

Kiama Independent



Billy helps children prepare for school

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CHILDREN'S mascot Billy Backpack paid a visit to Kiama Downs Children's Centre last week, helping students with the important transition to school.

Devised almost four years ago, the Billy Backpack program aims to prepare children for starting school and make them comfortable in their school environment.

Billy Backpack and representatives from Illawarra Children's Services visit pre-schools and child-care centres across the Illawarra, promoting the importance of a healthy transition through the popular Billy Backpack song.

Transition to School officer Kath Smith said children loved visits from Billy Backpack. She described the sing-song session as a "four-year-old mosh pit".

"Sometimes they can be a little scared at first, but usually they're up dancing and singing with him ... they just adore him," she said.

Ms Smith said the program was created after research showed the transition to school was a critical time in a child's life.

"We want it to happen smoothly so we provide helpful hints that assist them in starting school," she said.

"There is a lot to consider so we focus on the practicalities of making kids feel comfortable in a school environment."

The chef at Kiama Downs Children's Centre prepared healthy lunches for Billy Backpack's visit. Children had the opportunity to practice skills such as opening drinks and removing wrapping from sandwiches.

"We get them taking plastic wrap off and opening Poppas ... these skills might seem obvious to adults but they can be stressful for children if they don't practice," Mrs Smith said.

"It's about encouraging independence and making the transition easier for families as well."

Illawarra Children's Services staff also hold information sessions for parents and have found the program successful with families as a whole.

"We would like concrete evidence, but it's hard to measure. Anecdotally it is definitely helping," Mrs Smith said.

"People didn't know about transition before and now they are looking into things such as health checks.

"It's not about being brilliant academically, but having children be comfortable before they start school."

