

# Getting Off to a Flying Start

**Michelle Doyle Wildman** from Parentkind gives her take on achieving a successful transition by focusing on the parents, as well as the child.

## Transition is a unique opportunity

The importance of transition during the early years from home, child-minder or nursery to school reception class is well known. Children develop rapidly between the ages of three and five years and it's clear from a wealth of research that investing at this stage can minimise the risk of lower attainment later on, especially in children who are deemed to be otherwise 'disadvantaged'. Indeed, the Education Policy Institute found in 2016 that the school readiness gap at five years old leads to a 40 per cent attainment gap at the end of secondary school.

There is, rightly, a lot of focus, therefore, on helping children to 'be school ready'.

However, it's important to place a similar emphasis on supporting those who play a parenting role in that child's life, whether they are mum, dad, grandparents, older siblings or carers. We know that when it comes to how well a child does at school, parents really matter. Parents can be particularly engaged during their child's transition to 'big' school, so this time presents a key window of opportunity for education professionals to instil confidence and the positive attitudes and behaviours that will really make a difference.

## What does 'be school ready' mean? What's the problem?

Over the last few years, media coverage in April (to coincide with the allocation of primary school places) includes a number of stories on how reception children are not 'school ready'. In 2018, Teach First claimed one in three reception children failed to meet 'the level of social and emotional development, knowledge and skills needed to provide the foundation for good progress through school', according to their analysis of the Department for Education's early years foundation stage statistics for 2015 and 2017. Worryingly, their findings showed that poorer children in every part of the country are more likely to start school behind their better off peers, with around half of all children eligible for free school meals not deemed 'school-ready' by the time they start primary school.

By June, Ofsted chief Amanda Spielman's address at the *Pre-School Learning Alliance Conference* made the headlines as she implored nurseries and child-minders to do more to develop our youngest children physically and academically; being able to use the toilet, kick a ball, hold a pen, sit still, use a good range of vocabulary, enjoy reading and learn through play and structured sessions. Her take was that an increasing number of schools were reporting that fewer children were able to do these things, despite the majority of families taking up government-subsidised childcare places from age three – notwithstanding that parents are principally responsible for children being able to do these things.



## How can we ensure more children are ready to learn?

Ultimately children will do better if their parents and the education professionals in their lives understand each other and seek to work together.

It's very easy to fall into the trap of considering some mums and dads as feckless or otherwise being 'in deficit'. Amanda Spielman referred in her speech to some children as being 'unlucky' (presumably in the parents they were dealt) and therefore in need of structured learning in early years settings 'to replace what they don't necessarily get at home'. However, I would argue we need to take a bit more time to see things from the perspective of parents and be optimistic that they can give their child great support to be ready for school and ready to learn.

The first step towards doing this is to remember that mums and dads start school alongside their child. And with this, they may bring all sorts of sorts of emotions and baggage, especially if their own experience was not entirely positive. Their first impressions and the messages and resources you convey at this point will set the course of how they regard your school and their child's education going forward – no pressure!

The second important consideration is not to treat your parent community as a single homogenous entity – appreciate and consider the massive range of individuals who you will have to engage with, and hence the need to offer a range of ways that can happen to suit their circumstances and preferences.

It may be tempting to dive straight in and tell parents about how you will approach teaching phonics or mathematics. And although sessions on this would be useful, Parentkind's own desk research shows that before they would be able to fully engage with the academic stuff, parents need their emotional and practical needs met first.

This was borne out in the *Sheffield Early Years Transition Project*, which was undertaken by Sheffield City Council in partnership with Achievement for All in 2016-2018. This focussed on building professional relationships and sharing best practice and insight between primary schools and their feeder nurseries with a big emphasis on improved parental engagement. Questionnaires at the beginning of the process revealed that parents felt that they and their child were not ready for transition. The project team tackled this in a number of ways by giving plenty of opportunities for parents to get to know reception staff, including within the nursery setting itself, and this gave them a safe space to address their anxieties over a number of practical matters, including where their child would hang their coat, what they would eat for lunch and supervision over play-times. These deepened relationships also helped staff identify earlier which children may have had additional needs and those families were targeted for more in-depth conversations and support from expert colleagues. Parent surveys at the end of the project showed that they felt much better informed and prepared for the journey ahead.

At Parentkind, we have taken these considerations on board in our annual #BeSchoolReady campaign which is devised specifically for parents to inform and inspire mums and dads to take positive action for themselves and for their children. We focus on what school may mean for them emotionally and how it can be positive and fulfilling for them too. We also try to put the emphasis on getting the foundations right with their child, for example, being confident in getting dressed and using the toilet, rather than feeling under pressure to be able to write their own name before they start school if they are not ready.

We have supported growing numbers of parents and children over the last three years through two main thrusts:

- Producing a free #BeSchoolReady magazine as part of a 'welcome pack' that our parent teacher association (PTA) members can use to engage new parents when they come into school for welcome events.



- Last year we reached 150,000 parents in primary and secondary settings in England, Wales and Northern with the #BeSchoolReady magazine alone. Do get in touch with us if your nursery or school want to take part in our campaign in 2019.
- Running a supporting digital communications campaign with fun quizzes and light online resources to reach even more mums and dads. [www.parentkind.org.uk/For-Parents/Be-School-Ready](http://www.parentkind.org.uk/For-Parents/Be-School-Ready)

In my experience, all kinds of parents underestimate the difference they can make to their child's education, especially if they have their own struggles with literacy and numeracy. As the OECD PISA results indicate, parents talking positively within their children about education and taking an interest in what they are learning at school can make a massive difference to how well their child does. It would be marvellous if nurseries and schools could make sure that every parent who crosses their path gets this message too.

### Parentkind's prescription for getting this right

#### 1. Create a family-centric culture in your setting

If we are to see every child get off to a flying start and ultimately continue to thrive and reach their potential, it's vitally important that school leaders establish a culture that puts families at its heart and appreciates that parents not only matter but can make *the* difference for every child. This means ensuring a truly welcoming environment, clear communications, providing meaningful and timely information and guidance, loads of opportunities to get involved and have a say and a spirit of genuine partnership between home and school. Parentkind offers training for school leaders and governors on how to take a 'whole-school approach' to parental engagement [www.parentkind.org.uk/For-Schools/Training](http://www.parentkind.org.uk/For-Schools/Training)

#### 2. Boosting your skills and capabilities

Part of achieving a family-centric approach is ensuring that all school staff have the skills and confidence to do this well. It's sophisticated stuff that isn't always covered in, say, initial teacher training, so it's good to support this by investing in learning and development opportunities such as training or during INSET days. In the Sheffield Transition Project, nursery staff benefitted hugely from undertaking the same training offered to colleagues at the primary schools, particularly in conducting sensitive conversations with parents.

#### 3. Understand and meet the needs of the range of parents and children

Take the opportunity when new families join your school or nursery to find out about them, what they may need and how they would prefer to be communicated with. With this insight, plan a programme of communications and contact events and use a range of media to execute this. In the Sheffield transition project, each school produced a film that parents and children could view at home to help with this. Make sure that every parent knows that they shouldn't hesitate to speak to you if they have any concerns.

#### 4. Action Stations

Put together a plan of activities that maximise the 'face time' between children, staff and parents. As part of this plan consider:

- Putting together a transition pack for parents (perhaps building on the Parentkind #BeSchoolReady one) which addresses the common questions and requirements. Don't forget a jargon buster too!
- Set out the practical skills parents can help their child to master including using the toilet, getting dressed, catching a ball and using a knife and fork
- Inspire parents by reminding them of the massive and positive difference they can make to their child's education and what activities they can do in school and at home
- Cover the emotional and social elements, as well as how parents can support their child's friendships, learning, literacy and oracy
- Making the experience real by inviting the children and parents into school on a number of occasions before reception, sharing 'starting school' books they can read with their child and as providing nurseries with school uniforms, book bags and materials for role-play.

#### 5. Support peer-to-peer support

One uncomfortable truth is that some mums and dads do not find it easy to relate to figures 'in authority' such as a teacher, SENCO or head teacher. In your efforts to reach and engage every parent in their child's education, do not forget the power of parent-to-parent relations within your school community. Peer-to-peer support may be seen as softer and less threatening, and parents may prefer seeking advice from someone who has 'been there, done that' rather than risk embarrassment by troubling a professional. Therefore, do everything you can to support a parent group in your school or nursery, such as a PTA or Parent Forum/Council, and ask for their support in welcoming new parents, encouraging new parent volunteers, class reps and running pre-loved uniform sales.



Parentkind is a charity that supports and champions the role of parents in children's education. We are also the leading membership body for parent-teacher associations and parent councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and provide training and support to school staff and governors on parental engagement. [www.parentkind.org.uk](http://www.parentkind.org.uk)

**Michelle Doyle Wildman is the Acting CEO of Parentkind. Michelle joined Parentkind in May 2015 and has been the charity's Acting CEO since May 2017. She has over 25 years' experience of leading teams, public affairs and stakeholder engagement. As a mother of teenagers and the wife of a teacher, Michelle takes a keen personal interest in our schools. She has spoken and written widely on how parents can participate positively in education. Michelle is an accredited practitioner and member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and ACEVO.**