

Research summary: continuity and discontinuity between ECEC and school

26 August 2026

Why change can be good: supporting the transition into primary school

A new summary from the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is challenging the assumption that familiarity and consistency are the only keys to a successful primary school transition, revealing that some change is essential for growth and development.

As schools and teachers start planning transition days for children starting school in 2027, AERO's new research summary, [Continuity and discontinuity between ECEC and school](#), offers timely insights for those navigating the move.

The summary is drawn from a rapid review of 67 Australian and international studies, challenging the sometimes-binary interpretations of continuity as 'good' and discontinuity as 'bad'.

"We've long assumed that if we make preschool and school feel as similar as possible, children will cope better with the move," said AERO CEO Dr Jenny Donovan.

"In fact, what the evidence tells us is more nuanced, and more reassuring.

"Children don't need every part of their new classroom at school to feel the same as preschool or their early learning centre.

"New environments, routines and teaching and learning approaches bring new challenges that help children to adapt and build independence over time, so long as they have the support to navigate it."

According to one of the Australian research papers reviewed, children themselves often describe the differences between preschool and school, such as new routines, activities and expectations, as opportunities rather than obstacles. The research also highlights the importance of strong relationships in helping incoming primary school students feel a sense of belonging in their new setting, regardless of how similar or different it looks from preschool.

Evidence suggests that some children, including those with additional learning needs or disabilities, from low socio-economic backgrounds, or from culturally or linguistically diverse communities, including First Nations students, may need more tailored support to navigate this well.

To better support children's transition from ECEC to school, educators and teachers should:

- Focus on relationships — intentionally build and sustain relationships for children between peers and adults in the new education setting
- Involve families — work with children's families to understand how they might experience change and areas they may need support
- Prioritise collaboration — ECEC educators and teachers and school teachers should work together to understand and build upon children's prior experiences and discuss evidence-based ways to progress learning, development and wellbeing.
- Be culturally responsive — value children's cultural identities and listen to their perspectives to create an environment where every child can experience belonging, recognition and success.
- Identify children requiring additional support — use available information to identify children who are likely to need more support early and, if required, tailor transition support to meet their needs.

"The research shows that belonging is at the heart of a successful transition to school," Dr Donovan said.

"It comes from the relationships children build and the support they receive along the way, whatever mix of familiar and new that transition involves."

"Importantly, transition is a process that unfolds over months, not a single day.

"The job for educators, teachers and parents is to stay connected to each child and respond to what that child needs.

"Talking to children about what will be different as well as what will stay the same, and flagging children who might need extra support can help set kids up for a positive start to school."

The research summary is part of a broader AERO series on school transitions, including a 2022 discussion paper on measuring effective transitions to school, which found that a child's sense of belonging in their new school community is central to a successful transition.

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