parents and teachers.

## The Study

This project investigated the perspectives of children in the first year of schooling (year prior to Year 1 which is known as Prep in Victoria), and one year later (Year 1), about what they believed new children commencing school need to know about starting school. Responses across the two year levels were also compared.

Fifty-four children participated in this project and were drawn from three government primary schools and one private school in Melbourne Australia. They were first interviewed in the first year of schooling after having attended school for seven months. This time frame was chosen as it provided children with time to become familiar with different aspects and challenges of schooling and at the same time for memories of starting school to be relatively fresh. Children were interviewed again, almost 12 months later, when they were in Year 1 of school and had opportunities to observe the transition to school of a new group of children. Two of the schools involved had preschools attached (a private and a government school) and schools comprised families from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Small focus group interviews were conducted with children mostly in groups of three although there were two groups of two children and two groups of four children. The use of small focus groups has been used in previous research by Dockett and Perry (1999), Einarsdottir (2003), Peters (2000), and Griebel and Niesel (2000) in relation to children's experiences or expectations of starting school. Interviewing children about starting school acknowledges their agency in their own schooling and enables their voices to be heard among the voices of teachers, parents and academics.

Interviews were audio recorded with school, parent and child permission. Children were asked simple questions: firstly – 'What do you think new children starting school need to know?' and each child in the focus groups was given opportunities to contribute ideas. The key questions were chosen as it was believed that by depersonalising the questions and creating a situation where the children were empowered to give advice, children would be able to reflect their own experiences and interpretations of school in a non-threatening way.

Audio recordings of each focus group were transcribed and analysed independently by the two interviewers to identify emerging or repetitive types of responses and to validate decisions. Responses in the first year of school (prep) generally related to relationships and interactions with others, procedures, feelings about school, and academic skills. These were categorised into six main themes relating to knowing about: peer relationships; school rules; general procedures; classrooms; academic skills; and feelings. A smaller category, 'Other' included items not in the main themes. These themes were used to categorise children's responses to the interviews in Year 1. If a child provided the same response more than once or referred to the same issue more than once, these were coded only once.

## Results

Children's responses to the question 'What do you think new children starting school need to know' resulted in 248 coded responses in the prep year and 242 in Year 1. Eighty-eight and 128 coded responses (respectively) were received in response to the question, 'What can schools do to help children who are starting school?' Responses categories are summarised in Table 1 and explained in more detail in the following sub-sections..

A similar number of responses were made in both years to the question about what new children need to know about starting school. However, there was a 14.5% increase in the number of responses in Year 1 about how schools can help. This increase may reflect greater knowledge and understanding of the school system.

TABLE 1 Response categories by year level

Response category	Prep year		Year 1	
	Number of responses	%	Number of responses	%
Peer Relationships	70	28.2	49	20.2
School Rules	36	14.5	19	7.9
General Procedures	26	10.5	47	19.4
Classrooms and Teachers	23	9.2	24	9.9
Emotions/Feelings	14	5.7	16	6.6
Academic Skills	68	27.4	79	32.6
Other	11	4.4	8	3.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>248</b>		<b>242</b>	

### **Peer relationships**

Responses categorised in relation to knowing about peer relationships and what schools can do are presented in Table 2. While there were fewer responses in this category in Year 1, many were very similar in both year levels and included those associated with prosocial skills including friendships, knowing children’s names, considering the feelings of others, sharing and taking turns. One student in Prep tellingly noted the importance of children being responsible for themselves - (they) *have to be responsible for themselves sometimes*. Many of the concerns raised about relationships were presented in the context of playground difficulties.

TABLE 2 Knowing about peer relationships

Prep year			Year 1		
Knowing about peer relationships	n	%	Knowing about peer relationships	n	%
friendships, being a buddy	24	34.3	friendships, being a buddy	11	22.4
knowing names	5	7.1	knowing names	8	16.3
being nice, not being mean, helping, including other, sharing, taking turns	18	25.7	being nice, not being mean, helping, caring, playing together, manners, sharing	12	24.5
not hurting, being gentle	15	21.4	not hurting, not hitting, not swearing	9	18.4
not bullying, how to deal with bullying	7	10.0	not bullying, not bossing, dealing with bullying	9	18.4
being responsible for one self	1	1.4			
	<b>70</b>			<b>49</b>	

A high number of responses about what new children need to know in the Prep year related to friendships – more than double those in Year 1. For example:

In both years, knowing children’s names was important for some children, and this appeared to assist in the establishment and cementing of friendships

*Knowing who all their school friends are...You need to know your school friends like if you’re playing you won’t call then different names you have to call them their right name (prep)*

*They have to learn their teachers names and other people in their class. I was keeping on saying ‘what’s your name?’ (year 1)*

The reliance on teachers in the playground appeared to be less of an issue for the children in Year 1 compared to when they were in prep as illustrated in the following examples. This may be a result of their adaptation to the lack of teacher support available in the playground and increasing reliance on and confidence in older children.

*Teachers can help them if they get hurt (prep)*

*You don’t always have to tell on them first thing, you can work it out...and if they agree you don’t have to tell on them (year 1)*

### **School Rules**

Social institutions usually have a set of clearly articulated rules for protecting members of the group and setting standards for behaviour. Schools are no exception and as noted in Table 3, thirty-six responses in the prep year and nineteen responses in Year 1, related to knowing school rules, awareness of consequences, being good (not bad), avoiding or not getting into trouble and playing safely.

TABLE 3 Knowing about school rules

Prep year			Year 1		
Knowing about rules	n	%	Knowing about rules	n	%
knowing the rules	17	47.2	knowing the rules	16	84.0
consequences of breaking rules	7	19.4	consequences of breaking rules	1	5.2
being good, not being bad, avoiding trouble	11	30.6	being good, not being bad,	1	5.2
play safely	1	2.8	play safely	1	5.2
	<b>36</b>			<b>19</b>	

Knowing and remembering the school rules was referred to often and difficulties doing this seemed to be accepted as a rite of passage as noted in the following examples:

*L: Yep, like Bradley he doesn’t know a bit of the school rules.*

*E: Yeah, because he’s a new boy. (prep)*

*They try to follow all the rules but they really can’t (year 1)*

### General Procedures

In contrast to issues around school rules, the number of comments about the need for new children to know about general procedures increased in Year 1 compared with responses in the prep year (see Table 4). These involved knowing what to do (actions), where to go (locations), and timing of routines. There was a notable increase in comments about uniforms/clothing in Year 1. Procedures were often recited in lists such as:

*Hold hands and don't push and bring your hat to school and carry your own bags (year 1)*

TABLE 4 Knowing about school procedures

Prep Year			Year 1		
Knowing about school procedures	n	%	Knowing about school procedures	n	%
actions – what to do, asking for help, lining up with partner, responding to bells, doing show and tell	12	46.2	actions – what to do, asking for help, lining up with partner, responding to bells, doing show and tell	16	34.0
shoe laces	1	3.8	uniform/clothes/shoes	11	23.4
locations – where to go, toilet	6	23.1	locations – where to go, toilet	11	23.4
time – for lunch, for music, for lining up	4	15.4	time – for lunch, for music, for lining up	2	4.2
how it works	2	7.7	how it works	3	6.4
how it is different	1	3.8			
			toilets	3	6.4
			understanding what words mean	1	2.1
	<b>26</b>			<b>47</b>	

While knowing procedures are similar to rules, they were distinguished from school rules mainly because children did not refer to them as rules.

### Classrooms and teachers

Another category of responses related to knowing about classroom procedures including information about the teacher, the classroom and how to behave in the classroom (Table 5). The number of response in each year level was similar but in Year 1 there was an increased range of responses related to classroom rules and procedures.

The items in Table 5 are self explanatory and very close to children's own words and do not need repeating as narrative.

TABLE 5 Knowing about classrooms and teachers

Prep Year			Year 1		
Knowing about classrooms	n	%	Knowing about classrooms	n	%
about teacher, teacher's name	6	26.0	about teacher, teacher's name	5	20.8
what classroom is like	4	17.3	what classroom is like; what class in	2	8.3
listening to teacher, doing what teacher says	5	21.7	listening to teacher, doing what teacher says	6	25.0
procedures – being quiet, asking permission, sitting on mat, crossing legs, hands up, show and tell	8	34.7	procedures – being quiet, asking permission, sitting on mat, hands up, show and tell, speak clearly, pack away/tidy up, hold pencil correctly, be patient, wait for teacher before changing classes	11	45.8
	<b>23</b>			<b>24</b>	

### Feelings and emotions

Children in both year levels noted that beginning children should have positive feelings – not be scared, feel safe (Table 6). Most frequently in prep this involved 'not feeling scared' whereas responses by children in Year 1 were more differentiated and included being confident. The responses acknowledge that being scared is a valid feeling as children start school but that schools are really not scary.

Interestingly, in Year 1 but not in the interviews in the prep year, children referred to their own feelings of being worried or nervous when they commenced school and that children starting school needed to know they might feel like this. *Well because they're nervous and because there is so much rules (year 1).*

TABLE 6 Knowing about feelings

Prep Year			Year 1		
Knowing about feelings	n	%	Knowing about feelings	n	%
not feeling scared	8	57.1	not feeling scared	2	12.5
feeling safe	2	14.3	feeling safe		
not being shy	2	14.3	enjoying school		
taking risks	1	7.1	be brave	1	6.2
enjoying school	1	7.1	be confident	4	25.0
			being worried	6	37.4
			being nervous	3	18.7
	<b>14</b>			<b>16</b>	

### Academic skills

Academic skills were referred to in 68 responses in the prep year and 79 responses one year later. The spread of responses was very similar from one year to the next, with slight increases in responses related to maths and drawing/art in Year 1 as can be seen in Table 7. These skills related to learning generally, and also to specific domains of learning. Most frequently, responses related to literacy (writing, knowledge of alphabet and phonics, reading), followed by maths and numeracy, drawing or doing art, and knowing how to learn or work.

TABLE 7 Knowing about academic skills and learning

Prep			Year 1		
Knowing academic skills	n	%	Help for academics/learning	n	%
writing, writing own name	24	35.3	writing, writing own name	28	35.4
reading	15	22.1	reading	15	19.0
alphabet, letter sounds	6	8.9	alphabet, letter sounds	7	8.8
knowing words	3	4.4	knowing words, spelling	4	5.0
maths, numbers	10	14.7	maths, numbers	14	17.7
drawing, doing art	4	5.9	drawing, doing art	7	8.8
knowing how to learn things, doing hard work	6	8.9	knowing how to learn things, doing hard work, learning about the world	4	5.0
	<b>68</b>			<b>79</b>	

### Discussion

Children's responses to the question 'What do new children commencing school need to know about starting school?' reflect and add to current understandings including the voices of children, parents and teachers about starting school. They add a personal depth not usually evident in the considerations of adults. The children in this study referred to the importance of knowing about relationships and interactions with others, school rules, procedures and ways of doing things, classrooms and teachers, feelings, and academic skills. Children's responses support the notion that social, affective and learning competencies are important for children as they start school.

Knowing about how to make friends and deal with interactions including pro-social skills and the ability to deal with bullying were noted frequently. This supports the findings of Dockett and Perry (1999), Griebel and Neisel (2000) and Peters (2000) about the importance of friends and of social interactions, and the suggestion of Johanssen (2007) that relationships at school are shaped and characterised by negotiation and power struggles. Frequent mention of not being hurt, or hurting, particularly in relation to the playground is cause for concern and suggests that children's needs for physical and emotional safety are not being sufficiently met.

Children's suggestions about how school can help with relationships reflects the recommendation by Smith (2003) that children need to be supported in developing social and emotional skills for dealing with playground contexts. There is a need for deeper investigations into these issues and the impact of increased presence of teachers in the playground for children's sense of wellbeing and competence.

As noted by Dockett and Perry (1999), procedural or task rules were important such as how to line up or respond to bells, or where the toilet was located. Knowing the school rules and acceptable ways to behave appears to provide a sense of safety and emotional wellbeing.

Knowledge related to learning and the curriculum was important in both year levels, including how to learn, how to do hard work, and knowledge related to literacy and numeracy. The strong focus by children on the importance of knowing how to write and knowing the alphabet and letter sounds, along with suggestions that teachers could help them sounding letters and words, suggest that these skills are a challenge to new entrant children. They may also be an important means of measuring one's competence as a school child.

There was a high level of consistency in the range of children's responses in the Prep year and Year 1 what new children starting school need to know. The decrease in responses about school rules in Year 1 was counteracted by the increase in responses related to general procedures in that year. The consistency of responses across both interview periods provides evidence for the validity of children's perspectives about starting school. The voices of children about starting school validate the perspectives of adults, rather than the other way around.

Children's agency in contributing to the development of school transition programs should be recognised. It is important that the voices of children are used to inform transition programs and practices through seeking and responding to the magnitude of the challenges facing children as they commence school and their suggestions for how school can help.

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