
What Happens When a Child Starts School?

Three books and three projects reviewed

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*... for most children, going to school is something
looked forward to with pleasure, if tinged with the
inevitable uncertainty of the unknown.*

So writes Margery Renwick in her New Zealand book *To School at Five*. Two issues run as recurring themes through her study. (1) The myths surrounding changes that are supposed to take place at age five, the quite arbitrary age at which children enter the school system. (2) The role of parents and the part they are encouraged to play in the education of their child.

From England come two reports of research projects, *The First Transition* and *And So To School*, which also explore these issues. As well they highlight the fact that for many children, starting



school is *not* the first transition from home. Increasing numbers of children both in New Zealand and Britain, have already experienced at least one form of pre-school provision prior to school entry. After reading these three books, one is struck by the similarities in the New Zealand and English experience as well as being aware of some specific differences.

Anxieties, stress, discontinuities and breakdown in communication, as well as new opportunities for delight, growth and learning can happen at the beginning of pre-school just as at the beginning of primary school experience. What happens to the children and how they feel as they make their first steps into their new world, are closely linked to the adults involved. These are the parents, the pre-school teachers and the new entrant teachers with their perceptions, attitudes and expectations of each other and of the institutions they represent. Not infrequently blocks get in the way of real understanding and appreciation of one by the other. They are talking past each other or just not talking at all.

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All three studies ranged widely and
among the topics considered were:

Age for starting school—fixed or flexible entry
Individual or group admission
Pre-entry visits
School readiness
Class size
The pre-school and classroom and their activities
Class and School routines and organisation
Behaviour and discipline
Mothers staying or not on the first day
Settling in
The social experience
Parent helper schemes
Pre-school/school partnership
Passing on information
Home/school partnership
Children's and parents' expectations
Parents' feelings
Teachers' feelings
The advantages and disadvantages of pre-school
attendance
Status
Training
Fatigue

The First Transition: Home to Pre-School

By Peter Blatchford, Sandra Battle, Julia May.
Published by NFER-Nelson, Windsor, 1982

A report on the *Transition from Home to Pre-School* project, this research project was one of three concerned with transition and continuity in the early years, instigated by the National Foundation for Educational Research. It looked at the first link in a chain of transitions a child will pass through in her life.

The First Transition studied children prior to entry, at the point of entry, and after entry to pre-school.

It also elucidated and compared the perspective of children, pre-school staff and parents at these three points.

It was a massive project compared to the New Zealand one. It was designed to investigate the following areas:

(a) Prior to Entry

Children: A description of physical and social aspects of their home environment.

Staff: Actions taken by staff prior to children entering the pre-school. First contacts between staff, parents and children, e.g., prior visits to the pre-school and information collected on children.

Parents: Views about, and knowledge of, pre-school provision.

(b) Entry

Children: How do they behave on entry into the pre-school? Are there noticeable differences in behaviour? Does behaviour change? To what extent is behaviour associated with home background and previous experiences?

Staff: Strategies adopted by staff to help children settle into pre-school.

Parents: Reactions of parents to their child's entry into pre-school.

(c) After Entry

Children: How does behaviour change in time in the pre-school?

Staff: What are the staff's attitudes and actions towards parental involvement in the pre-school.

Parents: How do parents view their child's life at the pre-school? How has it affected them and their child's behaviour at home?

And So To School:

A Study of Continuity from Pre-School to Infant School

By Shirley Cleave, Sandra Jennett and Margaret Bate.
Published by NFER-Nelson, Windsor, 1982

This is the report on another of the projects: *Continuity of Children's Experience in the Years 3 to 8*. It was designed to describe the experiences of children in different types of pre-school and primary school, in order to highlight points of continuity and discontinuity between the various stages. There were three other researchers involved in this project, including New Zealander Fay Panckhurst.

This was another very large project, which set out to provide a child's-eye view of starting school by:

- 1 A cross-sectional study with detailed descriptions of all kinds of experiences in all forms of pre-schools and infant schools. The information was used to describe where and how children spent their time. Similarities and differences among the provisions were revealed and gave an indication of how much children's experiences are likely to be interrupted moving from one kind of provision to another.
- 2 A longitudinal study, with a picture of the individual experiences of a small group of 36 children coming from a variety of pre-school settings to 12 different infant schools. This study yielded a series of rich descriptions of the

experiences of the children before and after transfer to school. These highlighted the continuities, discontinuities and sources of distress encountered by new entrants.

To School at Five

By Margery Renwick.
Published by NZCER, Wellington, 1984

This report is based on the findings of the *Going to School Research Project* funded by NZCER, a study which attempted to document what happens when a New Zealand five-year-old starts school.

To School at Five attempted to unearth and examine a number of issues related to children starting school which concern the adults involved.

The exploratory studies involved observing and talking to children at home and at pre-school, on the first day of school and after they had been at school a week, interviews with parents, pre-school teachers and new entrant teachers. Thirty parents were asked to keep diaries.

The research project itself consisted of three national surveys by postal questionnaires — focusing on key issues for children starting school.

300 parents (selected through pre-schools) whose child was the last to leave pre-school to start school.
300 pre-school teachers (based on the estimated number of children attending each of the three main types of pre-school.)

300 new entrant teachers (selected at random from schools within each education board district.)

There was considerable feedback, indicating the questionnaires had stimulated thought and discussion, and an extraordinarily high return rate for a postal questionnaire.

The English reports involved careful observation of children and each has four case studies which bring the findings to life. The parents' diaries, scattered through *To School at Five*, are equally fascinating and illuminating.

Three Samples of the Findings

1 Adjusting to School

Adjustments the child is required to make are likely to be influenced by the *scale* of the setting, (e.g. the size of the playground and school buildings), the *range* of her territory and the *limitations on her movement* within it. (It is worth noting that toilet accidents are often the product of the school system rather than inadequacy on the part of the child).

For children moving from pre-school to school, one of the big distinctions is that between work and play. At pre-school a child's play is her work. At school there are set periods called *playtime* and periods for doing number *work* or language *work*. Exercise books are called 'work books' and phrases like 'Get on with

your work' are heard. Children are allowed to play in the classroom as a reward for finishing their work: 'You can choose something to play with now.'

Free choice is prevalent at the pre-school while the junior school child can explore only at certain times. The lack of choice does not imply lack of enjoyment though.

There is more dead time. *And So To School* reported that infant school children did at least three times as much waiting, queueing and lining up as pre-schoolers. Together with cruising and other non-specific behaviour this amounted to more than 17% of all infant activity.

While adjusting to the group could present difficulties to the child commencing pre-school this could re-occur on entry to school. Margery Renwick found that the single most important factor causing

children anxiety about school is the behaviour of other children. This was supported in the English study, particularly at playtime and dinnertime which were afforded a chapter each.

Children are often bewildered by the special language of school: assembly, line-up, home-base and ambiguous questions such as 'What do you want me to say?' (meaning: 'What do you want me to write under your picture?')

Other potential difficulties are the puzzlement of rules children cannot see the reason for. Why can't they play with friends in other classes, why do they have to ask to go to the toilet? Why can't they go outside when they want to? Why do they have to sit cross-legged on the mat for so long?

And, importantly, children have to adjust from being BIG at pre-school to LITTLE at school.

2 Parents' Feelings on the First Day

Whether leaving children at pre-school or school, many parents were upset on the first day. It is probable that many had underestimated their own reaction to the pangs of leaving.

A number worried before and after entry.

As one New Zealand parent wrote: *Complete sense of loss and sadness, that in some way our child has left us.*

The child's adjustment has to be the opposite of our own. We miss him more than he misses us.

All studies report the mothers' uncertainties about whether to stay or not. Forty-five percent of New Zealand mothers did not remain in the classroom at all and 45 percent stayed less than an hour there. In England, many felt that their prolonged presence was undesirable for staff and children. *Although I wouldn't have minded not staying if I'd been able to discuss the matter with the teacher and understand why it was better*

for me to go, but I didn't want to be just told to go.

Parents were reluctant to 'rock the boat'. They often simply accept the current position as the correct one.

This attitude continued for many beyond the first day.

After entry, the attitude of New Zealand parents to school is more likely to be favourable than unfavourable.

The personality of the teacher was seen as the paramount consideration for the child's happiness.

3 Pre-school/School Links

Liaison frequently depends on the personal qualities and enthusiasm of individual teachers.

In England some teachers had only a vague idea of which pre-school the child had attended even when the nursery unit was attached to the school. Some had absolutely no contact with pre-schools nor did they want any. There were few systems of communication

linking the school and pre-school.

In New Zealand there is the tendency for teachers to regard school as the beginning of learning and not to take pre-school education seriously. It follows that they do not think that liaison is necessary. Pre-school teachers commonly believe that they have to initiate contact with the school and the school is reluctant to get involved.

When it comes to passing on information from

pre-school to school there is often room for improvement. Information is frequently relayed by word of mouth and is haphazard and limited. Pre-school staff regret that their opinions are not valued more, and some new entrant teachers question the competence of pre-school teachers to assess children accurately.

Practical Suggestions

Each report offers sensible, practical suggestions to help the child make a confident and happy move into a new environment. The following statements show the commonality of their belief about where we need to aim:

The First Transition

In the absence of consistent efforts, the two worlds of the child will slip apart imperceptibly through lack of meaningful exchange. There is close interdependence of the parties in transition. Attention to only one or two perspectives will inevitably be only partially effective and if one corner of the triangle is unhappily situated then the other corners will be potentially unstable.

And So To School

- Changes in the introduction of new experiences must be *gradual* rather than sudden.
- People, places and things must be to some extent *familiar* rather than totally strange.
- The child must have a sense of *security* rather than instability.

A rule of thumb seems to be that it must be different enough to stimulate the child's curiosity but not so dissimilar as to reveal considerable gaps in understanding.

What is required is a more concerted attempt on a wider scale to bring together everyone involved in early education and care so that they can learn more about each others' aims and work.

To School At Five

At the point at which children enter the school system the main care givers (the parents, the pre-school teachers and the junior school teachers) all have a responsibility for the child. They may all share the same goals, in this case the smooth entry to school for the child, but because they differ in their responsibilities and experiences, they may have different views as to how this is best achieved. Neither group is necessarily right or wrong. The important thing is for there to be a common meeting ground where issues can be discussed and solutions sought.

Some extracts from *To School At Five*

Parallels for many could be found in the English studies.

The responses from teachers on school readiness emphasise the individual differences among teachers themselves.

The parents' responses to a checklist based on the teachers' comments about school readiness show that in a number of areas girls are significantly more competent than boys:

One wonders if teachers, in planning their classroom activities, take sufficient account of possible differences in the skills girls and boys may bring with them into the classroom.

Important considerations affecting how a child settles into school:

- How well the child already knows the teacher.
- Whether or not the parents have given the child the impression they like and trust the teacher.

- Whether there are plenty of interesting and absorbing things for the new child to do.
- Whether the class is small or large.

A parent's comment:

I feel that nine-tenths of going to school is fitting into the social situation, not learning, which can be done more quickly, under much easier conditions at home.

The family always mediates the experience of the school. The school does not mediate the experience of the family. The diaries show how parents monitor what happens to the child at school, explain things, comment, and help the child to cope. The school does go home with the child.

New Zealand pre-schools with their emphasis on parent involvement and parent-pre-school partnerships have had a marked effect on preparing parents, particularly mothers, for school. They break down barriers of professionalism, they assert that parents are capable of educating young children and that they have a right to be part of the process.

(Note: *The First Transition* states that nowhere in the British study was there evidence of a deliberate attempt to explain the pre-schools' aims and methods to parents.)

There was a recurring theme: despite the best efforts of many dedicated teachers, parents may be unsure of what the school is doing, what is available to them or expected of them.

Notes

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The practical outcomes of the Going to School Research Project were written up as *Going to School, A Guide For Parents* by Margery Renwick and first published in set No. 1, 1978. It is now available separately from NZCER Book Sales, Box 3237, Wellington for \$1.75.