



## **VOICES FROM THE FIELD - The Transition into Kindergarten: Building on the Foundation of Prior Experience**

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### *Service perspective*

#### **Introduction**

The empirical findings from the *Pathways Project* reported by Gary Ladd<sup>1</sup> demonstrate unequivocally that the attributes children bring to kindergarten, especially their behavioural dispositions, social and relationship-building skills, self-regulatory skills and ability to communicate, are important determinants of how well they adjust to school. The nature of the relationships children form with their kindergarten classmates and teachers, the attitude they develop towards school during this grade, and the extent of their willingness to engage in classroom activities strongly influence their later psychological and social development and the level of their scholastic achievement.

Relevant questions about the transition into kindergarten concern the antecedents and determinants of the knowledge and abilities that foster children's positive adjustment to school.<sup>2</sup> Children's early development is strongly influenced by: the extent to which their parents are nurturing and responsive to their needs and wishes; the availability of language and other developmentally appropriate stimulation in the child's home; the degree to which the child's community is physically and emotionally safe; and, for many children, the extent to which their child-care experiences support and encourage their well-being and development.

Children thrive in child-care settings, whether centres or family child-care homes, where the adult interacts with children in a warm, sensitive, responsive manner, the environment is safe and language-rich, and there are activities that promote pro-social interaction, creativity, exploration and problem-solving. Children participating in this type of high-quality child care are more socially competent with their peers and with adults, have higher levels of language skills and obtain higher scores on tests of cognitive abilities.<sup>3,4,5,6</sup> These findings hold true even after adjusting for factors known to influence child development, such as maternal education level, parental child-rearing practices, family socio-economic status and the level of linguistic and cognitive stimulation in the home. The positive impact of high-quality child care on children's social, linguistic and cognitive development persists well into elementary school, thereby establishing a trajectory associated with scholastic success.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

A recent paper from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care,<sup>10</sup> cited by Rimm-Kaufman,<sup>11</sup> raised concerns by reporting that the more time children spent in non-maternal care across the first 4.5 years of life, the more externalizing problems and conflicts with adults they exhibited in kindergarten. The researchers qualified this finding by noting that the effects of length of time in child care were modest and smaller than those of maternal sensitivity and indicators of family socio-economic status. In addition, they pointed out that the direction of the effects is not clear. It is possible that children who are more aggressive and difficult are placed in child care at younger ages and for longer periods of time.

### **Implications: What Does the Child-care/Early Childhood Research Tell Us?**

Five conclusions emerge from the research:

- The effects of child care on children's well-being and development and their transition into school vary primarily as a function of the quality of the child care the children experience.<sup>5,6,12</sup>
- All children benefit from high-quality child care and the optimal development of all children is compromised by poor quality child care. Coming from an advantaged home is not sufficient to protect children from the negative effects of poor-quality child care.<sup>13,4</sup>
- There is a solid base of knowledge about the structural variables, such as adult-child ratio and adult training, required for high quality child care, whether centre- or home-based,<sup>14,15,16</sup> and a growing understanding of the role of non-structural variables such as remuneration levels, a positive organizational climate in the child-care centre or family child-care agency and the extent of government funding.<sup>17,18</sup>
- The most relevant child attributes for success in kindergarten are social awareness and social skills such as friendship-making, self-regulation, knowing how to resolve conflicts with other children constructively, the ability to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally, and an enthusiastic approach to new activities.<sup>1,11</sup>
- Coordination between child care and kindergarten reduces the discontinuity between the two settings and assists children to make the transition into school.<sup>19</sup>

### **Implications for Governments**

We know that all children, whether from advantaged or disadvantaged homes, benefit from high-quality child care and we know what contributes to the development and maintenance of quality child-care programs. The challenge for governments is to take the information provided by research and implement government practices and public policies that are consistent with what we know. Good quality child care requires: (1) stable, predictable and sufficient funding to enable programs to maintain a physical environment conducive to quality programming and to attract and retain child-care providers who are able to implement activities that support children's emotional and physical safety and their development; (2) regulations, such as training requirements and adult-child ratio standards, based on the most current research regarding what is required for high quality child care and enforcement of regulations; and (3) an infrastructure that

includes accessible training and professional development opportunities in all parts of the country, other supports associated with high quality such as family child-care resource programs, mechanisms for the collection of comparable, reliable data to assist in evaluating and planning child-care services, and funds for research to answer specific program delivery questions.

Since all children benefit from good quality child care, regardless of their family background, universal access is more appropriate than targeting at-risk children. Universal access requires a sufficient supply of affordable, high quality child-care spaces in all communities for all the parents who wish to use them. Affordability requires acknowledgement of the reality that providing a quality program is expensive and most parents cannot afford the fees that programs have to charge in order to provide high quality child care.

Research on school transition has identified the most relevant aspects for success: good social skills, linguistic competence and a mindset that enthusiastically embraces new experiences and learning opportunities. Government policies and practices should be directed to enhancing child-care experiences that build on these empirically validated aspects of what is required for school readiness and successful transition into kindergarten. Child care presents a wonderful opportunity for children to interact under the guidance of knowledgeable adults who are able to assist them to learn the rules of social interaction and who provide play-based activities that support child-directed exploration and learning by hands-on experience. Pressures to push the kindergarten curriculum down to child care and have children engage in “academic” activities must be resisted.

Children’s transition into kindergarten is smoother when there is communication and coordination between the current child-care setting and the receiving kindergarten.<sup>19</sup> In all but one Canadian jurisdiction and many American states, responsibility for child care for children under age six does not rest with the same government department that is responsible for elementary schools. This fact may partly explain the tendency, in both countries, for child-care and kindergarten programs to act as if they were in two different silos with no means of communication. There is a pressing need to enable and encourage collaboration between child care and kindergarten during transition planning for children and during their initial period in kindergarten, a time when many children also continue to participate in child care.<sup>1,2</sup> Governments stand to gain a great deal of information about what works and does not work through the *Toronto First Duty* project. This is a three-year pilot study (2002-2005) on five sites in different parts of the city where child-care, kindergarten and parent-support programs have been brought together to form a single seamless program.<sup>20</sup> This pilot project is being evaluated by faculty of the Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

### **Implications for Child-Care Programs**

A positive organizational climate and a director who fosters collegiality among her staff and gives them a sense of being valued are key non-structural components of quality.<sup>21</sup>

## SCHOOL TRANSITION

This important fact needs to be kept in mind by owners or boards of directors when hiring directors for a centre or family child-care agency.

Many child-care programs face parental and/or government pressure to ensure that children have “pre-academic” skills before they enter kindergarten, for example, the ability to recite the alphabet, count at least up to 10 and write their name. However, the current conceptualization of emerging literacy and numeracy emphasizes the value of children being exposed to language and stories and having opportunities for hands-on exploration and participation in activities that promote an understanding of number and symbol. When required, child-care programs need to educate parents about the importance for kindergarten of social knowledge and abilities, communication skills and a willingness to take risks and explore, and assure parents that children really are learning when engaged in activities that promote these child attributes.

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