



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Working Together

Key findings from conversations with families:
School Transition

Prepared by TasCOSS for the Department of Education, Tasmania
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**INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE**

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Executive Summary

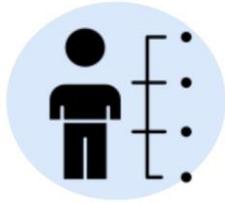
“[Working Together] was a great idea, it was awesome. I wish I had have had the same sort of program with my eldest child. It was great, [name’s] grown so much. I’ve seen a huge difference in them, so before going to big school this year they blossomed. They were coming home singing different songs, teaching me and [their sibling], and playing games that they’d learned. It was good.”

Talking to families this year, it was clear they were extremely pleased with the way that Working Together (WT) had assisted them to prepare for the transition into kindergarten. All families valued the growth and development they’d seen in their children. Many expressed astonishment at just how easy starting school actually was, but on reflection realised that this was helped by the fact that at WT their children had learned to be confident and independent, become used to a structured routine, learned a great deal from skilful educators, and had a chance to socialise with peers.

Parents and carers were appreciative of the fact that holistic supports existed through the formal structures of WT – through educators, engagement workers, and other service professionals. They also recognised that support arose through the connections that were made out into the community throughout their year engaged in the early learning opportunity.

The below ratings out of five, are an average of all families scores and tell the story of WT’s success clearly.

Preparing Child



5

Preparing Parent



5

Overall Satisfaction



4.9

Where there were downsides and marks deducted was where the things that families identified as working well had broken down.

When routine was interrupted or disturbed, such as over the summer break, families were concerned about the effects on their children and their ability to continue to prepare them for school. While families were thrilled by the growth and development of skills they saw, for some, comparisons to other children or their own expectations caused concern about preparedness. And while holistic support proved a boon for many families when avenues of support were unclear, daunting or withdrawn, some families were at a loss.

None of these challenges were total, nor were they enough to dampen the enthusiasm families had for WT and the opportunities it provided. All interviewed families indicated they would recommend WT to other families, most responded with 'definitely!'

Introduction

School transition check-in conversations took place between March and April 2020 with twelve families from the pilot cohort of Working Together. The respondents included 6 families in the North and North-West and six in the South of the state. Of the final interview cohort of eighteen families interviewed by TasCOSS at the end of 2019, five had children that were not yet attending school. One other family was contacted, but was unable to give an interview.

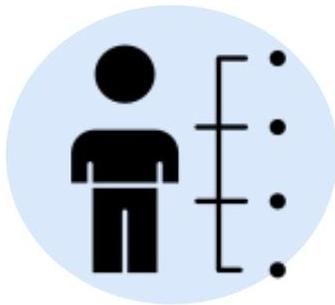
These interviews focused on how the transition to kindergarten had been for families. Families were asked to rate on a scale from 1-5 how WT had prepared their children and themselves for kindergarten, and their satisfaction with WT. The average score for each of these indicators is presented below.

Families were also asked how the period between finishing at WT and starting at kindergarten went and for reflections on what additional support they might have required in the transition.

A small 'In Focus' section at the end presents an overview analysis of school transition which touches on the broader environment in which WT is operating, and presents opportunities for adaptation on the state, community and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service level.

Preparing children for school transition

Families believed that WT had contributed significantly to the preparation of their children for school. All twelve interviewed families rated WT as 5/5 (the highest) on this measure. The most commonly cited successes and challenges associated with the transition from WT to school are presented below.



5



Building and maintaining routines



Overcoming separation issues

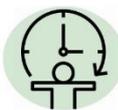


Interruption of routine



Perceived skill development

Top successes:



Building and maintaining routines

Nine out of the twelve families interviewed believed that WT had helped their children to build and become accustomed to routines which aided in the transition to school.

"[Name] picked up the routine really well. They knows to go in, put the bag up, put their name up. I was a bit amazed they were so quick with all that, but when I saw them at day care a couple of times they got used to the routine and expectations. I think WT helped with that."

Ten out of twelve families had also participated in another program, including pre-kinder, Launch into Learning, play group or activities through Child and Family Centres (CFCs). Families largely saw the benefit of a mixed approach to involvement in pre-schooling initiatives.

"I think pre-kinder helped because they did pre-kinder in the classroom that [name's] in now, and with the same teacher."

Though for some families, the proliferation of alternatives became confusing or burdensome.

"We didn't do anything else, we were doing WT3. Got asked if I wanted to do LiL [Launch into Learning], or another preschool program. Because we were doing so much already, and custody is split, I kept them for myself a bit when I could."



Overcoming separation issues

Separation anxiety and separation issues were a big concern for families last year. What families found heading into school this year, however was that involvement in WT had helped to reduce this, smoothing the way to school. Many parents described their shock and delight at finding the school drop-off to be relatively smooth.

“The first day of school I dropped [name] off and they were happy as. Didn’t cry, just walked off, went and played and that was it. If they never went to day care like we did, they wouldn’t have just went in like that.”

Parents and carers spoke widely of improvements in confidence and independence as a result of time spent at WT where children were guided by skilled educators and learning to navigate new settings independently.

“I think it really was helpful because it allowed [name] to be comfortable knowing that I drop them off somewhere and pick them up again. So they’re having that time away from me but feeling independent, I guess.”

Other successes:

Social outcomes

Families identified a number of social outcomes of participating in WT that they believed helped their children to thrive at school. These included:

- Increased positive social exposure for children with other children and adults
- Advances in children’s communication skills and emotional intelligence
- A cohort effect, where friendships built at WT and carried across to school

The positive cohort effect was identified strongly by a number of families as providing a familiarity which greatly assisted the transition.

“For [name] to have a familiar child in the same class was absolutely awesome, it was a huge help to actually settle in. [Name] was just wanting to play with [friend] and it’s an awesome distraction to help get settled into class. Because last year it was a lot of meltdowns, crying for five minutes even after I leave, but it’s the total opposite now.”

Skill development

A number of parents identified more specific skills and learning as benefiting the transition to school. These included things such as:

- Learning letters and numbers; and
- Toilet training

“WT helped probably with the learning. I could have done that at home I suppose, but I didn’t, and a lot of others may not have been able to.”

Top challenges:



Interruption of routine

Five out of the twelve families felt that the gap between finishing WT was a difficult period for children with the change in routine having a negative effect on children's learning and behaviour before school. Three suggested that an extension of WT or other access to care could be considered to help.

"The thing I didn't quite understand was that when you guys cut it off, the transition dropped a bit because they went for a couple of months without the extra days. It kinda took them out of the routine."

Children whose parents or carers were working or overloaded with many children and other responsibilities were at greater risk of this disruption as it was harder to maintain sufficient routine and engagement at home.



Perceived skill development

Families wanted to know that their children were set up for success. A small number of families felt that their children had not learned sufficient skills to make a completely successful transition to school or that they were behind other children.

"It's very confronting, very different. Especially when they're not quite up to the standard they should be at."

"Maybe some more writing skills, and a bit more practice with their own name. I know they do it at kinder as well, but a bit more letter association even in games and stuff".



Opportunities for Improvement

The following opportunities were identified through conversations with families:

- Facilitate cohort transitions where possible
- Structure WT offerings to minimise time out of care over summer holidays
- Extend WT offerings to cover summer holidays
- Provide resources and activities for children over break
- Provide clear information on developmental expectations on entering kindergarten

Preparing parents and carers for school transition

Parents and carers believed that WT had been a significant help in preparing to send their children to school. All twelve interviewed families rated WT as 5/5 on this measure. The most commonly cited successes and challenges associated with the transition from WT to school are presented below.



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Support provided through WT



Community Connections



Holiday break



Support access

Top successes:



Support provided through WT

Echoing the findings of last year’s conversations, parents felt strongly supported throughout WT. This support extended to the school transition.

Ten out of twelve families reported that they had received specific transition help, advice or assistance from educators and staff at ECEC services. This included general check-ins and follow ups, provision of specific information, introductions to schools and teachers, sharing of transition information, assistance with forms or other documentation, and other assistance as requested.

“The educators made sure I knew everything – they rang up to make sure I knew when my orientation was, et cetera. They offered if I needed any help planning...”

Families also identified engagement workers and other support staff through the Department of Education as assisting in the transition. A number noted that integrated support was a huge help in understanding and planning for the transition to school.

“I’d be able to sit down and talk to them about it. The engagement worker and educators helped me. They wrote letters to help with the process of moving [name] to school. I really appreciated them doing that. Someone from the other primary school, where we did some LiL, helped as well.”

“They were always saying ‘reach out if there’s anything we can do’, so the offers were always there. I didn’t take them up on anything, I didn’t feel like I needed anything particular.”



Community Connections

A number of families reported that, similarly to their children, connections they had made with other parents and carers through WT were helpful in the transition period. Having others to go through the process with and lean on for support and understanding was valued.

“I’ve somewhat befriended [another parent from ECEC service] since then, and she and I actually went out for a coffee straight after dropping the kids off. It’s calmed my nerves a little.”

Other factors identified as helpful by families was having family or other friends to assist with care and planning, and having previous connections with a school thanks to older children, or involvement with pre-kinder or LiL.

“Family being there for us helped, they could help care when I was at work, take [name] to pre-kinder and that.”

Top challenges:



Holiday break

Seven out of twelve families reported that the period between finishing with WT and starting school was challenging for them. Some families reported feeling overwhelmed by having children back home. Others reported unwanted reversions in behaviour which they were concerned they were not able to deal with to their satisfaction.

“When [name] was going to day care, they was listening to me and behaving well at home. After we stopped day care they were not listening, even at school. I don’t know the reason why they were doing that.”

The break in routine was nominated by a few as a cause for some of this.

“I did struggle a bit but I managed to get through it. It was difficult trying to encourage routine, that was one thing. And trying to make sure that they didn’t get too bored was tricky as well.”

Overall, families did not see this challenge to be as a result of or a responsibility of WT but rather one to be dealt with themselves.



Support access

A number of families reported a lack of access to the supports they may have needed to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Only six out of ten reported having contact with an engagement worker between finishing at WT and starting at school. Two reported no contact at all. The remainder were unsure or could not remember.

While some families felt they had all they needed, others remained unsure how and who to approach to ask for help.

“It wasn’t a lack of them helping me, more a lack of me asking for help. It was more because of me being stubborn and wanting to get it done myself. I couldn’t find the courage to buck up and say I need help.”

One family also reported a lack of support to overcome language barriers on entering the school:

“I was worried because whenever I tried to communicate with the teacher, she wouldn’t pay much attention or encourage that. English is a second language for me, but the teacher didn’t have that accommodative attitude so we’ve had some communication problems.”



COVID-19

COVID-19 was a constant concern and anxiety throughout conversations with families.

Uncertainty was the main theme arising from discussions of COVID-19, as events were rapidly unfolding through March and early April 2020 when conversations occurred.

Half of families reported keeping their children home due to COVID-19, but many of these were finding balancing children, work and other responsibilities a big challenge. Overseeing home schooling was a big concern, particularly for those with limited access to internet and technology.

COVID-19 and resulting physical distancing also represented yet another break to routines which had only begun to be established at kindergarten and had begun to hamper the development of connections with teachers and peers.

“I feel for all the children who were just starting to explore friendships and ‘getting to know you’ things. It all got cut short a little. They have set up a kinder Facebook page so we can upload the work they do and see pictures of other children doing their work. They can remember each other’s names and keep the bonds going.”



Opportunities for Improvement

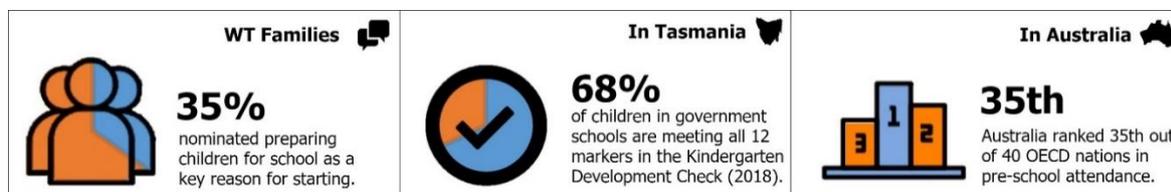
The following opportunities were identified through conversations with families:

- Link parents/carers with others heading to the same school
- Structure WT offerings to minimise time out of care over summer holidays
- Provide resources and activities for parents to do with children over break
- Ensure families are made explicitly aware of support available over break
- Reach out with offers of support for those who might be averse to asking



In Focus

'School Readiness' is a Team Effort



The transition into school is a crucial moment in a child's development, but studies show that transitions are more challenging for four particular groups¹, who together make up a sizeable proportion of WT families:

- Families experiencing financial hardship
- Aboriginal families
- Children with a disability
- CALD families

While WT is not exclusively a transition to school program, it can play a key role in facilitating that process. When thinking about the transition to school, it is helpful to consider this equation "Ready children = Ready families + Ready early childhood services + Ready communities + Ready schools"². That is, the work isn't all on families or their child. Success requires a 'ready society', one in which there is understanding and acceptance of the importance of investment in the early years, underpinned by government programs, policies and funding.³

Participation in transition to school programs has been shown to be associated with better adjustment to the first year of school, greater self-confidence, fewer behavioural difficulties and higher levels of social skills and academic competence and achievement.⁴ The corollary of this is that where children don't make a positive transition into schooling they can fall behind and stay behind.

This is particularly true for the four cohorts identified above, all of which have a higher likelihood of also being from low socio-economic status (SES). SES is a major factor determining a child's developmental performance over time. Exploration of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data shows that high and medium-SES children are able to catch up over time if they start behind, but if a low SES child starts behind they're much more likely to stay behind. Conversely starting well prepared appears to be a protective factor, in that it allows low-SES children to keep up with their peers over time.⁵

Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) findings suggest that in order to effectively support transition, support programs and initiatives must create a suitable degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and help children develop strategies to adjust to school.⁶ Working Together must seize on the opportunity to partner with families, schools and the community to ensure children get the best start at school.

¹ Rosier, K. and McDonald, M. 2011. [Promoting positive education and care transitions for children](#).

² See Kagan & Rigby, 2003. [Improving the readiness of children for school](#); Rhode Island [KIDS COUNT](#), 2005.

³ Royal Childrens Hospital, 2008. [Rethinking School Readiness](#).

⁴ Giallo et al., 2010. [Making the transition to primary school](#).

⁵ Australian Early Development Census. 2014. [Socio-economics and school readiness for life course educational trajectories](#).

⁶ Rosier and McDonald. 2011. *Ibid*.

Opportunities for Adaptation

The following opportunities are drawn from consultations with families as well as broader reflection and social analysis. The opportunities are broken down by level of intervention, with state wide level largely involving the Department of Education (DoE), community, and participating ECEC services. Action on these could help to overcome some of the challenges and barriers identified by families across the state.



State:

- DoE continue to build links between WT and schools, pre-kinder and LiL programs and emphasise the different roles they play to complement WT
- DoE work to provide clarity on school transition requirements (e.g. a social-story style info-pack that includes information on schools in the area as well as guides on things like uniforms and equipment, fees and assistance schemes, etc.)
- DoE build on ECEC transition processes and school receptiveness to ensure the work done at WT is not lost heading into school
- DoE ensure WT funding to ECECs enables ECEC services to be flexible in what they offer families
- Engagement workers ensure families are made aware of support available over break
- Engagement workers reach out with offers of support for those who might be averse to asking



Community:

- Community organisations work with DoE and ECECs to smooth the transition pathway (e.g. playgroup visits to centres, schools, etc.)



ECEC:

- Approach families early about school transition and work together to support identified needs
- Support connections among families who will be attending the same schools
- Build on ECEC transition processes, including transition statements
- Link parents/carers with others heading to the same school
- Structure WT offerings to minimise time out of care over summer holidays
- Provide resources and activities for parents to do with children over break
- Facilitate cohort transitions where possible, including recommendations for kindergarten class compositions
- Provide clear information on developmental expectations on entering kindergarten

Family reflections on Working Together

"I thought Working Together was great. It's just really easy, and seamless. For it only being in a pilot stage, it was frictionless."

This was TasCOSS's final touchpoint with families from the pilot cohort. As with previous conversations, families were overwhelmingly positive in their overall reflections about WT. Eleven out of twelve families rated it 5/5, with one marking it a 4 due to her belief that it should have run for longer over the summer. Final conversations in 2019 also saw one family rate 4/5, though for lack of translation support.



4.9

As at last interviews, all families reported that they would recommend WT to other families.

Families appreciated the growth and development they had seen in their children. They valued the opportunity it had given their children to socialise and form positive connections with other children and adults.

Parents and carers also appreciated the opportunity WT provided them. Whether that was some time for self-care or time to get other things done which had previously been pushed down their list.

Families were overwhelmingly appreciative of how "easy" WT was for them. They found things worked as they expected, and that the people involved were friendly and willing to lend a hand. This made families feel safe, welcome and respected.

"I'd give WT a 5/5. Just the support you guys have given, and how they've stayed in contact. How the staff were, everyone was very professional. You know because of our background, having been in the system and welfare being involved, not to be degraded or looked down upon was really comforting. I did start off feeling anxious and thought I got the vibe off a few of them, but nah, it was really good."