



Transitions: between groups, settings and beyond

In the second article in our series on supporting children's transitions, we visit a long day care centre at a campus of Victoria University, to see how a small but diverse group of children—and educators—manage transitions within and beyond the service.

Case study No.2

Footscray Nicholson Children's Centre

Long day care centre

Victoria University, Melbourne, Vic

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The Children's Centre at the Footscray Nicholson campus of Victoria University is a small setting—with just 39 places—that creates a close community of children, educators and families. Jodie Williams, the kindergarten teacher at the centre, says that 'everybody here knows everybody', which helps enormously with children's transitions into, and within, the service.

The transitions involved in daily routines are also assisted by the intimacy of the setting. The day begins with family grouping in the main room, where 'someone different from your normal room teacher might read you a story or do an activity with you', Jodie explains. Individual groups only move off to their home rooms when the time is right. 'It's really smooth, it's really organic,' she says. 'Everything is slow and it moves according to what the children and the room dictate. If the room's really busy, and there are too many adults, then it's time for a group to leave.'

Throughout the day, doors into each of the rooms remain open, so that children can 'roam and explore', Jodie says. The centre has a common outdoor space, which is used by all children, from babies to



the kindergarten group. 'All educators, even our relief pool, are well known and all families, children and educators know each other by name. So transition becomes something that is exciting rather than something daunting and scary.'

The Footscray Nicholson centre encourages families to take a very gradual approach to settling their child in for the first time. 'Once the child is enrolled and attending we encourage families to start slow and build up to longer days,' explains Jodie. 'Of course, we understand that families have other commitments—which is why their children need care—so we don't force but simply encourage, and the transition into the centre is generally smooth.'



Once the time comes for a child to move permanently into a new home room, the pace of transition is dictated by the child, Jodie says. 'If a child is in need of additional support, we always allow them time to move gradually, so although they may be signed in with their bag hung in one room, they have the flexibility to move back to the other room if they need reassurance or want to head back,' she says. 'This generally only lasts a few minutes, but the children have the option to do this so they continue to feel safe, secure and supported in their learning environment.'

School readiness is a topic that Jodie has immersed herself in, having participated in a 'peer swap' program in the Footscray area, which involved early childhood educators and school teachers spending time in each other's settings to gain a better understanding of the different environments and to help 'bridge the gap' in knowledge and expectations. Jodie says her philosophy is very child-centred. 'The kindergarten year is about a child having a full opportunity to learn skills and develop an understanding of the world that they live in through playing and having fun,' she says. 'For me, the schools are the ones that need to prepare for the individual children that are arriving at their setting.'

'The transition program that I conduct in the kinder room contains many aspects that are gently added into the program, rather than being loud, in-your-face and over-powering,' she explains. 'The children understand that they are off to school and our transition program runs all year round, but it's strengthened in mid to late Term 3.'

One of the elements that defines the Footscray Nicholson centre—the diversity of its children and families—also makes the school transition process slightly more complex. 'Since we are on a university campus, our children come from all over town, as their parents are often either working on campus or studying on campus, and so this can mean that the children will not be attending formal schooling in the area,' Jodie explains. For this reason, part of the school transition program at the centre involves creating a poster for each child, with the logo of their future school, which 'empowers the children to talk about their school with their peers.'

The transition process also involves the kindergarten children visiting local schools with their educators, to explore the physical environment. Back at the centre, educators teach the children about some of the practicalities of school: taking care of their belongings, hanging their bags and hats together and practising writing their names on their artwork.

Once children have left the Footscray Nicholson centre, the educators work to maintain the relationships. 'When a child leaves us, the door does not close,' Jodie says. 'It always remains open and we love having the children come back and visit us in their school uniform and tell us about their teacher, their new friends and what they have been up to.'

Families are also able to access additional support from the Footscray Nicholson educators in their child's first weeks of school. This policy was developed in response to a child with autism, who took a long time to settle into school. 'I said to myself, "Why am I not supporting him there?"' Jodie explains. 'And so, from that point, I decided to put the offer out there, and if any family wants help, they can take me up on the offer.'

Jodie says that transitions can be very positive for children, with the right support. 'You have to listen to what the children are saying and what the families are saying,' she advises. 'You can't force them to transition into anywhere until they're ready. You just have to let them do it at their own pace, and be supportive of them through the whole process.'

In the next article in this series, we visit a long day care centre and preschool in Melbourne.



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