

INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Organisation: Mission Australia

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Inquiry into transition support for students with
additional or complex needs and their families

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INTRODUCTION

Mission Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee's *Inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families*.

Our submission to this Inquiry is founded in both in our practice and research. It is informed by our experience in delivering Early Learning Services and other child and family services, as well as knowledge gained through our involvement in research, particularly that regarding the Pathways to Prevention program (Homel et al., 2006) and the transition to school of children from families with complex needs (Dockett et al., 2011).

Our submission focuses on providing information regarding Mission Australia services and the elements of good practice that have been identified therein via our practice experience and research findings.

ABOUT MISSION AUSTRALIA

Mission Australia is a national non-profit organisation operating more than 450 community and employment services across metropolitan, rural and regional Australia in each State and Territory. Mission Australia's approach asserts that every child deserves the very best start in life, as well as support throughout their childhood. Mission Australia recognises that some families are challenged in providing safe and nurturing environments within which children can thrive and have a solid foundation for success. Mission Australia focuses on early intervention for young children and their families from disadvantaged communities and supporting families and communities to be strong and nurturing. Additionally, Mission Australia is a provider of high quality childcare in highly disadvantaged situations as well as being a partner in the Good Start consortium.

While recognising that there are a range of education transitions across the lives of children and young people, this submission focuses on transition in the early childhood years from pre-school and any early childhood education experiences into school. Mission Australia has extensive experience in early childhood education and care, and through our services we provide a range of educational support activities. In New South Wales, Mission Australia is a facilitating partner at three Communities for Children (CfC) sites at Mt Druitt, Taree and Miller and also operates Brighter Futures programs at Dubbo, Riverina, Port Macquarie and Shoalhaven/Tablelands. In addition, Mission Australia operates two preschools with a specific focus on children with disabilities/delays, two specialist early childhood intervention services for children with disabilities/delays and a number of family support services and child and family-focussed community hubs.

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

Mission Australia understands that a child's early experience with education is a key determinant of his or her transitional experience through school and into adulthood. Our services work with children, families and communities to build strong foundations for positive early experiences with education. Taking a long-term engagement approach, Mission Australia has support services that work with families from the pre-natal stage right throughout the schooling years to foster positive relationships and engagement with the education system and encourage optimal childhood development.

Families defined as having complex needs are those families experiencing multiple challenges, this may be for the parents, the children or the whole family. These challenges may include financial problems, ill health, substance abuse, family violence, poor educational outcomes and truancy (Katz et al. 2007). Additional factors, on their own or in combination, may cause families to be particularly disadvantaged, attracting a label of 'vulnerable and at risk'.

The Dockett et al. (2011) research decided on the term 'complex support needs' to describe families facing challenges as this terminology focuses on the interaction of different problems and highlights ways in which families, with appropriate support, can 'draw on their own strengths to make positive changes in their lives' (Dockett et al. p.3).

For families with complex needs, the start of schooling can amplify existing challenges and affect a child's progression through key developmental stages (Newman and Blackburn 2002). Mission Australia's children and families services work with families that may need specific strategies to support the child's transition into school. Recognising that parental involvement is a predictor of a child's success at school, Mission Australia's children and families services take a strengths-based approach to working with the entire family.

Our Early Learning Services engage with families to learn more about their values and their practices and to build on the ways in which they support their children's development. This approach has been shown to be particularly important when working with families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Sims 2001) or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Amigó 2009). Mission Australia's Communities for Children sites are particularly focused on building the strengths of the local community. Our early intervention and specialist support services partner with families to provide opportunities for children to reach their full developmental potential. Mission Australia's Family Links program includes a 'dilly bag' project to support the transition to school for Indigenous children and their families. The Dilly Bag project is a literacy program designed to assist young Indigenous children and their classmates to develop emergent literacy skills and understandings. The project also seeks to engage the families by including in the Dilly Bag kit resources for families to read aloud to young children, helping them to develop emergent literacy understandings.

In addition to services that offer culturally supportive programs, Mission Australia offers services for families who have a range of complex needs. These needs might include families with financial problems, those who have family members with health or substance abuse issues, or situations in which there is family violence, poor or negative parental educational experiences or children who have complex support needs. At the Communities for Children site at Miller, Mission Australia provides many services aimed at transition points for children with complex needs, including two main programs: Miller Pre-school and the Early Intervention Groups. Miller Pre-school is focused on improving educational outcomes for children 3-6 years of age and uses play to develop learning and social skills. The pre-school offers an educational program for 40 children a day, with ten places specified for children with disabilities.

Two early childhood intervention groups are also held each week. They support children with special and complex needs to develop and practice appropriate social and play skills, and help prepare them for their next educational setting. This service also provides a pathway into the inclusive preschool setting. One of the groups is specifically for children with autism. The staffing mix is particularly important to the success of this program and includes an early childhood teacher, a therapist who specialises in meeting the sensory needs of children with autism, and experienced child care workers. Another critical success factor of this program is the parent group that is run concurrently and is facilitated by a family support worker who provides information and support to the families.

Services at Miller Pre-school also support guidance and activities that are aimed at developing and improving parenting skills. This includes access to services and social networks, which support healthy child development and family wellbeing. The range of family services includes parenting programs and workshops, a resource library, speech and occupational therapy to families and children enrolled in the preschool and individual and family counselling. The diversity in the programs is aimed at providing multiple entry points into support programs and activities for parents and care-givers.

Other Mission Australia children and families services have been established to fill service gaps in local areas with high needs. Macarthur Early Childhood Intervention Service (Sydney South-West) provides specialised early childhood intervention services for families who have a child diagnosed with developmental delay or disability. Similarly, we have services in Campbelltown, Camden and Wollondilly, in which there are concentrations of families with extremely low socio-economic backgrounds. A key aspect of these programs is that family support is offered from the pre-natal stage through to school age so as to provide the most complete range of support possible.

Services at these sites include centre-based and home-based individual special education and therapy, group programs, school transition planning and support, parent support groups which run concurrently with the child's group programs, early childhood centre support, and the provision of resources for use at home or other environments. Again, the diversity of

programs is intended to provide multiple entry and access points through which families can get the support they need.

This collection of services is designed to intervene in a child's first years, to aid development by building on the natural learning occurring in the early years of a child's life. The client group are often children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families are often isolated because of their low socio-economic status and culturally diverse backgrounds. At this service there is currently a diverse range of children attending, including those from Aboriginal backgrounds, CALD backgrounds, and children from single parent families. Another key aspect of these sites is the capacity and experience of staff to provide referrals, as needed, to other specialist services, agencies and professional support both within and external to Mission Australia.

In summary, the key strategies adopted to aid in the transition into school of children with complex needs are:

- Early learning groups to develop early play skills, movement, fine motor and communication skills;
- Pre-school skills group to promote the skill development and peer relationship building for inclusion required in an early childhood setting;
- School transition group for children who will attend school next year;
- Individual therapy and special education for each child including occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech pathology, psychologist, and specialist early childhood education;
- Support for the parent/carer to enable them to assist their child in the home environment including parent support groups and information and education workshops;
- The development of Individual Family Service Plans for each child that brings together all the people involved with the child so everyone can work in a coordinated way to ensure the best outcomes for the child; and
- Additional specialist services: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) support service for families who have children with ADHD; outreach consultancy service for other services and pre-schools who have children with special needs enrolled in their pre-school or service and Down Syndrome Support Groups.

Mission Australia also operates other early years services and specialist support services that specifically collaborate with schools to work with children and their families during the transition into school. A number of these programs are co-located at schools and community centres. The Circles of Care programs are part of the Pathways to Prevention project that recognises the positive impact that can be made when the school system works together

with a community organisation to meet the multiple needs of families living in a disadvantaged environment. The Pathways to Prevention project, developed by Mission Australia and Griffith University, includes a suite of programs aimed at improving the transition of young children from disadvantaged communities into school (Homel, Freiberg et al. 2006).

Families need strong and complementary supports, and the transition to school is best facilitated when strong relationships between families and practitioners are able to be developed over time. The Pathways to Prevention project's success is attributable to offering an holistic family service that provides universal or 'soft' entry points, such as playgroups, which link participants with the range of services they may require. These links are specifically designed so that people who might find services hard to reach are able and encouraged to access the support they need and to connect with the service system in their area. The direct involvement with the school and the strong relationships built between the community service and the schools provide the project with long-term sustainability within the community and facilitate a better functioning developmental system (Homel, Freiberg et al. 2006).

A common concern that arises with the families we work with is that children need to be ready for the school experience by the time they have reached school age. Families often regard choosing the right school as their responsibility but also felt they had little choice with their options. Other families are able to make decisions based on the location, perceived safety of the school and the reputation of the staff. For those parents of children with special educational needs, enrolling children in school can be highly stressful (Dockett, Perry et al. 2011). Families may not be offered the school of their choice so Mission Australia provides services that assist with the complex planning and negotiation with schools that may be required for families to gain access. Programs such as Community Links Taree help to establish school links while children are still in the playgroup years and encourage mentoring relationships in order to facilitate a smoother transition to school. Programs such as these help to introduce children and their families to the school environment, thus making the children's transition to school a less confronting experience. Furthermore, focussing on 'transition times' as crucial for children's development is of great assistance in ensuring their readiness for school.

A recent ARC-funded collaborative research study, in which Mission Australia was a partner investigator, highlights the practices and processes that facilitate the transition to school of children from families with complex support needs (Dockett, Perry et al. 2011). In summary, those practices include:

- Providing families with information about school including processes for enrolment, and any services and supports available;
- Assisting families to make positive connections with schools;
- Promoting the development of family skills and abilities;

- Acknowledging transition as a time when families seek, and are responsive to, input; and
- Recognising challenges that reside outside the family, for example in the neighbourhood or community.

To be truly effective, support for the transition into school has to continue into the school years. Mission Australia provides services that ensure that families of children with complex support needs have continuing access to specialist practitioners who can work directly with these families once the child is in school. Mission Australia's Inclusion Support program is an example of such a program. Inclusion Support funds specialist educators to provide this additional support and the required activities for children with complex support needs.

INTEGRATING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE WITH SCHOOLING

Where families experience multiple challenges, the support that they receive is often diverse and the fragmentation of the service system can be confusing and disempowering, making it difficult to negotiate. As demonstrated by the Pathways to Prevention project and the CfC initiatives, an integrated or 'joined up' approach in service provision provides the best supports for families. In particular, as has been discussed, this approach provides families with multiple avenues to enter the service system and assists in breaking down barriers that can prevent families from seeking support.

Mission Australia works in numerous communities where families benefit significantly from the provision of a seamless transition through a continuum of service responses that range from the universal through to targeted and intensive services. Universal services, such as the education and health care systems provide links with family support, income support and housing as well as some specialist services. Accessing support through universal services helps normalise the provision of support and reduces the stigmatising of clients. In this regard, Mission Australia supports the government initiative that ensures that at least 15 hours of early education is available for all Australian children. Initiatives such as these facilitate the transition to school for children and families who may not have previously accessed early childhood education and care services. This expansion of universal access for education provides another point of connection for children and families and a gateway into more intensive support if needed.

Many of Mission Australia's Early Learning Services (ELS) operate in disadvantaged areas. Practitioners in these areas have found that the single greatest factor in ensuring a positive transition to school is the relationship between the ELS and the school. Relationships that are based on mutual respect for practitioners in the ELS and the teachers in the school are, understandably, the most conducive to supporting children and their families. The best outcomes are achieved where the ELS and school staff work together on common goals for the child's success across all the domains of

wellbeing. Mission Australia is optimistic that the inclusion of qualified teachers in early learning services will facilitate relationships between these services and schools.

Cross-sector collaboration between early learning services and schools also overcomes problems that arise with fragmented services in which support from early childhood services completed ceases when a child enters school. The loss of continuity of service can have negative consequences for children's engagement in school and for their progression, confidence and achievements. Mission Australia practitioners who have observed disconnections between early childhood services and school suggest that the early years should be defined as 0 – 8 years. Currently, support provided in the years prior to school does not automatically continue into the school years. Families have to negotiate a whole new system of support and specialist assistance. Application processes are often complex and support limited, and our services report that families can miss out on supported places in mainstream schools. Extending the definition of early childhood could assist in developing a more seamless system. The aim is to provide a formal role for services to continue to advocate in schools and between services on behalf of children and families with complex needs beyond the 0 to 5 years age range.

Practice informed evidence in Mission Australia's Early Learning Services (ELS) highlights the factors that impact positively on the transition to school for children with complex needs. These factors include:

- Close links between the school and the ELS;
- Parents, schools and the ELS share responsibility for school readiness and transitions;
- Assistance is provided by those services already working with families to assist them to navigate the school entry process. This is particularly important where children have additional and complex support needs;
- The continuation of supports that have been established in ELS into the school years. This includes any funding, for example for specialist support for children with disabilities;
- The best and most successful transitions are supported at all levels and include collaboration between the leadership in the ELS and the leadership in the school;
- In some areas there is a specific early intervention/integration support service and this works really well. This is a service which has a responsibility for the integration/collaboration of services and provides a 'no wrong door' approach to meet family needs; and
- Regular visits between the school teachers and the ELS to meet with children and parents, ensuring that the school is familiar to children and their families as well as providing opportunities for school teachers to get to know the families before they enter the school.

In a child's life, all of the stakeholders need to have some responsibility in facilitating the transition to school. If the transition process is solely regarded as the family's responsibility; the risk of a negative experience is high, especially where there are complex support needs.

EVIDENCE INFORMING PRACTICE

Mission Australia supports the development of clear processes that improve knowledge and understanding of children's transitions into school. In particular, accountability could be improved with increased national data collection and improved outcome measurement processes. Mission Australia has developed an overarching evaluation framework that supports our models of service delivery by articulating and measuring the practices that improve outcomes for clients. In line with this approach, Mission Australia supports national data collection programs such as the Australian Educational Development Index (AEDI) which provide empirical evidence of the communities that have high support needs. AEDI results in 2009¹ indicated high levels of vulnerability in communities such as Taree, Emerton, Hebersham and Whalan, with many local communities demonstrating more than double the state and national vulnerability levels. Mission Australia has targeted initiatives in many of these communities (discussed above).

KEY MESSAGES FROM OUR PRACTICE EXPERIENCES AND RESEARCH

Children and their families will benefit from government policy that recognises transition to school as a time of additional stress for families. Where families have complex support needs, it is particularly important that there is a continuity of support across the transition to school process. In order to achieve this, all relevant funded programs ought to be working together. This collaboration requires adequate resourcing. For families with complex support needs, our Early Learning Services have found that transitions have a better chance of success where there is a funded agency that is responsible for ensuring the continuity of support from the early learning services into school. Schools and prior-to-school services need to work in partnership by ensuring that there is practical liaison across the transition process. This may take the form of inter-service visits and programs.

Many of our early intervention and prevention services promote school-community relationships through their various school readiness programs. It is important that such programs continue to be supported, particularly where families may experience social exclusion.

¹ Australian Early Development Index. *AEDI Results*. Accessed online August 2011 at <http://maps.aedi.org.au/>

CONCLUSION

Mission Australia works towards focusing on the unique needs of the children and on providing high quality experiences, in our Early Learning Services and in our children and families services, such as those described above. We aim to provide children with the opportunities to grow and learn and support those children with complex needs appropriately, based on their individual needs. Importantly, however, the services and supports that are provided are flexible and responsive to the changing needs of clients. Mission Australia's research and practice evidence highlights the need for these services and supports to be offered and provided in a respectful and collaborative way with parents and carers. Family strengths must underpin any approach and support services must be properly resourced with skilled multi-disciplinary teams that are sensitive to the local community contexts.

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