



REPORT

STARTING SCHOOL – THE PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVES

Findings from workshops with parents in Wales



Save the Children
Achub y Plant

Photo: Parents sharing their views and experiences on their children starting school in a workshop Photographer name: Millbank Primary School
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CONTENTS

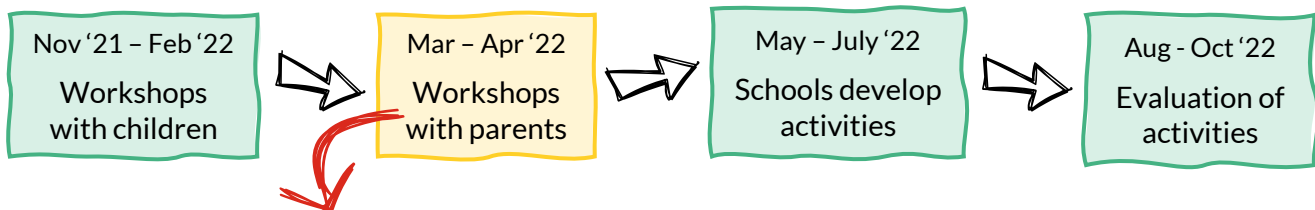
SUMMARY.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
Background.....	5
Overview of the research	5
FINDINGS: PARENTS’ EXPERIENCES	8
Getting ready: the practical side.....	8
Getting ready: the emotional side.....	9
Things that helped	10
Things that hindered.....	11
FINDINGS: PARENTS’ VIEWS.....	13
What do parents need to know?	13
What should teachers know?	16
The role of the wider community	18
CONCLUSIONS.....	20
Key takeaways.....	21
Next steps.....	22
APPENDIX: HOW WE LISTENED TO PARENTS.....	23



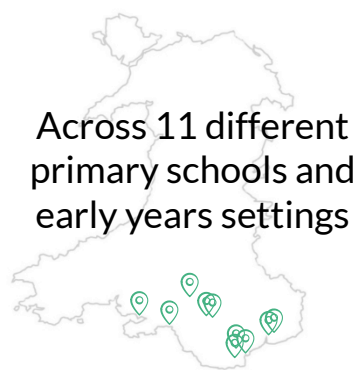
SUMMARY

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 second phase of the project.



8/11 schools were in 25% most deprived areas in Wales

An average of 36% of children in these schools were eligible for free school meals

Key takeaways

- **It's a big deal for children and their parents:** The transition into primary school is a big period of change for parents and children
- **Reduce the unknowns and ease the transition:** Change brings uncertainty, so efforts should be directed towards reducing the unknowns for parents and children
- **The practical and emotional sides are linked:** Practical support and information go a long way to helping parents prepare their children, both practically and emotionally – by giving them the tools to talk to their children about what to expect
- **We can't underplay the impact of Covid-19:** The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic had a big impact on how children and families experienced the transition into primary school, and may continue to do so
- **An ongoing conversation:** The transition into primary school is a process, not an event. It is best supported through an ongoing conversation between pre-schools, schools, parents, and children. There is also a role for the wider community of professionals and other parents.



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 work together. 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.

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

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.](#)

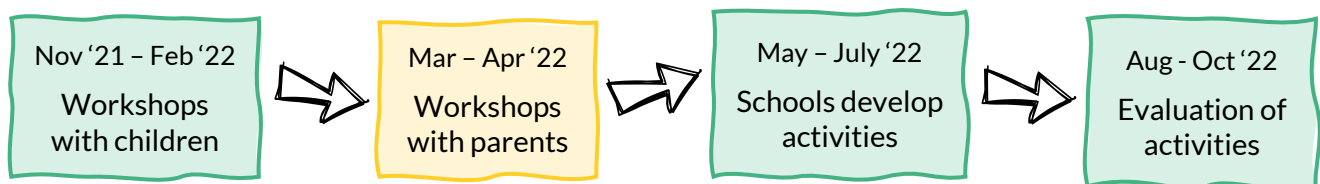
interested in the structure of the workshops themselves. Through this research we seek to explore the following question:

- **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



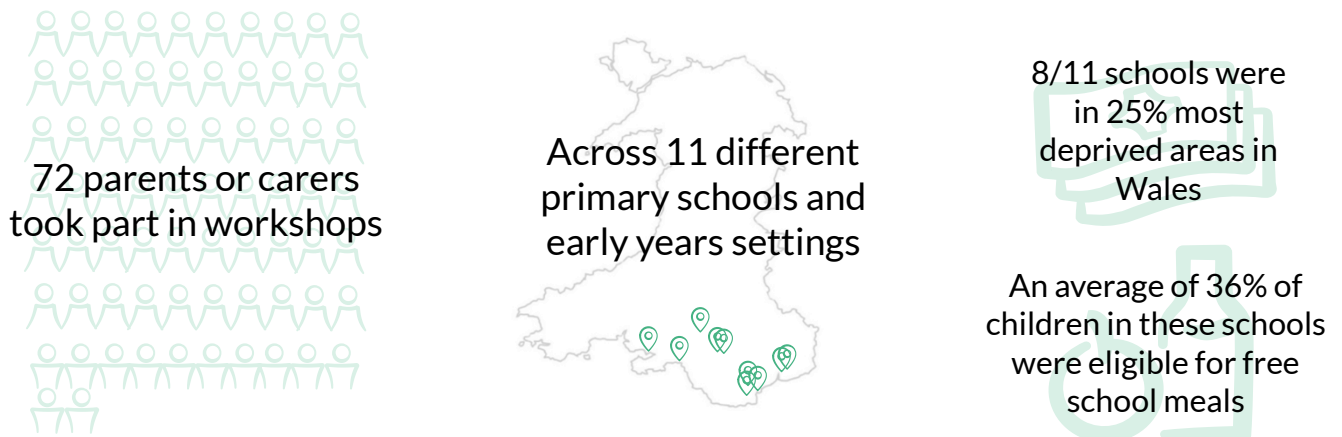
The foundation for this research was a series of workshops with children who are about to start, or have recently started, primary school. These workshops explored their experiences and views of starting school. A separate report outlines the key insights and findings from these workshops. The findings from the workshops also informed workshops with parents of children who are about to start, or have recently started, primary school. These workshops took place in March and April 2022 and explored parents' experiences of their children starting school, focusing on what can be done in schools and in the wider communities to ensure this transition is as happy and smooth as possible.

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

72 parents across 11 different schools and early years settings took part in the parents' workshops, including 62 mothers, 8 fathers, and 2 grandparents. Figure 3 (below) provides an overview of the participants who took part and study sites for these workshops. 8 out of 11 of these schools or early

years settings were in the 25% most deprived areas in Wales⁵, with 5 out of 11 in the 10% most deprived. An average of 36% of children in the primary schools that took part were eligible for free school meals⁶, rising to 62% at one school.

Figure 3 – An overview of participants and study area



⁵ 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.

⁶ [Welsh Government Free School Meal statistics, 2021](#)

FINDINGS: PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

Getting ready: the practical side

The things they need

When we spoke to children about getting ready to start school, they primarily focused on the material items that are associated with school such as lunchboxes, backpacks, new shoes, and uniforms. A focus on material items was also present in the responses of some parents across the workshops. However, parents' responses highlighted an uncertainty about what items children would need. In particular, parents who didn't have older children who had already started school wanted guidance about what they would need to get for their children before their first day.

Development milestones

However, the material items children needed was only a small part of what parents focused on when discussing the practical side of starting school. In four workshops, parents focused much more on their children's development and what milestones they need to have reached before starting school. In particular, toilet training repeatedly came up as a topic that parents were uncertain and concerned about. Many parents were uncertain about the requirements for toilet training before starting school and raised concerns about the anxiety and distress that it may cause their children. This was especially true for children who were still in the process of toilet training and who may find it difficult to go to the toilet in a new and different environment. Interestingly, for those parents whose children had already started school, some shared experiences of how support from teachers and being amongst other children who were potty trained had helped their child in reaching this milestone.

“There was a big panic about getting [child] potty trained in time for school.”

“One morning, [daughter] got up from bed ...

... and said ...

‘... I’m going to wear knickers like everyone else’”

Knowing where you're going

The findings around toilet training re-affirmed a key theme from workshops with children; the importance of knowing 'the place', including the physical environment, its routines and rules. Across six different workshops, parents discussed the importance of knowing about the school in advance and how this helps to relieve the uncertainty associated with the transition. Some parents discussed this in very practical terms, highlighting the value of knowing where the toilets were and how children could ask to use them. Others talked about the school gates representing a separation between them and their child and feeding children's anxieties about leaving their parents to go into this new environment.

Across all three of these themes, discussions about the practical side of starting school clearly had an emotional side too. A desire to know what children need and to know more about the school in advance were born out of feelings of uncertainty. In turn, concerns about toilet training requirements revolved about thoughts of children having potentially distressing 'accidents'. The next section explores the emotional side of starting school from a parents' perspective.

Getting ready: the emotional side

As well as the practical side of getting ready, parents were asked about the emotional side of preparing children to start school. We focused on this topic because it emerged as a key theme in children's workshops. When asked about starting school, the majority of children were worried and sad about starting school.

"The emotional side is hard."

"you think it is fine until the child's emotion hits during the holidays."

It was clear in parents' discussions that the strong emotions felt by children during this transition were also felt by parents. These feelings were mainly driven by parents' empathy for their own children's emotions. However, some parents also emphasised the additional pressure created by the sense of responsibility they felt for alleviating their children's concerns and anxieties. In turn, other parents highlighted that they felt the need to hide

their own feelings of loss and sadness so they would not exacerbate their children's concerns.

“I felt I did ok in preparing her”

“I think I struggled with the change more than her”

“It's important to try not to put your feelings onto the child.”

“It's nerve-wracking that your child is now being committed to full time education.”

Things that helped

Talking about it

“ ”

There was a relationship between the practical aspects of preparing children to start school and the emotional aspects. Across five different workshops, parents discussed the importance of talking to children about what to expect in order to prepare them and reduce the uncertainty associated to starting school. In doing so, they highlighted the significance of having the right information at the right time, a theme discussed further in later sections.

Prior experience

“He wanted to copy his older brother. Telling him, he is going to be a big boy.”

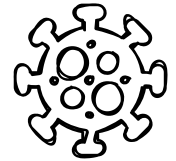
As highlighted in earlier sections, a key contributor to the practical and emotional concerns of parents was the uncertainty associated to starting school. Starting school brings forward a wide range of unknowns for parents and children. In turn, parents have the added pressure of helping to reassure and navigate their children through this transition.

Therefore, it's unsurprising that those parents who were going through this transition for the first time tended to express more feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Those parents who had older children were able to draw on prior experience to help prepare their children practically and emotionally. In turn, some parents highlighted that because the children had

a frame of reference in an older sibling, they were less concerned about going into this new environment.

However, it is important to highlight that not all parents felt this way. Some felt that each of their children's emotional reactions to starting school were unique. In turn, the context of Covid-19 drastically altered the experience of starting school, as it did with so many other aspects of life.

Things that hindered



The impact of COVID-19

The impact of Covid-19 was not a specific topic that we sought to cover in workshops with parents. Nevertheless, it consistently came up in discussions as something that made the transition significantly more difficult. Across parents' responses, it was possible to identify four main ways in which it impacted the transition into primary school:



1. The pandemic was scary and made children more anxious: In findings from parents and children's workshops we found that starting school is often a very anxious and uncertain time for children. It is important not to underplay the additional fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the potential for this to increase general anxiety levels in children more generally.



2. Children had less opportunities for socialisation before starting school: Parents consistently talked about the limited opportunities their children had for socialising during the pandemic. This meant less opportunities to socialise with other children and adults. It also meant that they had less exposure to new environments. They also reduced their experience of the two things that caused children anxiety when starting school: a new place and new people. Although lockdown restrictions have eased, the wider impact on children's social and emotional development is yet to be seen.



3. Parents and children were less able to visit schools to familiarise themselves: As well as reducing children's opportunities for social contact more generally, lockdown restrictions made planning transitions activities more challenging for schools. In parents' responses, it was clear that schools had employed a range of creative ways of

preparing parents and children for starting school (forest schools, video tours etc.). However, none of these could replace the value of visiting a school and meeting teachers and other children face to face, as highlighted later in this report.



4. When children did start, teachers and classmates changed regularly: Finally, the challenges didn't end when children did start school. Some parents with children who started school during lockdown restrictions talked about the ongoing uncertainty caused by self-isolation rules. At different points, entire classes were sent home or classmates and teachers were regularly changing. As a consequence, any opportunity for consistency was limited at a time when consistency was so key to building relationships and familiarity.

We're unlikely to know the exact longer-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the development and mental health of children. However, the recent Delphi study⁷ has suggested there has negative impact across several domains including speech and language development, cognitive, social, and emotional development, and physical development and health. These findings highlight the importance of further research and support to better understand and tackle these consequences.

Staggered starts

Although there will be lasting consequences, the impact of Covid-19 on the transition into primary school is almost certainly going to be lessened now we have emerged from lockdown. A more permanent structural factor that affects the experience of starting school is the age at which children move between stages of education. Some parents highlighted that these challenges are exacerbated for children entering foundation phase nursery due to children starting at three points each year⁸. However, this issue was not unique to this stage. In at least one school children were moved into mixed age classes due to the small number of children starting school that year. The experience of these parents was that this increased anxiety for children as they weren't able to join school alongside friends and were entering classes where friendships may already be formed. As a result, parents felt there was less certainty about what to expect and fewer peers (both in terms of children and parents) who were going through the same experience at the same time. In

⁷ [Delphi Study on the impact of COVID-19 on children under age 5](#)

⁸ [Foundation Phase nursery: a guide for parents and carers | GOV.WALES](#)

workshops with children, many had fears about whether others would be nice to them when they started school. Therefore, focusing on integrating new children into existing foundation nursery classes is particularly important. When we spoke to children, they highlighted the potential value of involving existing pupils in supporting the transition into primary school.

FINDINGS: PARENTS' VIEWS

As well as asking parents about their thoughts and experiences of supporting their children during the transition into primary school, we also asked parents about their views on how they and their children can be best supported by others.

What do parents need to know?

We asked parents about their views on what they and their children need to know as they embark on the transition into primary school. This section starts by outlining the areas they wanted to know about, before going into their preferences for how information should be shared.

What they need to know

When we asked what children need to know when they are starting school, children emphasised the importance of both knowing the place (the physical environment of the school, as well as the rules and routines) and knowing the people (the teachers and the other pupils). These themes were also prominent in the responses of parents. In 'knowing the people', parents' responses also focused on teachers (and other professionals) and other pupils. However, some parents also noted that they would like to have opportunities to meet other parents going through the same transition, as discussed further in a later section of this report.

“What adults are spending time with our children all day”

“What other children they're spending time with”

In ‘knowing the place’, parents, like their children, also focused on the rules and routines, as well as the physical layout of the school and the items their children when they start school.

“The routine of the day”

“Would have liked to have known what equipment we needed to get”

In discussing the physical layout and routines of the school, some parents re-visited the subject of toilet training. In doing so, they highlighted how seemingly insignificant details (such as where the toilets are) can provide a great deal of reassurance. One parent told us that her child was particularly shy and because English was a second language, struggled to ask questions. Because of this they weren’t able to ask where the toilet was while in nursery. The stress and anxiety was so great that it led the child to become extremely upset and ultimately led the parent to move him to another nursery.

In addition to knowing about the people and place, parents across four workshops also wanted to know about what their children were learning and information about their children’s social and emotional development both in terms of expected milestones and whether they were meeting these. In explaining each of these areas, some parents highlighted the importance of either explaining or minimising jargon to help all parents to understand.

“What they’re learning”

“The school’s expectations with regards to potty training”

“The jargon on things ...

... what is wellbeing?

... what does it mean in practice for my child?”

How information should be shared

One of the richest topics we discussed with parents was about how they would like information to be shared with them. Parents views on how information should be shared differed depending on the type of information.

Firstly, the majority of parents preferred to have **face to face** meetings to get to know teachers and share information. Parents generally felt this was important in the early stages of the transition as well as in discussions about children’s progress. Of course, face to face ‘parents’ evenings’ were common before the pandemic. Many parents highlighted the creative ways their schools had communicated during the Covid-19 pandemic but noted that these could not replace face to face meetings when getting to know a teacher or discussing their children.

“More time talking to the teacher, getting to know them”

“A personal conversation needs to be taken face-to-face.”

“You need to ask the school what they have on offer ...

... [know] it is a nurturing environment ...

... what support is there on offer?”

In some workshops parents were asked about where these meetings may take place, with most parents preferring for these to take place in schools. The idea of home visits elicited mixed opinions. Some parents had very positive experiences and felt it would make them more comfortable, while others felt it placed additional pressure on parents.

“The home visits were a really nice touch ...

... because I saw a person who was part of the new school”

“I stressed over it for a week ...

... and cleaned the house from top to bottom.”

Secondly, most parents **valued digital platforms** such as apps to send initial information and to keep up to date with their children’s progress. Many parents had very positive experiences of using apps but did highlight the range of different apps that are in use and generally preferred for there to be less of these. What was key in the use of digital platforms was that they were used alongside other communication methods, and they were regularly updated. In sending out initial information, some parents also highlighted how their schools had used videos to show the layout of schools, while tours weren’t possible.

Parents generally felt these were a valuable resource and could sit alongside in person open days or visits.

“The apps were great ...

... I was able to see photos of my child”

“We all misplace letters

... so much prefer apps and email.”

“Create a class video explaining the setup ...

Where will they play?

When can they go outside?

Where are the toilets?

Thirdly, a significant minority of parents **still saw value in paper** forms of communication for things like welcome booklets. In general, it was felt that these would supplement digital forms of communication, rather than replacing them. However, they allowed those parents without digital access to receive information and also provided a tangible and more personal touch.

Across all of these forms of communication, parents consistently emphasised the importance of sharing information at the right time. What constitutes ‘the right time’ will differ depending on the information shared. However, when asked about information provided before the transition into primary school, parents generally felt that this should come with enough time to allow parents to digest the information and then relay it to their children.

They also consistently highlighted that communications needed to be inclusive and accessible to all; whether that meant translating into other languages, reducing jargon, or avoiding the assumption that all parents have consistent access to electronic equipment or the internet.

What should teachers know?

We also asked parents what teachers needed to know during the transition into primary school. In their responses, parents highlighted three main areas:

- The most common was their **child's likes and dislikes**. This builds on findings from the children's workshops, where children also expressed a desire for teachers to know about their likes and dislikes. Parents particularly focused on the value of sharing information about what may lead their children to become upset and how to calm them. Some parents suggested ideas such as 'all about me' cards that could be sent home and filled out by parents with their children.
- The second most common was information about their **child's needs or information about their development**. As highlighted in previous sections, these parents were particularly keen to have a discussion with teachers about their child's development so that they could be reassured that their child would not be put in a position that made them anxious or upset. Given the rapid pace at which children are developing at this age, some parents were also concerned that information shared in the previous school year may have become out of date over summer.
- Thirdly, a smaller number of parents highlighted the importance of sharing information about **what's going on at home**. These parents particularly focused on the value of sharing information on family dynamics such as co-parenting arrangements.

"Families have different

... and social services may be

... Every child is different."

"The likes and dislikes

... the little quirky things that would calm the child down"

Building on findings in the previous section, parents consistently felt that this type of information needed to be shared in a discussion with the school, with many particularly noting the value of face-to-face engagement. Parents often referred to this as an ongoing conversation between the parents and the school. In turn, they talked about the importance of building an open and honest relationship, that can only be established by building trust through engagement over time.

A recurring theme across the workshops was around

“Parents want opportunity to discuss with the teacher before the child

... It’s too late at parents

“Teachers need to know about what triggers cause behavioural

... and parents want to know how teachers will manage

“It’s important to have an open and honest relationship between parents and the

the value of good information sharing. In particular, most parents felt that it was essential for there to be good communication between schools, pre-school settings, and parents during the transition process that went beyond just sharing general information on each child. As highlighted in earlier sections, parents felt that there was a need for a more discursive relationship where pre-schools, parents, and teachers could share information. Some parents even discussed the idea of pre-school staff moving with children for the first few days or weeks of starting school to aid the transition. Of course, this desire for more discussion and engagement must be balanced against the capacity of pre-school staff, teachers, and parents. Nevertheless, seeking to create more opportunities for discussion within those restraints should bring a richer understanding of each child.

The role of the wider community

As well as exploring the relationship between pre-school settings, parents, and schools, we also asked parents about the role the wider community should play in supporting the transition into primary school.

The most common theme that came up in these discussions was around the value of financial advice and support. Across five workshops, parents discussed the sharing of information about financial advice and support with things like benefits, uniform costs, or food. Some parents did not feel that this is something that schools should need to do, but the majority saw value in schools signposting and sharing information across all parents. Interestingly, where parents talked about financial support, they did so by highlighting what others may find useful, rather than support they would benefit from themselves. It is important to highlight that these topics were being discussed in groups with other parents. As a result, parents may not wish to share their worries about household finances. We plan

to discuss these aspects further with parents during one-to-one interviews as part of the evaluation stage of this project.

Some parents also talked about the value of sharing information about support groups in the community or activities for parents and children. Others talked about the value of having Health Visitors involved in transitions activities and more linked to the schools so that they could support children's social and emotional development.

“Information on financial support should be given to everyone.”

“It would be good to know about community led projects”

In addition to professionals in the community, parents across at least five workshops highlighted the value of getting to know other parents who were going through the same transition. Some noted that this may be an organic process with parents meeting during drop off/pick up. However, others suggested that more structured peer support groups (such as coffee mornings) could be beneficial. In two workshops, parents reflected on how useful it had been to discuss the transition with other parents and expressed a desire to continue to share experiences with others.

“A peer-support group for parents

... to talk and share experiences.”

“Many parents feel isolated in the playground...

... especially if they have had a negative experience themselves in school”

“A coffee morning located at or near the school after drop off would be good to have”

CONCLUSIONS

This report has summarised the key findings from a series of workshops with parents of children aged 3 – 7 years old in Wales. The workshops explored parents' experiences of their children starting primary school, as well as their views on how they could be best supported through 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 parents' thoughts, expectations, and experiences of going through the transition into primary school. We talked about both the practical and emotional sides of getting their children ready to start school. In doing so, a clear link between these two sides was identified. The next section then focused on what helped and hindered in getting ready to start school. In terms of what helped, parents emphasised the importance of talking to their children in order to prepare them practically and emotionally. They also highlighted the value of prior experience in helping them to overcome the uncertainty associated with the transition into primary school. In terms of what hindered, parents consistently focused on the wide ranging (and potentially long lasting) impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The report then moved on to parents' views about how they and their children can be best supported through this important transition. In addition to knowing about the people and place, parents also wanted to know about what their children were learning. They also wanted information about their children's social and emotional development both in terms of expected milestones and whether they were meeting these. When discussing how information should be shared, parents generally felt that the communication method should change depending on the information shared. The majority of parents preferred to have face to face meetings to get to know teachers and share information. Most parents valued digital platforms to send initial information, and apps to keep up to date with their children's progress. A significant minority of parents still saw value in paper forms of communication for things like welcome booklets. Parents emphasised the importance of sharing information at the right time and making sure communications were inclusive and accessible to all parents.

The final section focused on the role of the wider community in supporting the transition into primary school. Parents generally felt that at the centre of support and communication

around the transition should be schools, pre-schools, and parents. However, some also saw a role for wider support around the financial challenges some families' face and from professionals such as Health Visitors around children's development. Finally, across a number of workshops, parents expressed a desire to meet with other parents going through the same transition.

Key takeaways

Across the findings from the report, a number of key insights emerged:

- **It's a big deal for children and their parents:** The transition into primary school is a big period of change in the lives of children and their parents, both practically and emotionally. Focusing efforts on easing this transition for parents and children will enable children to more quickly settle into school and progress with their learning and development.
- **Reduce the unknowns and ease the transition:** The negative emotions felt by both children and parents were commonly driven by feelings of uncertainty associated to a period of change. Reducing these unknowns by providing opportunities to visit the school, meet teachers (as well as other children and parents) and by providing practical information can reduce the unknowns that drive negative emotions.
- **The practical and emotional sides are linked:** Workshops with parents and children revealed both the practical and emotional challenges associated with starting school. They also revealed how these two sets of challenges are interconnected. Practical information about the school and the transition itself provides more clarity and certainty for parents. It also gives them the tools prepare their children for starting school.
- **We can't underplay the impact of Covid-19:** The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the transition into primary school in a range of ways. For those parents whose children started school during the pandemic, opportunities to visit schools and familiarise themselves were limited. When children did start school, they often lacked the consistency that is so important in establishing routines and relationships. For those parents who were about to go through the transition, there were concerns about

how the pandemic may have longer lasting consequences. They expressed concerns about how the pandemic had reduced opportunities for socialisation before starting school and had also made their children more anxious.

- **An ongoing conversation:** Across our discussions with parents, it was clear that the transition into primary school is a process over a period of time. Throughout this process, parents felt there was a need for consistent communication and dialogue between children, parents, pre-schools, and schools. This ‘ongoing conversation’ between these different people is needed to share the wealth of information about children, home life, and the school itself so that everyone can feel more prepared. It also helps to build trust and fosters positive relationships between parents, teachers, and children.

Next steps

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 PARENTS

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

- What are parents' **views and experiences** of preparing their children to start school?
- What information do parents think other **parents should know** in advance of their children starting school? How does this differ across different types of families?
- What do parents think **teachers need to know** so they can have the right information to provide support for children?
- What do parents think that **the wider community can do** to support families as their children start school?

These workshops took place between April 2022 and May 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. A range of activities were used to explore the research questions including group discussions, post it exercises, and flip charts. Children's experiences and views were captured through detailed notetaking and through parents own written notes on flipcharts and post its. These notes were subsequently written up for analysis. Copies of any outputs from the workshops, such as flip charts, were taken by facilitators. Thematic analysis was then undertaken of workshop notes and flip charts to identify common themes across parents' 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.



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