



REPORT

STARTING SCHOOL – IT'S A BIG DEAL

Findings from workshops with children in Wales



**Save the
Children**
Achub y Plant



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Credits

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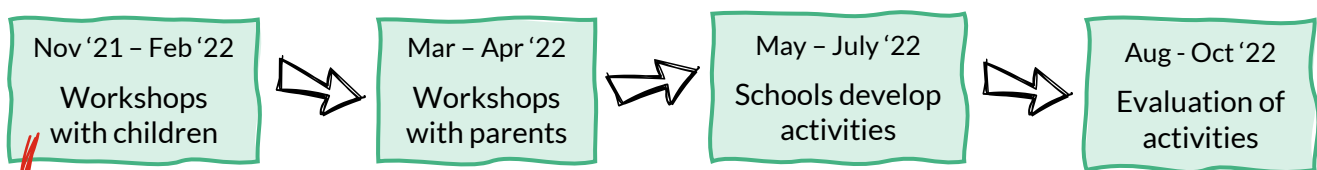


SUMMARY

Background and overview

The 'Starting Strong' project seeks to draw together learning from communities across Wales on the tools, techniques, and approaches that can make the transition into primary school as happy and smooth as possible for children and their families.

We aim to do this over four phases:



This report summarises findings from the first phase of the project.

117 children
took part in
workshops

Across **10** different
primary schools and
early years settings

8/10 schools were
in **25%** most
deprived areas in
Wales

Key takeaways

- Starting school is a big event in the lives of young children and their families, with most children feeling sad or nervous
- At home, it's important for parents and carers to recognise the material and emotional side of starting school
- Children wanted to know about the place (with all its routines and rules) about the people (other pupils and teachers) before they started
- Children were also keen for teachers to know their likes and dislikes
- Those children who had recently started school showed a desire and ability to help others who were about to go through the same transition

"I was a bit nervous and scared ...

... because I was scared of the other children ...

... I feel happy now ...

... because I've metted all my friends."

INTRODUCTION



Background

Why are we focusing on the transition into primary school?

The transition into primary school is a big change in the lives of children and their families. It's also an important point in their social, emotional, and educational development.

For children and families who are living in poverty, this transition is arguably even more important and challenging¹. There is a well-established link between poverty and children's outcomes². Living in poverty can negatively impact children's cognitive, social-behavioural, and health outcomes. In turn, a lack of money makes it much harder for parents to support their children. Wales has the highest rate of children living in poverty in the UK³, making it a pertinent place to explore the impact of poverty on this transition further.

The transition into primary school provides a key opportunity for parents, schools, early years settings, and wider community partners to align around a child. We know that when these actors work in partnership, they can mitigate the impact of poverty and give children the best chance⁴. In communities across Wales, our partners have been trialling innovative approaches to supporting children and families through this important change in their lives. It became clear that there was a need to collect and share learning across schools and communities to identify what's most important in making this transition as happy and smooth as possible. This project seeks to meet this need. In doing so, we are particularly interested in exploring approaches in areas of higher deprivation and levels of child poverty, where we know that children and families face greater challenges.

Why are we listening to children?

There are two main reasons why we're listening to children. Firstly, children have a right to be heard. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁵ states that children have a right to say what they think should happen and be listened to'. Children's rights are at the heart of everything we do at Save the Children. Shifting power to children and families and giving them a say is central to our UK strategy⁶. Through the workshops, we wanted to facilitate

¹ Hughes, C. (2015) *The Transition to School*. *The Psychologist*. Vol. 28. pp.714-717

² Maholmes, V., & King, R. B. (Eds.). (2012). *The Oxford handbook of poverty and child development*. OUP USA.

³ <https://gov.wales/relative-income-poverty-april-2019-march-2020>

⁴ Goodall, J., Lewis, H., Clegg, Z. et al; (2021). *From relationships to partnerships*. Welsh Government.

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

⁶ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/scukstrategy20212.pdf>

children's involvement in decision-making in matters that concern them (e.g. starting school). The Welsh Government have also taken a lead in promoting children's rights, basing their approach on a commitment to the principles of the UNCRC⁷. Children's rights are enshrined in Welsh law under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011, which underlines the commitment in Wales to listening to children. This means ensuring they have opportunities to express their views, feelings and wishes, and have their views considered, and taken seriously, particularly in decisions that affect them.

Secondly, it just makes sense to listen to children; if we want to understand how to best support them through this transition, then we need to ask children what's important to them. That's why the foundation for this project is a series of workshops with children who are about to start or have recently started primary school. The remainder of this report outlines how we listened to children and what they told us.

Overview of the research

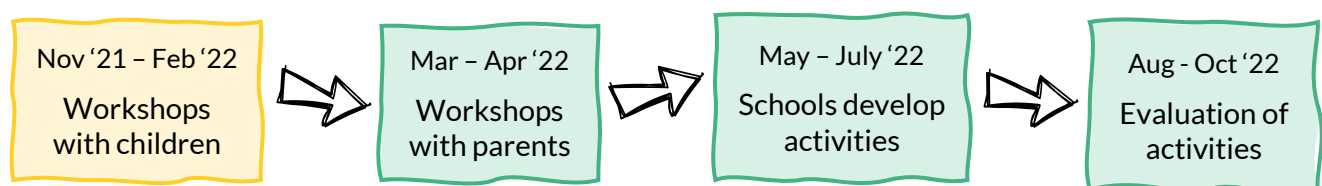
This section briefly outlines our methodology for the overall research project before focusing more specifically on the workshops with children. More detail can be found in the appendix for those interested in the structure of the workshops themselves. Through this research we seek to explore the following question:

- **What tools, techniques, and approaches can support the transition into primary school for children in Wales?**

In answering this question, we are particularly interested in approaches that can support this transition for children living in areas of higher deprivation and relative poverty.

To allow to us to explore the research question, our research is split over four key phases, each of which will provide learning that informs the subsequent phase.

Figure 1 – Overview of the four phases of the research



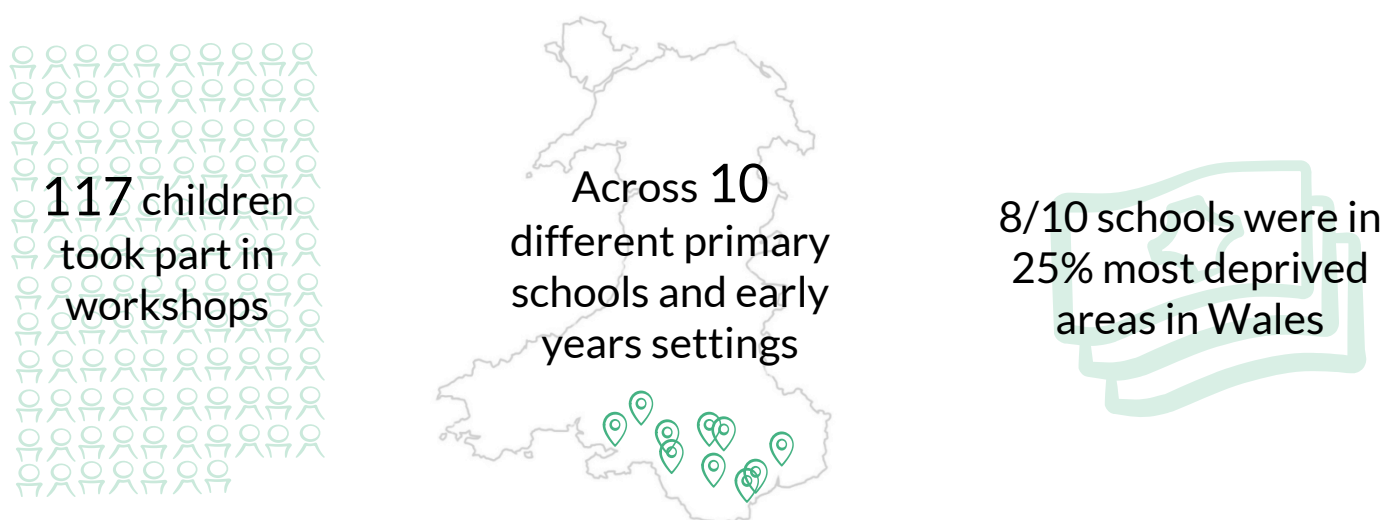
⁷ <https://gov.wales/childrens-rights-in-wales>

The foundation for this research is a series of workshops with children who are about to start, or have recently started, primary school. These workshops explored their experiences and views of starting school. The findings from the workshops will then inform workshops with parents of children who are about to start, or have recently started, primary school. In March and April 2022, these workshops will explore parents' views and experiences of their children starting school, focusing on what can be done in schools and in the wider communities to ensure this transition as happy and smooth as possible.

Findings from workshops with children and parents will then be combined and shared with partner schools and early years setting across Wales to allow them to develop transitions activities for summer 2022. These activities will be evaluated by the University of Swansea, with findings expected to be published and shared in Autumn 2022.

117 children across 10 different schools and early years settings took part in the workshops, including 30 in nursery or early years settings, 57 in reception, 25 in year one, and 5 in year two. Figure 3 (below) provides an overview of the participants who took part and study sites for these workshops. 8 out of 10 of these schools or early years settings were in the 25% most deprived areas in Wales⁸, with 6 out of 10 in the 10% most deprived. An average of 39% of children in the primary schools that took part were eligible for free school meals⁹, rising to 62% at one school.

Figure 3 – An overview of participants and study area



⁸ Refers to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019) overall rank of lower super output area in which the school or early years setting is located.

⁹ [Welsh Government Free School Meal statistics, 2021](#)

FINDINGS: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

First day: It's a big deal

**“Some are happy to start school ...
... and some are sad to leave”**

Children were asked about what it feels like to start primary school. Some children focused on their own experiences, with others focusing on how other children are likely to feel. Overall, children's responses emphasised that this is a significant event in their young lives.

A majority of children felt sad or nervous about starting school. This is perhaps unsurprising given that this is such a significant period of change in their lives. In their responses, children who were sad or nervous about starting school mainly focused on what, and who, they were leaving.

“Sad [be]cause my mummy went away”

“Sad because I wanted to stay home”

A minority of nursery age children also focused on fears about school. A common theme across children who had already started school was that they were now happy as they had made friends and enjoyed school.

“I was a bit nervous and scared ...

... because I was scared of the other children ...

... I feel happy now ...

... because I've metted all my friends.”

Although a majority of children felt sad or nervous about starting school, a significant minority stated that were happy and excited, even if some also acknowledged some apprehension. Rather than focusing on what they were leaving, these children instead focused mainly on what they were going to and exciting things they were going to do.

“I felt happy”

“Happy to come and excited ...

... Mammy bringing me to school ...

... but sad to leave Mammy.”

It's important here to highlight that a small number of children were speaking of their previous experiences but their responses seemed to indicate that they may be remembering their first day more positively. For example, one child noted all the friends they had made in school as a reason why they were excited to start. Nevertheless, this does re-affirm later findings that indicate that getting to know other pupils and teachers in advance of starting school is essential in easing apprehension and uncertainty. The next two sections focusing on children's thoughts and experiences of getting ready at home, and of going to school for the first time.

At home

These workshops sought to explore what children think could be done at home to help them to prepare for starting school. Children's responses broadly highlighted two main sides to preparing at home; the material side, and the emotional side.

The material side

“I'm going to have lunch in my backpack ...

... and toys and water

... and homework and writing!”

When asked about what they were going to need when starting school, the majority of children focused on the material items they felt they needed. Most commonly, children focused on items that are associated with school such as lunchboxes, backpacks, new shoes, and uniforms. The prominence of material items in children's responses remind us of the various costs associated with starting school and the additional pressure that can be placed on parents to ensure their children have all of these items. For parents who are experiencing poverty, this pressure is likely to be even greater. The financial cost of starting school wasn't explored with children but is a topic that may be explored further in workshops with parents.



Figure 4: Children's drawings from various workshops focusing on what children need before they start school

Taken by teachers at local partner schools

The emotional side

"I didn't want to go to school ...

... but hugs help"

As well as highlighting the material side of starting school, children's responses also focused on the emotional side. In particular, children highlighted the importance of parents and carers recognising the importance of the event in a positive and supportive way. This took a number of different forms

including presents, treats, affection, and talking about what they were going to do, or had done at school.

As well as being a big deal for children, it was also clear that this was an emotional time for parents. A small number of children highlighted that their parents had become upset when their children had started school. The emotional impact of children starting school will be explored further in workshops with parents.

At school

These workshops also sought to explore what children think could be done at school to help them to feel settled. The following section explores their views further. First, it is useful to briefly outline their experience of the transition into school. Children who had yet to start school highlighted a number of different worries that were either related to the new physical space they were going to enter, the different rules and routines, or the new people that they were going to encounter.

“Big bells might hurt my ears”

“They might tell you off for being naughty”

“If somebody is hitting me or not playing nice”

Interestingly, those children who had recently started school highlighted that the main positives of going to school were these previously new people, who were now friends and trusted teachers. In turn, the previously new and scary place had become associated with positive and fun activities. These findings re-affirm the value of transitions activities in easing some of the worries that children have about school by allowing them to build relationships with teachers and other children, and get to know their new environment before they start.

“I love my teacher”

“I like all of the girls and some of the boys”

“Arts and crafts are the best bit”

FINDINGS: CHILDREN'S VIEWS

This section looks in more detail at children's views of what can be done at home, and in school, to help them to have a happy start. Children's responses have been broken down into '*what children should know*' and '*what teachers should know*', before the final section which highlights the empathy towards others that was present throughout children's responses.

What should children know?

"You need to find a best friend ...

... the teacher will help you"

We asked what children need to know when they are starting school, children emphasised the importance of both **knowing the place** and **knowing the people**. In relation to knowing the place, children particularly highlighted the importance of getting to know the physical environment of the school, as well as the rules and routines. Although children may have had some experience of rules and routines in their early years' settings, these are likely to become more formalised as they enter primary school.

"Show us where the toilets are"

"She needs to know what is going to happen"

"They need to know to do good sitting"

In relation to knowing the people, the majority of children who had already started school felt that children should know that other teachers and pupils were helpful and nice. This was indicative of the empathy and understanding of worries of other children that was present across children's responses. The importance of getting to know teachers and other pupils in advance was further strengthened by the responses of children who had engaged in transitions activities before starting

school. However, the impact of pandemic had meant that many schools had been forced to run transitions activities away from the school building. These findings suggest that running activities in school may have particular value in helping children to get to know their new environment before they start.

What should teachers know?

“They really need to know I love maths ...

... do you want me to tell you this sum I know?”

As well as asking what children need to know, we also asked what teachers should know about children when they start school. In their responses, children focused primarily on their preferences, the things they liked and disliked. In doing so, they discussed activities (such as colouring or drawing) and subjects (such as maths and art), but they also discussed their preferences around how people interact them. Although it is important for schools (and teachers) to know about the stage of children’s development as they enter primary school. These findings also highlight the importance of taking the time to get to know children by understanding their preferences, particularly around how they like to interact with others.

“I need someone to play with me”

“I feel sad when people don’t listen to me”

A desire to help

“I’d be their friend”

Throughout the workshops, the children who participated demonstrated a strong sense of empathy towards their peers. This was particularly clear when those who had already started school were

asked how they would help a child who was about to start. In their responses, they showed an understanding of the significance of the event by noting the emotions that these children were likely to be feeling. As highlighted in figure 5 (below), they then showed a desire to help these children, with some wanting to show them affection and others expressing a desire to show these children the routines and activities of their new school. These findings suggest that there may be a role for current pupils in supporting new pupils with their transition into primary school. This is particularly true when we consider the importance of both knowing the place and the people in aiding the transition into school.

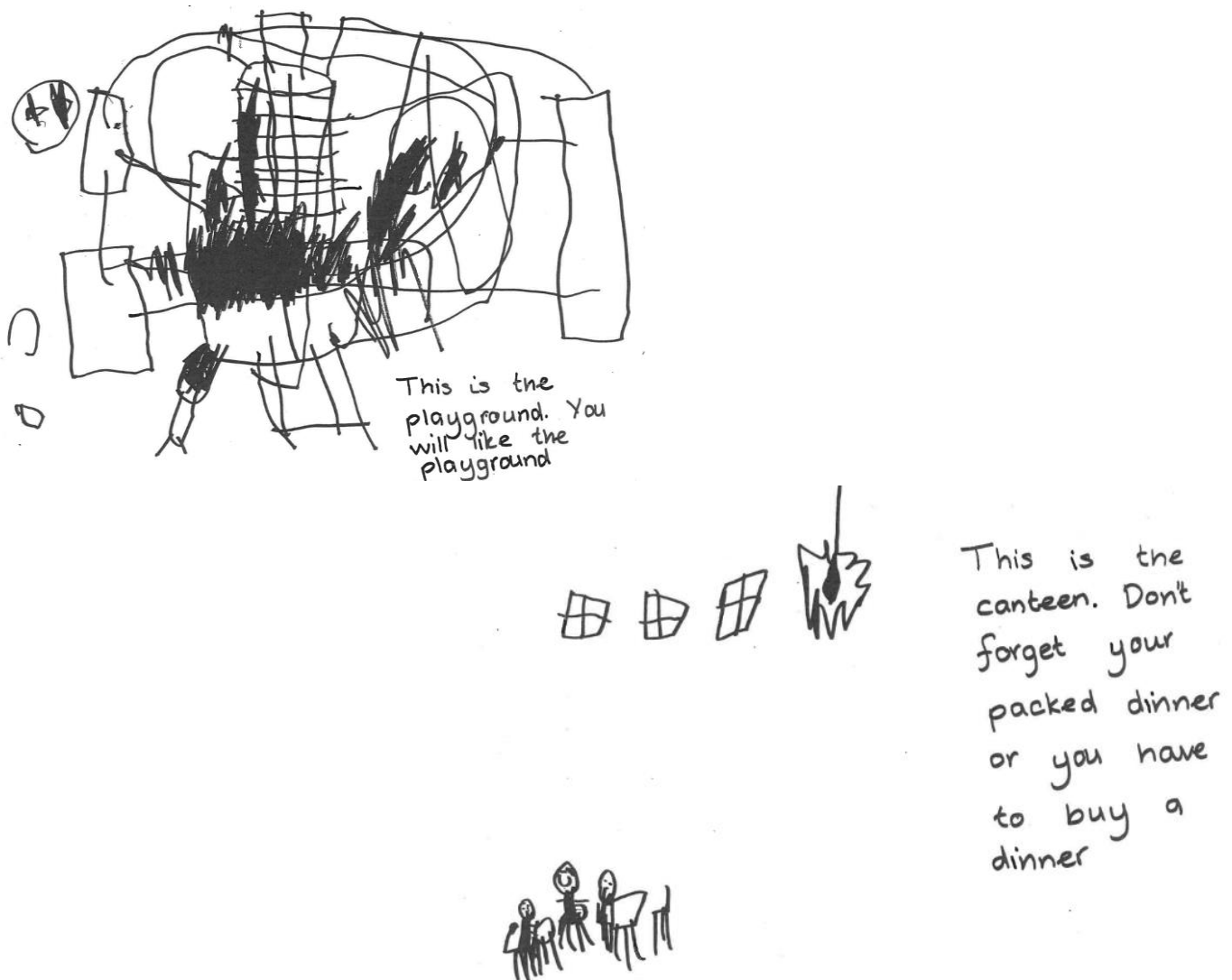


Figure 5: Children's drawings offering advice to children who are about to start school (with added captions added by teachers using children's own words)

Taken by teachers at a local partner school

CONCLUSIONS

This report has summarised the key findings from a series of workshops with children aged 3 – 7 years old in Wales. The workshops explored children's experiences of starting primary school, as well as their views on how they could be best supported in this important transition.

The report started by providing a background to the project and an overview of the methodological approach. The findings section initially focused on children's experiences and began with a reminder that this is a really important period in the lives of these young children and their families. Many children said that they were happy about starting school. However, the majority of children noted that they felt sad or nervous. Rather than looking forward to the exciting things we may do in school, they were instead focused on leaving their parents and home. These findings suggest that getting to know the school in advance can ease the apprehension and uncertainty many felt.

The report then focused on children's experiences of the transition into primary school when they were at home, and at school. At home, children emphasised the prominence of the material side to starting school with new clothes and items particularly associated to this transition. The financial pressures that may result from this will be explored further in workshops with parents in the next stage of the project. Children also highlighted that it helped when parents and carers recognised the importance of starting school and the value in offering emotional reassurance to them during this time. At school, nursery age children highlighted a number of different worries that were either related to the new physical space they were going to enter or the new people they were going to meet. In contrast, older children highlighted that these previously new people, were now friends and trusted teachers and the previously new and scary place had become associated with positive and fun activities.

The next section of the report built on these experiences to ask children about their views of what would help to make the transition into school as happy and smooth as possible. Children's responses emphasised the importance of getting to know the place (with all its routines and rules) and the people (the teachers and the pupils) in advance. In turn, children emphasised the importance of teachers getting to know them as individuals by understanding their preferences. This section ended by highlighting the strength of empathy among the children who participated and asked whether there was a role for current pupils in guiding new pupils through this transition.

Next steps

These findings provide the essential foundation for the rest of the 'Starting Strong' project. Allowing schools to base their activities on the views of children who are about to start school or have done so recently. The findings in this report will also be used to inform workshops with parents in Spring 2022. Findings from workshops with children and parents will then be combined and shared with partner schools and early years setting across Wales to allow them to develop transitions activities for summer 2022. These activities will then be evaluated by the University of Swansea, with findings expected to be published and shared in Autumn 2022.



APPENDIX: HOW WE LISTENED TO CHILDREN

Through the workshops with children, we sought to explore three key questions:

- What do children think could be done **at home** to help them to prepare for starting school?
- What do children think could be done **at school** to help them to feel settled?
- What do children think they **need to know about school in advance** of their first day?

These workshops took place between November 2021 and February 2022 in schools and nursery settings. Workshops were facilitated by a combination of familiar teachers and early years specialists, often with the support of Save the Children staff. We used a child centred approach tailored to the early years as it enhances thinking and communication skills, boosts confidence and self-esteem, and gives opportunities to open up children's learning through enquiry and the exploration of ideas. We provided children with positive resources to generate ideas and discussion ensuring opportunities for meaningful participation for children in early years on key areas of their lives (starting school). In turn, a range of activities were used to explore the research questions including group discussions, voting games, and drawing. Children's experiences and views were captured through detailed notetaking. These notes were subsequently written up for analysis. Copies of any outputs from the workshops, such as drawings, were taken by facilitators. Captions were written to describe visual outputs such as drawings and any written information was incorporated verbatim into workshop notes. Thematic analysis was then undertaken of workshop notes and captions to identify common themes across children's' responses. To ensure that these workshops were undertaken in a safe, ethical, and inclusive way, ethical approval was gained through Save the Children's Research Evaluation and Ethics Committee.



Figure 2: A workshop setting ready for children to arrive

Taken by nursery teacher at local partner

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