Announcer: This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

Virginia Bowdidge: Hi I’m Virginia Bowdidge and in this podcast researcher Grant Webb will join me to discuss what starting school looks like for families. Grant is the principal advisor for the Early Childhood Education and Care division for the Department of Education. He has an extensive background in education, he’s been a teacher, principal of primary and secondary schools, worked in the university sector and was responsible for establishing the division of Early Childhood Education and Care in the Central Queensland region. Grant tells us a bit about his research.

Grant Webb: There is a truck load of research around the importance of supporting children as they transition from Kindy into Prep. There is little research, however, about the effects that that has on the broader family unit. So I've just done some research recently about what does it look like for a family? What are the issues? And what are the opportunities as well for families as they transition for their children from Kindy to Prep?

Grant Webb: We do know that moving to school for families or a child moving to formal schooling is one of a major pivotal points in a child and a family's life transition.

Virginia Bowdidge: Do you think sometimes families could be more anxious than the child themselves about the move? Because it is a big upheaval for the family. It's like different hours. It's the beginning of 12, 13 years of schooling, at least, you know. So do you think sometimes that's the case?

Grant Webb: Absolutely. And we also know that parents project some of their nervousness and their worries onto children. So schools do a great job in allaying fears for the child. But the research that I undertook actually showed that a lot of the parents are really nervous. Then of course we get into the whole issues about intergenerational experiences.

So if you've got parents who it's their first child going to school and their own experiences at school were not positive, then there's a whole range of issues that they might face. So it brings back to them their own experiences, how they experienced school. One of the models that we look at sometimes is a model that says that whenever we're going to undertake a life transition, we experience those changes at the individual, the relational and at the contextual level.

So as you said before, a child starting school at the contextual level might mean changes to pick up times, drop off times. It means changes to having uniforms ready in the morning. There are some parents whose children have been in childcare since birth. They've never made lunches. So what does that look like for the all of those family routines? What does it look like about now having to navigate around outside school hours care?

At the relational level, there are many parents who their relationship with their own child changes during this time because a child is growing and developing, their relationship with the educators at their childcare centre are very different in many cases to the relationship that they have with the school teacher. Most parents actually think about their changes to their own identity. So I'm no longer the parent of a Kindy child I’m now the parent of a school child,.

Grant Webb: If I'm no longer the parent of a child who's not going to school, what's that mean for me? How am I changing my own parenting experience? So it is an emotional time for children. It's absolutely an emotional time for parents and grandparents and other siblings, but we tend to spend a lot of time thinking about the child, which is really important. But it is about that readiness equation.

We need children ready to make the transition from Kindy to school. We need ready families, we need ready parents, we need ready schools. We also need ready communities because children live in families who live in communities. So it's all about outside school hours care and those larger contextual aspects of making that a successful transition to school.

Virginia Bowdidge: For parents that may be apprehensive about there child starting school it’s good to know things have changed since we started school.

Grant Webb: If we go back 10 years ago, we would've thought transition was an event. So you had transition on the last week of school. If you were a Kindy child, I'm remembering that in Queensland 10 years ago, not many children were going to Kindy. It was you went and visited the school. So it was more a one off visit.

I think it was also 10 or so years ago where when you went and visited the school, the principal would tell you all the things around what you shouldn't do. Make sure that your child comes with being able to tie their shoes, make sure your child can come and have all these prerequisite skills.

So I think where we've changed over the last 10 years is that we now see transition as a process, not an event. And that it's also about schools not telling the Kindys and parents that before your child can come to school, they must know X amount of letters. They must be able to count to 10. They must be able to write their own name. But Prep teachers are really acknowledging that children will be coming from a whole range of experiences. Some of those children may have been in child care, education childcare services since they were six weeks of age. Other children have been at home and haven't experienced any out of home care or education.

So I think where we've really changed it is, not is your child ready for school but is the school ready for your child, and that how does a prep teacher in a school ensure that a child's continuity of learning is evident? So what can this child do and how can we build on that?

And it's not about coming to the school two mornings a week in the last week of school or the last month of school, but actually really getting familiar with that school because we also know that there's a direct correlation between a child's success at school and the amount of engagement that the parents have. So that's something that we're trying to make sure that schools also aren't only engaging the child, but engaging the parent, allaying the fears of the parent. The parent needs to feel really comfortable in this school.

The other thing, I think that was interesting in some of the research that I did, and it's only one example, but I interviewed a lot of fathers whose children were starting school. And I think without exception, they all talked about how they as a father were really engaged in their child's transition to school and were there on the first day.

And nearly without exception, they all talked about how their fathers weren't part of that a generation ago.

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Virginia Bowdidge: It sounds like we’ve come a long way.

Grant Webb And yes, we have come a long way. I think what I am so proud of is the work that our prep teachers are doing to build on the children's knowledge and understanding.

The work that we're doing around prep teachers, understanding that, well, the majority of children in Queensland, they've been in an approved kindergarten service for at least a year, 15 hours a week, and that they've developed these whole range of skills and abilities. They're inquisitive. They're amazing young learners. And how do I build on that to keep that work going more than starting to say, "Well now you're at school. I'm going to treat you like you know nothing and we'll start all over again."

So if I was to sum up what's changed in the last five years, I think it's the readiness equation that we talk about. It's about understanding that schools need to be ready for children and need to be ready for families. Families need to be ready to support their child's transition, and that there isn't this pre-determined set of criteria that a child must be able to do this, this, and this and this before they're ready for school.

So we're trying to talk about that schools are ready for children. It's not that we don't want children ready to learn. And I think that that's a major distinction. Children who are ready to learn are those children who are inquisitive, who want to learn, who want to be part of a group, who are learning the skills to be collaborative and cooperative.

That's a different model to being that you are ready for school because you can tie your shoes or you're ready for school because you can write your name or you're ready for school because you can identify five different shapes. Children are ready to learn and be inquisitive young learners, and we've come a long way with that.

Virginia Bowdidge: I s there any particular tips or advice that you can give parents to maybe quell their own fears and to assist their children?

Grant Webb: In the research that I did, most parents said that they needed a buddy. I think one of the biggest tips is to, for your own self, is to find parents in that community who have done it before. And it doesn't just only have to be in that community but talk to other parents. What are the tips that they'll tell you about supporting your child's transition to school but also supporting your own transition to school.

I think that another tip is to absolutely keep talking with the children. They're the ones that will feel really confident about going to school. Talk to the principal. Make sure that you are talking to the Prep teacher. Make sure that you understand the difference between saying to the school, "This is what my child must have" to having that conversation about "This is my child. I know my child. I know what I think will make a successful transition for them and how can we collaborate and cooperate to make sure that my child has a successful transition?"

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But I would think it comes back down to talk, engage and talk to other parents who've been through it. Don’t over dramatise it. Don't make it the biggest event. However, I acknowledge that for many families, their first child going to school is actually a major event in that family's history. They'll look back at those photos in years to come of, "There we are on the first day of school."

If I can share a story for one of the families that I've worked with. They set up their little routines and they set up their customs and practices. So one of the families that I worked with was lovely to see that on the first day of school, as the children came home, they had a special afternoon tea and they actually always talked about what was the best thing about school today.

So I'd also say "What are the things that you remember most from your own childhood about going to school?" It was interesting in lots of the research that we've done, one of the biggest things that parents remember is about buying and covering the books. It seems like that, that's an intergenerational thing that parents love doing the books and getting those books ready and just making sure that there's those sorts of rights of passage.

Don't over think it. It will happen and it will be all okay. And it might take longer for some families to feel comfortable in the new setting and it might take longer for children to feel competent in that new setting, but it will happen and it will happen if you're well prepared, there's strong communication, and that you feel really comfortable with the school that you're going to, and that you've talked with the school personnel about letting them know what you think will make a really great transition for your child.

If your child is in an approved kindergarten in Queensland, then you will expect to get a written transition statement in November. And part of that transition statement should be around asking you as a parent, what is it that you'd like the school to know that will help your child settle in? What do you want that school to know about your child and what you think will help that child make a successful transition?

But it's not just up to the Kindy teacher to give that information to the school. It's up to you as parents as well to give that information to the school. And in that triad of working together, it's the Kindy, the school and the family, you'll be setting your child up for success and you'll be setting yourself up for success. We do know that a successful transition does have long term positive benefits on children's engagement and parents' engagement in school.

Grant Webb: We are really committed to giving every child a great start in the early years of learning. And just like, it's an old adage, but it's true, it takes a whole village to raise a child, it takes a whole community and I mean both education, families, the whole group of people to rap their love and their support around a child to make sure that they're getting a great start to learning in the early years of formal schooling.

Virginia Bowdidge: That’s very informative. Thanks Grant.

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