

Preparing for the transition to school.....

A snapshot of research and early childhood practices to support children in preparing for the school environment.

By Jodie Turley (January 2016)

In my role as an early childhood consultant and University lecturer, I am often asked about 'School Readiness' programs in early childhood centres. This area of research is a great passion of mine and I have spent many years researching and teaching in early childhood programs where a key concern amongst educators and parents is often around effectively preparing children for the school environment.

The transition to school can be a smooth and enjoyable experience, one tackled with enthusiasm and excitement, or it can be a challenging and overwhelming one for all involved. The experience often depends on the "tools" that each individual child has when the big day arrives.

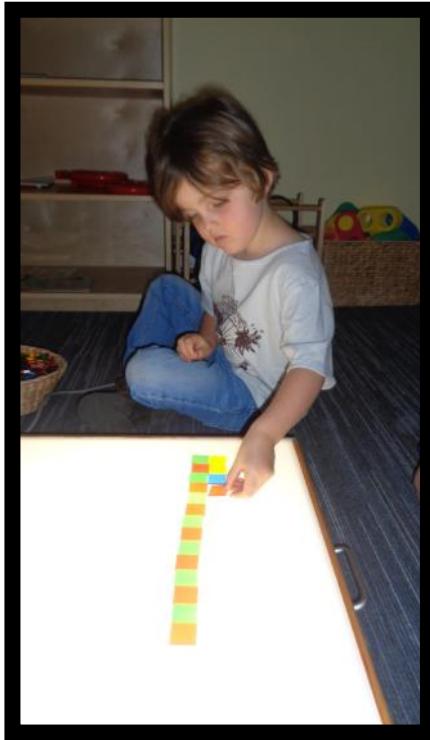
I have had the pleasure of interviewing Olive (aged 6) who transitioned from My Stepping Stones (MSS), a long day Childcare Centre at Leichhardt to school in early 2014, and Olive's mum, Samantha, who also experienced this change for the first time. I have spoken with (MSS) educators and centre directors and made observations of learning programs and

environments. Their responses, my observations and extensive published research confirm that quality play environments are essential to future success.



More than just reading and writing

Interestingly, the measure of school readiness is not based on children's early numeracy and literacy abilities. School readiness is far more holistic. For children to be ready for school they need to have the physical, emotional, social and psychological capacity to deal with the demands of both the school classroom and the school playground. Olives' mum Samantha agreed. She emphasised the importance of being able to adapt socially and emotionally and recalled the many and complex relationships that children encounter in the school environment. It's imperative that children can make friends, establish new and positive relationships, share, take turns, resolve conflicts and co-operate. Extensive international research has provided strong evidence that suggests a holistic approach; one that develops an extensive range of skills and abilities and prepares children to be lifelong learners is essential for a smooth transition to "big school".



Setting the scene for a lifelong love of learning

The first year of school sets the tone for children's attitudes towards and their enjoyment of school. When children have a positive start to school, when they take the leap and discover that they have the right tools, then they are likely to experience personal, social and academic success.

“Children who have a positive start to school are likely to regard school as an important place and to have positive expectations of their ability to learn and succeed at school”

Being able to self regulate their own behaviour, tackle learning with imagination and creativity, and to focus and persist when faced with new problems and challenges all help children put their best foot forward when starting school. All of these learning dispositions are formed well before starting at 'big school'.

Brain power

DID YOU KNOW that the brain is the only organ not fully developed at birth. The brain literally needs to be wired. Pathways need to be created and the way to do this is through quality sensory experiences. The MSS educators, through quality planned and spontaneous experiences, direct brain cells and create new neurological pathways. Rich and meaningful experiences that provide opportunity for repetition and mastery is key. Children require lots of opportunity for practice and the weekly program and daily spontaneous experiences allow for ample opportunities for this. The brain operates on a “use it or lose it” principal and educators draw on their creativity and knowledge to provide experiences that are interesting and engaging to cement important pathways. At MSS Leichhardt, Cathy (the Director), is adamant that developing the skills for a successful transition to school must start from the youngest of age (yes, even in the nursery!), through supporting the development of those learning dispositions mentioned above. The children and families are lucky to have educators that acknowledge the importance of developing a love for lifelong learning.

Learning to learn.....

Providing children with the skills that they need to actually learn is vital. Children need to have the capacity to continue with a task once it has been set, to listen to and follow instructions, and to have a desire to learn. The educators employ specific and carefully planned strategies and teaching methods to help ensure that the children have strong learning skills. When speaking with Olive about what she was learning at school, she confidently told me about “poetic devices”, adding that

she particularly liked personification (and yes, she was able to expertly explain exactly what personification means). She revealed that “capacity” was her favourite thing to learn about. Olive has the skills to actually listen to, process, interpret and remember her learning and this is a credit to both MSS and her family. Each year Olive is building important foundations for future more complex learning and this is possible because she knows HOW to learn.



How ? (Play looks easy, but is super complex)

If someone told you that there was a completely harmless pill that your child could take to help them become an enthusiastic learner, one who had a deep well of knowledge to draw on, a rich foundation to build more complex maths and literacy skills upon, confidence in their own ability to tackle a problem head on while applying creativity and abstract thought to solve it, could regulate their own behaviour and apply well developed strategies to ensure they had positive friendships and relationships would you give

it to your child? Well, while it’s not actually a pill, there is something that provides young children with all of that and **much, much more**. It’s PLAY. Can it be that simple? Can play be that powerful? Can it offer so much promise? Research tells us that the answer is a huge resounding YES.

“ Confident young players become lifelong learners who are capable of independent , abstract thought and who feel able to take risks in order to solve problems and gain understanding (Elkind, 2007).



Facilitating learning through environments and interactions

MSS educators are well aware of the importance of play and its role in preparing children for school. They use this knowledge to provide a program that builds on the children's innate desire to play and they understand the importance of interacting with the children at opportune 'teachable' moments to increase the children's knowledge and skills.

Expressing themselves using well developed language skills is vital to establishing important relationships at school and asking for help within the classroom. *Understanding* language is just as important if children are going to comprehend and then incorporate all the new learning that they are exposed to each day. The pre-schoolers eagerly engaged with me, asking,

listening to and answering questions and demonstrating a keen enthusiasm to share their ideas. They were articulate and expressed themselves with passion and detail. Their confidence was a reflection of how well supported they felt within their classroom. An environment where children feel safe and secure is vital if children are to discover, learn and thrive.



The pre-schoolers revealed that they expected to "draw", "write", and "work, work, work" when they go to school.



The tools to learn.....

In order to learn, to read and write, and to attain numeracy skills there are foundational skills that must be present. Bypassing these essential skills will mean that children's academic success may eventually falter. As academic requirements become more complex children need to draw on previously established skills and understanding.

A lot of the learning and preparation for school at MSS may go unnoticed to the casual eye.

It's all connected.....

DID YOU KNOW that when the children are threading and doing obstacle courses they are actually working on achieving fluency between the left and right sides of the brain as preparation to read and write and motor planning so that they can follow the tasks that are required of them in the classroom? When you see children involved in drawing, painting, puzzle activities and ball play, staff are actually

using intentional teaching methods to promote these very important skills.

During our conversation Olive discussed the importance of pencil grip and neat writing at school. At MSS the children are involved in specific manipulative activities such as play dough, building and sand play to further develop finger and hand strength ready for the fine motor

demands of school. Cathy discussed the MSS belief that while focusing on pencil grip through age appropriate experiences was part of their school readiness program, staff are careful to take an individual approach acknowledging that children are ready at different times. This respect for individual differences means that children can confidently grow and develop at their own pace.

And don't forget about routines.....



Simple routine tasks can go unnoticed and possibly be dismissed easily as mundane tasks. But don't underestimate their importance.

Much of the pre-schoolers focus when discussing school was centred around lunch time. They seemed excited about taking a lunch box, back pack and drink bottle. Samantha made a point of drawing attention to essential practical

skills such as opening and closing their lunch boxes, putting on their own jumpers and being responsible for their own belongings. Developing independence and self help skills are important if children are to feel confident and capable at school. Samantha praised the dedication of the staff at MSS in ensuring that the children had ample opportunities to practice these skills.

Your in the right hands.....

The transition to school is a significant step in the lives of young children and their families - however the foundations for its success are set much earlier. The opportunity to play, to experiment and to make amazing discoveries, to succeed and to fail in a safe and supportive environment, to understand and practice many strategies in order to solve problems and negotiate

with others, to develop pride and self-esteem as well as resilience, to be a creative and intuitive thinker rather than a 'programmed' one, will enable children to become lifelong learners and innovators that are positive members of their community. I'm pleased to say that educators at MSS are working hard to support the development of those foundational skills to enable

children to thrive not only in their first year of school, but throughout their futures. The confidence, strong language skills, well developed learning skills and social strategies demonstrated by Olive and the pre-schoolers was clear evidence of the competency and capabilities of the staff who are to be commended for providing such a supportive and nurturing learning environment.

About the author

Jodie Turley is a lecturer and researcher with the Faculty of Education at The Australian Catholic University. She has over 25 years experience in early childhood programs. Jodie has undertaken significant research in the area of brain development and learning and established a well regarded learning activities business, Hop Skip Jump Kids.

Jodie herself is a current Masters of Education Student at the University of Wollongong where she will continue her already significant research into brain development.

