

Supporting successful transitions

Case study

Why relationships matter: North Coast Region



North Coast Region is experiencing year-on-year growth with new communities established and existing communities expanding. This growth has resulted in the need for additional schools and early childhood services to meet demand. North Coast Region's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Director, Marian Prete outlines why a focus on relationships is valued and prioritised in the region.

Why relationships matter

Education is a social context in which learning occurs through the interactions between children, adults, materials and environments. All participants in the educative process – children, families, teachers and administrators engage in thousands of interactions on a daily basis. These interactions centre on the knowledge, skills and dispositions that enhance learning as well as the social and procedural contexts that help participants navigate the routines and expectations of school. Each of these interactions has maximum impact when underpinned by trust, mutual respect and reciprocity. These attributes just do not occur, they require commitment, time and a genuine desire to connect with others towards a common goal.

“Effective programs are based on the establishment and maintenance of relationships between all parties: educators, parents, and children. While transition programs may focus on developing children’s knowledge, understanding, and skills, they have, as their key function, a commitment to facilitating positive social interactions and relationships.”

Starting School: Effective Transitions Sue Dockett & Bob Perry University of Western Sydney in *Early Childhood Research and Practice* Fall 2001, Vol3 No.2

The research positions families as the most important people in children’s lives and emphasises the central role they play in supporting children’s learning and development. It is because of this that families must be involved in the transition process as it is not only children who experience the changes and challenges of starting school. Families who play an active role in supporting their children during transition and experience positive relationships with school staff are more likely to continue to be engaged with the school and contribute as a member of the school community.

We also know that children enter school with a range of prior experiences, knowledge, skills, cultures and family contexts. Our 2013 ABS data tells us that our region has a very high kindergarten program participation rate. Given the number of children engaged in early childhood education and care programs in our region, the importance of schools connecting with local service providers is valued. In North Coast region we are promoting engagement between schools and ECEC services as the conduit to deeper engagement with families.

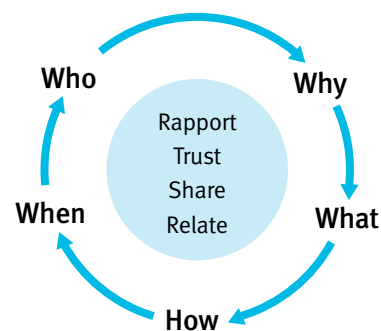
Our approach

In North Coast Region we invest time in supporting school teams and their transition partners to explore the principle of trusting partnerships and action area reciprocal relationships described in the *Supporting successful transitions: school decision-making tool*.

We emphasise a model which unpacks the **who, why, what, how** and **when** of positive relationships. To do this, we firstly ask school teams to think about their existing practices, focusing on the reasons for engaging others, the outcomes achieved and whether these outcomes match what was intended or anticipated. This process of self-reflection can help identify whether current practices are supporting the school to move forward or whether they simply reaffirm existing outcomes.

The matrix in the *School decision-making tool* (p.11) is a useful starting point and helps frame conversations about identifying transition partners (the **who**), reasons for engaging with partners (the **why**) and the benefits or outcomes as a result of engaging with partners (the **what**).

Model for building positive relationships



Starting the conversation

Schools can be action focused and may often start the process of relationship building with a discussion about what they want to achieve. We encourage schools in our region to consider the relationship as the outcome. This can be a mind-shift for principals and we advocate that the benefits will flow once the relationship is established and trust developed.

We encourage schools to utilise their AEDC school and community data as a way of connecting with local ECEC educators. We find it provides a safe space to discuss the complexities of the communities in which both services operate and provides a structure for shared language and understanding. Through this process, rapport building questions such as 'Is this consistent with observations you have made in your service?', 'What does it mean for the way you plan for children?' are encouraged.

We strongly promote taking a non-judgemental approach, eliminating any pre-conceived agenda based on what a school may believe will be in their best interest. Removing these barriers demonstrates respect for the views, expertise and knowledge of the educators in the early childhood service. Our advice to our school leaders is, start with knowing each other as people, then as educators and then as partners in transitions.

Plans in action

Our regional transition and partnerships and innovation officers are working with individual schools, school clusters and local networks to consider the importance of genuine relationships in implementing successful transition strategies.

In a region experiencing significant and rapid growth, we have noticed the benefit of prioritising and investing in the development of relationships. We see school communities with a strong sense of belonging and community connectedness form where families are not only welcome, but have their views canvassed and included in the school's decision-making. School communities are making informed decisions about the most effective strategies for engaging with their partners (the **how**) and taking account of key points in time when engagement is more relevant (the **when**).

We have seen small communities connect by extending an invitation to the local kindergarten service to join school professional development activities, school social events and to share their practice with ECEC educators. We have seen community action as a result of analysis of AEDC data with devolved leadership models based on interests and existing partnerships. For those schools without a local ECEC service we have seen the establishment of school-based playgroups which support families to engage in early education experiences.

What I am most encouraged by is the increasing number of conversations I have with school leaders in which they speak animatedly about their transition programs and the relationships they are developing and sustaining with families, local ECEC services and support agencies. This tells me that the benefits of this level of engagement have a significant impact on schools, families, children and the wider community.



More information

For contact details for your region's Transitions and Partnerships and Innovation officers visit <https://oneportal.deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/forschools/Pages/Transitiontoschoolsupportcontacts.aspx>

For more information and resources on supporting successful transitions visit www.qld.gov.au/transitiontoschool