

A new approach to school transition

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The change from early years services into formal educational settings has long been considered an integral transition point for young people. Now research from Flinders University asks 'Is service integration actually important to the children?'

A recent paper, published in *Children's Geographies*, led by Flinders

University Ph.D. Dr. Jennifer Fane, who is now based at Capilano University in Canada, indicates that service [integration](#) seems to have little impact on children's experiences of this transition.

The Australian Government has supported the Integrated Early Years Services since 2005, following what is considered best practice policy for supporting children and families. It is considered to constitute services that are connected in ways that create a comprehensive and cohesive system of support for children and families, including [early childhood care](#) and education, health, [social services](#), parenting, and family services.

"For adults, this concept seems to intuitively make sense—it's basically a one-stop-shop where families can access services and reduce the need to negotiate between sectors and disciplines to access the care, health, and educational needs of their children and support their overall well-being," explains Dr. Fane. "What we wanted to know, though, was whether they made life better for the children they were servicing."

The researchers identified potential early childhood education and care services by mapping them against their socio-economic status and level of service integration to reflect the diversity of these services across metropolitan South Australia. All four-to-five year old children attending the eight selected sites who were due to start [school](#) in 2017 were invited to participate. Twenty children participated with parental or guardian consent given.

Service integration did not appear to be a significant factor for young children during their transition to school.

Eighteen of the 20 participants spoke positively about their transition to school, with most sharing their perception that school provided a lot of time for play and that the rules were 'good' and fair. These 18 children

were from all transition categories, with children attending fully integrated early childhood education and child services generally having no marked difference from children in the moderate or low service integration categories.

"Service integration has come under critique before," explains Dr. Fane. "The work across disciplines is complex, and while in theory everyone works together, it can often be the case that the services are delivered side-by-side and effectively siloed rather than truly integrating practices".

"What adults value is different from what children value, and we must recognize this," says Dr. Fane.

"What we have learned from doing [wellbeing](#) research with instead of on young children is that their experiences of wellbeing are broader than what adults are currently measuring. For example, play and agency are key aspects of wellbeing to children that are not measured or assessed currently in child wellbeing frameworks".

Through the study, the researchers found that 90 percent of the children reported positively on their play experiences—a key indicator of their wellbeing, by their own estimations—after transition, regardless of how integrated their service was.

"Most children thought that school offered more opportunity for play than their early childhood setting, even though we know this isn't actually the case," says Dr. Fane. "This being such a strong marker for wellbeing for children, though, indicates that they saw this very positively, regardless of the integration levels of their early years service."

Most of the children also reported that there were more rules at school

than their early childhood service, but they did not view this as a bad thing. The rules made sense to the children, and they could see the benefits to the rules that the adults put in place.

"The children, regardless of the integration level of the services, saw the rules as fair and in place to keep them safe, and expressed that they felt good when following the rules set out for them at school," says Dr. Fane.

"The study found that—at least for the young children in this study—service integration in and of itself did not have a significant impact on [children](#)'s experiences of wellbeing during the transition.

"Informal integrations and partnerships were just as successful as the more formal arrangements, and so holding [service](#) integration up as the best way to go might not be rooted in reality. There are some things that intuitively seem to make sense, but don't necessarily hold up to further scrutiny.

"We need further research into whether this is actually best practice, or whether it just appears to be so on paper."

More information: Jennifer Fane et al, Preschool aged children's experiences of integrated early years services in Australia: including missing perspectives, *Children's Geographies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2021.1942790](#)

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