



Australian Research Alliance
for Children & Youth

School readiness

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For the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth February 2007

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Funded by the Australian Government
Department of Families, Community
Services and Indigenous Affairs

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ISBN: 978-1-921352-06-5

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ABOUT ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was founded by a group of eminent experts and organisations in reaction to increasingly worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia's young people.

ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia.

ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia's future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

1. To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people
2. To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

Developed for the Facilitating Partners of the Australian Government Communities for Children initiative, this paper is now being made available to a wider audience via the ARACY website: www.aracy.org.au

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

The experiences of early childhood have lifelong implications for our health, well-being, and development, including our ability to become productive, socially adjusted contributors to society. Though these experiences do not determine how children ultimately develop, they do set them on trajectories that, over time become increasingly difficult to modify (1).

There is clear evidence that gaps in children's functioning and achievement develop early and are significant by the time they reach school. As a result, children enter school with marked differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills needed for success in the school environment (1,2). These differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success (1-4). Children who enter school not yet ready to learn tend to do less well in school, are more likely to become teenage parents, to engage in criminal activities, and to have mental health problems. Ultimately, these children tend to have lower educational levels on leaving school and are more likely to have poor employment records in adulthood (5).

These differences at school entry can, in turn, be traced to capabilities seen during the preschool years and to the experiences in and out of the home that foster their development (1,3). Young children's home environments are strongly associated with their relative skills and abilities upon entry to school (1-3,6).

The implication of these findings is that schools may have difficulties changing children's developmental trajectories. As the U.S. National School Readiness Indicators Initiative (7: 2) has noted,

Children from low-income families are more likely to start school with limited language skills, health problems, and social and emotional problems that interfere with learning. The larger the gap at school entry, the harder it is to close.

The evidence suggests that it becomes increasingly difficult and costly to change children's developmental trajectories as they get older, and that schools have increasing difficulty compensating for early cognitive and non-cognitive deficits as children grow (2).

One of the reasons why this is a matter of great concern is that school 'unreadiness' is so costly: having significant numbers of children start school with poorly developed learning, emotional and social skills has substantial consequences and costs to society as well as to the children themselves (2,8). Against this is the evidence that investments in the early years are cost effective, yielding long-term social and economic benefits (2,8-10). Because skills develop cumulatively, early investment in cognitive and non-cognitive skills lowers the cost of later investment by making learning at later ages more efficient (2).

With the increasing complexity of contemporary living, and the corresponding increases in the skills needed by young people entering adult society, school readiness has never been more important:

What children know and can do at the time they start school ('school readiness') helps determine their educational, and lifelong, success. This is never more true than today. Today's economy demands a highly educated citizenry, meaning that children must be prepared for their own futures more than any other generation in the past (8: v)

REDEFINING SCHOOL READINESS

There has been a significant shift in the conceptualisation of school readiness in recent years. Previously, school readiness was understood in one of two ways: it was either simply assumed on the basis of chronological age, and children were admitted into school when they reached the designated age; or it was conceptualised in terms of specific skills and competencies that could be measured and assessed against established norms and standards.

In either case, the focus was on the individual child and his or her 'readiness' for school. Children needed to demonstrate their 'readiness' and were accepted into school when they met these age or skills criteria.

More recently, the conceptualisation of what constitutes school readiness has broadened: it is no longer seen as applying *only* to the child, but as a *shared* responsibility. As stated by the US National School Readiness Indicators Initiative (7: 2),

Children will not enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development of infants, toddlers and preschool children.

This rethinking of what constitutes school readiness has occurred in the context of our increasing understanding of the importance of the early years of childhood. This includes research on brain development, the influence of risk and protective factors, and the nature of the environmental or ecological factors that contribute to family functioning and child health and development.

We now know that the neural (brain wiring) connections and pathways are laid down very early in life and that these are crucial to effective learning. We also know that brain development occurs in response to genes as well as environments. This research, in turn, has helped us understand how risk and protective factors can impede or enhance brain development. For example, high levels of cortisol in early childhood are associated with stress, and may impede the child's capacity for learning and the formation of memory. As the capacity for learning and memory are important factors in school success, continuing highly stressful experiences and environments negatively impact upon school readiness. By contrast, relationships that are nurturing and responsive to the infant/child are protective: they reduce the effects of stress,

and help build the healthy brain development that provides a strong foundation for learning, behaviour and health (1).

The ecological approach in child development studies, derived from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (11,12) has also had a significant impact upon the reconceptualisation of school readiness. This approach complements the brain development research emphasis on the early years and early childhood experiences. The ecological perspective contextualises child development within the series of relationships that form the child's environment. In this model, these relationships are represented as layers (or systems), beginning with the child's immediate context of the family and extending through school, religion, community to wider society and beyond that, to global relationships and structures.

In an ecological model a child's development is understood as occurring in the context of these overlapping, interconnected influences and relationships: it does not occur in isolation, or just in the context of the family, for example. The relationships that comprise these contexts are dynamic and malleable.

Overall, the research highlights the importance of early detection of emerging problems and effective early intervention strategies to redress problems. The unambiguous implication of this research is that services, strategies and programs intended to optimise school readiness need to be implemented in early childhood – well before a child approaches school entry.

The 'Ready Child Equation'

The ecological model, together with the new emphasis on early experiences (from research into brain development), has led to an approach that widens the basis of 'readiness' from individuals to communities and their social and

educational institutions and resources. The new concept of school readiness recognises that early childhood development is influenced by characteristics of, and relationships between, the child, the family and the broader social environment. One way of expressing this broader concept of 'readiness' is the 'Ready Child Equation' developed by the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative in the US (7,13):

**Ready Families + Ready Communities +
Ready Services + Ready Schools = Children Ready for School.**

'Ready families' refers to children's family context and home environment. 'Ready communities' refers to the resources and supports available to families with young children. 'Ready Services' refers to availability, quality and affordability of proven programs that influence child development and school readiness. 'Ready Schools' describes critical elements of schools that influence child development and school success.

The implied emphasis on the child in the 'ready child equation' suggests that re-phrasing the equation as the 'school-readiness equation' may be a more appropriate way of expressing the interconnection between the different components of the equation. Questions are now asked about the school's readiness for a child, thereby turning the old question, 'Is this child ready for school?' on its head. The school's readiness for children is, in turn, shaped by the resources and relationships available in the community, so the questions are widened further to become 'Is the community ready?' 'Are the services ready?'

Domains of school readiness

An additional aspect to the way in which the concept of school readiness has broadened relates to the developmental 'domains' considered relevant

to a child's school readiness. Ultimately, these are now understood to involve all aspects of early childhood development: school readiness is a reflection of the physical and socio-emotional health, and cognitive developmental outcomes and milestones children should be able to achieve under optimal circumstances before they enter school. The domains therefore include:

- Physical health and well-being
- Social knowledge and competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive development
- General knowledge and communication skills

Thus, school readiness is not restricted to cognitive development but is multidimensional, involving physical, social, and emotional development as well as general approaches to learning (2,8).

The specific terms used by programs/projects to label these domains vary, though the scope and range remain comparable. Responsibility for providing the experiences and resources required to support child development in these five school readiness domains is shared between the institutions and contexts described in the 'Ready Child Equation'.

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH 'CHILDREN'S READINESS FOR SUCCESS IN SCHOOL'

The literature would suggest that there are a number of factors that either facilitate or hinder the school readiness process at either an individual, family or community level. These include socioeconomic status (which often interacts with race or ethnicity), the child's health, family background characteristics, particularly the mother's education, single- parent status, and mental health, the home and community environment, including risk factors and literacy-related factors; and participation in some type of quality preschool program. (14).

Some of the factors listed above are not readily amenable to change but their effects can be modified with specific interventions, programs or through certain provisions. For example family characteristics and socio-economic status are particularly difficult to change, though their impact upon a child's school readiness may be highly significant. Long term and intergenerational unemployment are associated with poor school outcomes. However, with appropriate family support, including access to effective parenting programs and high quality services and facilities, outcomes for children can be improved.

Similarly there are strategies that can improve early childhood development outcomes, particularly for those most disadvantaged, thereby closing the inequality gap. The most compelling evidence of effective programs can be summarised as the 'preschool advantage'. High quality early childhood education is advantageous to all children, but targeted programs for disadvantaged children can also help to redress school readiness inequalities. This is particularly important for Indigenous children and those from CALD families. In this context, school readiness strategies need to directly address the significant disparities in the school entry skills of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The 'preschool advantage'

Compelling evidence of the efficacy of targeted, high-quality early childhood education programs is found in data from studies in the U.S. (High/Scope Perry Preschool Program) and the U.K. (The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project). North American data from the High/Scope Perry Preschool program in particular demonstrates the long-term, wide-ranging gains of such programs. No comparable Australian data are available but the results from these studies can be extrapolated to Australia.

High/Scope Perry Preschool program

The High/Scope Perry Preschool program (frequently referred to as the Perry Preschool program), is currently the benchmark for longitudinal studies examining the effects of targeted, high quality early childhood education programs. It was initiated in the U.S. in 1961 with a target population of three and four year old African-American children who were living in poverty. Two things make the results of this program so significant: data were collected on program participants and no-program participants from the same 'at risk' population (randomised controlled trial); and, data have been collected periodically since the program began, with the participants tracked throughout their lives, up to the age of forty. These two aspects of the study ensure that the effects of the program are able to be reliably verified and tracked through the life of the participants.

The data include education and work history, earnings and welfare dependence, marriage and birth details, social integration and arrests rates. On all these measures, participants did significantly better than the non-participant population. A cost-benefit analysis, conducted in 1992 when the participants were 27, concluded that the total benefit, through lower subsequent rates of special education, higher employment rates and increased earning capacity, as well as reduced victim and criminal justice system costs, amounted to U.S.\$88,433.00 (in 1992 dollars) per program participant. The report on data collected when the participants were 40 concluded that the 'preschool advantage' includes: "higher lifetime earnings, greater employment stability and dramatically reduced involvement in crime" leading to a "public benefit of almost \$13 for every dollar invested in the program". The private monetary benefit to program participants was estimated to be approximately \$14 for every dollar invested (15).

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project (EPPE)

The EPPE is a more recent, large, longitudinal study following 3,000 children, their parents, home environments and pre-school settings. It examines the kinds of home and preschool environments that are associated with better and worse school outcomes for these children. The EPPE project confirms the value of high-quality early childhood educational programs. It was initiated in the UK in 1997, so the data cannot yet provide a picture of adult outcomes in the way the Perry Preschool program has done, but the results to date indicate that pre-school can help to combat social exclusion and promote inclusion for disadvantaged children.

EPPE has demonstrated that high quality pre-school education has wider gains, too, with enhanced social and educational development for all children who attend. A recent Australian review of research on early childhood education drew similar conclusions:

... access to good early childhood programs with appropriate curricula and pedagogy can provide children with social and cognitive experiences that promote independence and positive attitudes to learning. Such quality programs facilitate the transition to school and underpin later academic success (16: 33).

Two additional findings from the EPPE project have particular policy relevance:

part-time pre-school education attendance is as effective as full-time
parental involvement increases the 'preschool advantage'

The High/Scope Perry Preschool program's emphasis on the role of parents and the significance of the home environment is echoed in the EPPE conclusion that '*What parents do is more important than what they are*'. That

is, strategies such as parents reading to their children can help to overcome structural disadvantages related to class, race and ethnicity.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Although school readiness is multifactorial, with its origins in the experiences and relationships of early childhood/infancy, there are nevertheless a number of specific strategies and programs that have the capacity to directly contribute to the “ready child equation”.

Ready families

The conclusion drawn from the EPPE project that “*What parents do is more important than who they are*” is consistent with a strategy for building school readiness that involves parents (or carers). Home visiting is noted here as a strategy impacting upon family well-being and school readiness. The issue of home visiting is complex, however. It is not a single, uniform practice, but comprises a number of distinct streams, the success of which relate to specific conditions. While home visiting is acknowledged as important, the complexity of the related issues and considerations are beyond the focus of this paper.

Parenting and family support programs are additional important mechanisms through which parents can develop skills and confidence that may improve child outcomes, including those related to behavioural problems that compromise school readiness. For example, behavioural problems compromise school readiness. Parenting programs have been shown to be effective in reducing behavioural problems and improving behaviour over time. The *Positive Parenting Program* in particular has been a highly effective intervention program for at risk three year old children.

A specific way in which parents can build school readiness is to promote child development at home. One strategy is for parents to read to their children, promoting a love of literacy and social bonding. Promoting literacy requires

strategies at family, community and local agency levels. 'Let's Read' is an Australian program that has been developed to encourage parents to read with their young children, beginning at four months and continuing to at least the age of five. 'Let's Read' provides parents with simple and practical tips on how to read to their child. A DVD demonstrates parents reading with their children and provides examples of different ways in which books can be read aloud. As the recommended 'Let's Read' project illustrates, parents need support and guidance in this – and they need appropriate book resources.

Ready Preschools and Schools

Schools and pre-schools (and long day centres and family day care) need to develop strong links and communications that form the basis of transition to school programs. They need to ensure continuity and consistency between these environments and for children's experiences. Families need to be involved in transition to school programs, and the communications and relationships that underpin them.

Preschools

With specific reference to pre-schools, an effective, evidence-based strategy for building school readiness and all the individual and societal gains it provides is to fund universal pre-school education, at least in the year preceding school entry. Consistent with the EPPE conclusion that full-time attendance confers no greater advantage than part-time attendance, funding of part-time positions is recommended.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool program, and, more recently, EPPE, provide clear evidence of the value of high quality pre-school educational programs in preparing children to learn and succeed at school – that is, for school readiness. The long-term gains documented for children who participated in the High/Scope Perry Preschool program convincingly demonstrate the positive trajectories affected by the program and the wide range of social, emotional and economic gains for its participants. The target population and

the strategies of the Perry Preschool program make it particularly relevant to Indigenous communities in Australia, and to disadvantaged CALD families.

In recommending high quality early childhood education programs (preschool education), it is noted that specific features of the High/Scope Perry Preschool program were critical to its success with disadvantaged communities and 'at risk' children. These features are not optional extras, but were integral to the program and its success. Home visits and parental involvement in the preschool program were key features identified with the success of the program. The nature of the program was also significant: active learning was encouraged, with children initiating activities and controlling their environment. Significantly, the success of the program is also attributed to its small class sizes with trained and supervised teachers.

A similar conclusion is drawn from the EPPE project: 'Children's progress increased commensurately with the level of qualification of staff'. High quality early childhood programs are assumed to have high levels of qualified staff, but the point is emphasised here that it is high quality early childhood education programs that confer school readiness (and other) gains.

Schools

The resources of individual schools are important components of the school's readiness for children. These resources include: materials and infrastructure; attitudes, skills and knowledge (eg. of child development); and relationships both within the school and with families and the wider community.

'Transition to school' programs are important contributors to school readiness, and the recent literature (4) suggests that these programs are most effective when they:

- are informed by and responsive to the need of the child. How the child feels about the transition is important to the program's

success. Listening to the child and giving them a voice in the process builds the child's sense of competence and confidence

- recognise that children are capable learners with their own experiences and expectations. Children are likely to have quite distinct expectations of school and these are acknowledged and respected. Children's strengths and interests are built upon
- develop positive, reciprocal relationships and communications among and between children, families, early childhood services and communities
- involve the child's family and support parent-professional partnerships.

These features of successful transition to school programs show the interconnectedness of family, school and community. It is this interconnectedness that underpins the 'ready child equation'. On-going, meaningful communications are the foundation of this interconnectedness. For Indigenous and CALD families, these principles and the practices they inform, are even more important in supporting school readiness.

Ready services

Early detection increases the likelihood of positive outcomes and reduces the financial burden of addressing entrenched developmental problems or delays. Early interventions are far more effective than later, remedial or compensatory programs, but early intervention requires early identification of problems. Identification of severe or major problems and developmental delays is generally not difficult, but mild to moderate problems may be more difficult to identify. Evidence shows that parents are generally accurate observers of their children and may be aware of problems before they become apparent to outside observers.

In Victoria a tool used by an increasing number of early childhood services for eliciting and responding to parental concerns about their child's development is the Parents' Evaluation of Development Status questionnaire (PEDS). The tool consists of ten questions worded in everyday language (eg. "Do you have any concerns about how your child talks or makes speech sounds?") that invite parents to raise their concerns about their child's development.

PEDS was developed on the premise that parents know their own child best, and that their expertise is complimentary to the professional expertise of early childhood professionals. PEDS is a validated screening tool for early detection of mild to moderate developmental delay. It is also used to facilitate a relationship between the parent and the professional: as such it supports the ecological model's emphasis on relationships across and between children's environmental contexts. When parents are respectfully involved in supportive, collaborative relationships with professionals, outcomes are likely to be improved.

Similarly it is important that services use evidence based approaches to managing common developmental problems such as behaviour, language and sleep, as well as promoting health and preventing problems such as obesity. This means that not only can service providers identify children early, they can also use a range of innovative, yet evidence based approaches to making a difference. There are a number of web based resources available, such as the *Research Based Practice Resources*.

Ready Communities

As the 'Ready child equation' demonstrates, school readiness is not an outcome linked to an intrinsic quality or set of innate characteristics, nor is it a set of skills that can be taught to individual children. Rather, school readiness is an outcome of the resources (including knowledge and skills), attitudes

(including priorities) and relationships of a community. School readiness, conceptualised as the community's readiness for the child, will vary from one community to another, and over time within the same community. Assessing a community's level of preparedness for children is, therefore required. This includes policy and service planning, and community initiatives that are targeted, able to be measured, and support healthy child development.

A tool that effectively measures school readiness at a community population level is the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is a population-level measure of children's development at school entry, based on the Canadian Early Development Instrument. From this perspective, school readiness as a concept offers an opportunity to explore developmental concepts at a population level, in relation to external factors at individual, neighbourhood and community levels, such as socioeconomic status or availability and access to services. A population-level measure of school readiness is based on the premise that while developmental processes do not differ across settings, the degree and specific impact of external factors may do so.

The AEDI uses a teacher-completed checklist to measure the five developmental domains: physical health and well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. In mapping the health and development of populations of children, the AEDI allows communities to assess how effectively they are supporting young children and their families. The AEDI facilitates increased collaboration between schools, early childhood services and local agencies supporting children and families. It is used at school entry (the first time point where data can be systematically collected on all children in a population), but its data relates directly to planning and policy relevant to school readiness at the community level. Specifically, the AEDI can influence planning and policy by:

- more effectively allocating existing resources

- exploring new ways in which schools, early childhood services, and local agencies can work together to ensure children get the best possible start in life
- reorienting community services and systems towards a greater focus on children
- increasing awareness of the crucial importance of the early years for children
- creating and evaluating effective community-based responses.

Results from an evaluation of AEDI are currently being analysed, but preliminary evaluation results already suggest that the AEDI is a useful tool for mobilising communities around early childhood and that it has facilitated partnerships (particularly between health and education services). Also, by delivering small area level data, the results from the AEDI have helped communities, including parents, have real discussions about the development of their children. All of these contribute directly to the conditions and relationships associated with school readiness as described earlier in this paper.

CONCLUSION

Investment in the early years

All these recommendations link back to the importance of the early years of life in establishing the foundation for future development, health and well-being. Effective investment in the early years reaps life-long gains.

Recent studies highlight that the young child's neural architecture remains open to environmental influences during their pre-school years and, perhaps as a result, early years programs are much more cost-

effective in overcoming socio-economic disadvantage than later year interventions. (17]

Therefore investment in programs and services in early childhood brings the most powerful, most enduring and most cost-effective results. School readiness ensures children start school on the best possible trajectory for later life. Considerable investment is required in the strategies, services and programs that support school readiness, but this investment reaps multiple gains that more than compensate for the financial costs.

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