Personal, family and social influences on children's early school adjustment.

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As children start school they are faced with many challenges. Personal challenges occur as children take on a new identity and the behaviours and demands of being a school child (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dunlop, 2000). Children must also adjust to strange buildings and classrooms, new school and teacher expectations, new academic challenges, and they need to mix with a new and more diverse group of children (Cleave, Jowett & Bate, 1982; Ledger, Smith & Rich, 1998). In addition, children from rural areas often have to travel by school bus, and spend long hours away from home.

Class sizes and the ratio of staff to children changes at school. There is an increase in waiting times, and the daily schedule is more structured, with more formal rules and routines. Children are faced with large groups of children of different ages and size especially during assembly and playtime, and they are confronted with the challenges of making new friends. Toilets are often located away from classrooms and play areas. There are more buildings and the playgrounds are bigger.

Successful adjustment to school partly depends on past experiences and on children possessing the skills and knowledge to respond to the demands of the school setting (Dockett, Perry & Tracey, 1997; Fabian, 2000). When children exhibit a range of social skills associated with cooperation, initiating interactions or assertion, and self control, they are more likely to adjust easily to school. Difficulties are likely to arise when children are: non compliant; disorganised; distractible; or when they are anti social and have difficulty considering the rights of others (Margetts, 2002).

Adjustment to schooling is influenced by a variety of personal and family characteristics, societal trends, contextual and life experiences (Reynolds, Weissberg & Kasprow, 1992). The ecological model of child development acknowledges that children's development and adjustment to school is mediated at a personal level through the child's direct and indirect experiences with the world, and at the micro-level through the interactions of the child's personal characteristics with the

immediate environment that forms the basis of the child's daily life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). It is the interaction of the child's personal characteristics and their experiences that ultimately determines how a child adjusts to school (Margetts, 2002).

The twentieth century notion of mothers assuming responsibility for raising children is being challenged by changes to family structure, work patterns and the availability of child care outside the family. Within the ecological framework, these family and societal trends have implications for children's development and particularly their adjustment to school. Thus with increasing numbers of children experiencing different types of parental and non-parental child care for varying hours, there is concern about the influence of different types of care on children's development and their progress in school.

In adopting an ecological approach to the notion of early school adjustment, this paper reports the findings of a recent study designed to explore and add to the knowledge about the complexity of relationships between children's personal characteristics, family demographics, school factors, child care histories and adjustment to the first year of schooling. Careful consideration of this range of influences provides insight into factors that support children as they make the transition to school, or predispose them to risk of poor adjustment. Strategies for supporting children's adjustment to school will be addressed.

Method

Participants were 212 children from 12 preparatory classrooms across 4 Melbourne metropolitan government primary schools. Children were aged between 52 months and 80 months ($M = 66.87$, sd 4.23). Of these children, 122 were male (57.5%) and 90 were female (42.5%), ($M = 0.42$, sd 0.50). Adjustment to schooling was measured using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (Gresham & Elliott) Teacher Form (Elementary Level). This rating scale was completed by classroom teachers after nine weeks of schooling for each child in the study, and consists of 57 items in three domains: social skills; problem behaviours; academic. A parent questionnaire was used to obtain background information about children's personal characteristics, family demographics, school transition information, and child care histories. Analyses of variance and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were employed to determine which variables best accounted for most of the variance in the dependent or outcome

variables and to determine the significance or otherwise of these contributions.

Results

The results of this study suggest that children's personal characteristics, family and school factors in the first year of schooling are important in explaining the influences on different social, behavioural and academic aspects of adjustment in the first year of schooling. The study also found variations in measures of children's adjustment to school associated with their child care histories, and highlighted that more out-of-home child care in the early years had a greater impact on children's adjustment than less extensive out-of-home child care arrangements.

This study has also shown that children at particular ages, with particular child care experiences, from particular socio-cultural groups, and with particular school experiences are particularly vulnerable to adjustment difficulties.

<u>Personal characteristics</u>

Gender, relative age, birth order and language/s spoken at home predicted a range of adjustment outcomes.

<u>Family demographics in the first year of schooling</u>

Parental levels of employment, and socio-economic status impacted on school adjustment. Increased risks for social skills, behaviour and academic competence were revealed for children in families who received government family payments and where the father was not in full-time employment when children commenced schooling.

<u>School factors</u>

Children's participation in greater numbers of transition activities (optimally 6 or more) reliably predicted higher levels of confidence, self-control, overall social skills, and academic competence. Attendance at before-school care was strongly associated with externalising behaviour, hyperactivity, and overall problem behaviour. Given that 17.4% of children attended before-school care, this predictor of poor adjustment outcomes deserves further attention.

Prior-to-school care

The different types, and extent of regular parental and non-parental care arrangements for children in each of the 5 years prior to the first year of schooling were identified, including: centre-based child care, 3-year-old preschool, 4-year-old preschool, family day care, occasional care, nanny care, grandparent care, care by neighbours, friends or others, father care, and mother care.

Generally the type of care itself was neither advantageous nor detrimental for children's adjustment, although after allowing for the influence of personal, family and school factors, attendance at 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool provided significant benefits in terms of social skills and academic competence.

The timing and extent of different types of care was more significant and predicted advantages and risks for children as they commenced school. For example, there were some benefits to children of more extensive regular father care or mother care in all but the year immediately prior to schooling. However, more extensive non-parental care per week in the years closest to birth had a greater impact on children's adjustment than less extensive non-parental care. In some years, more extensive grandparent care was associated with higher levels of problem behaviours and lower levels of academic competence in different years prior to schooling. In the year immediately prior to school, more regular care by neighbours, friends or others was associated with lower levels of a range of social skills and problem behaviours and more days of mother care, especially 5 to 7 days per week, with higher levels of internalising behaviour.

Particularly strong results were found in relation to extensive attendance at centre-based child care. Children who attended this care for more days (4 or 5) per week or more than 30 hours per week were at risk of lower measures of social skills and academic competence, and more problem behaviours. The results were particularly strong in relation to the extent of care in the 2 years closer to birth and developmental outcomes.

Attendance at preschool predicted benefits for children in relation to cooperation, self-control lower levels of externalising behaviour, and higher levels of academic competence. higher levels of cooperation, self-control and academic competence, and more hours per week predicted lower levels of problem behaviour.

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Implications

In combination with different child care influences, significant personal characteristics of children, family demographics and school factors in the first year of schooling, contribute to our understanding of children's early school adjustment.

Given the significant benefits of children's participation in greater numbers of transition experiences for social and academic adjustment outcomes in the first year of schooling, children and their families should be given many opportunities both formal and informal, to visit the school prior to commencement as part of a comprehensive transition program. Transition programs should provide children and parents with opportunities to become familiar with the school environment and its procedures and practices.

The impact of extensive attendance at centre-based child care on children's adjustment to school cannot be ignored. Taken together with results from a previous study (Margetts, 1997) which revealed that only 2% of schools contacted child care centres about children's adjustment to school, it is imperative that links and flexible practices are developed between child care centres and schools to enable children to participate in transition experiences.

Schools should be encouraged to provide additional or targeted opportunities for children who are at risk of adjustment difficulties; those from low socio-economic backgrounds, who only speak languages other than English at home, and children who do not attend preschool.

Attendance at before-school care was significantly associated with poor behavioural outcome. In general families should be discouraged from using before-school care, particularly in the early months of schooling, but this is not easy given parental employment commitments. An alternative strategy could be a change to earlier staring times for schools. Given the trends toward greater use of non-parental outside-school-hours care there is a need to explore the conditions and influences of this care in more detail and to consider strategies for addressing any detrimental outcomes.

Other studies (Ladd & Price, 1987; Margetts, 1997) have suggested that the presence of a familiar playmate in the same class supports children's adjustment to school and is related to higher levels of social skills and academic competence, and lower levels

of problem behaviour. In response to this, it is important that transition strategies are developed for recognising friendships in allocating children to classes such as placing children from the same preschool or child care centre in the same class, and in encouraging the development of friendships for children who may commence school without a familiar playmate.

Children's adjustment to school is fostered when they develop the following attitudes, skills and knowledge:

  confidence in their own abilities

  responsibility for their own actions and behaviours

  socially valued academic skills and conceptual knowledge

  independence and self reliance

  concentration and perseverance

  the ability to share, take turns, cooperate and follow reasonable instructions

The diversity and complexity of school transition needs to be valued and understood by teachers as they support children moving into the first year of school. As well as developing effective transition programs in the year prior to commencement, teachers should reflect on the extent to which practices in the early weeks of schooling are responsive to the diversity of children's backgrounds, needs and abilities. The kinds of experiences that children encounter as they make sense of relatively new surroundings, routines and procedures and learn what behaviour is considered appropriate may have far reaching effects on their social and academic success.

When carefully planned transition programs are developed so that changes and new experiences are introduced gradually and children and their families are supported in the process, the unfamiliar will become familiar, children will feel more secure, and they should adjust to school more easily.

An executive summary of the research reported in this paper 'Child care arrangements, personal, family and school influences on children's adjustment to the first year of schooling' is available on the following website; http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/ by following the link to Australia

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