Working together
for a good start at school

Articles

This booklet has two articles about children's transition from kindergarten to school and after-school centres. The articles are for inspiration prior to a common dialogue.

The articles are based on interviews with the researchers Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek and Ditte Winther-Lindqvist, who have worked on children's transition from kindergarten to school.

It is also possible to download the articles for easy distribution to participants. Download the articles here: **http://english.eva.dk/goodstartatschool**

You need friends to concentrate

Social interaction in a group of children is an important element in children's well-being and ability to learn. According to research, when starting school, it is important for children to form and maintain relationships. Similarly, the experiences which the children have already had are important. As a professional, it is therefore important to exchange knowledge about how children can join the community of children.

"We easily overlook the importance of children's social interaction and its significance for their ability to concentrate during class," says Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek who is an assistant professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Southern Denmark. Listening to what the teacher is saying is not merely about mental processes and biological heritage. Just as importantly, it is about children's opportunities to play with other children.

As part of her research, Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek has followed a number of children in their transition from kindergarten to school and after-school centres. Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek believes it is important for child carers and teachers to focus on what children bring into the community of children.

Someone to hold your hand

For some children the challenge begins with not knowing any of the children they start school with. Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek followed a girl named Aida, who did not know any of the children in her new class. This meant that, unlike the other children, Aida had no one to sit next to when they sat in a circle, she had no one to hold hands with when they went outside and she had no one to go to for help when she felt insecure. "Without anyone to join in an activity with, even small and simple tasks become very difficult to cope with. Simplicity is overshadowed by the fact that you have no one with whom to share all the new stuff," says Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek.

Access to friends

But also children who start school with children they know from kindergarten may have challenges in joining the community of children. Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek also followed a boy called Peter who, unlike Aida, knew some children at the school. He had gone to kindergarten with a group of boys who were now in another class than him. Therefore Peter wanted to maintain contact with his friends and often directed his attention towards the playground, finding it difficult to interact with activities in the classroom.

New understanding provides new options
Without an understanding of children's access to the community of children, Peter might be seen as unfocused, and Aida might be considered immature or unprepared for school because she reacts to starting school with tears and stomach pains. However, the reactions of Aida and Peter could also mean that, for the moment, they are not part of a community of children, explains Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek.

If professionals in kindergartens, schools and in after-school centres keep an eye on the children's options and conditions for participating, they will have a new insight into children's actions. This means that professionals will be able to help Aida and Peter establish new relationships and support Peter in maintaining his earlier friendships. This provides new possibilities. As Peter seems unfocused, at first glance, it might seem a good idea to shield Peter from the children in other classes to avoid disruption. However, as Peter sees it, the lack of contact makes it hard for him to focus, and therefore he might need to maintain contact with his old friends; this could be by making specific arrangements for where and when he can be in the playground together with his friends.

Early experience plays a role
However, knowing other children is not the only important aspect in children's possibilities for joining the social community. Children's earlier experience in joining communities of children also plays a role. Children who have not had positive experiences in joining communities of children may have difficulties finding their own way into the new communities. In connection with her research, Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek has watched children almost become invisible to the adults and other children because they keep themselves occupied by wandering around when it becomes difficult to join in.

"They look like children who are on their way to something, but they're not actually part of the community. Several of these children wander around in this way in kindergarten and in school when they have no one to play with during recess and in the after-school centres," says Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek. Therefore, professionals need to help encourage these children to play and join the group, and similarly, it is important to exchange knowledge about children's experiences.

Exchange of knowledge is important
Thus, different aspects render it difficult for children to join the community of children, and therefore teachers and child carers must consider what each child has at stake.

By including the child's perspective as a way to understand their behaviour, and by keeping an eye open for children's possibilities to join the community of children, professionals will be better able to help children during their start at school. Thus professionals working with children in kindergarten, school and in after-school centres must mutually share experiences and the conditions for joining the community of children.

"I've often seen that employees in school and at after-school centres are unaware of which children went to kindergarten with whom; who knows others and who doesn't," says Anja Hvidtfeldt Stanek, who believes that contact between professionals about the children should not be viewed as handing over ironclad knowledge saying "this is what children are like". The exchange should rather be seen as a clarification of the children's possibilities to participate, whilst maintaining an understanding that this is something that evolves over time and which may be different from one context to the other.

Questions for reflection

- How can we share knowledge about the previous experiences children bring with them and their conditions for joining the community of children?
- How do we work with the community so that some children are not left out?
- How do we affect the opportunities of children to participate in communities of children when e.g. designating groups of children according to who knows/who doesn't know each other from kindergarten?

Children are allowed to see great changes

The transition between kindergarten and school may become too smooth, says Ditte Winther-Lindqvist, who is researching into the transition from kindergarten to school. She says that a distinct difference between the activities in kindergarten and in school contributes to giving children a good start at school. In return, learning must be a pervading characteristic and children should experience themselves as learning subjects. Therefore, professionals should discuss what and how to teach children.

In transitions with huge changes in life, people evolve. When children start coming into new rooms, entering into new social relations and participating in new types of activities this triggers their development.

"Our way to function in the world and for others to see us changes during these transitions, and helps drive our development forward," says Ditte Winther-Lindqvist who is an assistant professor at the Institute for Education and Pedagogy at Aarhus University. She is concerned that the transition between kindergarten and school may become too smooth.

Difference between kindergarten and pre-school class
"It's important to make a clear distinction between activities in kindergarten and activities in pre-school class, as otherwise we deprive children of the possibility to grow," says Ditte Winther-Lindqvist. Kindergarten children are often part of a group preparing for school-start up to one year before they actually start school, and then these children also have an entire year of preparation for 'real school' in pre-school class. According to Ditte Winther-Lindquist this means some children experience a high degree of boredom.

"Many children are disappointed when starting school because the activities presented to them in their first year of primary school are not that different from the activities they know from kindergarten. The children expect something new to happen and are disappointed that school is similar to what they already know from kindergarten," says Ditte Winther-Lindqvist.

Learning should be an ongoing process
Even though kindergarten and school should differ, Ditte Winther-Lindqvist also believes that there should be continuity in the transition, and that such continuity should mean that children before and after starting school are helped to view themselves as learning people. Children should see that professionals around them want to teach them something and therefore be introduced to many different things.

"Professionals around the children should provide children with the experience of constant development and learning," says Ditte Winther-Lindqvist. This applies to kindergarten, school and in after-school centres. This should incite confidence in the children and give them positive learning experiences.

Ditte Winther-Lindqvist stresses that professionals should support what she calls meta-learning: teaching children to experience their own development and make their own learning explicit.

Ideas about school life

Even though kindergarten, schools and after-school centres work on children's learning in different ways, through play and physical activities, activities preparing for school are often associated with a specific understanding of learning. In connection with her research, Ditte Winther-Lindqvist has seen that many places focus on teaching children to sit still, raise their hand before speaking and solve assignments in workbooks. This might reflect a special idea about learning attached to school life. Ditte Winther-Lindqvist also sees that children's idea of school life is not reflected in practice in present day schools. "Many children think they will be facing some authoritarian "Mr. Teacher" when they go to school. When children play, their activities often reflect rather conservative ideas about school. Many of them pretend to be something like an angry teacher who yells at them and gives them homework and detention."

It might be necessary to talk about how children imagine school, reflecting on and discussing what children should learn and how.

Reality check

One way to work on the understanding of learning is to do what Ditte Winther-Lindqvist describes as a reality check. This means professionals should work on obtaining more knowledge about each others' worlds. For example, child carers from kindergarten could participate in a school day and visit after-school centres and vice versa. Teachers and child carers should also then experience children's learning in kindergarten.

By reconciling expectations it is possible to prevent some children from becoming fearful because they think that they have to learn the alphabet on their first day at school, and other children could be spared the disappointment that their expectations are not satisfied.

Questions for reflection

- When do children need continuity and when do they need a fresh start in the transition?
- How should children be prepared for their new life in school and after-school centres?
- What and how should children learn?