

READY TOGETHER – TRANSITION TO SCHOOL PROGRAM EFFECTING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES IN THE INALA TO IPSWICH AREA

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Introduction

The *Ready Together - Transition to School Program* is a partnership program between C&K and Mission Australia's *Inala to Ipswich Communities for Children (C4C)*. *Communities for Children* is funded by the Australian Government under the Family Support Program and is facilitated by Mission Australia. C&K is the community partner engaged to deliver the program.

The *Ready Together - Transition to School Program* focuses on:

- children's early learning and literacy through engagement and education of parents and professionals via the delivery of the Ready Together booklets at information sessions and workshops
- engaging the school community, professionals and community services to deliver resources which support parents and children to learn about their school, and develop confidence to take part in the school community.

The development of this program has been informed by:

- documented strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem and life chances
- the growing body of research that acknowledges the importance of children's transition to school
- feedback from families and other key stakeholders within the region.

About the Family Support Program, Communities for Children, Mission Australia and C&K

Communities for Children (C4C) was part of the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. In 2009, it was announced that *C4C* would become part of the new Family Support Program. This early intervention and prevention initiative supports families with children birth to 12 years.

Mission Australia is the facilitating partner for *Communities for Children - Inala to Goodna* and more recently *Ipswich Communities for Children Plus (C4C Plus)*. It is one of 45 *C4C* and 10 *C4C Plus* sites throughout Australia currently funded under the program. Mission Australia oversees the development and implementation of strategies and activities and manages the funding allocation for the Inala to Ipswich site. In its role as broker, it engages smaller local organisations to deliver a range of activities in the site region. The development of partnerships with key stakeholders and local community based organisations is a key feature of the initiative. In the case of the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* the community partner is C&K.

C&K was established in 1907 and is the strongest and most established community based not for profit provider of early childhood and education services in Australia. All C&K services offer Australia's first collaborative birth to school age curriculum, Building Waterfalls.

The Inala to Ipswich region

The Inala to Ipswich region comprises extensive cultural diversity, a relatively high proportion of families experiencing economic and social adversity and generally low levels of parental education achievement. The Mission Australia *C4C* site is located on the South Western fringe of two major Local Government areas in Queensland (Brisbane City Council and Ipswich City Council) and two State Government Regional Districts (Brisbane South and West Moreton).

Services for families and children tend to be focused in pockets of the region with other localities experiencing significant isolation - having limited services, resources and community infrastructure. The region is identified as one of the most disadvantaged in Queensland, with high public housing density, high levels of unemployment, low income levels and limited transport services. The main Queensland corrective centres for adult males, women and youth are based within the region. While demographic socioeconomic disadvantage indicators identify this region as one of the most disadvantaged in Queensland, the *C4C Initiative* aims to build on strengths identified from its consultations and engagement with the community, to provide integrated universal and targeted responses for children birth to 12 years of age and their families.

Background Information

The Ready Together – Transition to School Program was developed following the conclusion of Phase I (mid – 2009) of the *C4C* initiative operating in the Inala to Goodna region. C&K was the project partner for the following two programs:

The *Under 5's Regional Reading Campaign- Lets Read Inala to Goodna*, which focused on:

- building a region wide awareness and commitment to early literacy and the importance of reading to children birth to 5 years of age
- recognising and valuing traditional ways of promoting literacy within Indigenous Australian and CALD communities
- delivering The Smith Family's Let's Read packs in partnership with schools, early childhood services, libraries, community services and family networks.

The *Early Childhood Partnership*, which focused on:

- linking early childhood services
- supporting the development and strengthening of relationships between early childhood services and schools
- the development of strategies to support families and children transitioning from the early childhood and community environment to the school community.

The success of the *Under 5's Regional Reading Campaign* and the *Early Childhood Partnership* along with the outcomes from a whole of community consultation process resulted in the development of the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program*. As part of the sustainability and exit strategy for each of the above programs a range of resources have been developed:

Starting school – the research

There is a growing body of research that acknowledges the importance of supporting transition to school for children and their families (Fabian, 2000; Margetts, 2010). There is also a number of studies which document successful transition to school programs (Dockett & Perry, 2001; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2007). Studies also show children’s initial successes, both socially and academically, can be crucial to not only determining their initial adjustment to the school environment but also to their future progress (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). This research has informed the development of the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program*.

The Ready Together – Transition to School Program

The program has 2 components:

1. *Ready Together*, which focuses on children’s early learning and literacy through engagement and education of parents and professionals by:
 - coordinating and facilitating the delivery of tailored early years language and literacy information sessions and workshops for services with clients from a diverse range of backgrounds
 - coordinating professional development sessions for early childhood professionals focusing on early years language and literacy development
 - working in partnership with parents, carers, schools, early childhood professionals and community services to deliver the Ready Together resources.
2. *Transition to School*, which engages the school community, early childhood services, professionals and community services by:
 - coordinating quarterly meetings focusing on all aspects of Transition to School
 - supporting the development of Transition to School programs across schools, early childhood services and community services
 - coordinating professional development and community forums focusing on issues related to Transition to School
 - working in partnership with schools, early childhood and community services to deliver the Starting School resources.

The *Ready Together* resources include:

- Ready together for parents (available in English and Vietnamese)
- Ready together for early childhood professionals



These resources contain practical ideas and activity suggestions to assist parents and professionals facilitate the development of young children's language and literacy skills. The publications acknowledge and honour literacy across cultures, highlighting the importance of reading, storytelling, reciting rhymes and singing to children from birth.

The *Starting School* resources include:

- Parent guide
- CD-ROM of parent guide in English, Vietnamese, Samoan and Sudanese Arabic
- Children's activity book

The parent guide is available in booklet form in English and as a talking book in four languages. The guide provides tips and suggestions for parents on different ways to prepare children for school. The children's activity book helps familiarise children with prep and the school environment.



Delivering the Ready Together and Starting School resources

The Ready Together resources. A range of information sessions and workshop options focusing on supporting young children's language and literacy development is available. The following *Ready Together* resources are delivered as part of these sessions and workshops:

- Aussie Story Pouches – held 3 times per year and open to parents, carers and early childhood professionals, these sessions are facilitated by the Butterfly Wings Child Parent Program team. Participants learn about story telling and make the characters from selected stories which are stored in 'story pouches'
- Individualised Ready Together sessions tailored to meet the needs of services or groups. These sessions are facilitated by the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* coordinator.

Stakeholders who have attended a workshop and are interested in independently delivering the *Ready Together* resources to families accessing their service are able to do so upon submission and approval of a delivery plan and agreeing to the conditions outlined in the Program Memorandum of Understanding.

A *Ready Together* workshop can also be delivered by the program coordinator as part of a school's Transition to School program.

The Starting School resources

Quarterly meetings focusing on starting school and the planning and implementation of localised Transition to School programs are open to all interested schools, early childhood services and community services working with children and families in the program region.

Each stakeholder in the region who wants to deliver the *Starting School* resources to children and families is requested to provide an audit of any existing transition to school related activities or programs and a delivery plan outlining their proposed Transition to School program and associated activities.

The *Starting School* resources are forwarded to schools and services upon submission and approval of the delivery plan and agreeing to the conditions outlined in the Program Memorandum of Understanding.

The Mission Australia Schools Connect Worker has also developed a workshop that can be delivered as part of a school's transition to school program. This session provides parents with information about things to consider when choosing a school. The other session is a 'Getting to know your school' interactive activity session for children starting the first year of school (Prep).

Both the *Ready Together* and *Starting School* resources are provided to all services in the program region as part of their partnership and program agreement, As part of a sustainability strategy the Ready Together and Starting School resources are available for purchase by services from outside the Inala to Ipswich region. This enables groups around Australia to utilise these valuable resources and play a part in:

- supporting the development of young children's language and literacy skills
- facilitating a smooth transition to school

An example of how the Ready Together and Starting School resources have been used - Camira State School

Camira State School delivered both the *Ready Together* and *Starting School* resources in 2010 and will continue to be a partner in 2011. At the beginning of 2010 Camira SS held a literacy fun day for children in prep and their families. One of the key staff members from the school previously attended a *Ready Together - Transition to School* coordinated workshop and then facilitated a Story Sack session at the school. The session involved the delivery of both the *Ready Together* and *Starting School* resources. There were two separate interactive sessions focusing on language and literacy: one for children and one for their parents. The Story Sack concept, developed by Neil Griffiths, based in the UK was used to provide both children and their families with literacy rich experiences and activities. Both parents and their children were immersed in language and literacy and the parents had a first hand opportunity to see how their children learn.

Feedback provided by parents was overwhelmingly positive. When asked what their expectations were for the day, the majority thought they were going to be 'told how to read to their children'. They came away enlightened, had a better understanding of how their children learn and commented on how much fun they had while learning themselves.

The program has been slightly modified for 2011. The literacy fun day will again take place early in the new school year and a more coordinated Transition to School program has been established. The *Starting School* parent booklet has been delivered to parents during the

enrolment interviews in 2010. The school has initiated coffee and chat mornings with parents of new enrolments. The *Starting School* children's activity booklet will be delivered to the new children early in the 2011 school year.

Conclusions

Key elements of the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* and where to from here

C&K in partnership with Mission Australia Communities for Children is working with the school communities, early childhood services, professionals, community services and families to facilitate a whole of region approach (Inala to Ipswich) to:

- support the development of young children's language and literacy skills
- facilitate a smooth transition to school

The program model described above is currently operating in the Inala to Goodna region. From 2011 this program will become operational within the Ipswich region. The model operates using a strengths based, soft-entry approach and focuses largely on increasing the capacity of parents, carers and professionals working with children and families. This is achieved via the delivery of practical resources, workshops and information sessions.

As a result of the coordinated approach to supporting the development of young children's language and literacy skills and facilitating a smooth transition to school the *Ready Together Transition to School Program* has raised the profile of these key issues both within and outside the region. The following key elements have assisted in this process.

The Importance of Partnerships

While leadership and facilitation of this program sits with Mission Australia Communities for Children and C&K, a strength of the program is the development of collaborative partnerships with all stakeholders. Partnerships and collaborative relationships with key stakeholders are the key to providing services which result in best outcomes for children and their families. Partnerships are also essential in promoting sustainable development.

In addition to partnerships formed with a range of schools and services in the region, the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* coordinator works closely with the *C4C* Schools Connect Worker and the Mission Australia Pathways to Prevention Program STEP program Family Support Worker. The Schools Connect Worker links schools with other services, offers education and training activities, supports the development of family friendly school spaces and provides links with the *C4C* Family Connect Worker for family support and assistance.

The STEP program aims to facilitate playgroups within schools for children commencing school the following year and build a targeted individual family support structure into school Prep Programs through Supporting Transition and Entry into Prep (STEP). Working closely with this STEP worker helps to provide a coordinated approach to the range of Transition to School programs within the region and helps to minimise duplication of services.

Delivery as opposed to distribution

As with the Smith Family's Let's Read model, the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* operates a delivery as opposed to distribution model (Centre for Community Child

Health & the Smith Family, 2005). Both the *Ready Together* and *Starting School* resources are delivered to families through workshops or information sessions. Delivery creates more opportunities for parents to be empowered and to develop the skills and knowledge required to support their children.

Evaluation

Evaluation is a key aspect of the program. Feedback is obtained from participants attending *Ready Together* workshops through questionnaires and anecdotal comments. Stories of significant change are also noted.

As part of the partnership and program agreement, schools and services delivering the *Starting School* resources provide feedback about the outcomes of their Transition to School programs. Based on this information the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* will document the range of *Transition to School Program* models used in the region and their outcomes with a view to presenting these to Education Queensland. The purpose of this is to encourage Education Queensland to adopt a state wide *Transition to School Program* strategy, supporting all schools throughout Queensland to develop and operate effective transition to school programs.

Listening to the community

This year the Program organised a Starting School forum for early childhood professionals, parents and carers with a guest speaker who is an academic and current researcher in school transition. This forum was open to individuals from within and outside the region. Based on feedback from participants another forum is planned for 2011 with the focus being on how schools within the region facilitate a smooth transition to school for children and their families.

Expanding outside the region

C&K is the strongest and most established community based not for profit provider of early childhood and education services in Australia. The organisation has a key presence in Queensland and a proposal has been submitted to management to provide *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* workshops for a range of C&K branch and affiliated services, with a particular focus on those located on school sites.

The future for the *Ready Together – Transition to School Program* in the Inala to Ipswich region appears promising. The number of schools involved in the program is gradually increasing. The quarterly meetings are an effective platform for keeping all schools, early childhood services and community services connected. Strong collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders will continue to be a major focus and it is these partnerships that are the key to the success of the program, as we all work towards achieving positive outcomes for children and their families.

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