

A Family Affair

*The 'lived experience' of becoming the parent of
a school child*



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This presentation will be based on the findings of a recent Queensland research project which aimed to describe and interpret parents' narratives of their experiences as their child transitioned to school.

- provide a short overview of the current literature in the area and the project's methodology.
- share the 'stories' of a number of parents' experiences as their child transitioned to formal schooling.
- explain how the results of this study have relevance for schools and systems as they develop and review policies and practices.



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A child starting school is a significant event for most families. During childhood, children progress through a number of transitions and each of these will be a critical and fundamental point of development for both them and their families. Pivotal transitions for most children include starting childcare, transitioning to kindergarten and transitioning to formal schooling. For other children, pivotal transitions may include changes in family circumstances such as parental divorce and separation.



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DUAL ROLE

- These transitions can have a lasting impact on the child and their family.
- During their child's transition to formal schooling, parents have a dual role. They are expected to both support their child's transition and they are expected to cope with the challenges and changes the child's transition involves for them personally and for their family unit.



A Time of Transitioning

I have no idea [what I will do] ... I left home at 16. I fell pregnant at 16. I've been with Anthony ... Left home, got an emergency house, partied and didn't worry about school. And from there I've had babies ever since ... It's like I've never changed from a caterpillar to a butterfly. I've got to try and do that now, with little butterflies attached.

for a parent, the transition of his/her child to school means supporting the child's transition, plus coping with his/her own transition towards becoming a competent parent of a school child. (Griebel & Niesel, 2009, p. 66)

The transition to school represents both a time of opportunity and challenge for these families.

All of the mothers experienced a loss of support as their children started school and they were no longer eligible to attend the supported playgroup.

Dockett, S., Perry, B., & Kearney, E. (2012). Family transitions as children start school. *Family Matters*, 90, 57 - 67.



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Literature Review

While existing literature places a strong focus on understanding and supporting children as they make this transition, little focus has been placed on the experiences of parents as they transition to being the parent of a school child (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012).

Similarly, most literature on school transitions has focussed on, and examined the individual experiences of the child in the transition process and has left 'the implications of this event for the other family members underexplored' (Everri, 2014, p. 257).



This research study aimed to describe and interpret eight parents' stories from four families about their perceptions, expectations and experiences as well as analysing the continuities, changes and adjustments made as their child transitioned to the preparatory (prep) year of formal schooling in a regional area of Queensland, Australia

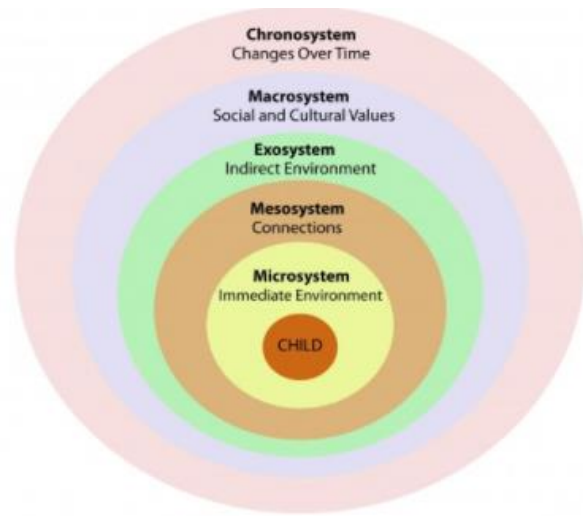


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This research used the Family Developmental Transition Approach (Griebel & Niesel, 2013) and the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to describe and interpret the ways in which parents' perceptions, expectations, adjustments and experiences may have been shaped by contexts and systems over time.



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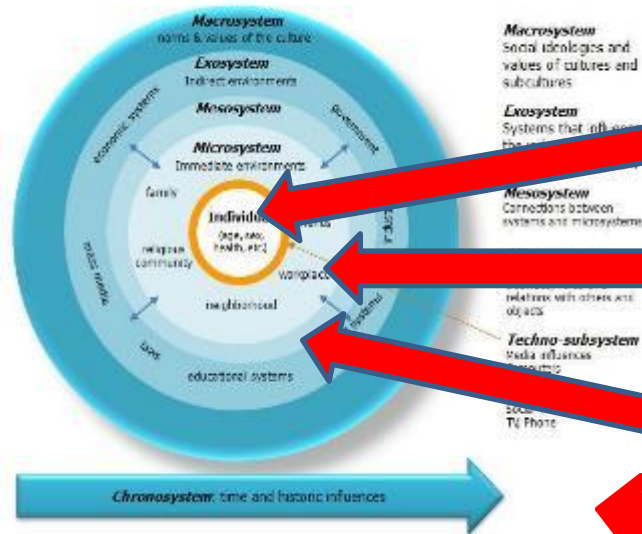
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Analysis Frameworks

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development



Transgenerational Effect

Family Developmental Transition Approach

Individual Level

✓ reconceptualising identity

Relationships Level

✓ learning to adapt to new relationships

Contextual Level

✓ adapting to new physical environments, institutions and rules



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In addition, through an intergenerational lens, this research also analysed how a parent's own experience of transitioning to school may have shaped the milestone of their child transitioning to school.



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KEY FINDINGS

The cross-case analysis identified that there were both similarities and differences in the experiences of parents and these could be interpreted using the Bioecological Model of Human Development and the Family Development Transition Approach models.

All parents in this study experienced changes at the individual, the relational and the contextual levels.

At the individual level, parents experienced a change in their status and identity in moving to being the parent of a school child. As expected, this transitional period was a highly emotive time for most parents and in many cases, these emotions could be linked to the participant's own experiences at school



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Roles

- Changing role/s and identity
- Work and parenting conflict
- A time of high stress and 'mixed' emotions for some parents
- The emotions experienced by the parents can both be reflective of the emotions of the transitioning child as well as having an effect on the child



At the relational level, it was evident that there were changes to the many and varied relationships with educators, between spouses, with the child undergoing the transition, with other children in the family, with extended family members and between siblings.



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Relationships/Interactions

- Relationships with the Transitioning Child
- Relationships with Educators
- Relationships with Extended Family Members
- Relationships with Partner/Spouse
- Relationship with other Transitioning Parents
- Relationships with other Children in the Family



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It was at the contextual level that most changes occurred. For most parents, having a child start school had an effect on daily routines, adult working hours, household finances, vacation care arrangements and holidays.



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Contexts

- Family Routines and Schedules
- Homework
- Before and After School Care
- Vacation Care
- Drop Offs and Pick Ups
- Financial and Work Implications
- Weekends and Holidays



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No two alike....

that families are not homogenous units. Not only are no two families exactly alike, but also, no two family members have exactly the same experiences, expectations or perspectives. In other words, families are made up of multiple actors who have had diverse experiences.

(Dockett 2017, p.261)

- This lack of homogeneity was evident in this study. The individual experiences of parents and of families were a result of the unique contexts and systems in which they were operating over time.

In summary, the research found that this transition was a significant time for each parent as they have individually reimagined their parenting role to some degree; reshaped their many and varied relationships and interactions and have reorganised their family context. This transition has been a personal journey and has been a result of the influence of the interactions with the various systems and contexts in which the transition took place. This journey has also been influenced by their own schooling experiences

TRANSITIONS



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The following composite case studies, generated from the data, illustrate the complexity of the lived experience of parents as their child transitioned to school.

The case studies provide an opportunity for educators to question some of current transition to school practices.

They also reveal some of the meaningful ways schools can promote and facilitate positive experiences for parents during this dual transition.



You look back from when he was a baby and you think, I can remember that like yesterday, but at the time, the days were so long and so repetitive and you never - especially with the first one, it's like you could never see the light at the end of the tunnel but looking back now, that light was upon you before you really knew it. Yeah. It goes quickly.



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Gary's biggest problem at school was his shyness. Very, very shy, withdrawn child, separated parents which had a detrimental effect for him. In his brain school was a place that he didn't like because he had to make friends. He had to talk in groups and he didn't process that information that the teachers were telling him, so he felt stupid. He felt inadequate and dumb.



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Yeah in a way like I've looked at it as almost like me going back to school for the second time. So as he's going to progress I'm sure a lot of things where I had no interest in when I was actually there I've got a genuine interest in now. So it's like we're definitely both going back to school. I'm certainly going to have a lot more involvement than possibly what my parents did. Yeah, hopefully there's definitely a lot more benefit and there's a good chance that he gets into the later years then I'll learn a few things again too. I think looking back now I see you matured and you realise how important schooling is. So I will definitely try and persuade them to stay in school. I just hope that they take after their mother as far as schooling goes. Again, I have no control over that. So all I can do is be there for him and any assistance that he does require, make sure that he receives it.



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I'm definitely excited, he's grown up so quick and he's going to school. I do feel that what I've seen of him developing so far, he's going to well at school. But yeah, definitely anxious drawing on my experiences at school. Anxious that they won't happen with him.



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Some other parents have mentioned that they'll be sad to see their kids go to kindy, the last one and so forth. They'll have mixed feelings about that, whereas I - knowing how excited she is about going, I'm happy for her to get there. I do worry about them when they get older, going to high school and things like that possibly, but yeah, primary school - that's probably the best years of your life, I think.



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We went to a prep orientation evening last week. I do remember being in a room with all the other Mums and I didn't really know any of them, and I realised that because I don't have a kindy connection, I don't actually know any of the Mums except for maybe a couple who have older siblings here. You kind of feel like I don't know any of these people.



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We sort of sat down and I said to Gary, just reflecting back on the last four and a half years. It's just so hard to believe that we now have our eldest child in school. He's going to be learning how to write and read. He'll start to lose that dependency so much on us over the next couple of years. Coming to terms with that - that he's going to be his own little person. Not that he's not already but just more so. It is confronting.



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For Janet having time apart from her son Billy, while he is attending school full-time has improved their relationship. Lilly explained many times that being a single parent for much of the time has a negative effect on her relationship with both of her sons. She says that:



...it takes its toll, particularly if I'm having a bad day and my stress levels are a little bit higher and my patience is extremely thin. They don't want to associate with me, they want Dad, both of them. Billy's obviously got a lot more vocabulary than what Sam has and he says I want Daddy to come home today and play with me because you're grumpy. It certainly has its toll on both the boys and the family.



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Afterwards I got to converse with a lot of the other Mums and dads who already have children in school, so they were giving me some pointers about buying books; don't get this one, get this one, or this news agency's cheaper so go and have a look at that one. Just that networking with the other parents as well, and knowing that they're doing the same as what we're doing. So we're not out of the norm so to speak.



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Of course, everyone wants to see if I'm going back to work full-time because I've got my youngest at school next year. I just cannot make it clear enough that is the last thing I want to do. Yeah, I do, even amongst the people I work with because I've asked for part-time again next year and everyone says, but your little girl will be at school, surely? It's like, no.



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I think it will be because they're all going to be in the same spot, even though it's on the same site, typically. I think it will hopefully be easier because they'll all have the same events on at the same time.



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The next one went to kindy. It was only a little kindy, so she had ten friends who all went to prep, and that was only a little prep class. She couldn't wait to go to prep either, so that was quite a nice choice. I knew all the Mums because kindy was a - it was a nice little kindy, and we were all really close-knit with Mums, so therefore it was quite nice having all our kids heading off to kindy together. We all went and had a coffee afterwards, type thing, after we dropped them off to prep, so that was quite nice.



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Transitional Capital

It's what I know whereas I think high school is really unknown for me and it will just be logistically different. She's going to have to catch a bus and take herself to school.



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I'm just going to be grateful, I think, when the first week's done. We've got it done, we've got that bit of the routine happening by Thursday-Friday, I'm hoping. Billy will understand what's required of him at school and Sam's first week alone in the childcare centre will be done and dusted. We can start the year, move on, move forward - look forward to his learning.



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...so overwhelming beforehand definitely, the first couple of days, just the not knowing, not knowing the routine. After that, fairly smooth sail for our family. So I guess it all sort of impacted on our family right at the end before he was to go to school and that was probably the most stressful I guess, but once we'd gone to school and we provided everything that we needed to provide and we got into our routine, I feel yeah, I feel at peace. This is our life now. Our son is in a school where he's going to be well educated which is what we both want.



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But when I drop my younger son off he's still a bit clingy so I need to settle him to play while I'll still have Billy. Then I'll need to leave with Billy to go to his school and get him settled in. Even though parking and stuff like that is limited where they go to school so finding a park, getting them out of the car, into their classroom, get them settled and get back into the car, get myself to work. So that will probably add just a little bit of time onto the timeframe that we currently have.



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For the West family, because Gary is a drive-in drive-out worker and on a seven day rotational roster, they were able to pack up and go camping during the week. After their transition to being the parents of a school child, Naomi commented that this *'is going to change the dynamics of where we go, when we go and who we go with. That will definitely factor into our recreational time next year'*.



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Implications

- It is anticipated that this study will lead to a better understanding and appreciation of parents' experiences during this transition as well as a better understanding of the ways in which parents shape and are shaped by their children's developmental transitions.
- The findings of the research may be used by school personnel when planning and implementing transition programs within educational settings.



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Schools and systems must be challenged to engage in a strengths-based approach to support parents at this pivotal time in their own and in their child's growth and development. There is also a need for increased research to identify ways in which this support can occur within respectful, collaborative and agentic relationships.



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Practical Take-Aways

- Structured Enrolment Interviews
- Differentiated Transition and orientation Programs
- Parental Peer Support Programs
- Handbook for First Time Parents
- Parent Resources
- Celebration of the Successful Transitions



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The Parent Voice

- *Yeah, I think it is just the next stage. You have - that we just - so the more we grow with Billy, so - and the others. Yeah, so we've moved onto the next part now and, yeah, we learn what it's like to be a school parent.*
- At the end of the day looking back say in hindsight, it's your own journey and you have to accept that it's your own journey and you make it what it's going to be. You manage it how it's going to be and that comes down to you as a person I think and as a parent.
- *We've broached this great big thing in our lives, school, and we've done it really with hardly any bruises so I'm pretty happy about that.*
- So I feel like we've gone over the hill and we're pretty much down the plateau now. So - there'll be other hills, I realise that but for now we're on a plateau.



Thank You



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