

The Transition to School: Experiences of parents of Young Children with a Disability

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Background

- The transition from play-based preparatory programs to the full-time academic program of school presents children with a range of social, behavioural and academic challenges (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000)
 - Most children make the transition to school successfully
 - Children with developmental disabilities have additional support needs and are at high risk for poor school adjustment (Guralnick et al., 2006)

- The nature of parent support provision is critical (Dempsey, Keen Pennel, Reilly & Neilands, 2009)
 - Parents of children with disabilities experience higher levels of parenting stress (Boyd, 2002)
 - There has been little attention to the roles parents of young children with disabilities play in their children's transition to school
 - Research on parents' experiences of services, support and parenting as their children make the transition to school is clearly needed

- Successful transition can be defined as
 - a child's level of engagement in the classroom
 - his/her social, emotional and behavioural adjustment (school adjustment).
- School adjustment is mediated by:
 - The quality of the teacher-child relationship
 - Teachers' provision of emotional and instructional support
 - Parental involvement in their children's education

The Transition to School Project

- A longitudinal research project funded by the Australian Research Council
- Commenced with a pilot study in 2008
- The study will follow 200 children with additional needs as they make the transition to school
- Data is collected across three years:
 - Time 1 - Early Childhood Developmental Program (ECDP) and Preparatory Program
 - Time 2 - First year of school
 - Time 3 - Second year of school

Research objective

- The study will examine the extent to which school adjustment in inclusive preschool programs, and school adjustment in the first two years of mainstream schooling , are predicted by concurrent and prior teacher-child relationships, teacher support and parent involvement, for children with developmental disabilities.

Measures

Teacher questionnaire

- Once per year across three years
- Nature of the child's involvement in the classroom
- Program and services received
- Measures of child's learning and behavioural competencies
- Classroom practices
- Level of engagement of the child in the program
- Teacher's demographic background

Development assessment of the child

- In the first year of the study
- Bracken Basic Concepts Scale
- Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test

Telephone interview with the parent of the child

- Once per year across three years
- Nature of child's health/disability
- Child and parent well-being and adjustment
- History of early education programs/ services accessed
- Parental involvement in programs
- Family demographics

Pilot Phase

- 22 children (19 boys, 3 girls)
 - Child age range 5 years 6 months to 6 years 9 months
 - Children attending both an Early Childhood Developmental Program (ECDP) and a mainstream preparatory program in a regular school
- 22 Parents (4 fathers, 18 mothers)
 - Age range 30 – 55 years
 - 16 parents employed (5 full-time)
 - 13 parents had completed post school qualifications
 - 3 Certificate, 5 Diploma, 5 Bachelor degree
- Parent questionnaire data
 - What do families think about the ECDP and the preparatory program staff?
 - How well are parents coping?
 - How do parents feel about their parenting?

The staff at the ECDP /prep program... .

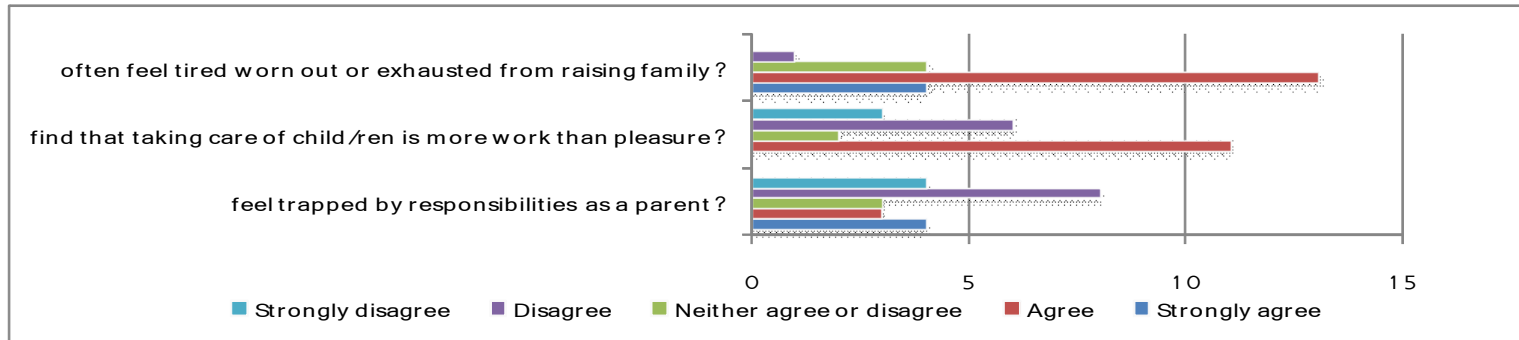
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither Agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Help me to gain knowledge and skills about what I can do to help my child learn	14 / 8	6 / 8	1 / 3		1 / 1
Let me know about the good things my child does	15 / 12	5 / 6	1 / 1	1	
Treat my child with respect	18 / 15	4 / 4		1	
Value my opinion about what my child needs to learn	14 / 16	8 / 2	1	1	
Are available when I need to talk	13 / 13	7 / 6		1	2
Are honest with me	14 / 15	8 / 5			
Use words/ explanations that I understand	16 / 15	6 / 5			
Show respect for my family's values and beliefs	15 / 16	7 / 4			
Pay attention to what I have to say	15 / 16	6 / 3	1	1	
Are friendly	16 / 16	6 / 3		1	

■ = ECDP ■ = Prep program

How would you rate the amount of support your child is getting through the school system?
More than needed n = 3
About the right amount n = 7

Less than needed n = 10

Sometimes people are stressed by their parenting responsibilities. Do you ever.....



How well do you think you are coping?

Extremely well n = 2

Very well n = 6

Fairly well n = 13

A little = n = 1

In the past year have you had two consecutive weeks or more during which you have felt sad, blue or depressed?

No = 10

Yes = 12

Summary of Results

- Most parents were happy with the staff at the ECDP and Prep programs that their children attended, parents felt that:
 - Their children were treated with respect;
 - Staff used words and explanations that parents understood;
 - Staff were friendly and valued their opinions
- However, 10 parents felt that their children were receiving less support than they needed

Summary of Results

- Many parents often felt tired worn out or exhausted from raising their family and over half the parents felt that taking care of their children was more work than pleasure.
 - 13 parents indicated that they were only coping “fairly well” while 1 parent was only coping “a little”
- Of concern are the 12 parents who indicated that they had experienced a significant episode of depression in the last year.

Conclusions

- Family-centred support, based on family systems theory (Turnbull et al., 1999), is an approach to service provision which focuses on **strengthening family functioning** and **supporting parents in their parenting roles**.
- Family-centred and responsive support can potentially reduce stress and enhance parenting competence (Dempsey et al., 2009).
- Given that over half the parents in our pilot study reported experiencing a depressive episode in the previous year and many parents appeared to be experiencing stress related to their parenting role, **family-centred support could be a means by which support staff can facilitate positive outcomes for children and families**.

Conclusions

- In line with a family-centred approach, it is important that support provided encourages family participation in decision making about their child's program and ongoing parent involvement.
- In conclusion, our results support previous literature which has indicated that parents of young children with disabilities experience higher levels of parenting stress than parents of typically developing children and highlight the importance of a focus on the role of transition-to-school programs and how these can support families and children's adjustment in the early school years.