

No more tears for big school's newest students

Starting Kindergarten has often been a traumatic time for kids entering this new world but a program aims to make the transition easier on them - and their parents. KATELIN MCINERNEY reports.

Starting school can be a traumatic time for parents and children alike but an innovative program is working to decrease the stress of starting 'big school'.

The Transition to School program is a NSW Government initiative funded by Families First, and it builds partnerships between primary schools, preschools, families and communities to ensure the process is as painless as possible.

During May, the Transition to School program, co-ordinated by Illawarra Children Services, will hold a series of expos around the Illawarra to help make the transition to Kindergarten easier.

The expos will give parents information on schools in their area, the chance to speak with staff and parents whose children started school the previous year as well as advice on nutrition, managing asthma at school, managing bullying and out-of-hours care.

Helpful transition

Keiraville Community Preschool co-ordinator Margaret Gleeson recognised the pivotal role preschools played in a child's transition to school and said the centre's program aimed to make the whole process easier on families.

"One large part of our role is to make sure the experiences a child has today stand them in good stead for tomorrow," Ms Gleeson said.

She agreed that children who took part in a Transition to School program experienced higher levels of success in their first year and had less difficulty adapting to their surroundings.

"It has made a big difference. Teachers and parents say they can see

a real difference in how children settle into school," she said.

At the beginning of the year, staff at Keiraville Community Preschool survey the families of children going to school the following year on their priorities, thoughts, feelings and needs in the transition to school process.

Kindergarten children visit the preschool to tell them about their experiences at 'big school' and show them how their uniform will look.

Then their photographs are added to the *People We Know at Big School* display book.

During Term 2, the preschool

runs the Playing and Learning to Socialise program (PALS) to establish which children are ready to attend primary school and the schools they are likely to attend.

The preschool holds information sessions for families throughout the year on the transition to school process, offering suggestions on how parents can help smooth the path.

It also invites principals from nearby public and Catholic primary schools to speak to families about the school systems and to answer questions.

It then provides the

principals with a list of concerns parents expressed.

Ms Gleeson said one of the most popular events on the program was the networking morning tea, a get-together of parents whose children will attend the same school the following year.

Ms Gleeson said the preschool ensured there was always a parent mentor whose children had already started at the school at the morning tea to provide first-hand information to families.

As the year progresses, preschoolers begin participating in "school time" from 10 to 11 am daily in an effort to introduce more structure into their day.

Ms Gleeson said school time gives children experience operating in a larger group and obeying their teacher's commands while developing a positive attitude to school.

At the end of the program, the preschool surveys parents on their assessment of the transition program and provides space for them to suggest any ideas for improvements.

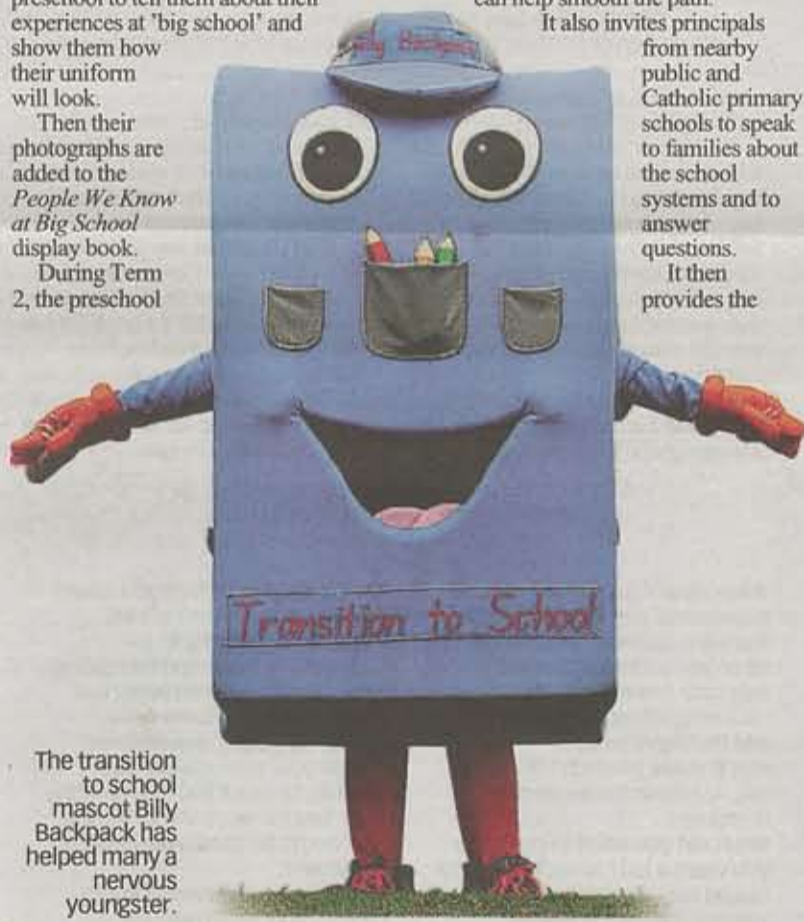
Taking a tour

The Warrangong Public School Transition to School program is a 10-week program run in Term 4.

Kindergarten teacher and program organiser Sharon Titus said the extended timetable allowed more families to take part in the program.

"Forty per cent of families in the area do not access prior-to-school facilities so it is important to give them time to find out about our program and get them involved," she said.

She agreed that children who participated in such programs exhibited less anxiety when starting school and settled in more quickly than children



The transition to school mascot Billy Backpack has helped many a nervous youngster.



who did not. The longer timeframe also allows parents to digest the information given and offered children a comprehensive experience of "By the end of it, the kids were settled and so comfortable at

'The program helps need to think that

we had very few tears on the first back," she said.

The school's program covers a number of often overlooked factors such as guiding parents through the structure of lessons, the teaching methods and filling out medical and permission forms.

It also gave parents the opportunity to interact with staff and explain their child's future school.

Ms Titus felt the program was an important step towards building children's enjoyment of learning.

"The program helps children develop confidence and a love of learning - they need to think that it is great and lots of fun and the aim is to give them a really positive attitude to their education," she said.

Parents attend the first four weeks with their children in one of the school's kindergarten classrooms.

Children start the 10-week program with general activities and "free time" at designated learning centres in the classroom, like the book corner, puzzle table and the Duplo table aimed to familiarise them with their surroundings and the kinds of activities they could expect at school.

Gradually, more structure is introduced, with the Kindergarten teachers directing activities and

Tips for parents

- Deciding when your child is ready to start school can be difficult. Some factors to be considered are: Are they able to play alongside others? Do they relate well to adults? Are they able to express themselves clearly? Do they have separation issues? Are they able to make small decisions for themselves?
- Attend school orientation days with your child - it will help you and your child by interacting with future classmates and fellow parents.
- Introduce a small job or responsibility in the home like collecting the mail each day.
- Ensure your child knows their

- name, address and age.
- Avoid questions like "Will you miss me?" and statements like "I will miss you". Instead reassure your child that you will be back to collect them after school.
- Encourage your child to dress him/herself, practise buttons, zips, etc. Laces are often difficult for a child under six years to manage.
- Make a special trip to buy school bag/lunch box and practise using them.
- Have your child open cling wrap, and practise eating sandwiches before cakes.



Starting school can be a difficult time for both parents and children.



Keiraville Community Preschool teacher Margaret Gleeson with children who will be going to school next year, Aaron Turney (left), Cameron Low and Georgia Dellow. Picture: KEN ROBERTSON

Big-school expo

Five expos will be held throughout the Illawarra next month to help preschoolers get ready for "big school". They are organised by the Wollongong Transition to School Network. The expos will have booths with information, uniforms, guest speakers and sample bags.

- May 8, Woonona/Bulli RSL, 7-9pm
 - May 14, Dapto Ribbonwood Centre, 7-9pm
 - May 22, Illawarra Master Builders' Club, 7-9pm
 - May 31, Helensburgh Community Centre, 7-9pm
- RSVP to Carrie Sutherland on 4283 9946

to them. Tours were conducted for parents and children, featuring visits to important places in the school like the canteen, the toilets, the bubblers, the hall and the front office. The tour finished in the library

making friends, how to deal with bullying and nutrition. Later in the program, children and their parents were introduced to the playground equipment and the school's computer labs. At the end of it all students were

Children develop confidence and a love of learning - they find it is lots of fun, and the program aims to give them a positive start to their education.

where the librarian spoke to parents about library bags and topped it all off with a story for the kids. From week four of the program, parents dropped their children off at the classroom and spent the hour in the parents' room. In there they watched a DVD about the school, spoke to other parents and learned what goes on in the Kinder rooms from day to day. Parents were also given advice from guest speakers on ways they could help their child with reading and numeracy,

presented with a certificate and a sticker book by Transition to School mascot, Billy Backpack, and Ms Titus said his visit had proved invaluable. "You don't realise the power one mascot has," she said laughing. "I had a student last year with real separation anxiety. She had her mum with her the whole time through the program until she met Billy Backpack who gave her the book which she slept with under her pillow. After his visit, she was fine."

Making movies

Russell Vale Public School went straight to the experts when casting the DVD on starting school which formed part of their involvement in the Voices of Children community campaign. Rhonda Morton, formerly the assistant principal at Russell Vale and now stationed at West Wollongong Public, said the decision to have six Kindergarten students and mascot Billy Backpack as the stars of the show was a no-brainer. "The value of this project lies in the fact it is children speaking to children," Ms Morton said. The seven-minute DVD had a limited adult presence and the production featured colourful settings and still photography to make the visuals as appealing as possible. The DVD was made at the request of two preschools in the Russell Vale area which addressed questions children had asked. The questions included:

- Where do we get dropped off?
 - Where do we eat lunch?
 - What does the classroom look like?
 - Do we get to use the computers?
 - Can we climb the trees?
 - Can we play in the sand?
 - What do we do at the end of the day?
- "Our program is about making the transition to school as smooth as possible, and to involve and respect the whole family in the process," Ms Morton said. "It is important for a school to know where parents and their children are coming from and parents to understand the process of starting school, not just dropping their kids off and leaving." And the Kindergarten children involved in the DVD loved their time in the spotlight. "I know it certainly made an impact on the Kindergarten kids," she said. "They really embraced the littlies coming in and got a real sense of involvement and importance out of going to the preschools and answering questions."



Transition programs can make the move to big school happier for kids. Picture: RUTH HARTMANN, FAIRFAX

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