

Guidelines to Build a Smooth Transition from Home to Preschool: Parental Roles in the Thai Context

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Abstract

Preschool has become, for a majority of children, the introduction to learning in a structured environment with teachers and other children. It represents both a transition from and an extension of children's home environments. The main objective of this study is to analyze the roles that parents in Thailand play in building a smooth transition from home to preschool in two aspects: 1) preparation of school readiness skills and self-adjustment and 2) the involvement of the parents in transition activities. The data was obtained from questionnaires administered to 400 parents, each with a 3-year-old child attending school in Bangkok, and by interviews with 15 parents who had the highest average scores in both of these aspects. Frequency distribution, mean, percentage, standard deviation and content analysis were used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that parents recognize the importance of their child's transition from home to preschool, and are active in both preparation and involvement. The mean score of operational level in the aspect of preparation was the highest, followed by that of involvement in transition activities. It also must be noted that building smooth transitions requires collaboration between parents and teachers. Smoothness of transition is a key factor in reducing a preschooler's stress and anxiety, thus helping to facilitate learning.

Keywords: parental role, smooth transition, home, preschool

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Introduction

Preschool education is an extension of the knowledge and experiences that a child has gained from home, as well as the transition of the child to a structured environment with teachers and other children. According to statistics on enrollment of 3- to 5-year-old preschoolers provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), preschool enrollment increased from 47% in 2000 to 56% in 2017. The Office of the Education Council [ONEC] (2018), records even higher rates of preschool enrollment. According to ONEC, enrollment increased from 77% in 2016 to 80.3% in 2017. These statistics indicate that a majority of parents choose to enroll their children in preschool, rather than having them remain the sole charge of parents or caregivers.

Preparing children for this transition is a critical factor in determining their future success in school. Preparation reduces the dropout rate of children in primary school. Therefore, preparation for preschool is a worthwhile investment that will help to lessen the problems of social inequality (Anderson, 2010; Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University and Quality Learning Foundation, 2015; Pholphirul & Teimrad, 2016).

There are a number of factors involved in the transition to preschool. Each child responds to this transition differently, due to his or her emotional background, flexibility, and experience. All of these factors affect his or her adjustment during this transition (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center [ECLKC], 2019). Gable (2012) states that children who have been in a nursery school can better adjust themselves to the new setting, compared to children who move directly from home to preschool. Interestingly, children of the same family-including twins-adjust differently to preschool; therefore, inadequate preparation may affect a child's experiences during transition, and lead to physical, social-emotional, or behavioral concerns (Harper, 2015).

Collaboration between parents, children, teachers, schools, and neighborhoods can ensure relatively seamless transitions from home to preschool. The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition confirms the importance of these interactions. The relationships among these people will develop in accordance with the time children have spent in preschool and their successes in adjusting themselves to the school setting (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000).

Many studies about transitions to preschool have been conducted in other countries; however, there have been only a few in Thailand. Therefore, this researcher chose to investigate the issue by examining three different schools in Bangkok, in order to develop guidelines for transitioning Thai children from home to school.

Literature review

After review of studies and articles about the role of parents in building smooth transitions from home to preschool, this researcher chose to focus on two aspects in this paper: 1) preparation of school readiness skills and self-adjustment and 2) the involvement of the parents in transition activities.

School readiness skills of 3-year-old children

The transition from home to school is crucial, because it is when 3-year-old children learn to be independent while temporarily separated from their loved ones. This can be a tough time for children. However, if their parents prepare them well regarding all areas of development, children will adjust well to school. They will have a positive attitude towards learning, and will become confident in performing new daily activities.

According to four sources (Community Action of Allegan County School, 2014; Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995; Ministry of Education, 2017; ONEC, 2009), the preschool readiness skills of 3-year-old children can be categorized into three areas:

Physical readiness, which includes a) use of body, i.e. large motor and fine motor coordination; b) safety, while playing and using devices; c) healthcare, such as choosing healthy foods and learning to keep one's body clean.

Emotional and social readiness, which includes a) understanding one's own emotions; b) socializing; c) self-control; d) conserving the culture and environment.

Cognitive and learning readiness, which includes a) thinking and learning strategies; b) mathematical and scientific skills; c) language skills.

Adjustment during the educational transition and school readiness of 3-year-old children

During this transition, children have to cope with unfamiliar settings (i.e., environment, friends, teachers, routine). They experience a variety of emotions (i.e. anxious, insecure, uncomfortable, lonely, excited). Therefore, a parent can help their child's adjustment by talking with the child about their feelings, as well as facilitating the child's familiarity with the school environment and schedule (Gable, 2012; Strasser, 2014). Parents, in coordination with their children, teachers, and neighborhoods, have been involved in designing curriculum and teaching approaches to support the transition (Dockett & Perry, 2007, 2009, as cited in Dockett et al., 2010; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Saifah, 2014; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2012, as cited in Dockett et al., 2014). A smooth transition can be achieved when children are well-prepared and schools are ready.

Parental roles in building smooth transitions

Parents play an important role in transitioning their children from home to preschool by supporting them in readiness for school. They can also act as assistants both at home and at school, as they communicate with teachers and transmit to children what teachers report is necessary to enhance development (Harper, 2015; Miami-Dade County Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Programs, 2015). Parents should establish a close relationship with schools one month before the school starts and one month after the school starts (Strasser, 2014).

In researching the influence of parents in building smooth transitions from home to preschool in the Thai context, this researcher divided parental activities into two main roles:

During the four weeks before preschool enrollment: Promoting their child's readiness and adjustment. This consists of two subdomains: promoting physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development, and promoting the child's adjustment by fostering a positive attitude towards the enrollment and engaging in activities around the enrollment.

During the four weeks after preschool enrollment: Involvement with the school activities. This consists of two subdomains: supporting their child at home by fostering positive

feelings toward preschool and practicing skills (such as academic and life skills), while also supporting their child at school by communicating with teachers and other parents and by collaborating with teachers.

Method

This survey research collected data from 400 parents whose 3-year-old children attended three different preschools in Bangkok. The private school is under the supervision of the Office of Private Education Commission (370 parents), the public school is under the Office of the Basic Education Commission (20 parents) and the demonstration school is under the Office of the Higher Education Commission (10 parents). Stratified random sampling was used to classify samples divided into two groups: 200 parents whose child had been enrolled in a nursery school prior to preschool, and 200 parents whose child went directly from home to preschool. Fifteen parents were selected from both groups for a follow-up interview. This selection was based on the highest average scores of parents on both aspects of the study. The top five represent each school.

The questionnaire comprised three parts. Part 1 was a checklist of 14 items of general information, i.e. gender, parent's education, occupation, salary per month, nursery school attendance, is preparation for preschool is important to children?, did the parent get information about transition?, and how long did it take for your child adjust to school? part 2 was a five-point Likert scale (always, very often, sometimes, rarely, and never) to rate parental roles in two major aspects: 1) preparation of the child in school readiness skills and adjustment and 2) involvement with school activities, comprising 64 items (See Appendix A). Part 3 was an open-ended question concerning the problems the parents encountered and any suggestions they had for improvement. The criteria of content validity (IOC) > 0.50 (Kaemkate, 2008). This questionnaire was 0.78 (acceptable) and its reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.94 (high).

The follow-up interview form also covered the two aspects of this study: 1) preparation of school readiness skills and self-adjustment and 2) the involvement of the parents in transition activities. There were 20 items related to the first aspect, and 14 items related to

the second aspect (See Appendix B). The content validity of the form was 0.66 (acceptable).

Data collection and data analysis

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 352 (88%) were returned. Then, frequency distribution, mean, percentage, and standard deviation were used to analyze the quantitative data. The criteria of mean score is as follows: 4.51-5.00, parent's practice is at the highest level; 3.51-4.50, parent's practice is at a high level; 2.51-3.50, parent's practice is average; 1.51-2.50, parent's practice is at a low level; 1.00-1.50, parent's practice is at a very low level. The interview session was one-to-one. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, transcribed verbatim from a tape recording. After this, content analysis was used to classify data according to the themes.

Results

Demography of both groups of parents (in the first group, their child had been in a nursery school prior to preschool; in the second group, their child had been at home prior to preschool) were similar. Females were the majority of participants (78.13%). A high percentage of participants were married and lived with their partner (94.89%). Over a third were self-employed (38.07%). Over 60 percent earned more than 50,000 baht a month, making them upper class income earners (61.36%).

A vast majority of participants agreed that preparation for preschool was crucial (95.17%). However, participants from the second group reported that it took their child more than 15 days to adjust to preschool, while the first group reported that it took their child five to ten days to adjust. According to both groups, a large majority (85.23%) said that they had been informed about the transition before enrollment. The findings revealed that most of the parents in both groups had done work to prepare their child for the transition, as shown in Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1. *Mean, standard deviation, and operational level of the participants*

Item	Operational level								
	Parents: Group 1 (<i>n</i> = 188)			Parents: Group 2 (<i>n</i> = 164)			Total (<i>n</i> = 352)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Result	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Result	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Result
1. Preparation of school readiness skills and self-adjustment	4.08	0.45	High	4.04	0.49	High	4.07	0.47	High
1.1 Preparation for readiness	4.28	0.40	high	4.23	0.46	high	4.32	0.46	high
1) Activities promoting physical readiness	4.36	0.46	high	4.28	0.47	high	4.32	0.46	high
2) Activities promoting emotional and social readiness	4.29	0.47	high	4.28	0.52	high	4.29	0.50	high
3) Activities Promoting cognitive readiness and learning approaches	4.19	0.51	High	4.14	0.60	High	4.17	0.56	High
1.2 Child's adjustment	3.89	0.59	high	3.86	0.62	high	3.88	0.60	high
1) Activities promoting adjustment	4.06	0.62	high	3.97	0.67	high	4.02	0.64	high
2) Fostering positive attitude towards school enrollment	3.72	0.81	high	3.74	0.79	high	3.73	0.80	high
2. Involvement of the parents in transition activities.	3.78	0.44	high	3.81	0.50	high	3.79	0.47	high
2.1 Support children at home	3.97	0.45	high	4.01	0.50	high	3.99	0.47	high
1) Promoting emotional stability	3.85	0.49	high	3.92	0.50	high	3.88	0.60	high
2) Promoting necessary skills	4.09	0.53	high	4.12	0.59	high	4.10	0.56	high
2.2 Support children at school	3.58	0.56	high	3.60	0.64	high	3.59	0.60	high
1) Interaction with teachers and other parents	3.85	0.60	high	3.82	0.71	high	3.84	0.66	high
2) Collaboration with teachers and school	3.31	0.70	average	3.38	0.72	average	3.34	0.71	average
Total	3.93	0.40	high	3.93	0.46	high	3.93	0.43	high

In regard to the first aspect, operational levels were high. Parents organized activities that primarily promoted their child's physical readiness, followed by emotional, social, and cognitive readiness, and learning approaches. In addition, they highlighted activities that promoted adjustment more than they promoted a positive attitude towards school.

Regarding the second aspect, operational levels were high. Parents paid more attention to promoting necessary skills than reinforcing the child's emotional stability. The scores of operational levels of interaction with teachers and other parents of both groups were high, while the scores of collaboration with teachers and schools were average.

According to the interview, the total average scores of all aspects were high. The parents focused on the enhancement of school readiness and their child's adjustment, in addition to participating in school activities as much as possible. Their attempt to build smooth transitions from home to school can be divided into two phases.

Phase 1: Four weeks before enrollment. The parents organized activities that promoted their child's school readiness and self-adjustment.

In terms of preparation for physical readiness, they helped their child strengthen his/her large and small muscle groups by encouraging their child to perform daily activities such as running in the park, cycling, jumping, assembling and dismantling toys, playing with clay, and hanging clothes. They also helped their child to be independent by teaching them how to wash their hands properly, brush their teeth, go to the toilet, get dressed, and eat by themselves.

In terms of preparation for emotional and social readiness, they were the role models for their child concerning how to control their emotions or feelings. They gave their child time to adjust his/her emotions and taught their child to be patient. They encouraged their child to spend time with others and share his/her toys with other children. They taught their child about Thai culture and proper social conduct, such as waiting in line and paying respect to adults through a 'wai' (a slight bow, pressing the palms of the hands together in prayerlike fashion).

In terms of preparation for cognitive readiness and learning approaches, the parents cultivated their child's inquisitive mind. They read a story to their child, asked him/her to count things, or bought him/her educational toys or videos so that their child could sing, do artwork or notice things around them. They encouraged their child to cut, chop, or mix things. They pointed out to the child which things floated or sank.

In terms of adjustment, the parents promoted this aspect in line with the child's development. They adjusted the schedule of their child's daily activities two weeks before the semester started. They adjusted the bedtime, the wake-up time, and breakfast time. They also helped familiarize their child with the school timetable by adjusting the schedule of their child's daily activities to fit the school timetable. They sometimes took their child to the school, talked about the school, and provided their child a chance to talk to other students to ensure positive attitude towards teachers and school.

Phase 2: Four weeks after enrollment. The parents organized activities to promote school and academic skills at home. They encouraged their child to talk about he/she did at

school with caring and loving gestures, so the child felt secure. If the child seemed worried or regretful, the parents would comfort him/her. They also complimented their child on what he/she did and kept their promises, such as always picking up their child on time.

Seven out of 15 parents reflected that communication with teachers and other parents were important. They shared information and experience about childrearing and finding solutions to problems. Parent participation in school and classroom activities, such as reading a book to children in class or providing food in a school event, would further help parents to learn about their children's school lives and behavior. However, all 15 parents commented that many preschools do not allow this type of participation, or only for a very short time.

Discussion

The findings indicate that most Thai parents are ready to prepare their child for transition to preschool, according to their capacity.

Four weeks after enrollment, parents paid more attention to promoting their child's academic skills than before

Most parents and Thai society put emphasis on good academic performance, with the hope that their child will have a good job with a high salary. In their view, school is a place that educates their child—so it is teachers' responsibility, not theirs, to make their child literate or well-versed academically. In reality, every aspect of the child's development should be promoted (Ministry of Education, 2017). The support of the child's emotional stability and emotional development are important factors that ensure the child's academic success in the future (Thompson, 2002), and are key in building a smooth transition from home to preschool (Hatcher et al., 2012).

Having attended a nursery school affects the period of self-adjustment of each child

According to the results of the questionnaire, children who attended nursery school took a shorter period for adjustment, in line with the findings obtained by Jasrai (2001) and Gable (2012). However, it also can be concluded that each child's adjustment period is different depending on his/her personality.

Fostering a positive attitude towards attending school affects smooth transitions from home to preschool

The operational level scores of the parents whose child had not attended nursery school were higher than those of parents whose child had attended nursery school. These parents believed that they had to work harder in preparing their child for preschool, because they were worried that their child would not do well in school, might have problems adjusting himself/herself to school, and thus become unhappy. Jasrai (2001) and the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC, 2008) agreed that such parents were worried about their child's adjustment and the danger or problems that he/she might encounter in school. These parents employed various strategies to foster a positive attitude towards attending classes (i.e., talked to the child about schools, used stories as a way to promote adjustment, and took their child to visit school). As stated by LaParo et al. (2003), a school visit, visiting the class, and talking to the teachers are activities that help these children go through transition smoothly.

Communication between parents, teachers, and school during the transition affects the child's readiness

The communication started when the parents filed the application. According to the questionnaire, most of the parents (85.23%) had been informed about the preparation before the application period and after the semester started, and most of the parents attended orientation activities. According to the interview, they searched for further information online about activities, books, and research that promote school readiness. In addition, they

sought advice from relatives, friends, or teachers, and participated in open houses and orientation sessions. Gable (2012), Kielty et al. (2013) and LaParo et al. (2003) found that searches for more information and participation in orientation sessions and open houses were crucial and useful for parents and children in achieving smoother transitions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Parents play an important role in smoothly transitioning their child from home to preschool. Preparing for school readiness is a challenge not only for the child but also for the parents, because they have to organize educational activities to support their child's development, including his/her psychological adjustment. The parents should take part in school activities. This researcher proposes some suggestions for parents to build smooth transitions from home to preschool before the semester and a short while after the semester starts.

Before the semester starts, parents should: 1) plan some activities that help their child learn how to be independent and to interact with others properly; 2) take their child to school and the school playground so that the child will get used to the setting; 3) be prepared to handle the situation when their child's behavior changes (they should learn about the different stages of child development so that they can understand why their child behaves differently when he/she has to be away from those with whom he/she is closely bonded); 4) communicate with other parents and teachers so that they can share childrearing experiences.

After the semester starts, parents should 1) always support their child morally; 2) focus on both activities at home and at school. At home, they should participate in their child's activities and in school, they should participate in school activities; 3) take part in supporting their child at school, such as volunteering for reading stories and participating in other school activities.

In addition, teachers, schools, and related agencies should provide instructional media or information about activities that help parents to build smooth transitions from home to preschool. Media and information such as videos, pamphlets, or television programs are

readily accessible. Schools should encourage parents and their child to visit their school before the semester starts, and invite parents to participate in school activities during the beginning of the semester.

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Appendix A: The example of the questionnaire items

Parent's practice during the 4 weeks before school start

No.	Topic	Practice level				
		5	4	3	2	1
1	You prepare the activities for develop child's fine motor skill such as cutting or tearing paper, picking up toys, molding dough, crumpled paper, playing hand puppets or finger play.					
2	You take the child to participate with other children. For example, take them to a public playground.					
3	Play music to encourage their listening skill.					
4	Arrange their schedule so it is similar to school schedule. For example, napping time, activities time.					
5	Take your child to visit the school or meeting with teacher to make them feel secure in a new environment.					

Parent's practice during the 4 weeks after school start

No.	Topic	Practice level				
		5	4	3	2	1
6	Before sending the child to school, you tell them about the pick-up time clearly and pick them up on time.					
7	Talk with them about how they feel when go to school.					
8	Contact teacher face-to -ace to talk about the child					
9	Build relationship with another parent.					
10	Join in school meetings for parents.					

Appendix B: Example of the interview items

Aspect 1. preparation of school readiness skills and self-adjustment

1. Do you think that self-help skill is important to attend preschool? How do you help children to do things by themselves?
2. How do you help children to understand how to live with others or friends?
3. Do you talk to children about school? How do you encourage them to go to school?

Aspect 2. involvement with school activities

1. Do you hug and talk to your child before and after school? Do you have other ways to build relationship with your child?
2. Do you still prepare activities for children at home after school starts? How?
3. Do you have contact with a teacher, or with another parent? Did you join in classroom activities? How?