

Early Years Transitions



SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT RISK OF EXPERIENCING
VULNERABILITY: PRACTICE REVIEW REPORT



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Glossary and abbreviations

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AEDI	Australian Early Development Index
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
DET	Department of Education and Training
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DHS	Department of Human Services
ECI	Early Childhood Intervention
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECEC	Early Child Education and Care
Educators	Qualified people who work with children between birth to age eight in a service of care and/or education, such as an early childhood service or at school
HIPPY	Home Intervention Program for Parents and Youngsters
KESO	Koorie Engagement Support Officer
Kindergarten	A government-funded educational service provided for children in the year before school
LDC	Long Day Care services
LGA	Local Government Areas
MAV	Municipal Association of Victoria
MEA	Multicultural Education Aides
OoHC	Out-of-Home Care
OSHC	Outside school hours care
Prep/Foundation year	The first year of compulsory schooling
PSFO	Pre-school field officer
SES	Socio Economic Status
SFO	Student Family Occupation index
SFOE	Student Family Occupation and Education index
SNAICC	The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care. A national non-governmental peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
VCAMS	Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System
VDEI	Victorian Deaf Education Institute
VEYLDF	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework
Vulnerability	Children and families who have experienced trauma, children living in Out-of-Home Care (OoCH), refugee children and their families, and children and families affected by intergenerational poverty and disadvantage

Executive summary

This final report documents the completion of the Practice Review on support for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in early years transitions for the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). The data that has informed this report is state-wide (Victoria). Provided within this report are many encouraging examples of effective and promising practices from Victorian DET regions across the State informed by the accounts of those involved. While the data is not exhaustive, it showcases and illustrates many promising transition practices happening throughout Victoria. A rapid literature review, commissioned by DET and conducted by Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Kochanoff, Krakouer, Mitchell & Trevitt, 2016), informed the methodology and findings of this report.

Information for the Practice Review was collected and collated from participants from across the early years sector, including from ECEC professionals representing kindergartens, family day care, long day care and Out of School Hours Care, and preschool field officers, school staff including principals, assistant principals, teachers, and school support officers. Participants were also recruited from professional support organisations, support programs and policy staff from the Department of Education and Training, including Best Start Facilitators, Maternal and Child Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services, and Local Government Areas (LGAs). This breadth of information has enabled carefully considered options to be developed, with the aim to assist with charting directions forward to ensure that key stakeholders improve early years transition practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability.

Informed by previous research experience, and working with community groups supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, the methodology for this Practice Review was mixed methods enabling the perspectives of professionals, teachers and families to be gathered in respectful and responsive ways. Methods were designed to be flexible to address issues of data collection across different situations, locations, with busy personnel and with more marginalised stakeholders, for example, families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Implementing a state-wide survey and targeted focus groups across all DET regions helped maximise the data available.

Key findings point to:

- The importance of collaborative professional networks
- The identification of effective and promising practices and resources
- The significance of respectful, responsive and supportive relationships with families
- The need to build professional knowledge, skills and attitudes around transition and vulnerability, and
- The necessity for further research and evaluation of programs and practices for effective transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability

In presenting the options for consideration we have briefly summarised the rationale underpinning the suggestions. Each rationale included with each options has arisen from the data collected and analysed for this report. The options are organised in a hierarchal order beginning with the most important.

Option 1

Formal networks are established, or existing networks built upon, that have the scope to collaborate around transition to school processes and practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability

These networks will have the capacity to work with families in a more holistic way, such as streamlining referral processes, reducing duplication and sharing of information across the services. It is important that schools are key players in these networks, and that the networks are sustainable with supporting policies and procedures in place.

Option 2

Robust evaluation systems are embedded across the cross-sector network to provide evidence of impact to improve transition practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability

Having a systematic process to document and assess programs and initiatives enables promising practices to be identified and replicated across the sectors. The assessment of the impact of many programs, strategies and actions supporting families and children experiencing vulnerability is often informal, ad hoc or non-existent.

Option 3

The revised VEYLDF and Transition to School Kit be promoted more widely across sectors

Promoting these resources widely will increase the likelihood of them being taken up by services. This has the potential of facilitating shared language, discussion and actions around effective transition practices across sectors. Many programs featured valued these aspects of practice.

Option 4

There is a focus on building the capacity of staff working with children and families experiencing vulnerability with targeted professional learning delivered across the sector

Professional skills and knowledge benefit from enhancement with regard to working respectfully and inclusively with children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. It is recommended that professional learning is delivered cross-sector to support transdisciplinarity and consistency of practice and that pre-service teacher education better equips educators and teachers to work with children and families experiencing vulnerabilities.

Option 5

Each network has a designated 'leader' who can champion transitions at network meetings and is recognised for this work

Programs reported the benefits of having a designated leader to support the group to keep transitions on the agenda of networks, raising awareness of the complexity of transitioning children and families within the locality.

Option 6

Increase the participation of younger children experiencing vulnerability in early childhood education and care, for example fully-funded kindergarten programs for three-year-olds across Victoria.

Having younger children (0-3 years) in ECEC programs assists with identifying children experiencing vulnerability and connecting them into services early in life, with the aim of mitigating and reducing the effects of disadvantage

Option 7

Communication and confidentiality protocols that are easy to navigate and timely, and are jointly developed by networks that enable the sharing of information across services to better support the transitions of children and families experiencing vulnerability

Programs that shared information had a better informed services system and promoted the building of trust between services and personnel.

Option 8

A 'key' transition person at school is aligned to each child and family experiencing vulnerability

Programs that had a dedicated key transition person enabled a trusting relationship to develop with children and families. This person could be a primary school teacher or support worker. This can enhance understandings, tailoring of transition processes, and sharing of information between the school and family.

Option 9

Funding options are considered to allow for ECEC educators and primary school teachers time and resources to work effectively with each other, and more intensely and closely with families experiencing vulnerability

Time management was considered a major barrier for all services. Through having designated time and resources professionals will be able to be more supportive of children and families experiencing vulnerability.

Option 10

A strategy to facilitate better understanding and utilisation of the Transition Learning and Development Statement within schools is developed

Some participants indicated a limited understanding of how to use the Transition Learning and Development Statement, especially taking a strength-based approach when articulating vulnerabilities. Further support is required to ensure shared understanding, common language use relating to transitions, child development and learning. This has the potential to significantly influence transition processes and build continuity of practice across ECEC and school settings.

Option 11

Case studies documenting promising practices are recorded and disseminated so effective practices can be replicated across Victoria

Exemplar case studies shared across the sector will address issues of consistency and cohesion in practice and promote critical reflection and professional dialogue.

Introduction

The Victorian Auditor General's (VAGO) Report on Education Transitions (2015) has found that while most Victorian children are effectively supported in their transition to primary school, children experiencing developmental vulnerability are particularly at risk of falling further behind during the transition process. Hence, in the current context there is a strong emphasis by governments on children and families experiencing vulnerability in an effort to better support and enhance their life opportunities. Importance is placed on providing these children and their families with a coordinated approach where services work together collaboratively enabling a more targeted approach. With better connected services, there is opportunity for knowledge building and sharing of practices. Thus, there is less likelihood that children will fall through the gaps.

This Practice Review identifies and maps some of the existing supports and effective practices in relation to transitions for children at risk of experiencing vulnerable circumstances. Child vulnerability was defined as children vulnerable to child abuse, neglect and exclusion 'if the capacity of parents and family to effectively care, protect and provide for their long term development and wellbeing is limited' (Victorian Government, 2013, p.1). The review focused on children and families affected by trauma especially those known to Child Protection and Family Services, children at risk of intergenerational poverty, refugees and children in out of home care. Children and families experiencing vulnerability may also be from culturally or linguistically diverse or Koorie backgrounds and have a disability or developmental delay, however, these were not the focus of this review and were considered part of the other categories identified above where relevant.

An outcome of this Practice Review are findings and options of how best to support Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals to work in transdisciplinary teams for improving transitions for families and children at risk of experiencing vulnerability. It also considers costs and strategies for sustaining practice change and collaborative/transdisciplinary partnerships. This has been informed by the Rapid Literature Review, mindful of national and international evidence, and the experience that the Project Team brings to the project, having experience in undertaking research on transition and transdisciplinary practice.

As research in the area has reported, building strong partnerships between key stakeholders is important especially during times of transition. Acknowledging the complexity of children's and families' life circumstances such as families experiencing trauma, refugee families, children in and out of home care, and those associated with child protection and affected by intergenerational poverty, it is vital that all stakeholders provide a strong support network during times of transition. However, at times partnerships are not well formed, are not reciprocal, and can lack understanding or congruence of practice. Building understanding across the ECEC and primary sectors so knowledge and skills can be valued by all parties can enhance the transition program and provide children with consistent approaches to transitioning to school. A coordinated service system provides an opportunity for an even more targeted approach to transition for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

This Practice Review provides valuable insights for DET's Transition to School Initiative and aligns with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) in acknowledging the holistic role of ECEC in supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability. This work will also contribute to early childhood reforms being undertaken by the Victorian Government—the Education State and the Roadmap to Reform. The Education State has a strong focus on creating a more flexible and integrated service system to support children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The Roadmap to Reform aims to improve the Victorian child and family service system to intervene early to prevent abuse and neglect, keep families together through crisis, and secure better futures for children who cannot live at home.

Methodology

The methodology for this Practice Review was mixed methods encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a broader coverage of the topic. It was designed to reflect the voices of professionals, teachers, and families on practices within ECEC services and schools that support transitions for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. It was also conceived to be flexible to address issues of data collection across different situations, locations, personnel and with more marginalised stakeholders e.g. families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, as well as retention and attrition of participants.

The methodology took into consideration the need to be fit for purpose, sensitive to diversity of circumstances and culture, power imbalances, an ethic of care, preferred forms of communication of various participants along with people's limited time to meet. A multi-faceted approach to data collection, including consultations at existing meetings, holding dedicated focus group meetings, conducting an online survey and telephone interviews, that was responsive to and respectful of potential participants and assisted with recruitment and minimised attrition. Incentives such as being placed in a draw to win one of 5 iPads for survey respondents' organisations for educational purposes, and reimbursement for travel to focus groups assisted with participation.

Data collection consisted of a state-wide survey and focus group interviews across all DET regions, however, in reality it was recognised that busy people may not be free to attend in the short timeframe of the project. This meant that the definition of a focus group was expanded to include phone interviews with individuals, and acceptance of written responses to focus group questions.

The Practice Review addressed the main questions:

- What effective or promising practices are being implemented by ECEC services and schools to support children and families experiencing vulnerability during key transitions (including transitions from home, out-of-home care and/or other programs/services to ECEC services and to school)?
- What are the gaps in service quality, professional learning and networks/coordination mechanisms for supporting positive early years transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability?
- What are the options and findings for the Department and the ECEC sector to improve support for children and families experiencing vulnerability in transitions?

STATE-WIDE SURVEY

The survey had two purposes:

1. as a mapping exercise assisting with identifying and collecting information relating to existing supports, effective practices and programs
2. to identify effective transition networks and professionals who could be potential focus group participants.

Development

Survey questions were informed by:

- the Rapid Literature Review
- previous work on Transition projects held by Project Team
- reviewing the current Victorian *Transition: A Positive Start to School* initiative and related policies, research findings and reports, and
- consultation with DET.

The survey (Appendix A) was created in *Qualtrics*, encompassing multiple choice and open-ended responses to enable qualitative and quantitative data collection. Ethical approval to undertake the research was obtained through Deakin University's Ethics Committee and DET's human research ethics process. Potential respondents were asked to read a Plain Language Statement before responding to the survey questions. It was made clear that by submitting responses participants were giving consent for their data to be used in the project.

Identification and implementation

Potential respondents were identified in consultation with DET. The online survey was then made live by emailing the survey link to sites. DET targeted preschools, Long Day Care (LDC), and primary schools. The Project Team targeted Best Start project officers, private providers, and other organisations such as Mission Australia, BPA Children's Services, Geelong Kindergarten Association (GKA), Maternal & Child Health Services, Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), GoodStart Early Learning, Family Day Care Victoria, Children's Protection Society, Community Child Care Association, Australian Childhood Foundation and Department of Health and Human Services.

Demographics

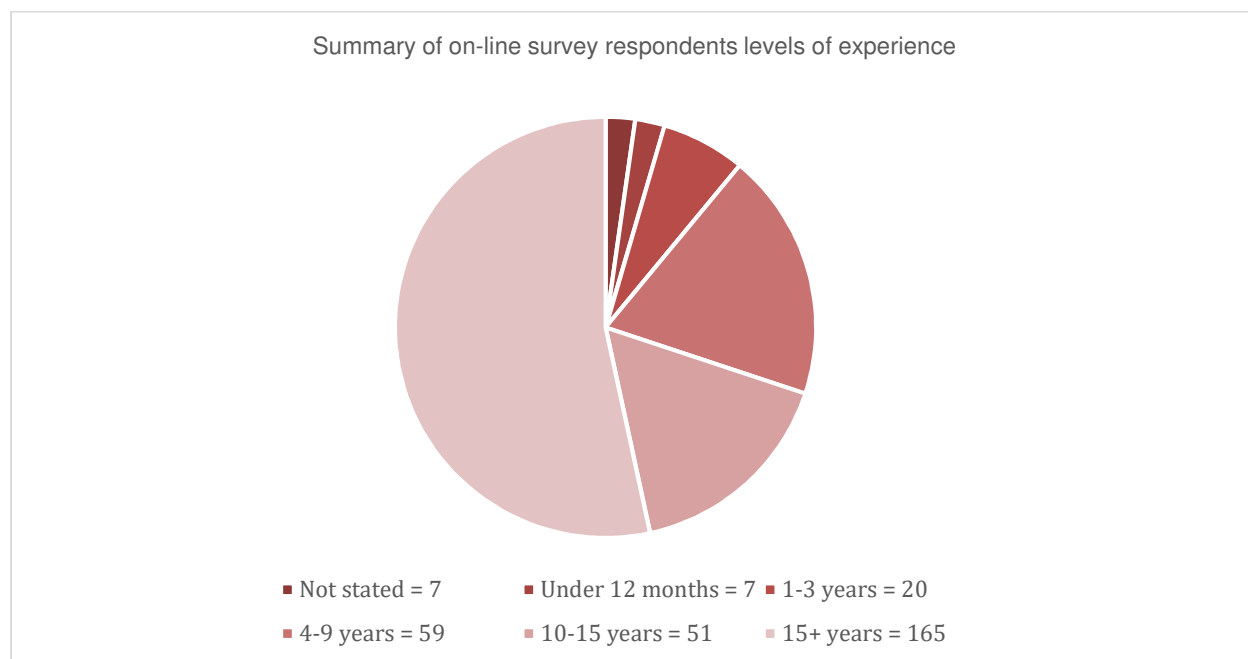
Overall statistics

The on-line survey went live using Qualtrics from 11 October 2016. While it was intended to close on 31 October, some organisations did not receive information about the survey until late October. The survey therefore closed on 2 December 2016. Three hundred and nine completed responses were received, exceeding the target of 300.

The 309 survey respondents included Principals/Assistant Principals, teachers, from schools; ECEC professionals from, preschools/kindergartens, Long Day Care Centres and Family Day Care; and other support program/policy staff from Department of Education and Training (including Best Start Facilitators, Maternal & Child Health Services), Department of Health and Human Services, Local Government Areas (LGAs), Children's Protection Society, Australian Childhood Foundation, and many government, private and not-for-profit child and family / support services throughout regional and rural Victoria. While the number of responses to the survey exceeded expectations, it is worth noting that 275 respondents have in excess of 4 years' of experience in the early childhood education and care sector. The pie graph below indicates the different levels of experience of respondents.

Figure 1. Survey respondents by years of experience in the ECEC sector

The image (graph) below shows the breakdown of survey respondent by years of experience in the ECEC sector: Not stated = 7; Under 12 months = 7; 1-3 years = 20; 4-9 years = 59; 10-15 years = 51; 15+ years = 165.



Locations

Table 1: Survey respondents per DET Region and Area

The Tables below provide details of the number of survey respondents according to both their DET Region and area. Of the 309 respondents the location details of nine are unknown.

Appendix B records the survey participants' organisation type and role details

North-Western Victoria

Region: North West by Local Area (metro/rural)	On-line Survey respondents by region = 69
Mallee (rural)	21
Loddon (rural)	10
Hume Moreland (metro)	11
North Eastern Melbourne (metro)	27

North-Eastern Victoria

Region: North East Local Area (metro/rural)	On-line Survey respondents by region = 54
Ovens Murray (rural)	12
Goulburn (rural)	14
Outer Eastern Melbourne (metro)	22
Inner Eastern Melbourne (metro)	6

South-Eastern Victoria

Region: South East Local Area (metro/rural)	On-line Survey respondents by region = 50
Outer Gippsland (rural)	5
Inner Gippsland (rural)	7
Southern Melbourne (metro)	26
Bayside Peninsula (metro)	12

South-Western Victoria

Region: South West Local Area (metro/rural)	On-line Survey respondents by region = 127
Western District (rural)	16
Barwon (rural)	24
Central Highlands	10
Western Melbourne (metro)	58
Brimbank Melton (metro)	19

Involvement in transitions

The 309 survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they supported children and families through transitions of which 288 (93 per cent) responded that they did. When asked whether these transitions included children and families experiencing vulnerability 274 respondents (95 per cent) stated that this was the case. The Tables below provide details of those survey respondents who support children and families through transitions according to both their DET Region and area.

Table 2: Involvement in Transitions Survey per DET Region and Area

Details of the 274 survey respondents (who support children and families experiencing vulnerability through transitions) are shown by area / role type in this Table. Please note the details of five respondents are unknown.

North-Western Victoria

Region: North West – total number of Respondents = 58	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 3	Teachers = 4	ECEC Professionals = 20	Support/policy/ program staff = 31
Mallee	2	3	3	11
Loddon	0	1	4	3
Hume Moreland	1	0	4	4
North Eastern Melbourne	0	0	9	13

North-Eastern Victoria

Region: North East - total number of Respondents = 48	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 8	Teachers = 3	ECEC Professionals = 20	Support/policy/ program staff = 17
Ovens Murray	4	1	3	4
Goulburn	2	1	5	3
Outer Eastern Melbourne	2	1	9	7
Inner Eastern Melbourne	0	0	3	3

South-Eastern Victoria

Region: South East - total number of Respondents = 43	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 3	Teachers = 2	ECEC Professionals = 22	Support/policy/ program staff = 16
Outer Gippsland	2	0	3	0
Inner Gippsland	1	0	4	0
Southern Melbourne	0	0	12	12
Bayside Peninsula	0	2	3	4

South-Western Victoria

Region: South West - total number of Respondents = 120	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 4	Teachers = 6	ECEC Professionals = 56	Support/policy/ program staff = 54
Western District	0	3	6	6
Barwon	1	1	10	11
Central Highlands	1	1	3	5
Western Melbourne	1	1	25	27
Brimbank Melton	1	0	12	5

Respondent's organisation and role

Appendix B records the type of organisation survey respondents are aligned with and their role within that organisation.

FOCUS GROUPS

The initial methodology was to conduct 17 Professional Focus groups; one in each of the 17 DET areas identified with a minimum of six participants per group targeting professionals working in early years services. The experiences of families was also important to inform this Practice Review and as such two Parent/Family Focus groups were planned. The aim was to have 15 families represented (two Focus groups) being mindful that working with families experiencing vulnerability takes time to build trusting relationships with researchers.

Ethical consent was obtained from the Deakin University Ethics Committee as well as approval to undertake the research with early childhood personnel through DET. Each participant was given a Plain Language Statement that explained the research process and was asked to sign a Consent Form before Focus groups could take place.

Development

Focus group questions were informed by:

- the Rapid Literature Review
- previous work on Transition projects held by Project Team, and
- consultation with DET (refer to Appendix C for the Focus group Schedule for professionals, and Appendix D for the Focus group questions for families/parents).

Identification of participants – professionals

Participants were identified by the following:

- Consultation with DET helped identify regional personnel to contact for local initiatives
- Survey results were consulted to determine initiatives within regions and issues related to transition processes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage; and one survey question asked 'would you be prepared to be part of a Focus group' to which respondents could provide a 'yes' / 'no' response
- Consultation with professional organisations
- Identification of key personnel (snowballing technique) utilising networks as listed above.

Identification of participants – families

During the Professional Focus group discussions, when participants mentioned they were working with children and families experiencing vulnerability, they were asked if they would be willing to approach families to gauge their interest in participating in the Family Focus groups. Further liaison occurred with existing personnel/services already connected with these families who volunteered to assist with recruitment and provide support to families up to and during the focus group.

Implementation - professionals

Due to having to accommodate busy professionals in a short time frame, we expanded the definition of how a focus group meeting could be facilitated to include:

- an invitation to attend a meeting organised by the project team where nominated professionals will be in attendance
- a project team member attending an existing 'scheduled' network meeting with all or key participants who are available
- teleconference with a small group of participants
- individual telephone interview, and
- the opportunity to complete written responses to the questions that were asked at Focus groups.

Locations for the focus group meetings were chosen using the following criteria:

- evidence of functioning networks in the area
- central location for the 17 DET areas
- survey respondents interest in participating
- availability of centrally located venues to encourage greater participation
- connecting into existing meetings and networks
- as wider coverage as possible

In an effort to maximise participation and minimise costs, focus groups were held in central locations within each region such as community centres, family centres, and in council meeting rooms.

The Project Manager invited potential participants to attend a focus group meeting for initially via email and/or phone contact. These invitations were sent to those who completed the on-line survey and had indicated their interest in being included in a Focus group meeting. The Project Manager also sought assistance from local Best Start facilitators to promote the meetings via flyers sent to their networks; and information sent out via the DET network. Participants were invited to multiple focus group meetings if more than one was occurring in their area, in the hope that one would fit into their schedule. For those participants who declined the invitation to attend a face-to-face focus group meeting, they were then offered the other focus group options (as noted above).

Implementation – families

Potential family focus group participants were identified during professional focus group meeting's and phone interviews. The project team liaised with representatives from organisations to identify families as potential focus group participants and would be appropriate and willing to be interviewed. The trusted support workers also provided advice to the project team on the most appropriate way to engage with families. Families were invited to focus groups by service providers / professionals / organisations on the ground with whom the families already had an established trusting relationship. Flexible methods were used to access families such as face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. 19 families from rural and metro areas: Shepparton, Swan Hill, Geelong, Frankston, Knox, Werribee, Pakenham, Berwick, Tooradin and Footscray were interviewed and provided valuable insights on their children's transition experiences.

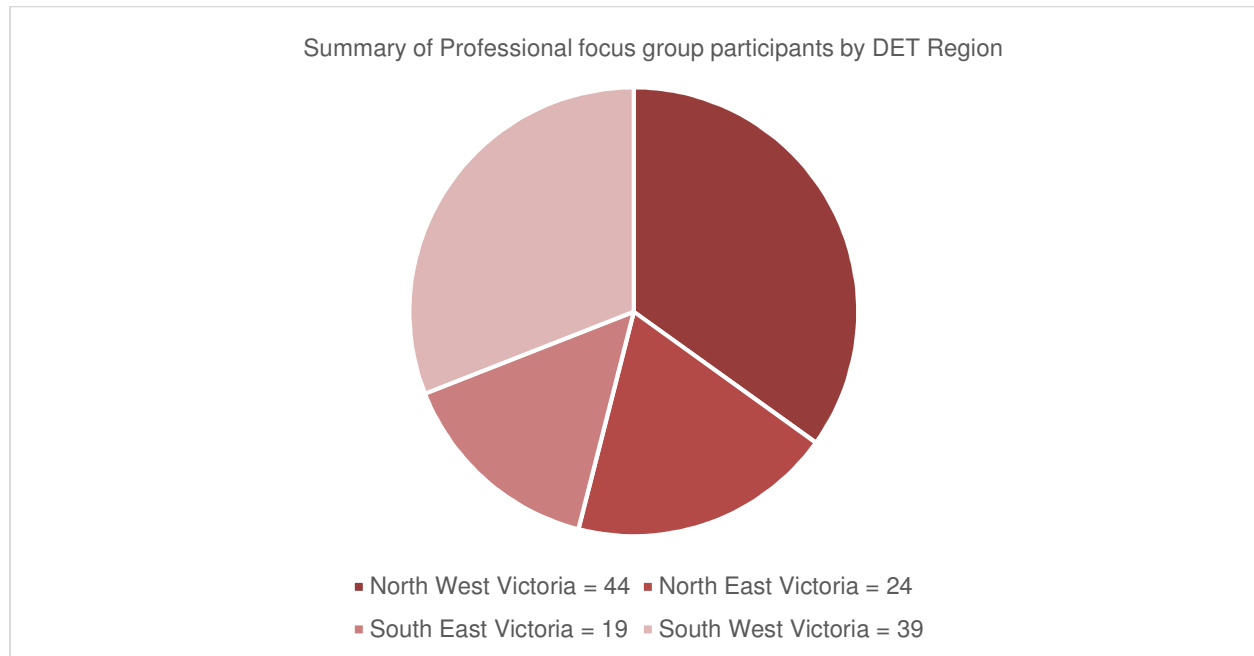
Demographics – professionals

Overall statistics

A total of 126 Professionals throughout Victoria who attended focus group meetings provided valuable information regarding experiences, programs, initiatives and strategies to support vulnerable families and children around transitions. The following graph provides a summary of focus group participants by region.

Figure 2. Professional focus group participants per DET Region

The image (graph) below shows the breakdown of Professional focus group participants by DET Region: North West Victoria = 44; North East Victoria = 24; South East Victoria = 19; South West Victoria = 39.



Locations

A total of 13 focus group meetings were scheduled and held throughout Victoria, with the number of attendees varying from a minimum of three to a maximum of 22. In addition to the focus group meetings, a total of 22 interviews were conducted and 3 focus group meeting forms were completed.

Three additional focus group meetings were scheduled in central locations (Melbourne CBD and Burwood), however these were cancelled as there was limited responses from those invited. Where meetings were cancelled, the participants were offered a phone interview; were advised of other meetings; or were provided with the focus group meeting questions to complete.

The number of professionals who declined / weren't able to attend a Focus Group Meeting / didn't return the questions is in excess of 30. Some commented that while they were keen to take part the timing of the meetings did not fit with their schedule and the lead in time was too short for them to reorganise teaching or other work commitments.

The Tables below provide details of Professional focus group meeting locations and participant numbers per DET Region and Area.

Table 3: Professional focus group meeting locations and participant numbers

126 participants attended focus group meetings. Focus group meetings included face-to-face meetings; phone interviews with individuals and acceptance of written responses to focus group questions. The Tables provide a breakdown of the focus group meeting locations according to DET region and area then by participant numbers for each area.

North-Western Victoria

Region: North West by Local Area (metro/rural). Total number of participants = 44	Focus Group Meeting Locations*	Total Number of Participants by Area
Mallee (rural)	Mildura and Swan Hill	16
Loddon (rural)	Bendigo	2
Hume Moreland (metro)	Broadmeadows and Brunswick	2
North Eastern Melbourne (metro)	Darebin	24

North-Eastern Victoria

Region: North East by Local Area (metro/rural). Total number of participants = 24	Focus Group Meeting Locations*	Total Number of Participants by Area
Ovens Murray (rural)	Wangaratta and Albury Wodonga	2
Goulburn (rural)	Shepparton	6
Outer Eastern Melbourne (metro)	Yarra Ranges	13
Inner Eastern Melbourne (metro)	Burwood	3

South-Eastern Victoria

Region: South East by Local Area (metro/rural). Total number of participants = 19	Focus Group Meeting Locations*	Total Number of Participants by Area
Outer Gippsland (rural)	Lake Wellington	1
Inner Gippsland (rural)	Lake Tyers	1
Southern Melbourne (metro)	Dandenong	11
Bayside Peninsula (metro)	Frankston	6

South-Western Victoria

Region: South West by Local Area (metro/rural). Total number of participants = 39	Focus Group Meeting Locations*	Total Number of Participants by Area
Western District (rural)	Portland	11
Barwon (rural)	Geelong and Colac	12
Central Highlands (rural)	Ballarat	2
Western Melbourne (metro)	Moonee Valley	4
Brimbank Melton	Braybrook	10

Participant's organisation and role

The Tables below provide details of the numbers and roles of focus group participants by DET region and area.

Table 4: Summary of professional focus group participants' role

126 participants attended focus group meetings. The Tables provide a breakdown of participants by role: Principals/Assistant Principals = 3 (2%); Teachers = 11 (9%); ECEC Professionals = 23 (18%); Support/policy/program staff = 89 (71%).

Appendix E records the professional focus group participants' organisation type and role details.

North-Western Victoria

Region: North West by Local Area. Total number of participants = 44	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 1	Teachers = 5	ECEC Professionals = 7	Support/policy/ program staff = 31
Mallee (Mildura and Swan Hill)	1	1	4	10
Loddon	0	0	0	2
Hume Moreland	0	0	0	2
North Eastern Melbourne	0	4	3	17

North-Eastern Victoria

Region: North East by Local Area. Total number of participants = 24	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 0	Teachers = 2	ECEC Professionals = 5	Support/policy/ program staff = 17
Ovens Murray	0	0	1	1
Goulburn	0	0	1	5
Outer Eastern Melbourne	0	2	2	9
Inner Eastern Melbourne	0	0	1	2

South-Eastern Victoria

Region: South East by Local Area. Total number of participants = 19	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 0	Teachers = 1	ECEC Professionals = 2	Support/policy/ program staff = 16
Outer Gippsland	0	0	0	1
Inner Gippsland	0	0	0	1
Southern Melbourne	0	0	2	9
Bayside Peninsula	0	1	0	5

South-Western Victoria

Region: South West by Local Area. Total number of participants = 39	Principals/ Assistant Principals = 2	Teachers = 3	ECEC Professionals = 9	Support/policy/ program staff = 25
Western District	1	3	2	5
Barwon (<i>Colac and Geelong</i>)	1	0	6	5
Central Highlands	0	0	0	2
Western Melbourne	0	0	0	4
Brimbank / Melton	0	0	1	9

Demographics – families

Table 5: Family focus group meetings per DET Region and Area

The Table below provides a breakdown of the family focus group meeting participant numbers according to DET region and area locations.

Region	Local Area (metro/rural)	Parent Focus Group Meeting location and participant numbers. Total number of participants = 19
North Western Victoria	Mallee (rural)	Swan Hill (3)
North Eastern Victoria	Goulburn (rural)	Shepparton (2)
North Eastern Victoria	Outer Eastern Melbourne (metro)	Knox (1)
South Eastern Victoria	Southern Melbourne (metro)	Pakenham (2) Berwick (1) Tooradin (1)
South Eastern Victoria	Bayside Peninsula (metro)	Frankston (1)
South Western Victoria	Barwon (rural)	Geelong (2)
South Western Victoria	Western Melbourne (metro)	Footscray (5) Wyndham (1)

DATA ANALYSIS

All data was deductively coded initially according to the research questions. Survey data, focus group meeting transcripts, and written responses to focus group questions made up the data set. The data was analysed for intentional actions – effective or promising practices, resources, transdisciplinary networks and coordination, feedback processes and evidence of impact. Within each of these nominated areas, thematic analysis allowed the data to be clustered around themes. Gaps in service quality, professional learning and networks / coordination mechanisms were identified.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this project need to be taken into consideration when reviewing the findings and options. These limitations relate to the timeframe of the project, the time of year when the project was conducted (final term of the preschool/school year), and the fact that participation in the online survey and focus group discussions with early years professionals was voluntary. This meant that the data is not exhaustive of all key stakeholders perspectives on supporting transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability, and as such will not include all innovative and promising practices happening across the state of Victoria.

Engaging with families proved difficult due to the time of the year focus groups were held and some families did not identify as experiencing 'vulnerability' (perhaps due to the stigma attached) which meant that after showing initial interest, there was a disconnection from the project. Also there were barriers with some organisations having lengthy internal ethical procedures that could not be accommodated in the timeframe of the project.

Rapid literature review

The following section is a modified version of the Executive Summary from the *Early Years Transitions Supporting Children and Families at Risk of Experiencing Vulnerability: Rapid Literature Review*, commissioned by DET and conducted by ACER and the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Kochanoff, Krakouer, Mitchell & Trevitt, 2016). The Executive Summary provides detail about the Rapid Literature Review's scope, methodology, findings, conclusions and summary of recommendations, and has been included in this report as the findings have informed the report's Summary and Options.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

*Source: Early Years Transitions Supporting Children and Families at Risk of Experiencing Vulnerability: Rapid Literature Review (Kochanoff, Krakouer, Mitchell & Trevitt, 2016).

This rapid literature review on support for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in early years transitions sought to understand how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, professionals and teachers could better support children at risk of vulnerability, and their families, during transitions.

The transitions included are from home, out-of-home care (OoHC) and other programs/services to ECEC services and to school. In particular, this review focuses on the support needs of children who have experienced trauma, children living in out-of-home care, refugee children, and children who experience intergenerational poverty.

Research questions

The review addresses the following key research questions:

- What strategies, programs and practices are effective in ECEC services and schools to support children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability during key transitions (including transitions from home, out of home care and/or other programs/services to ECEC services and to school)?
- How can ECEC professionals and prep teachers be best supported and resourced to assist children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability to transition as successfully as possible?
- How can transdisciplinary networks or teams involving ECEC and school professionals, family services, child protection etc. support children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in transitions? What is required to enable this to happen?
- What are the gaps highlighted in the research in terms of service quality, professional capability, professional learning and networks/coordination mechanisms for supporting positive early years transitions for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability?
- What are the conclusions and the future directions for improving support for ECEC professionals and teachers assisting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in early years transitions?

Methodology

The scope of the review is international with a focus on Australian literature, with 2008 as the starting date of publication. Both academic research literature and grey literature published in English across psychology, social work, social policy, public health and education disciplines is included. The age range for early childhood is 0-8 years of age and this review focuses on the 4-6 year old age range.

The review begins with consideration of key concepts inherent in the research questions, and is informed by the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and its eight Practice Principles (Department of Education and Training [DET] 2016b). Terms such as early childhood education and care, vulnerability, strength-based approach, school 'readiness', transdisciplinary teams and transition are discussed.

The main section of the review describes and discusses the different ways that children and families may be at risk of experiencing vulnerability. The focus is on identifying programs, practices and strategies identified in the literature as effective in supporting early years transitions. There are four key groups discussed in detail.

- children who have experienced trauma
- children living in out-of-home care
- refugee children and families
- children affected by intergenerational poverty

Findings

Despite the research evidence that demonstrates the positive effects of engagement in quality ECEC programs, children at risk of experiencing vulnerability tend to attend formal ECEC at lower rates than their more affluent peers (Gilley et al. 2015). Children at risk of experiencing vulnerability also tend to have more complex support needs when experiencing early years transitions.

While the support needs of these children and families are recognised as varying greatly from other children, this review found that there is minimal recent literature about programs specific to early years transitions programs and strategies that have been shown as effective in supporting children and families at risk of vulnerability. In particular, there is a lack of recent literature regarding early years transition support for children who have experienced trauma, children living in OoHC, children from refugee backgrounds, or children experiencing intergenerational poverty.

The role of transdisciplinary networks in supporting children and their families as they transition into school is acknowledged in the VEYLDF. These transdisciplinary networks often include a range of services, such as health and welfare services, ECEC institutions and schools working collaboratively. Such networks not only help with early years transitions, but also have a significant impact on longer term schooling outcomes for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability.

Supporting children who have experienced trauma

The work of the Australian Childhood Foundation, the Australian Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (United States) and the Zero to Six Collaborative Group (United States) is highlighted in this section.

Practices that may be effective in supporting these children during early years transition include: (1) resilience programs; (2) trauma healing activities; (3) providing clear routine and structure; (4) providing safe spaces for children and their families, and; (5) developing strong interpersonal relationships based on trust and mutual respect.

Programs that foster resilience and enable a child to heal from trauma are identified as particularly important interventions that can assist transitions for children affected by trauma. Strategies identified as effective in supporting children who have experienced trauma include:

- Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)
- Attachment, Self-Regulation and Competency (ARC) (Arvidson et al. 2011)
- Play-based therapies
- Mindfulness
- Trauma-informed approaches

The Supportive Trauma Interventions for Educators (STRIVE) Pilot Intervention (McConnico et al. 2016) is discussed in detail. It has been trialled in Boston public schools and focuses on student-teacher interactions, skill building and improving student social and emotional skills.

Supporting children living in out-of-home care

The reasons why more than 6,000 Victorian children reside in OoHC range from family violence, abuse, neglect, voluntary relinquishment of care duties by parents and parental mental health and/or substance use issues (Tucker & Mares 2013).

Children in OoHC experience twice as many school transitions compared to their peers, due to multiple placement breakdowns (Child Safety Commissioner 2007). As well as having to adapt to new settings, this often leads to children missing elements of the curriculum, and having strained relationships with teachers and peers (Harvey and Testro 2006).

Evaluated programs identified that may assist children in OoHC include Kids in Transition to School (KITS) Program (Pears et al. 2013) and KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) (Slee et al. 2012). It is important to note however, that the KMEC program is not specific to early years transitions.

Supporting refugee children and families

The lives of many refugee children and families are plagued by trauma, uncertainty, instability, change, cultural dislocation, violence, and possible loss of family members. Some refugee children may have experienced education

before arriving in Australia, however, it is possible that this context was dissimilar to a Western schooling experience (Szente, Hoot & Taylor 2006).

In addition to possible traumatic experiences and educational disruption, refugee children and families are typically from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. This means that refugee children and families experience additional challenges related to cultural and language differences. The literature noted that ECEC institutions and schools are sometimes ill-prepared for working with children and families from refugee backgrounds due to the complexity of trauma experience and educational disruption, coupled with cultural linguistic diversity.

Interventions for refugee children include group interpersonal psychotherapy, creative play, school-based cognitive behavioural therapy, dance and movement therapy, mind-body techniques (such as meditation and mindfulness based therapies), narrative therapies, art therapy and, teacher-led trauma psychotherapy (Betancourt et al. 2013). Strengthening support structures for each transition, over time, is important, as studies tracking refugee children over several years indicate that they may be at heightened risk of experiencing vulnerability after the early resettlement period, compared to the arrival period (Paxton et al. 2011, p. 69). Programs that have been used with refugee children and families include The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (2016) Early Childhood Access and Participation (ECAP) and The Pyramid Model for supporting preschool refugees (Hurley et al. 2013).

Supporting children affected by intergenerational poverty

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) which measured family financial disadvantage, children's school readiness, and children's later school progress and engagement, emphasises the negative influence that persistent poverty or intergenerational poverty can have on educational achievement and adjustment (Smart et al. 2008, p. vi). Maurin's (2002) findings suggest that an increase in income made directly to poor families has a potentially large impact on children's early transitions and performance at school. Practical assistance such as coverage of school fees, school uniforms and books can also support transitions and engagement in school for children and families affected by intergenerational poverty.

In addition to a wide range of home visiting and parent education programs, such as and the Home Instruction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) (Liddell et al. 2011; Yak 2016), there are examples throughout Australia of school hubs being established to integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning.

A selection of programs and strategies were identified and these are described through the review to highlight the patterns and trends in evidence of what works to support children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in early years transitions.

Strategies reviewed include:

- Access strategies
- Care teams
- Fully integrated services
- Professional learning
- Reflective practice
- Trauma training

Conclusions

The focus on a transdisciplinary approach to transition comes through strongly across the programs reviewed. There are four key issues and priorities identified through the review, namely

1. a focus on partnerships
2. transdisciplinary and holistic approach to transition
3. professional learning for ECEC professionals
4. gaps and further research

These are tied back to the VEYLDF Practice Principles and a range of recommendations are included.

Summary of recommendations

In short, the recommendations arising from the review include strategies and practices intended to:

Identify and attend to children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability

- Ensure accurate identification of the needs of children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability
- Add questions regarding areas of vulnerability to existing transition assessment tools
- Undertake ongoing analysis and reporting of attendance as well as enrolment for these children in both ECEC programs and school

Facilitate partnerships and transdisciplinary networks

- Identify effective leaders in existing local transdisciplinary networks and use them as champions
- Commission and publish a set of case studies showing a range of models of transdisciplinary networks
- Develop a set of protocols and templates to assist local networks
- Facilitate inclusion of good practice guides for transdisciplinary networks in teacher education courses

Build professional knowledge, skills and attitudes

- Resource appropriate professional development, training and information
- Facilitate the establishment of reflective practice learning communities specific to these areas of vulnerability
- Enhance universal teacher professional learning programs to include successful transition experiences for children at risk of experiencing vulnerability
- Facilitate input to initial teacher education courses from specialists in early years transitions for children at risk of experiencing vulnerability

Foster genuine communication

- Work to ensure that all those involved in ECEC transitions recognise that genuine communication with children and families requires more than information dissemination
- Provide accessible alternatives when using online communication channels
- Provide opportunities for ECEC professionals and educators to engage in dialogue with other professionals, parents and communities

Resources

- Curate a clear, structured roadmap of resources, programs and referral information relevant to children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability, on a regional basis
- Develop a register of research in progress, programs, data and resources related to particular areas of vulnerability

Support future research

- Facilitate program development and evaluation specific to children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in early years transitions
- Prioritise investigation of enablers and barriers to the development of transdisciplinary networks, including effective practices and benefits, and costs of operation
- Develop a detailed profile of the 5 per cent of Victorian children who are not enrolled in ECEC, including the reasons for non-enrolment and the impact of non-enrolment in ECEC
- Commission research on trauma-informed practice in ECEC settings

Practice review findings

State-wide survey

This section focuses on data collected through the State-wide online survey. It is organised under the following headings: effective or promising practices; professional learning; transdisciplinary networks and co-ordination; feedback processes and evidence of impact; and influences on supporting effective transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. The data presented are the views of participants who are professionals working in early years transitions. It must be noted that responses to each question varies due to not all survey participants choosing to answer every question, and many questions allowing for multiple answers.

The 309 survey respondents included Principals/Assistant Principals, and teachers from schools; ECEC professionals from preschools/kindergartens, Long Day Care Centres and Family Day Care; and other support program/policy staff from the Department of Education and Training (including Best Start Facilitators, Maternal & Child Health Services), Department of Health and Human Services, Local Government Areas (LGAs), Children's Protection Society, Australian Childhood Foundation, Mission Australia, Brotherhood of St Laurence and many private and not-for-profit child and family / support services throughout regional and rural Victoria. Of the 309 respondents, 275 have in excess of four years of experience in the early childhood education and care sector.

EFFECTIVE OR PROMISING PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY

Eighty-three percent of survey respondents (n=187) out of the total responses for question 8f (n=225) reported that they changed their transition approach with children and families experiencing vulnerability. The changes noted by respondents were wide ranging, and included providing more support in the form of offering to accompany families to the school or appointments, completing paperwork with families, connecting families to other local support services, organising community transport, home visits, explaining the transition process, starting the transition process earlier in the year, creating, tailoring or accessing specific resources (fee support, uniforms, social stories, recruiting a secondary consultant to advise on trauma informed practice), being more flexible in regards to times available to meet with families, and childcare arrangements, and advocating on a family's behalf. The six most common changes (in descending order) are:

1. Spending more time assisting and supporting families. This results in taking a more active role in the process such as helping families to complete forms and access services. It encompasses being available to families when they need to connect, referring them to specialist services, and following up with them more so than other families.
2. Individualising transition to the uniqueness of each child and family so support is tailored. It is not viewed as 'one size fits all'.
3. Educators and professionals attending school visits and transition events with children and families, meetings between families and specialist services and providing transport to such meetings.
4. Regular student support meetings and additional discussions with families, between all personnel supporting the family to enable the sharing of information. This allows family members to be active in the decision-making process.
5. Tailoring transition sessions allowing more time for children and families to transition. In some instances these transition sessions were additional to what was already offered, in other cases they were shortened in length and then progressively lengthened over time. In one case an 'enhanced transition' was a precursor to the usual transition program experienced by all children transitioning to school.
6. Presentation and dissemination of information provided to families. This varied, but included presenting information in an accessible format (spoken rather than written in some cases), the use of interpreters, written information followed-up by a telephone call to check for family understanding, disseminated over a longer period of time, and more frequently delivered such as having informal 'chats' or 'smaller conversations'. This supports getting to 'know the child and the family'. It was considered that

communication needed to be more sensitive and 'adaptable' in regards to family situations with 'appropriate' language used, less paperwork, more detailed Transition Learning and Development Statements, and being available to listen.

Positive transitions for families experiencing vulnerability were described by respondents as children and families feeling welcomed, comfortable, valued and safe in the school environment with the majority of respondents seeing this as actively promoted when positive, respectful relationship building with families was the focus. It was noted that when schools, kindergartens and support services worked together to support families this enabled a more seamless transition and ensured that families were provided with the support they required. For example, one survey respondent explained:

'A positive transition would see all stakeholders understanding the families' circumstances, working in collaboration to meet the needs of the child and family. This would mean sharing of information, accessing all the relevant resources and services that would best support a positive transition resulting in positive outcomes for that child.'

'Non-negotiables' to support children and families experiencing vulnerability during transitions elicited short answer responses. These responses varied in what was deemed important. Seven main categories are reported here in order of importance (starting with the most important).

- Partnerships between all parties involved regular care meetings and regular communication. Support agencies, schools, preschools all working together as a team around the child to ensure information is shared to meet each child's and their family's needs. For example:

'Student Support Group /Care Team meetings...setting up a care team for each vulnerable child. E.g. parent/guardian/ kindergarten teacher/ teacher/ school wellbeing officer/ agency staff/ extended family/ allied health workers...creating a team around the learner.'

- Joint meetings prior to the school year involving all key stakeholders allowing for:

'all relevant concerns addressed and referrals in place prior to children entering school', adopting a 'child first approach'. 'Clear, reliable pathway referrals and partnership development. The way forward is through relationships and connections of service providers knowing about each other's core business and expertise when working with families and sharing this knowledge.'

- Open, strength-based and non-judgemental relationships with families and children.
- Creating a welcoming environment at school where families feel welcome and are aware of the supports the school can offer, and can participate in school activities and are involved in conversations and decision-making processes.
- Approaches to transition are flexible and inclusive. Time and resources are allocated to the differing needs of children and families.
- Staff are skilled (supported through training e.g. child protection, trauma) and experienced in working with children and families experiencing vulnerability. They are knowledgeable of the barriers some families experience, are respectful, non-judgemental, and 'go the extra mile' to support families.
- Transition sessions are attended by children and families as this is a way to disseminate useful information while also beginning to build a partnership with the school and a level of comfort in the environment.
- A support person/key worker is designated to be the main contact for each child and family experiencing vulnerability. A key worker-type model enables families to develop a relationship with a key staff member who is responsible for follow up and 'outreach' to help to overcome barriers the family may be experiencing. One respondent describes this as:

'Having a person that will advocate for the child. Ensuring that parents have one person that they can contact within the service. This person will then be able to build relationships with the family that will assist with transitions.'

This type of support can help allay family anxiety regarding new experiences and builds trusting relationships. It also avoids families having to tell their story to a number of different personnel.

While most responses regarding the 'non-negotiables' were generic in nature and did not relate directly to different types of vulnerability, responses did note non-negotiables for families living in poverty and how they might require support to access and travel to transition events, or they might require funding for school uniforms and supplies. Children with learning difficulties and access to educational support was mentioned along with families with ESL backgrounds and having access to interpreters and information presented in accessible ways. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and refugee families and their access to culturally safe processes were noted, and access to case workers and case managers for Out of Home Care families. Other non-negotiables noted were: adherence to the child protection plan and compliance with legislation, regulation and interdepartmental obligations.

Having considered the non-negotiables of support for children and families experiencing disadvantage during transitions, survey respondents were asked to consider how this would differ depending on the type of vulnerability being experienced. Of the 101 responses for this question, 14 (14 per cent) responses said that it does not or should not matter and that no differentiation occurs based on the type of vulnerability experienced by the family. However, the most common sentiment expressed in the responses was that the support would differ depending not so much on the type of vulnerability but more on the individual and specific needs of each family. For example:

'Very contextual. There is no blanket approach to supporting families as their needs are all so unique.'

'Each child with a vulnerability deserves individually tailored and resourced support to ensure the best outcome for their needs.'

There would be different supports offered, different personnel, agencies and services involved (for example a family support officer), with one respondent suggesting that the areas of assessment targeted would also differ. Another respondent pointed out that one difference would be the different training for staff giving the example of 'refugee families [or] child protection families'.

Some responses did align to specific supports linked to types of vulnerability. As one respondent noted:

'Each form requires specific actions (as well as specific to each individual family). There is a tendency to expect that there is a one size fits all set of actions.'

The responses are outlined below using the categories as stated by the respondents.

Newly Arrived Refugee and Migrant Families – the need for staff to provide an understanding of how the education system works and its benefits to these families.

CALD Families – language support, which could be through translators; understanding cultural differences.

Children and Families experiencing Trauma – the need for long, slow transitions to develop the confidence and trust of children and families; staff understanding the impact of trauma and what that means to support families in this situation; and providing a 'trauma informed response'.

Koori and Indigenous families—Koori Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) available for Koorie children.

Families experiencing Poverty/Welfare – waiving costs of programs and resources; providing food and clothing; use of care team co-ordination.

OoHC – meet criteria of Safeguarding Children Program training; require more planning due to consent and other issues such as court orders.

Support for Children Experiencing Vulnerability – teaching the child how to cope; providing opportunities for the child to practice their coping skills; praising them for success; extra person in the room to provide practical assistance for the child and to observe what is happening within the classroom

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The survey asked participants to respond to a question about whether they had undertaken professional learning related to transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability, and if they had, the nature of the training. Forty-four percent (n=71) of respondents from a total of 161 responses had undertaken what they saw as related or relevant professional learning. Although on further analysis of the content that was listed, some courses and training were generic in their nature and not specifically targeted towards vulnerabilities (see Appendix F for a full list). In a subsequent survey question when asked about useful resources respondents utilise to support their transition work with children and families experiencing vulnerability, professional learning areas and training were listed, these appear below:

- Cultural competency
- Family violence
- Research-based practice
- Motivational interviewing
- Bridges Out of Poverty
- Trauma
- Engaging parents
- Tuning into kids
- Smalltalk
- Settled and Safe training - Victorian Legal Aid
- Attachment
- Brain development

Resources

There are a number of resources that survey respondents draw on to assist them in supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability. Many of these are relevant for supporting transitions for all children. These resources are either used to support discussions and information sharing with families, or given to families for their own information, or employed to better inform staff practice. Useful documents, useful programs, useful assessments, and useful materials and social resources according to respondents include:

Useful Documents - as identified by respondents

- Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and the National Quality Standard
- DET Transition - A Positive Start to School Resource Kit
- Transition Learning and Development Statements
- Planning Successful Transitions for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Resource Package
- Schools In For Refugees: A Whole School Approach to Supporting Students and Families of Refugee Background. Further information can be accessed from the [Foundation House website](#).
- Schools and Families in Partnership: A Desktop Guide to Engaging Families from Refugee Backgrounds in their Children's Learning. This document can be accessed from the website: [Foundation House \(PDF, 1.43 MB\)](#).
- Best Interests Case Practice Mode (Resources). This document can be accessed from the website: [Department of Human Services \(PDF, 7.10 MB\)](#).
- Best interests Case Practice Summary Guide. This document can be accessed from the website [Department of Human Services \(PDF, 1.18 MB\)](#).

Useful Programs – as identified by respondents

- Bringing up Great Kids Program & Bringing Up Great Koori Kids. Further information can be accessed from the [Australian Childhood Foundation website](#).
- Smalltalk Supported Playgroup Program. Further information can be accessed from the [Smalltalk website](#).

- Bridges Out of Poverty. Further information can be accessed from the [aha! Process, Inc website](#).
- Cultural Competence Training. Further information can be accessed from the [VICSEG new futures website](#).
- Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities. Further information can be accessed from the [Bastow Institute website](#).
- MCH Enhanced Program. Further information can be accessed from the [Maternal and Child Health Service website](#).
- Circle of Security. Further information can be accessed from the [Australian Institute of Family Studies website](#) (Children Family Community Australia)
- Community of Children have a range of programs. Further information can be accessed from the [Australian Institute of Family Studies website](#).
- Linking Schools and Early Years LSEY Pilot Program - Murdoch Children's Centre
- Triple P Positive Parenting Program. Further information can be accessed from the [Triple P Positive Parenting Program website](#).
- HIPPY is a two-year, home-based, early learning and parenting program for families with young children. Further information can be accessed from the [HIPPY Australia website](#).
- KidsMatter is an Australian mental health and well-being initiative set in primary schools and early childhood education and care services (like preschools, kindergartens and day care centres). Further information can be accessed from the [KidsMatter website](#).

Useful Assessments / Data – as identified by respondents

- Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS) database on the state-wide nature of disadvantage and its location
- DET – Early Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) - for children 0-5 years with a disability or developmental delay
- Intervention assessments by SCOPEVic, a Disability Support Service provider
- The Early Assessment Referral Links (EARL) Model

Useful Materials and Social Resources – as identified by respondents

These resources include physical facilities and materials, networks, and professional support.

For children

- 'Feelings' cards from St Luke's Innovative Resources
- Social Stories
- Playgroups
- The Journey to Big School - SNAICC
- Sensory equipment - stress balls, weighted blankets, ridge wedge seats, slinky tunnel, kinetic sand

For families

- Pre-school Field Officer (PSFOs), Student Welfare Coordinators, Social Workers, KESOs, School Based Chaplains, School Wellbeing Teams
- Bi-cultural workers
- Playgroups
- Positive Parenting website
- Pamphlets and brochures received through various support organisations
- Big Hugs
- Apps, video clips, access to websites
- Maternal Child Health new ages and stages card- Growing Up Strong and Healthy
- The Journey to Big School - SNAICC
- Having information translated in other languages and/or interpreters with photographs and illustrations if possible, including the Transition Learning and Development Statements
- Parenting education that emphasises building secure attachment
- Victorian Deaf Education Institute (VDEI) kit for families transitioning their children who are deaf or hard of hearing into primary school

For professionals

- Utilising local community resources and networks for example using the Wyndham Child and Family Directory or Inspiro a local, non-profit community health service for the Yarra Ranges community, local homework program because 'they are strongly connected to the community'
- Connecting to allied health professionals and organisations – Email tree between professionals involved with vulnerable families – 'by far the easiest way to stay updated and connected with each other and the supports being offered to each family'
- Results from Parent questionnaire (early childhood service)
- Resources from Early Childhood Australia (not specific)
- 'Bridges out of Poverty: Strategies for professionals and communities' by R. Payne' P.E. DeVol and T. Dreussi Smith (Revised edition 2006), published by Aha Process Inc.
- Online resources - Raising Children's Network, Children and Parenting Support Services (CaPSS) website, Australian Childhood Foundation, Foundation House
- English as an Additional Language (EAL) documents written by Priscilla Clarke
- Talking in Tune - resource to help schools understand the importance of interpreters and how to best work with interpreters
- Conferences
- Using the Abecedarian approach
- Everyday is Transition Day - Catholic Education Office

(Refer to Appendix G for 'Estimated Costs of Promising Practices and Professional Learning' collated from both survey and focus group data.)

TRANSDISCIPLINARY NETWORKS AND COORDINATION

The survey asked respondents to indicate which professionals they engaged with to support families experiencing vulnerability when making an early years transition. Respondents were asked to indicate who initiated the engagement and the nature of the engagement. Provided here are the first two elements to this question, the number of responses and an indication of the initiation of the engagement. The Table below indicates from left to right, the responses of survey participants and who they engage with. Then who initiates this engagement for example, 136 respondents engage with primary school teachers. Of those respondents, 46 respondents had the contact initiated *by* the teacher and 24 initiated the contact *with* the teacher. Twenty-six respondents felt that contact had been initiated both ways. It should be noted that not all respondents completed the 'contact initiated by' component of this task which has caused a disparity between the responses.

Table 6: Professional engagements

The Table below denotes professional engagement related to early years transitions. The Table also indicates from left to right, who initiated these engagements, who they engage with and the number of times they engage.

Professional type	%	Number of respondents	Contact initiated by both respondent and professional	Contact initiated to the respondent	Contact initiated by the respondent
Early Childhood Educator	87	144	16	44	26
Primary School Teacher	82	136	26	46	24
Speech Pathologist	81	134	18	47	20
Child Protection Practitioner	75	123	13	47	3
Maternal & Child Health Nurse	70	116	18	41	12
Child Psychologist	61	100	7	43	22
Family Services Professional	61	100	10	35	17
Social Worker	59	98	5	34	20
Family Day Carer	35	57	3	17	12
Other	21	34	Not applicable	27	3
I do not engage with any professionals	0.6	1	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable

Survey respondents were asked about how information relating to children and families experiencing vulnerability is transferred between ECEC services, schools and other services during times of transition. The Table below shows the methods by which this information is transferred, noting preferences.

Table 7: Methods of information transfer between services

The Table below provides a breakdown of methods of information transfer between services by number of respondents in descending order from most utilised to least utilised.

Method	Number of times the method was noted in responses
Reports (including the Transition Learning and Development Statement)	66
Meetings (educators and teachers; all key stakeholders/ agencies)	53
Verbally / conversations	37
Telephone	32
Emails	22
Reciprocal visits	16
Through referral pathways involving agencies	6
Via Transition Worker	1
Letter	1
Shared professional learning	1

* Data did not always indicate if a family was included

Issues surrounding confidentiality feature throughout the responses and need further consideration as this was seen as a barrier to working as a 'team', being 'fully informed', and the transfer of information between services.

FEEDBACK PROCESSES AND EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Survey respondents were asked to outline the processes that are in place to assess the impact of programs and practices on positive transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. One hundred and one responses were received and 28 responses (27 per cent) of those replied that they were unsure, did not know or that there were no processes in place. Of these, four responses indicated that ad-hoc or informal processes exist. In summary, many processes to assess the impact of programs and practices on positive transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability are informal, non-descript and would not be considered robust measures. More formal evaluation and assessment processes tend to align with funded programs where there are expectations surrounding accountability. For example, the program 'Smalltalk' is evidence based as the impact and practices are monitored using a range of resources including data collection, conversations with parents, using video to film families and discuss as they progress through the phases, attendance, retention and home visits. Another example is from Barwon Child Youth and Family who have their own internal programs and monitoring.

The most utilised method of generating feedback for evaluation purposes for the less formally evaluated transition approaches was surveys, mainly involving families. The next most utilised method was followed by meetings, then critical reflection on practice, and daily 'catch-ups' and informal conversations which are all used as evaluative measures. Formal evaluations with outcome measures focused on impact, while the less formal evaluations focused on meeting their developed service plans, collecting case study data, and reflecting on practice.

INFLUENCES ON SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY

Gaps in coordination processes

Respondents were asked to indicate any gaps in the coordination mechanisms for supporting positive early years transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. From the 125 responses, 10 indicated that they did not see any gaps. The responses have been clustered under the following themes in order of most prominent in the data. These themes are networking and cohesion issues across the service system, availability and accessibility of resources, and lack of effective transition approaches.

Networking and cohesion issues across the service system

- No coordinated mechanism for services to work together which can make referral pathways hard to navigate and support across services difficult. Some example responses include:

'I think the main gaps exist between the services, including kindergarten, early intervention and DHHS, Child and Family Services... The coordination for these families is not consistent and there is no mechanism that can be triggered to highlight that the family is needing some special assistance. This means that the process is not consistent and is dependent on individual teachers and schools approaches.'

'We don't always know who else is working with the families therefore cannot coordinate services. Parents are often confused by the system and disengage when they have to change services (due to change in eligibility – Early Childhood Intervention/Community health).'

'I still believe getting vulnerable children connected into preschool, especially Early Start remains a challenge. It relies a lot on informal networks e.g. what happens when children have been in protective services and then the file is closed before those

children make it to Early Start - who refers them in? Does DHS actually have a system that alerts them to following up these families to make sure they are getting access to Early Start at preschool /kindergarten?’

Child Protection / Child First – ‘a closed shop’

‘Full implementation of the partnering agreements between DHHS and DET is not consistent.’

- Lack of time to establish and sustain relationships across services. For example, one respondent pointed to a gap in health care professionals talking to each other. This is tied to the perceived need for funding to support staff to meet (e.g. backfill) and thus build a professional relationship. At present this relies on the willingness of all key stakeholders
- Lack of desire to want to work collaboratively – taking a ‘silo’ approach instead
- There is a perceived reluctance (often relayed as confidentiality issues) for sharing information. In some locations, there is no coordination or promotion of available services for children and families experiencing vulnerability
- There is a lack of co-ordinated groups that meet regularly to discuss families experiencing vulnerability and early years transitions
- Who will lead the support?
- Time gap between MCH 3 ½ year- old visit and commencing kindergarten

Availability and accessibility of resources

- Transition Learning and Development Statement can be difficult to interpret for families, and is undervalued by primary school teachers
- Professional learning - lack of understanding of vulnerability and effective support/practice
- Dedicated time required to connect with families, services

Lack of effective transition approaches

- Lack of consistency and cohesion in approaches to transition between and within schools and kindergartens which makes it difficult to explore ‘best practice’, and can cause families to feel uncertain and then reluctant to engage
- Better documentation of ‘good’ practice at the local level would help to build the sustainability of effective practice
- Difficulty in locating culturally and linguistically appropriate ECEC services
- No opportunity for kindergarten staff to support transitioning children in their first few months of school

Barriers to effective transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability

Survey respondents were asked to note what they saw as barriers to supporting effective transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. There were 149 responses to this question. The most cited response was related to issues that stopped families engaging or sustaining engagement in transition process and activities, and as a consequence the difficulties this causes to developing relationships between families and schools. The data was reflective of the three types of barriers to families making use of services: service level barriers, family level barriers, and interpersonal or relational barriers (Centre for Community Child Health, 2010). Respondents noted that this lack of engagement can come about due to families choosing not to engage as a consequence of their own prior negative experiences with the schooling system; mental health issues; not wanting others to know about their vulnerabilities due to being ashamed or embarrassed; not wanting to be labelled; their competing priorities; not valuing education; not understanding the transition processes, and language barriers.

A lack of understanding, skills, confidence and/or the ability for ECEC and school personnel to make connections with families was the next most cited response. This included factors such as not having time built into roles to invest in building knowledge of, and relationships with, families; judging families; not working in an inclusive way with children and families; not knowing the available supports; and the inability to identify vulnerable families.

The third most common response related to services not working together and elicited comments relating to misunderstandings occurring between ECEC and schools; lack of information sharing; and the protocols of information sharing related to confidentiality.

One comment specific to children in out of home care is included here as it clearly articulates a specific barrier for positive transitions for children experiencing this type of vulnerability. This barrier relates to the relocation of children from their community and networks due to placement location.

‘This system acts as a barrier to these children being able to remain consistently and securely in the services and with the educators they are connected to.’

Support from workplace to better support transitions

Survey respondents were asked to consider what their workplace could do to provide better support for them in their transition work with children and families experiencing vulnerability. Responses to this question were collated under key themes below from most responses to least responses.

Table 8: Support from Workplaces

The Table below provides a summary of responses by survey respondents about how they could be better supported in the workplace. The list provides key themes eg: ‘provide training or professional development’ and shows how many times these themes were mentioned in descending order from most popular response to least popular response.

Key theme	Number of responses received from survey respondents
Provide training or professional development related to effective transition practice, vulnerabilities,	43
Provide more time	20
I have enough support/ I feel supported enough	17
I don't know	8
Provide more funding	6
More school visits or school contact	5
Provide more resources	4
Build better relationships	3
Improve transition programs	2
Provide more staff	2
Provide more support	2

Suggested ways to provide better support for staff included:

- Address flexibility and accessibility across the service system – a more seamless approach
- Fostering greater service collaboration and expectations between different streams of the service sector. For example, ‘involvement with Case Workers throughout the year and as a support with transition at start and end of year’
- Increase funding – more staff, time to meet with other professionals across services, targeted resourcing - being available to attend ‘partnership’ meetings, ‘provide Case Management meetings for professionals involved with vulnerable families’, ‘have a social worker on site’, and ‘Primary Welfare Officer in all rural mid-to-large primary

schools regardless of SFOE (Student Family Occupation and Education) as we get children from all SES (Socio Economic Status) backgrounds unlike suburb-specific SFO (Student Family Occupation) rankings in Melbourne'

- Build the capacity of staff working with children and families experiencing vulnerability – 'Provide current research outcomes, best practice across the state', and 'develop and implement best practices guidelines and direction for services'
- Improve and evaluate systems through robust feedback and evidence of impact approaches - 'I don't get enough feedback from the families or the schools to see if what we did was effective or not'
- Realistic view of life in rural Victoria to inform government planning – As one respondent commented 'So many issues and anger in our community. Lots of different attitudes that are not reflected in government body planning. Totally out of touch with the vulnerability and lifestyles of a depressed rural town and the role that drugs, anti-social behaviour have on general feelings of safety making for divisions and anxiety in general population. Staff have repeatedly expressed they feel it is unfair the role they have to play for the wages they earn. Staff security and fairness is not a consideration for government bodies which means asking people to do more is not going to work'

Focus groups – professionals

Focus group meetings for professionals involved in early years transitions were conducted across 17 locations in metropolitan and rural areas in Victoria. Professionals were invited to attend a scheduled focus group meeting, however if this was not possible, an option was provided for participants to partake in a teleconference, individual telephone interview or complete a focus group meeting question form. On one occasion the project team was invited to attend a Local Government 'Early Years to Primary School Network' meeting where the 'focus group meeting' was included as an agenda item.

A total of 13 focus group meetings were scheduled and held throughout Victoria, with the number of attendees varying from a minimum of three to a maximum of 22. In addition to the focus group meetings, a total of 22 interviews were conducted and three focus group meeting question forms were completed. The range of 'professionals' roles in supporting families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions are listed in the demographic section of this report. A total of 126 professionals provided valuable information regarding their experiences, programs, initiatives and strategies to support families and children experiencing vulnerability making transitions.

SUPPORTING EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY

Successful transition practices were seen by focus group members as those where a community-wide approach was taken, involving skilled and committed people. Across the regions, time is being spent building strong relationships and specific knowledge across services with the aim of providing seamless, 'wrap around' services for families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions.

Focus group participants reported a variety of programs and initiatives that support early years transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. Some programs, mentioned by focus group participants, are not necessarily focused on transition to school activities, but rather they provide early years professionals with an opportunity to make contact and build relationships with children and families. Having an awareness and knowledge of such programs and initiatives is useful for early childhood educators and primary school teachers working with families experiencing vulnerability. For example, educators and teachers can take into consideration what experiences families may have had before arriving at their service and plan their programs accordingly. In addition, educators and teachers can continue to build on the experiences provided by other professionals and acknowledge that families may have already formed relationships with other professionals, and have had experience making a transition with their child to a service or program.

Collaborative transdisciplinary networks

Services and professionals working together to achieve successful transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage was seen as of paramount importance across all focus groups. Holding a similar philosophy, having 'united strategies' and a 'common language' were noted as factors that consolidate a network. One participant described functioning transdisciplinary networks as '*meeting on the same page*' (Moonee Valley) and another commented that:

'we are successful because we all share a common focus of working for the best possible outcomes for vulnerable children and families; we have collaboration, passion, empathy, respect, enthusiasm, sharing of information and strategies'

(Frankston)

Whereas a member of a 'Kinder to School' network thought:

'positive relationships and effective communication is key along with people being 'open to change' and 'different ways of doing things.'

(Primary School Principal, Portland)

Through strong networks, engagement with families who can be 'hard to reach' or services that are hard to access may be enhanced when services work together and trust each other professionally, as the example below attests. The following statement is made by a Child Protection representative discussing how families may be more comfortable connecting with other services such as a child care centre or school and how Child Protection can then work within this space.

'And we (child care centre or school) will have a conversation on the phone about, 'Do you want to take the first lead in this because you have a relationship with Mum, and if I (Child Protection) come in the chances are she thinks that you have said something negative about her.' So we'll actually sit on the phone and we'll practice what she's got to say, and she'll go, 'Yeah, that's not so difficult, I can ask those questions.' And I say, 'It's better for you to do that. You can come back to us a hundred times and ask more questions if the concerns change.' But in the first instance I think we need to be doing what you're doing about building those relationships then and putting it back into the community, because children are a community responsibility and they shouldn't always bounce in to Child Protection and Child FIRST because it's not always going to lead to the best outcome for families, and they get quite defensive and they push away.'

(Children's Support Worker, Frankston)

Developing a collaborative transdisciplinary network takes time to achieve. The following excerpt explains the evolution of one such partnership:

'How we started was, we just felt that there was this hierarchical level of service, especially between our childcare workers, our kindergarten teacher workers, and then the education in the school workers. We found that they felt quite hierarchical, that the childcare workers felt very inferior to working with the primary school or the kindergartens, and there had been this traditional system of 'they're not as good' or, 'they're not as professional'. So our first point was we actually worked really hard on working in with each other's services, not just visiting and having a look but we actually worked on how we would go about working within each other's services. So as a primary school teacher I went to the day care centre and we planned a model and we actually delivered it together. And then the day care worker that I was working with came to school and delivered it with me with the preps [children], so we had this shared understanding of not only what we were doing, but with the children that we were working with, but also what it felt like to be in each other's services. We've been able to

do that for most of the years we've been going, but it's just developing that professional understanding and respect that's just been phenomenal.'

(Primary School Teacher, Frankston)

Sustainable approaches to how information is shared is an important consideration when working within transdisciplinary networks. What can occur in some areas is an informal exchange of information due to long-standing relationships between service personnel. One concern about this approach is that when a person moves on from their role that connection is lost. Therefore, an essential element of these networks is good communication between all key stakeholders with communication protocols and systems embedded within the organisations and services rather than relying on personal relationships.

Breaking down perceived barriers goes a long way to begin collaborative partnerships. The *Stepping Stones to School* program, an early intervention playgroup, has made a positive difference. One early years educator notes that:

'I think with 'Stepping Stones to School [program]', that's where I feel like it's really broken down some of the barriers between the primary school and the kindergarten sector, and just a better understanding and better communication, and I think once you understand and know things, and you've got more respect for people, and you value what they do.'

(Portland)

A collaborative partnership model can be illustrated in the following example where Maternal and Child Health practitioners have started a playgroup that is co-facilitated by CoHealth, a group of allied health professionals, which has formed a partnership between MCH and a local primary school (Moonee Valley). Children attending the MCH service are introduced to school, and gain access to additional assistance while they are on a waiting list for allied health services. Families experiencing vulnerability receive more intensive support from the enhanced nurse initially when they require it, and the support decreases as the vulnerability factors start to decline. This in turn supports the family's transition back into the universal service system.

In one region (Yarra Ranges), precinct-wide planning for the transition to school is undertaken that aims for more consistency across all services. No matter what service the professional is involved with, the aim is that the language and family focus remains the same. Providing a consistent approach for all children and families, presents as 'a united front' and people having 'similar expectations, regardless of which type of service they're accessing.' The collaborative nature of decision making is evident, as the following excerpt illustrates:

'So the last case conferencing session we had, we talked. We had all of the professionals in the space and we talked about the process of targeted induction or orientation, and who would do what. So what role could Maternal Child Health play, what role would the educators play, what role would [integrated practice] leader's plays, what role would Brotherhood of St Laurence play?... In terms of piloting it [this initiative] it's quite a significant investment of everybody's time and goodwill, so we realise at this stage we wouldn't have the resources to do it for everyone. But we want to be able to give it a go for example for ten families, and then be able to evaluate to see if it made any impact.'

(Yarra Ranges)

Case Study: An Integrated Service Model 'Leap Ahead'

A supported playgroup coordinator discusses the aims of 'Leap Ahead', a program that acts as an integrated service model in the early years and supports families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. She says:

'In 'Leap Ahead' there's a whole lot of intentional actions around child, family and community and service outcomes. One of the service outcomes is a more coordinated and supported approach to transition to school activities. The families need to feel supported but our main emphasis on this in the initial couple of years is getting the services working really well together. Over 50 percent of the kids won't speak English at all, and/or their parents. In some of the kindergartens it is 80 percent.'

(Braybrook)

Collaboration and cooperation across the services and agencies is paramount to the success of this integrated service model as the following example exemplifies:

'Integrated practice leaders have a range of activities that they are working on at the hub to support vulnerable families, and it's really about doing things differently. We collaborate on everything they are planning to do. For example, it's not the kindergarten teachers saying we're going to focus on vulnerable families and do this and this, and maternal and child health wanting to do something different. They all have to agree.'

(Braybrook)

Rather than expecting children and families to be ready to seamlessly fit into school or ECEC, 'Leap Ahead' is designed to be 'ready for communities' and advocates 'service readiness':

'We come together every fortnight and all of this is resourced through the agency. It's set up as a sustainable system of integrated practice. We sit alongside the pedagogical leaders and aim to get a collaborative result to support vulnerable families. Then the final point of that exchange is to actually follow up with all those services on what actually happened with the individual children. The design of what we are doing is 'ready for the community'. It's called service readiness and community readiness.'

(Braybrook)

In one region (Darebin) it was noted that their transition network had developed a better appreciation for and clarification of the roles of early childhood educators and primary school teachers as well as an understanding of common practices and language. The network is used as a platform to highlight and discuss available resources. Working within a network means that families do not have to constantly tell their story to yet another person from another service. It also benefits professionals as they become aware of local services and referral processes. However, a number of participants agreed that for a transition network to be successful it depended on having 'someone drive them forward' or act as a 'champion'. Having leadership teams from services 'on board' was also an important factor required to sustain the network.

Services sharing knowledge

To effectively accommodate the unique needs of children and families experiencing vulnerability, to build strong relationships with families as well as connect them to a range of community services and organisations, can be a challenge. Some focus group participants shared a new online Victorian Municipal Association of Victoria initiative that might make a difference in connecting services to be able to support families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The initiative is an online software program being trialed by some Best Start partnerships, called *Patchwork*. An early years worker explains:

'There is Patchwork. It's like a big telephone directory or communication directory where you put the person's name, with permission and date of birth and if I'm working with Carol now, she has given me permission to go on Patchwork, I can put her name in there and it comes up with who else is working with her. And then it also, then you can join in a team - Join the team and then you've got all the email addresses, all contact details so you're not sort of going back.... You can converse with them and you can put push a button to say 'I am really concerned about the family'.

(Colac)

Patchwork is explained on the DET website as: 'a simple web site that helps to connect practitioners from different agencies who have common clients. Patchwork can help simplify the myriad of systems that have emerged over the years to support clients, but all too often appear complex and difficult to access for those families that need additional support' (DET, 2016a).

In Dandenong, a Best Start facilitator thought that the way to connect services and families together along with connecting services with other services is to have more effective system coordination. She says:

'This would be my wish list, I'm not saying we do it well. So that's taking off the lens, of just our one lens about one service, and looking at the lens of the community outcomes. It is a serious intention to support vulnerable families, and with increased complexity, and I'm hearing that over and over again that the families are becoming more and more complex in their needs. Making systems fit the families rather than the families fit the system. Empowering and informing families early through multiple ways. And with the opportunity for children starting [education and care] early.

(Best Start Facilitator, Dandenong)

How families experiencing vulnerability are supported with early years transitions

Acknowledging families' diverse backgrounds

Highlighting family diversity and how educators can positively respond to cultural difference is evident in the next example. According to an early years educator, one of the parents said to her 'we all thought kindergarten was for rich white families'. Another issue that came to light for an early years educator when talking with a parent was that the parent wanted the teacher to 'please tell us when our children turn four because we don't measure birthdays in the same way'. (Brimbank)

The parent went on to say:

'We don't count birthdays in a conventional way, instead we ask a child to touch their left ear with their right hand over their head. We measure the children's ability to follow a verbal instruction and it's also physical because a baby's head is too big for it to bring its hand up and touch the ear lobe.'

The early years educator noted:

'So it's actually a really clever test of school readiness; verbal instruction, language, and a physical test. I think professionals may make a judgment about family approach such as this one and think 'well, you don't even know when your child's born, therefore you don't know much'. You hear of things like this and you think actually that's a really clever and authentic sort of valid measure, probably better than birth dates, so it makes you think.'

(Brimbank)

The following example explains how families new to Australia do not necessarily see the benefits of their children participating in a kindergarten program before they go to school, illustrating how important this message is to ensure that it reaches all those in a community.

'A colleague was telling me about a South Sudanese woman, who works full-time and has got young children and she's really capable of working in the Australian system. She has been in the country perhaps eight or nine years, and she was asking why should she send her child to kindergarten. In her community the answers were 'well it will help with your little girl's English' and 'it will teach her to read before she goes to school'. So she goes back to her family day carer and says 'I think I want to try and organise kindergarten for my child'. The family day carer, who's speaking Dinka to the kids, says 'well that's all right I'll teach them to read next year and I'll start to talk to them in English' [without the need to send the child to kindergarten]. This is a highly capable parent who spoke to another colleague who said, 'Oh no I think kindergarten is much more than that [learning to speak and read English]'. This information started to make her think more about the issue and the potential benefits of kindergarten and her colleague suggested she go and talk to the kindergarten teacher and also talk to her daughter and ask what her daughter thinks about this.'

Both of those approaches were really new to this mother but she did do both of those things. She asked her daughter ‘What do you think about going to kinder?’ and the daughter said ‘I don’t know anything about it, but it sounds very exciting’, which is a lovely child response. And she went to the kindergarten teacher who was able to really explain what would the benefits of a year at kindergarten would be for her child. It was just interesting that that child could have turned up at school without a year at kindergarten and the mother thinking she had done the right thing by the child, having the family day carer just speaking in English and teaching the child to read. So you’ve also got to be working closely with communities, and even high well-functioning communities that understand the Australian way, may not [understand the education system]. This story really made me think a lot. ‘

(Early Years Coordinator, Wyndham)

Focus group participants acknowledged the difference in families’ socio-linguistic profiles and discussed ways of getting to know families better. A School Support Officer who works with refugee families proposed:

‘The notion of socio-linguistic profiles is also really important. We work closely with the Catholic Education Office in Melbourne, and Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, and their documents around transition to school, they’ve got some great resources around socio-linguistic profiles and looking at how to get to know families from refugee backgrounds.’

(Dandenong)

Working ‘with’ families

Working ‘with families’ rather than ‘doing things to families’ is a theme that has featured strongly in focus group participant responses. Part of working ‘with’ families is being open to understanding more about diverse cultural family backgrounds and taking an interest in them. For example, one participant noted that cultural awareness and understanding is essential for the success of her work with families:

‘We are finding that a bi-cultural understanding is making a really big difference in our supported playgroup environment but I think also in our kindergartens, and in every environment if we have workers that understand the cultural context of our children....some of the challenges around the expectations of English language versus home language, which from a kindergarten perspective we’ve been certainly supporting language of origin. Some of that conversation still needs to happen around transition.

(Dandenong)

Similarly, in the Ovens Murray region, early years professionals have engaged families by working 'with' families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. They acknowledge the importance of having transitions tailored to each family, enabling flexibility and modifying support. Families are considered on a 'case by case' and 'family by family' basis, and the support could entail:

- supporting families in completing Early Start applications
- encouraging and assisting children and their families to attend a supported playgroup
- building relationships with the families through attending 'Coffee Clubs'
- home visits
- developing 'social stories' to be shared with a child and their family
- attending school orientation visits and meetings with families
- assisting with the completion of any paperwork associated with funding applications or school enrolment
- making phone calls to other support services to get enrolment and other processes started on behalf of families
- providing families with relevant information in styles and formats that are accessible for them to easily understand about transition or the services that are available to them in their local area.

For a Preschool Field Officer (Brimbank), being an advocate for the family is seen as a huge part of her role described as 'advocating and following up everything for them [families] and the constant like a dog with a bone, that's what I call it'. Little things can make a positive difference for families such as knowing who the Foundation teacher will be for the following year. However, many schools do not make these staffing decisions until much later in the year and children start school with little knowledge about who their teacher will be. A kindergarten teacher made the comment: 'That's something I really value about that school and our other local feeder school; they know well in advance who is going to be the teacher of the prep year...' (Ovens Murray).

Another way for services to approach families is to 'put families at the centre and make them feel valued and wanted' (Dandenong). Families need to 'feel safe in that education setting, wherever they go, and that they are understood for who they are rather than, if they're a square peg in a round hole re-arrange the hole, fill it in, get to know the child, and scaffold the supports for the education setting' (Dandenong).

An Integrated Services Worker has a respectful approach to working with families, an approach where 'there is no wrong door' for family members to knock on. Working with new immigrants, refugee families and asylum seekers, the service has around 1,500 families visit them every year and access their integrated family service. The Integrated Services Worker elaborates:

'Our biggest transition is from those families who do not know anything about Australia, the community. We encourage the families to 'just knock at the door' and knowing that there's no wrong door they can enter. So that's our policy, 'no wrong door' policy, whatever they need we try to do and accommodate.'

(Dandenong)

Transition practices are often viewed as broader than children making the transition to school, and can be seen as families making the transition to connect with any family service, whether it be a supported playgroup or early childhood and care service. An Integrated Services Worker reminds us that 'transitioning a family from the playgroup to the kinder, it's a big step for them, it's huge, even just walking into a playgroup it can be so frightening' (Dandenong). This supports the call for services to really get to know each family and their own specific situation.

As one school principal found out, it is easy to make assumptions about families experiencing vulnerability, particularly in certain situations. This relates to an assumption that the youngest child with five older siblings who had all attended primary school would have visited the school numerous times and therefore would know the context well. Instead, the preschool aged boy had never been to the school his siblings went to, as he was always dropped off at a long day care centre before his parents dropped his siblings at school.

A Preschool Field Officer noted that the best way of engaging families was taking a very positive, respectful approach, and being accepting of cultural and other differences. She explains:

'Just accepting or just being really positive 'oh that's great you've got kinder today' even though they might be really late. 'It's fantastic you've turned up, it's really great to see your child'. It's about the interaction that you have with the family and the child. My personal feeling is the kindergarten teachers I've seen who've had a big success rate with these families they've just made a big fuss "it's so good to see you, I'm so glad you could come today, anything we can do to help you with attendance". Give them a ring and see how things are going, what can we do to help you out. So you put it back on them and ask how we can support you rather than being judgemental about them, which would be annoying. I think seriously it's about your relationship and people pick up pretty quick whether or not you're being judgemental and condescending and so on.'

(Brimbank)

Making transition to school information and activities accessible for all families can be a challenge, but is quite important if families are to feel genuinely welcomed. A Best Start Facilitator explains:

'Some of the other accessibility issues are 'transition accessibility'. This is what I've termed it as. Transition accessibility is around the welcoming of families, the cultural safety, particularly for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. We are thinking about access for all families and what that looks like for each, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. How safe they feel within the spaces is important. The information and the welcome that's provided for them, and also the context of seeing the child within the whole family system, not this assumption that it's the primary caregiver and dad's excluded. Grandparents who may have raised a lot of our children in Casey, because parents are off working, are often the primary care giver.'

(Dandenong)

One issue that was raised was how kindergartens and schools usually address transition information to parents, rather than to families. Many parents are working and it is the grandparents or carers that need to be included in the communication. One early years professional (Dandenong) asks herself and her colleagues the question, 'what can transition look like in regards to a family model?' and is considering how they can work in partnerships with families rather than assuming it is the parents who are the child's primary care giver.

Collaborative partnerships can enable collective ownership of passing on information about children (with family permission), so that the school transition and enrolment process works smoothly and is timely. A school principal explains how a close partnership between schools, kindergartens, family workers and others has meant that families experiencing vulnerability can benefit.

'That's one thing I've noticed is that doing the [school] application process has been much smoother and the partnership between the two settings has been much stronger [with our partnerships across the network] and we can get that work done by the time the children are starting school. The support is already in place, the assessment's done and the families don't have to worry about that.'

(Geelong)

According to some participants, a practice that supports families experiencing vulnerability is a 'transition to school calendar' (Geelong). This initiative was a feature of a few different transition networks, and is a way of informing all stakeholders in advance about the transition related activities that are to take place during the year. Early childhood educators, primary school teachers and other professionals can be consistent with their timelines and expectations, which ultimately makes it easier for families who may be struggling with taking on board transition to school expectations.

Programs, practices and initiatives

This section reports on programs, practices and initiatives that support children and families experiencing vulnerability, according to focus group participants.

Reciprocal visiting schemes and school involvement

Reciprocal visiting schemes, between schools, kindergartens and long day care settings as well as with families are evident as a practice to support families who are experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions. Early identification of services that might be required is one benefit of these shared visits, along with school teachers and principals getting to know the children and families.

A local transition network in Geelong has a reciprocal visiting system where primary school teachers visit kindergartens and Long Day Care centres where they meet the kindergarten teachers, children and families. One principal in this area allocates funding to enable teaching staff to cover her Prep/Foundation teachers to be able to undertake the reciprocal visits a few times a year as she sees the benefits of school teachers engaging with families experiencing vulnerability early on in the transition process.

'Part of the practice [for us] has been for the prep teachers to be able to spend time on a regular basis in early year settings, getting to know families, getting to know the educators, so there's a really strong relationships base. Getting to know parents with the hope that by building that relationship first, there's a level of trust that enables families to more readily connect to school with the support of the early years educators as a sort of broker for that relationship.'

(Geelong)

This practice is also implemented in Swan Hill where the principal prioritises transitions by resourcing teachers at her school to visit local preschools and connect to families and children prior to the commencement of the school year:

'I think it depends on the resources of the school. My school is large. I've been fairly proactive in making sure that we have resources for transition so our teachers go into the preschools and that we make contact with early childhood workers and know what's happening. So just the normal transition, the teachers will go in and look at and make assessments of things for kids and who will need more and who won't. We also run an enhanced transition program, so that for those kids who are vulnerable that we've

identified that are coming, I employ a local worker to come in and work for six afternoons a week with families.'

(Swan Hill)

Striving to make the transition to school as seamless as possible, another school principal acknowledges the family histories and experiences that early childhood educators can share about the families (with permission), along with the families themselves.

'Building confidence to share information to make the transition [for children and families] smooth and more seamless so the school doesn't spend six months finding out about the child and family and their needs, but it's also acknowledging the wealth of information the family has to share but also the early educators. And trying to make it seamless, so for vulnerable families that they don't need to be retelling a story that might be something around trauma or something that's quite difficult to share. But instead, they have given permission for information needed to be passed on.'

(Geelong)

In one example (Swan Hill), a playgroup is held on a school site. According to focus group participants, this initiative has strengthened the connection between the school and the early childhood services. The playgroup has enabled informal networking to take place resulting in additional supports to be put in place early for children and their families.

Tailoring approaches for families experiencing vulnerability

Across all focus groups there was universal agreement that a partnerships with families approach should be taken, accommodating the unique needs of children and their families, built on strong relationships with all stakeholders. Tailoring transitions for specific children and families experiencing vulnerability could include:

- developing photograph books to aid integration into a school setting
- providing extra transition days above what is usually offered
- providing primary school teachers with the opportunity to get to know preschool children and their families during the preschool year
- considering funding options to provide further support to families as required.

Not only should conversations start with families early on about expectations of kindergarten and school, the barriers families face when experiencing vulnerability need to be addressed. A Best Start facilitator maintains:

'I think we should be starting really early with some of the messages about the expectations for school, long day care, and kindergarten. This is some of the work that I think Best Start is doing in those areas, looking at what the barriers are for families, particularly families from CALD backgrounds. [Running through] what does a day look like, and those important messages around early learning and development, [are so important] and how children play and those early development years are so important for setting the foundation for school readiness.'

(Dandenong)

Supported transitions for refugee children and their families

Part of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) organisation's goal is to increase the access and attendance of children of refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds into the universal early years

services. They focus on one area at a time within a 'whole agency' approach, 'working with Maternal and Child Health, primary schools, kindergartens and local government and local council colleagues' (Hume).

The 'Refugee Education Support' program, run by Foundation House, builds capacity of early years professionals working with refugee families. Working closely with schools allows for shared goals and ways to support refugee families by mapping experiences families have and reflecting on shared practices. A School Support Officer explains:

'We are working with the education sector to help them to be more ready to be supportive to families who have a refugee background, including asylum seekers. We work with about ten schools for two years and we have a whole-school approach. So transition to school is one aspect that we look at over the two year period.'

(Hume)

Usually preparation for transition to school starts before Prep/Foundation, but as refugee children might have arrived in the country at any time of the year, in the middle of Term 3 for example, preparations for transition need to accommodate these families. A School Support Officer explains:

'A lot of what we're focused on [with transition to school] isn't that official beginning, start of the year with everybody else. We're interested in newly arrived kids who drip in through the year and helping schools to have more supportive practices for those families.'

(Hume)

An Early Years Program Coordinator at Foundation House shared a model where they employ family members as 'community advisers' to engage families. Family members who were employed as community advisers were asked to give advice on making the services more accessible for families and:

'It's taking a group of parents who aren't particularly known for leadership skills and working with them to develop their capacity to be able to give advice to services around engagement with families and accessibility. And it's a little bit different from working with community leaders who often have different motivation for working with agencies. As well as getting good advice for agencies and really authentic information [from families] about how to make services more accessible for families, it creates a new group of leaders within a community.'

(Brimbank)

A Welfare Worker shared some insights about the *Schools in for Refugees* program in Dandenong, where five schools in the region were part of the program. A key feature of this program was to listen to a core group of influential community members, as explained by a welfare worker:

'We had a core group of women [parents] that would come in as our advisory group, Afghan Advisory Group, and we had three people from Foundation House that would come in and ask questions and sit with the women, and they would have homework to do to go and follow up on, 'Okay, we want you to give us feedback on parent/teacher interviews.' And things like that. It was a brilliant process, it went for about two years, and the capacity that we built with those women was incredible, but what was most

valuable ... could be replicated in any institution, and that is the fact that you had this core group of influential people [working collaboratively]).'

(Dandenong)

As part of School's in for Refugees program, influential community members were invited to share common experiences and insights families were experiencing. According to a welfare worker, this approach has meant that everyone is better informed and can be more responsive to family needs:

'We chose people who we knew were going to be influential in the community, and we brought those people together. We asked them specific questions about schooling transitions, and then we sent them away with homework and then they came back a month later and they fed that information back to us. This helped refine our processes. So we made changes (based on these insights). For example, we started having longer parent/teacher interviews for families that needed interpreters, which has blown out parent/teacher interviews a lot longer than what they normally would be, but by the time you have a 10 minute interview with somebody and they've got an interpreter they might only get two minutes of information, so they need 20 minutes. So that advisory group model that Foundation House ran I think was really valuable and I think any institution that works with CALD families, bringing them in, discussing what their experiences of education are, and then what our expectations are [is most useful]'

(Dandenong)

Throughout the focus groups, the role of Multicultural Education Aides [MEAs] was said to be crucial in providing a communication link between refugee families and the school.

'Cradle to Kinder'

According to an Out-of-Home care worker (Dandenong), a successful program that supports children and families experiencing vulnerability is the *Cradle to Kinder* program (previously funded by DHHS). He explains that school attendance and engagement is a significant issue for families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage and that the *Cradle to Kinder* program is a good support as it builds family capacity. This program operates throughout Victoria and provides intensive ante and postnatal support for parents with their children until they are four years old. The *Cradle to Kinder* program aims to build 'the capacity of parents, to not only provide for their children's health, safety and development, but to build their own self-reliance and sustainability through access to education, vocational training and employment. The target group is for young pregnant women (under 25 years of age)' (DHHS, 2014).

'Parents Zone'

Parents Zone is another program providing families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage with support, and is a way for families to build contacts and relationships with early years professionals. *Parent Zone* is a regional parenting resource service, funded by Anglicare Victoria and it works with many families, carers and professionals 'to provide families with access to the resources and support they need to parent effectively' (Anglicare, 2016).

'Berry Street ELF'

A welfare officer spoke about the benefits she could see for families experiencing vulnerability participating in the *Berry Street ELF* Program. The program had run as part of the Afghan supported children's playgroup for a number of years. The Welfare Officer said:

'It [the Berry Street ELF Program] was fantastic, they did a wonderful job, they provided [comprehensive] information sessions [on the value of play and learning for young children] and we had turn outs of up to 45 Afghan women (mothers/carers) in a playgroup session, it was enormous. Berry Street provided a lunch every day, and they provided three facilitators including two that were with Afghan backgrounds, and they would maybe five information sessions in a term, so it was very slick. And this is what the women wanted.'

(Welfare Officer, Dandenong)

The aim of the *Berry Street ELF* Program is to 'support parents and carers to create nurturing relationships with their children in the earliest years. We know that when the relationship is right, learning will follow. We also know that when early years and family support services are inclusive and easy to reach and use, we achieve better outcomes for children, families and society. Inclusive services acknowledge people's shared humanity, celebrate diversity and promote acceptance, belonging and participation. It's about relationships' (Berry St Childhood Institute, 2016).

'HIPPY'

Focus group participants agreed on the important role the *HIPPY* program plays in connecting children and families experiencing vulnerability with early childhood services. The *HIPPY* program (Home Intervention Program for Parents and Youngsters) is a federally funded, place-based program (Department of Social Services) and is free for families to participate. It is delivered from approximately 100 sites around Australia, with the Brotherhood of St Laurence licensed to run *HIPPY* in Australia. The program is fully funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services with extra funds available to *HIPPY* 'sites' to enhance the program such as enrichment and celebration experiences, training funds for home tutors, and extra picture story books for children. Throughout this program family members are supported to become more confident to engage with educators, kindergarten and school environments and professional services.

According to focus group participants, *HIPPY* has been described as an effective program for families experiencing vulnerability, particularly as it can be 'individualised based on what the family's needs are' in a local area (Regional Early Years Coordinator, Colac). A regional Early Years Coordinator says the *HIPPY* program assists family members in a variety of ways, including:

'understanding school terminologies, developmental levels of their children and we explain the AEDC to them and everything, so it gives them a lot of confidence about schooling before they even get there. Parents and children learn pre-numeracy and pre-literacy skills so when they get into school, they are on par with others because they are exposed to these concepts beforehand. It has been a really wonderful program to assist more families experiencing vulnerability and if need be, the co-ordinator of that program will go to the school with them or go to the kindergarten and support with the transition days and things like that.'

(Colac)

Feedback from family members suggests that children are more prepared for school after they have been in a *HIPPY* program (Braybrook). A *HIPPY* Coordinator maintains:

'The anecdotal feedback that I get from families through the tutors is that the children are more ready for school. We do encourage parents to think of themselves as the first teacher. Learning starts from home so there would be more, having more interaction of

the children at home, we don't expect much, 15 minutes a day. That way parents would be familiar with terms that they normally use at school. We're hoping that this will actually boost their confidence to have a chat with the teachers on how the children are developing.'

(Braybrook)

The key features of this program are that sessions are individualised based on what the family's needs are in a particular local area, family members have ECEC and school terminology explained to them, family members are made to feel valued and some are provided with an opportunity to be employed at the end of the program and share their new learning with other families.

A precursor to the *HIPPY* program is the *Play Program*, for babies through to four year olds. This program assists families to 'tune into their own children's developmental levels, expectations of behaviour, supporting with [children's] behaviour management, parent/child relationship and everything and supporting the parent to be the first educator of their child' (Regional Early Years Coordinator, Colac).

'Kid's First'

Another home based program, connecting families, and particularly those experiencing vulnerability, is the Kids First program. As part of the program, young parents choose a support person, someone they know to guide them through the process. It is aimed at parents under the age of 22 and it provides support for families. One of the benefits of this program is that it allows professionals to make contact with families who are experiencing vulnerability, families who may not have been in contact with other early years professionals.

'Let's Read'

Let's Read is a home based program providing support for first time parents/carers in their home. Delivering reading tips for first-time parents/carers, this program is an opportunity for early years professionals to make contact and build relationships with families experiencing vulnerability.

'Living with Autism'

The *Living with Autism* program is an initiative supporting families with children diagnosed on the autism spectrum. The scope of this program is wider than the transition years although participants acknowledged such programs play a key role in bringing families and early years professionals together before transition to ECEC or school. It was suggested at one focus group meeting that the collaborative approach taken by this program would make an ideal approach for all children and families experiencing vulnerability as it is inclusive and brings all key stakeholders together – children, families, early childhood educators, Prep/Foundation teachers and other professionals (Burwood).

Social and emotional learning programs

Social and emotional learning programs for children were featured throughout focus group responses. Many of these programs were designed to assist children to be emotionally and socially ready for ECEC and school, particularly as an additional support for families and children experiencing vulnerability. One such program is called the *Social Emotional Literacy* program (Yarra Ranges). *Social Emotional Literacy* incorporates the 'Tuning Into' programs for toddlers, young children and teenagers. Also there is 'Sunshine Circles', a program from the USA, described by a focus group participant as being very useful for an emotionally positive environment and she explains that the program 'brings the children right out and helps them self-regulate, ...it supports children to tune into others and have empathy and everything for each other' (Colac).

Mobile visiting play program for rural families

Often support for families experiencing vulnerability means additional support is required when orientating children and families to the school setting. As part of the community response to supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability, a mobile visiting play program has been set up in Swan Hill. This program is particularly targeted in

areas where families may not know how to make connections with services or have an opportunity to connect. The *Mobile Visiting Play* Program has been described as being:

'quite broad in that it's there to support vulnerable families and it can do that in many, many different ways. And if that's what that particular family needs, then that's what we'll do with that family, so we also have really great links within the community and we can certainly support the families to go to a speech appointment or whatever may be required, and just to give the school as much heads-up as we can.'

(Swan Hill)

Professional learning

Participants noted that while it was felt that early childhood educators had attended many professional development sessions relating to working with young children and families, more targeted professional learning was needed especially related to families experiencing vulnerability, including cultural and trauma awareness. Also mentioned was the need for early years professionals to undertake professional learning in 'engagement skills', awareness of different services and how to engage with other services. In one area, professional learning about trauma, how to build positive relationships with families and children's attachment has been offered to Preschool Field Officers (PSFOs), with guest speakers being allied health workers. Participants of these sessions thought that over time this type of awareness would build a knowledge base in ECEC and lead to a positive change in practice.

Many participants acknowledged how useful the *Victorian Early Childhood Learning and Development Framework* (Department of Education and Training, 2016b), and the Transition Kit (DEECD, 2009a) was to their professional practice and for a shared language across the sectors and service types (Darebin). However, it also needs to be noted that in some areas and for some professionals (including Prep/Foundation teachers and Transition Officers in some areas) there is a lack of awareness of the DET Transition Kit. The DET Professional Learning initiatives around the Transition Kit planned for 2017 will act to address this.

Pre-service teacher education was nominated by more than one focus group as the place where more training and education is required to equip educators and teachers to work with children and families experiencing vulnerability. In-service professional learning was mentioned by a few participants, with a child and family support facilitator noting the importance of in-service professional learning as part of her role:

'My role is working with families, it is a bit 'one-on-one' with families as my main role, and then also developing PD's [professional development] for kindergarten teachers, principals and primary school teachers, prep teachers. [In particular], on what is 'readiness for school'. So we're doing two big PD's next year on that. And it is about having those conversations with the principals and prep teachers, and just breaking down those barriers.'

(Portland)

A school support officer who noted the importance of cross-sector in-service professional learning said that these sessions provide professional learning opportunities for teachers and school staff to build capacity when working with students and families from refugee backgrounds, and particularly those who have experienced trauma (Dandenong). Having a good working knowledge of existing networks and service mandates in the local area was seen as imperative in supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability. Again it was acknowledged that this knowledge is built over time and comes with experience.

When asked what they see as ways to support families experiencing vulnerabilities, an Early Years Coordinator said it was providing educators and early childhood professionals with regular professional learning and reflective practice opportunities:

'I think [educators and early childhood professionals should be provided with opportunities] for reflective practice and ongoing training. The professional training needs to be systematic, ongoing training on a two-year cycle because of the large turnover in staffing in many places, and I am thinking about long day care as well. It really needs to be thought through carefully and early childhood educators do not have much opportunity for PD [professional development]. So creating champions of team leaders and supporting them in their reflective practice and also in understanding. From our viewpoint the educators need to keep up with the changes in the refugee and asylum seeking sector. Training that was completed five years ago [is out of date], the context changes so much it needs to be a constant and deliberate process. We're working with an early years management group in the West to try and set up a two-year systematic support of reflective practice and staff training, so we'll trial that with them and see about supporting other organisations along the way.'

(Hume)

Resources

Resources for supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability making the transition to school can be in the form of personnel and time, teaching and learning resources, information and support for families, and funding. Some of the following resources discussed below are locally tailored solutions and others are available state-wide.

Personnel and time

Time has been mentioned by many focus group participants as the greatest resource as it is needed to develop relationships with organisations and to connect with support staff and schools to ensure as smooth and seamless transitions as possible for children and families experiencing vulnerability. For example, a preschool educator maintained that time to connect with school support officers was deemed a valuable resource when working with children and families experiencing vulnerability making the transition to school (Ovens Murray). Some early years professionals are allocated additional time to work with families experiencing vulnerability, but others are not. Supporting families with children experiencing vulnerability and with developmental delays takes a team approach according to some. Therefore, speech pathologists, occupational health workers and psychologists in different regions need time devoted to work together to ensure a smooth school transition for children experiencing vulnerability.

There are a range of personnel who support children and families experiencing vulnerability making an early years transition. In the Yarra Ranges, one primary school has a chaplain and a psychologist who work with children experiencing social and emotional difficulties. In the Frankston area, three family literacy officers are employed by Frankston City Libraries. This has come out of the State Library of Victoria's 'Read' Program. The family literacy officers play a key role getting out into communities (holding story-time sessions at playgroups in community halls for example) and making contact with families experiencing vulnerability, and sometimes being the first contact families have had with an early years professional since their child's last maternal health nurse visit.

In other areas Multicultural Education Aides [MEAs] are a key resource for families experiencing vulnerability. Participants noted that MEAs provide a key link between parents and schools and help refugee families better understand school expectations and teachers better understand home cultures. A school support worker points out that they are fortunate to have two MEAs at their school:

'We are lucky in our school we've got two dominant populations, we've got Albanian and Afghan, so we have an Afghan and an Albanian MEA [Multicultural Education Aide] in the school. They're out in the school every morning and every afternoon talking to parents. They go regularly down to the kindergarten to meet with the families, they're

regularly in playgroups to meet with the playgroup families, and then they're in the classrooms. I would say a good percentage, maybe 85 per cent of our Afghan families are illiterate in their home tongue, so translated documents won't work for us, it is our MEA's going out and speaking to the families.'

(Dandenong)

At one school in Swan Hill an English as an additional language co-ordinator makes it her priority to be the first point of contact at the school for families experiencing vulnerability and connects with them in advance to support them in transitioning to school:

'I always make it a priority to make some hours available in my schedule to be able to begin meeting families who have either enrolled or expressed interest in enrolling, who are from a language background other than English. Even if the children can speak some English or even if the parents have reasonable English, if they're from a language background other than English, I'm the first point of contact at our school. I usually support them with the enrolment process. I try to gather some sociolinguistic profile information in the times that I spend with them, just to build up a bit of background and understanding about the child's previous educational experiences, especially if they're newly arrived in Australia. Also, the family's educational background and experience because that's often a good indicator about how easily they're going to be able to transition into the Australian education system. From midyear I try to visit each of the local preschools to just meet with teachers and ask them about students that they think may be coming our direction and once we have met children. I make some visits to the preschool so the children see me in that setting. I usually try to do at least one home visit to any children who are coming from EAL backgrounds prior to the start of the year they're commencing with us. I think it gives valuable insight into what cultural things are important to families. It also is an opportunity for them to share information in the setting that's most familiar and most comfortable to them.'

(Swan Hill)

Teaching and learning resources

A few participants mentioned the benefit of creating a photobook displaying information about the local primary schools for all preschool children, with the idea that it will mostly benefit children experiencing vulnerability as they may have less knowledge about school and what it is like to be a student in primary school. Some preschool educators and family support workers find it useful to have a 'social story' resource to share with children and their families experiencing vulnerability and to go through the pictures with families to assist them in understanding what classrooms and teaching looks like in contemporary primary schools.

Focus group participants spoke about the benefits of online resources when working with children and their families experiencing vulnerability. Examples listed were:

- ECIA (Early Childhood Intervention Australia) NSW Transition to School Resource website. Further information can be accessed from the [ECIA \(Early Childhood Intervention Australia \(NSW Chapter\) Inc. website](#).
- Disability Standards for Education website, developed by the University of Canberra. Further information can be accessed from the [University of Canberra website](#).
- The Ready Services Audit Tool, part of the Enhanced Best Start Project 2011-2014'. Further information can be accessed from [The Greater Shepparton City Council website](#).

Information for families and working with families experiencing vulnerability

A number of resources were identified by focus group participants that assist them to better support children and families experiencing vulnerability making transitions, with many of these listed below.

Participants across the State thought that the booklet entitled *'Your Child's First Year at School: Getting off to a Good Start'* (Australian Primary Principals Association and Early Childhood Australia, 2012) was a really useful resource for families they worked with. A Stepping Stones Facilitator acknowledges the value of this resource and said that she tailors her use of the book with different families:

'As Stepping Stones facilitator, I've purchased 10 [Your Child's First Year at School] booklets to hand to parents that I'm working with. Depending on their vulnerability I might choose to talk through sections of that book. I found that book because we were in the process of looking at developing similar resources, and then I thought, 'This is really a very good book...'

(Portland)

Acknowledging that many families do not attend kindergarten or supported playgroups, a School Support Officer explained how her service, Foundation House, developed some of their own resources to address this issue:

'The 'Schools and Families in Partnership: A desktop guide to Engaging families from Refugee Backgrounds in their Children's learning'. This resource was developed over a two-year consultation with five groups of parents across Victoria. They were diverse groups of parents: South Sudanese; Hazara; Burmese; and Iraqi background parents asking what would help them best in supporting their children in Australian schools. There is a section on transitions.

To get the voices of parents across to schools, we now use this resource in our training with teachers, and provide them with an opportunity to hear the voice of families. As teachers often say to us, 'Oh they won't come, they don't turn up.' And say, 'Well this is what families said would help.' I think the clearest message out of this one is definitely around communication, so the use of interpreters being absolutely crucial for parent information sessions, for enrolments, and particularly schools who are in the secondary space as well using multi-cultural education aids.

In the primary school, if schools have the opportunity to have bi-cultural or bi-lingual workers, it makes a significant difference to parents, as does translated documents in terms of communication with parents and families. The Department of Education and Training has some fantastic resources in terms of translated documents, and I'm aware that Maternal and Child Health is looking to develop some more packages in that space. So my role is really advocating the use of some of these approaches with schools.

The background paper, 'Educating Children from Refugee Backgrounds: A Partnership between Schools and Parents' goes with the desktop resource (explained above). The background paper includes further details around preparing for Prep and what refugee

parents said would help them best. Another main resource is 'Schools in for Refugees', which is a resource that was developed over a number of years.'

(School Support Officer, Dandenong)

Families with English as an additional language can have difficulties completing school enrolment forms. One school principal takes the opportunity when she first meets families to start completing the enrolment form:

'It is a really big challenge [families completing school enrolment forms] and we've changed how we approach getting families to fill in their part. I do a one-on-one interview where I'll go through the form – I'll have the document sitting on the laptop in front of me and then type in their responses. Or, I will ask families a question straight away and then type their response in. So whether they are ESL families or whether they are illiterate families or have intellectual disabilities, at least we can support them and type in responses and they are contributing to what's going forward.'

(Geelong)

In Frankston a 'case management sort of approach' is taken, as the following excerpt illustrates:

'In terms of providing practical support for parents such as: assisting with ensuring that enrolments for kinder take place; it might be as simple as actually taking them to progress the enrolment or helping them complete the enrolment form if there's some literacy issues for the parents. Making sure that there's access to the early start kinder programs, particularly for three year old kinder if they have ability to access that in terms of meeting the criteria; again, also assisting in making sure the enrolments from kinder to school are progressed. Sometimes parents just assume that that happens and there doesn't need to be any follow up, or sending birth certificates; sometimes families don't even have birth certificates for family. We might even do some of that practical assistance in making sure that those tasks are completed.'

(Frankston)

An early childhood educator (Mildura) ensures she has a copy of the birth certificate of each child she teaches on file so that when it is time for families to enrol their child at school and a birth certificate is required, this is easy to obtain and does not delay the enrolment process. This same educator makes sure that she has all relevant information on hand about all schools in the area to keep families informed and distributes information to them when needed and in an accessible form. She says:

'A number of organisations are working with the kindergarten, including case workers. [They] are there to support each family. For example, with 96 per cent of families with Health Care Cards attending, a bus is funded to support engagement in the kindergarten program'.

(Mildura)

Raising the issue of supporting families experiencing intergenerational poverty and disadvantage, a Centre Director discussed some government funding (\$120 approximately, as part of the DET State Schools' Relief program) for

families experiencing disadvantage to purchase school uniforms, shoes, books and other items for Prep/Foundation aged children. The Centre Director shares some insights about how costly it can be for families to keep up with all the costs at the end of the year and juggling this with enrolling and getting ready for their child to start at school.

'I have certainly noticed at this time of the year and I was having this discussion with my colleague who is the Centre Director of the local Family and Child Centre and has been working with vulnerable families for nineteen years. We were [saying that] this is such a terrible time [of year] [the lead up to Christmas] for vulnerable families. You see increased domestic violence, families not coping, increased use of alcohol and substance abuse and it's just really families trying to cope at this time of the year because there's that expectation of Christmas that children will get presents. There's a lot of social things on, you've got to put petrol in the car, school uniforms, enrolment and all that so it certainly is not an easy time for an educator working with vulnerable families and children at this time of the year.'

(Geelong)

Sometimes the barrier preventing families traveling to school can be financial, and they may have difficulty accessing transport, and other times it can be an emotional challenge, fronting up to a school where they may have had negative experiences themselves.

When supporting families experiencing vulnerability enrolling their child at school, a parent support officer points out that: 'some families don't have the skills to be able to do those things [fill in enrolment forms] sometimes. We have had to at times pick up people [in cars] and bring them down to school to enrol kids, because they don't have cars' (Portland). For family members with severe anxiety, a principal, assistant principal or office staff member might offer to 'pick up these children from their homes' (Yarra Ranges).

To support their work with families, a 'Ready Services Audit Tool', has been developed and reviewed by Best Start, as part of the Greater Shepparton Enhanced Best Start Project 2011-2014 (City of Greater Shepparton, 2016), which assists services to be ready for anyone who walks through their door, 'whatever it is they might need.' This audit tool has been implemented in kindergartens and is currently being trialled in long day care centres with the intention of taking it further afield outside of the council area. The audit tool can be used across maternal and child health centres and kindergarten to identify children who are experiencing vulnerability. This audit tool came about as there was a gap in being able to identify children experiencing vulnerability in a service. The audit tool looks at what the vulnerability factors are within a family, and also what the protective factors are. This has expanded some previously held limited views of practitioners who identified children as vulnerable if they were known to Child Protection or held a Health Care Card. With the roll-out of the tool personnel from services across the area received education and training about how to use the tool.

Funding to support transition activities

Funding for early years professional's time and for adequate resources to support children and families experiencing vulnerability is an ongoing challenge. Sometimes funding is available short-term, but early years professionals can find it a challenge when programs or initiatives supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability cannot be sustained.

The estimated cost of one transition initiative in Frankston was \$14,000 per annum which allowed for dedicated workers to be employed, and teachers and educators to meet fortnightly. This initiative has not been formally evaluated. Closely tied to this is the continuity, or lack of, funding systems and communication between departments and services that support resources.

'At first it was the Linking Schools and Early Years pilot program, so at first we had a facilitator for the first three years from the Murdoch Centre. Because we were able to

prove that it was successful we actually got further funding from them and the pilot program was extended. When the pilot program finished two years after that, sort of about five years out, it was actually still so popular, and still so productive that our Catholic school went away and got some private funding through their parish council to actually keep it going, so for the last four years we've actually been running as a group privately.'

(Frankston)

Allocation of funding can enable educators and teachers time release to meet together, visit each other's setting, meet with children and families, prepare resources to support children and families, for all key stakeholders to meet once or twice a year, or to add additional staff, for example, another Preschool Field Officer funded through Municipal Council funding (refer to Appendix I for more details about costings taken from both survey and focus group data).

Feedback, evaluation and evidence of impact

Overall, focus group participant responses indicate that assessing the impact of various intentional actions, programs, strategies and initiatives for supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability making the transition to school was generally informal, and at times ad hoc or non-existent. There was an exception to this and this was when there was a specific funded program that included a formal evaluation requirement.

Some types of informal assessments developed and implemented at the organisational level include meetings, reflections, debriefings with schools, surveying families and services (using paper-based or phone calls), and gathering the children's perspectives about the transition process. One community hub employed consultants to work with the services involved around evaluation, concentrating on hub outcomes and goals. However, in filtering down to individual project outcomes, the feeling was that they were not there yet (Yarra Ranges). 'Anecdotally, we've got a lot of fantastic information, but we don't have a formal pathway to collate [evaluate] that' (Yarra Ranges). This was a sentiment echoed by many focus groups. One participant agrees that evidence of what works is crucial for the sustainability of programs. She maintains:

'I think one of the things that I think is paramount is just looking at relationships and sharing of information, and sharing of resourcing, and reducing duplication, and looking at gathering our evidence of the things that actually do work really well. Because it's the age old problem, you get a wonderful program, for example the Berry Street ELF, and what happens, we lose our funding. You have these really fantastic programs, and we know that they work, but for one reason or another, change of government, we end up with no funding so we can't continue. Well maybe it's about time we actually had a body of evidence, which I think is starting to happen now. Local evidence to actually support some of the things that we want to do. We can go, 'Well you know what? that worked, that worked, now let's contribute what we've learnt today and add to it.' So then we can always refer back to that, and it's a common body of work that we can draw from.'

(Dandenong)

Also included as ways of assessing impact were such things as 'word of mouth', 'noting changes over time', and unsolicited feedback from families, however, such feedback could be years after the event. For one professional having 'happy families' and 'happy children' was the yardstick of success: 'I think if you've got families that feel safe and confident, and you've got children who feel safe and confident, your efforts have been successful' (Frankston).

In Brimbank/Melton, early years workers are taking a multidisciplinary approach and are working with Koorie Education Support Officers, specialist children services staff and education staff, to identify the gaps in service provision.

'In our local area we have a priority project that's focusing on using the data to identify challenges for vulnerable families in accessing early years services and transitioning to school. We want to know what the data is telling us and identify specific locations to deliberately focus our effort on to support families. It is in the early stages, we have analysed some data that we have. We are going out next year to actually bring on board some additional evidence, some additional data that the department does not hold, to try to inform ourselves further. At this point we've identified two specific geographical locations where we will be focusing some of effort next year.'

(Brimbank/Melton)

Participants acknowledged that it takes time to collate and evaluate data across different services and areas of government. A speech pathologist on a Child Health Team (Brimbank/Melton) has gathered feedback from schools in the area to ascertain the speech program's effectiveness and the best ways to support families:

'As part of a project we are working on developing a transition report that we provide to the school. We've done a bit of research or surveys with the schools in the Brimbank area to find out what they want from us in terms of supporting the transition and also with the parents. We've built a template [evaluation tool] that the whole child health team at our service will now use and we'll evaluate that in February next year to see if that's helped the transition period. Then either change it or continue to use it.'

(Brimbank/Melton)

According to participants in Wyndham, auditing the effectiveness of their program allows for an opportunity to ascertain what is working from their perspective, and also to see what is working or not through the lens of the refugee families having these experiences. Sharing family experiences, according to participants, can be most useful:

'We start with an audit with schools. We include some of those questions around transition, so schools, we get them to reflect on their practice. We take schools through professional development and we have a training team. We can map refugee experiences and how these families are particularly vulnerable. Then schools take the audit and make an action plan. We run workshops with them every term. We walk through it with them over that two year period. Support for transition is around the use of interpreters because a lot of schools don't use interpreters and translated materials. It's using Multicultural Education Aides [MEAs] to support families. It's making the actual practicalities and logistics of enrolment less threatening for families who may find it quite a confronting experience.'

(Wyndham)

CHALLENGES, GAPS AND BARRIERS

A number of challenges and barriers were identified by participants to be overcome to be able to effectively support children and families experiencing vulnerability. This section illustrates some of the challenges and barriers identified by participants during focus group meetings.

Service inconsistencies

One barrier identified related to the inconsistencies that can occur within regions where schools practice different transition processes and value different types of collaboration with preschools. This can lead to a difference in expectations between kindergartens and schools about what constitutes continuous learning and a smooth transition to school. One early childhood professional said that 'some schools are inflexible', and recognised that some schools do not have the capacity or knowledge on how to be proactive in the transition space. One school principal recognises the increasing emphasis on transition to school and explained that now there are multiple and ongoing transitions:

'Professionals, parents, kids, teachers, the whole lot. If you're not all on the same train and going in the same direction you don't get anywhere, and we've worked really hard around that. I've now been at this primary school for seven years and transition used to be four mornings a week for the pre-schoolers and three-quarters of an hour one day on the last day of school. That was it. Now, it's transition to school, from school, within the school. Transition is everywhere. Getting up in the morning to come into school even.'

(Swan Hill)

An early childhood professional commented about how important it is for schools to collaborate with other services and to recognise the importance of transitions for young children:

'What we need is schools that are willing to recognise how significant that time of transition is. We can't do this work if we're working with schools that say, 'We don't need your help. We know what we're doing with transition.' That makes it impossible. Whereas if we are working with schools who recognise that this has long lasting impact and are open to being cooperative, we can make a massive difference.'

(Swan Hill)

An issue that arose on a few occasions was the different organisational agendas within education, health and the welfare sectors, along with different strategies and ways to support families experiencing vulnerability, and how at times these ways of working are not always aligned.

Another factor is whether the representatives at transition networks have the authority to make decisions transition practices and processes. A focus group participant speaks to this issue:

'And I guess the interesting aspect of networks is - for me, networks can only really be powerful, or one of the ways that they can be powerful, is if there's someone with decision-making ability around the table. So, sometimes within networks in our precinct, where there's a lot of goodwill and a lot of interest in each other's work and things like that, but in terms of being able to have an impact on a decision, those people aren't necessarily around the table.'

(Yarra Ranges)

Personnel time and resources

Time to carry out transition related activities, was considered a major barrier for many services. With the importance placed on establishing, maintaining and also building collaborative relationships across services, time needs to be devoted to make this happen. Often this time happens out of hours for dedicated staff for example, a transition forum held after hours at night. Sometimes there is a lack of relief staff to enable full-time staff members (such as early childhood educators) to attend networking events during their working hours. Time is also an issue with how many networks one professional can contribute to, therefore the purpose of each network may need to be questioned in order to judge its relevance and priority.

Involving educators and teachers from private long day care centres can be an issue due to educator time release, or lack of it. Focus group participants were asking how transition to school networks can involve more kindergarten teachers working in private long day care centres, as these professionals are often missing from the dialogue. A centre director made the following comments about the difficulties kindergarten teachers can have with their teaching timetables accessing network meetings and conducting school reciprocal visits:

'We are very fortunate that the City of Greater Geelong has a commitment to working with vulnerable families and they're happy to support our kinder teachers having time release to support families, but a lot of the private sector don't have that luxury and we need to get the private sector involved as well. Another issue is that not every kinder teacher teaches at the same time. My kinder teacher teaches full days so – they go [to network meetings] – but the meetings are in the afternoon. And Grace teaches until 5.30 at night so it's all about the time release. And I'm happy to do it [release teachers for this work] and council are happy to support it, but in a lot of private centres that doesn't occur.'

(Geelong)

Lack of sustainable funding

The amount and continuity of funding sources is a major issue across the state. Some participants perceived a lack of coordination between local, state and federal funding in this area and that programs that are supporting families experiencing vulnerability come and go:

'We often go to tap into [link up with on behalf of a family] a service, it is no longer there or the conditions have changed. I know it's difficult for families with their access to the kindergarten, for vulnerable families, those sorts of things, and that's the frustration of it all, it's not consistent... There's local government, there's state government, there's federal funding; and you think, 'They're not even talking to each other whatsoever.' So it becomes really frustrating for all of us, especially if you've been around the traps for a long while, and you think, 'That service was available -' you know, Maternal Child Health visits were available for all parents as often as they wanted a couple of years ago, and oops, they can't go now.'

(Frankston)

Not having enough funding for activities such as engaging translators to translate documents for some families or for professional development to build staff knowledge is restricting the extent and quality of the support that can be offered. An example of how detrimental a lack of cohesive funding can be for families involved with Child Protection is noted:

'Children involved with child protection are often linked into childcare services and a certain number of weeks are funded by the federal government (this varies). Once the funding [for that family to attend] stops, children are often taken out of the service [and families can't afford the fees] and go nowhere. If these children were also linked into a kindergarten program they would get priority access and they would receive 15 hours of funded kindergarten a week for the whole year prior to school. I have 2 cases at the moment where the funding has stopped and the children are no longer attending an [ECEC] program. This has significant implications for these children.

As well as the obvious detrimental impact this has on their learning and development it impacts on the schools ability to gain support for the child. One child has not been enrolled in school and therefore funding applications haven't been completed. We are technically not supposed to work with children if they aren't enrolled in a funded program and so have limited capacity to help. There is also inconsistent engagement from child protection workers in ensuring these children attend kindergarten regularly and engage with services these children need [due to the large case load Child protection workers have]'

(Children's Support Worker, Brimbank/Melton)

Another example impacting on a Catholic School:

'In the Catholic Education Office we have to, if there is a child in our area, there are certain mandated things that we have to have put in place within a very short timeframe. But if that child is within kinship care, then it doesn't come out of that out-of-home care legislation, so then they don't get quick access into being assessed or accessing support, so it's a very different, fine line for some of our students.'

(Darebin)

Difficulties services can have engaging families

One barrier noted by participants across focus groups was the way some families experiencing vulnerability choose not to engage with ECEC services. Participants explained that different intentional actions could be tried to engage families but some families consciously choose not to engage. The issue of families choosing not to engage could be due to a variety of reasons, such as living in rural and remote locations, lack of accessibility to ECEC services or because of family members' own past experiences of schooling which could arouse negative feelings and anxiety. The transient nature of families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage was also raised as an issue related to family engagement, along with parental drug addiction and mental health issues, which can make relationships complex and problematic to establish in the limited time and resources available to services. One centre director shares the difficulty she can face when families do not want to acknowledge there are problems:

'We have a lot of families that will 'kinder hop' or will 'child care hop' because – nothing to do with fee payment – it's because they actually don't want to acknowledgethat their child might be behind, that they need help, they don't want to be hooked up with any services and it's really difficult.

(Geelong)

For some families and communities there are more layers of vulnerability than others experience resulting in multiple disadvantage. A Goodstart member explains:

'For some communities you've got two layers of vulnerability, the community vulnerability which is established around all the economic, very low income, and then there's more the general vulnerability of the family. When you have both you need resources and it could be any of these programs.'

(Brimbank)

According to some participants, families moving from one location to another can be a challenge for services to support families experiencing vulnerability. When families move from one place to another and service funding does not follow the family, families are required to apply for funding again. A kindergarten teacher notes how it can be a challenge to provide information for families experiencing vulnerability if they are new to the area, or move away.

'What is a challenge...where families haven't decided which school their child will go to...because we have such a transient population as well and families move from area to area or even town to town. Often you'll get children that will commence kinder in term three and they haven't even thought about schools or anything like that.'

(Geelong)

Enrolling children at school at different times or late in the year, can result in families and children missing out on valuable transition experiences. A primary school principal explains that it would be ideal if families experiencing vulnerability could enrol as early as possible so that supports can be put into place:

'It works well [transition to school] when parents enrol their children early enough so that transition can be spaced. It constantly amazes me we still get people coming through the door in September/October looking for enrolment forms when transitions really already started, and they're behind the eight-ball. So we do ask for enrolments to happen in July, and I know that may mean that there's an enrolment and then withdraw the enrolment because they're not ready, but we would rather that than people coming through the door too late.'

(Primary School Principal, Portland)

A barrier for parents to enrol their children at school can be that they: (1) do not have access to the internet or (2) transport to take their child to school or (3) they may not be aware of the importance of learning in the early years.

'I've had a couple of families that we've had to try and arrange to come in to enrol because they don't have transport and internet. So some of those real vulnerable, in the country, really struggle because these days we're saying, 'Get on the internet and do it via the internet.' But we need to have something in place for those vulnerable families to

help them enrol without them feeling like they're dumb, but also so they can realise how important (it is). They don't see kindergarten as important, 'Oh, that's [kindergarten] is just an extra.'

(Portland)

Limited or no access to a transition network

Services and individuals working in isolation is another challenge for professionals. Sometimes this is due to competing funding or focusing on their own organisation's agendas without consideration of others. This can create barriers and prevent smooth transitions for children and families. Other times it could be due to geographical remoteness. Two participants in different regions explained:

'People that work with families tend to work in silos, and historically it can be very competitive in terms of going for resourcing or going for funding, so people are working to their own agenda. It can be difficult to work collaboratively and in partnership. Often the barrier is around communication and sharing information to ensure that transitions are really smooth.'

(Dandenong)

'I think communication between the agencies is really important, that's something that has been really quite lax for a long, long time.'

(Colac)

Universal access for a kindergarten program for three-year olds

Several participants raised the issue of how important it is to have a funded kindergarten program for three-year olds and accessible for all families, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability. They maintained that families experiencing vulnerability who are not known to child protection do not get access to a funded kindergarten program for three-year olds, and they believe it is vital that they do:

'There are continual questions around why kindergarten isn't compulsory and particularly in vulnerable communities around three-year old kindergarten not being compulsory as well, because when we have children coming to us as four year olds, their development is quite often at a two year old level. So going off to school, they are starting behind.'

(Centre Director, Geelong)

'There needs to be more flexibility around financial support for families for three-year old kinder. So, vulnerable families shouldn't have to fall under the category of families known to child protection because some vulnerable families are doing an amazing job and yet they're not getting the same recognition, unless they're known to child protection.'

(School Principal, Geelong)

Support for children and families experiencing vulnerability to access funded kindergarten for three-year olds

Early Start Kindergarten

The Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) grant was introduced in 2008 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and in 2009 for children known to Child Protection. ESK aims to provide two years of kindergarten to children experiencing vulnerability to reduce the effects of disadvantage on their long-term outcomes. ESK was developed in response to strong evidence that highlighted the positive impacts of duration and quality of education and care on the life-long effects of disadvantage.

There are two types of ESK grants available to children who are at least three years old by 30 April in the year they are enrolled to attend ESK:

- the Aboriginal ESK grant for children identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander by a parent/carer; and
- the ESK grant for children known to Child Protection or referred by Child Protection to child and family services information, referral and support teams (Child FIRST).

Services must offer ESK enrolments in a kindergarten program offering at least 15 hours per week or a minimum of 600 hours per year, delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

In 2013, an ESK extension grant was introduced, which allowed children who had accessed ESK to attend kindergarten in the year before school free of charge (or at low cost), in cases where they were not eligible to receive the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy (KFS). In 2014 the ESK extension grant was made available to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in kindergarten in the year before school in settings where KFS was not available, regardless of whether or not they had participated in ESK.

Applications for ESK and the ESK extension grant are completed and submitted by the kindergarten service on behalf of the child and family (DET, 2015).

Access to Early Learning

The Access to Early Learning (AEL) model was developed and piloted in 2011 to provide additional supports to engage and sustain participation of eligible three-year-old children in universal kindergarten services where the ESK grant alone would be unlikely to be sufficient (DET, 2015).

AEL is an early intervention and prevention program that is designed to support the sustained participation of three-year-old children experiencing vulnerability and their families in quality universal education and care, strengthen home learning environments and build capacity in the local service system. To be eligible for AEL, children must be referred by an Enhanced Maternal and Child Health service, ChildFIRST or Child Protection professional. These referrals identify children from families with a minimum of two relevant characteristics (known to Child Protection, intellectual or physical disability, family violence, mental health issues, sexual assault, and alcohol and drug abuse).

Seven AEL lead agencies each support, on an annual basis, 16 three-year-old children and their families to sustain their participation in universal education and care services. Intake for the AEL program generally occurs in the year before children are to commence the program. Subsequently, AEL children are enrolled in a year before school kindergarten program where a low level of contact with families is maintained to check the children have transitioned successfully.

The AEL service model incorporates five interrelated service components that are designed to build capacity in the service system and to better meet the needs of children experiencing vulnerability and their families:

- Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the core component of the AEL model.
- A Key Facilitation Worker [focuses] on identifying eligible children and linking them to appropriate ECEC places, introducing the family to the ECEC service and ensuring that the administrative arrangements necessary to support the child's engagement with ECEC are completed. The Key Facilitation Worker also leads the development of professional and practice development, and mentoring of educators.
- The family services component, through the Family and In-home Learning Support Worker, works to improve the participation of children and their families in the ECEC service and to deepen learning in the home.

- Professional and practice development [supports] ECEC educators to develop and refine the skills and competencies required to successfully engage children experiencing vulnerability and their families. Brokerage funding [provides] the flexibility to access support for children and families that cannot be accessed by other means (DET, 2016c).

Families having to share their ‘story’ many times

Another issue that was raised across several focus groups was the issue of families who experience vulnerability often have to share their personal ‘story’ many times, feeling that they are judged all over again. A Best Start facilitator explains:

‘A lot of schools or kindergartens have different expectations [of families], but it’s not necessarily a continual process for them [families], so a lot parents get frustrated or upset, or feel like they’re being judged because they’ve had to tell the story to the Maternal and Child Health; to the three year old teacher; to the four year old teacher; to the office; to the teacher. So for them, talking about your difficult child, or your difficult family life, whatever it is, having to say it over and over and over again can be quite detrimental to them. I think that, ‘no surprises’, and that link with the kindergarten (is important). When we do the early years evaluation we don’t recommend a second year to anyone unless it’s been recommended from the kinder teacher. We support them by saying, ‘Have you thought about a second year?’ As opposed to saying, ‘That’s what your child needs.’ The kinder teachers are the experts and we follow their advice.’

(Dandenong)

Children ready for school and schools being ready for children

The issue of whether it is the school’s role to be ready for children, or whether children should be ‘ready’ for school was mentioned by different participants. Many early years professionals working with families experiencing vulnerability were aware that children experiencing vulnerability being ‘ready for school’ is not easily attainable. This can be exacerbated when schools expect that children undertake academic and/or social and emotional tests. One participant maintained:

‘I talk to families who come out from these assessments who are absolutely devastated and in tears. If you’ve got kids and they have got high social emotional anxieties, on the Autism spectrum, things like that, teachers are telling parents that their children are not socially/emotionally ready for school. Well, they are never going to be socially/emotionally ready for school, as they have Autism. And I have a great deal of concern with that because at the moment I’m working with parents who are being told that their kids aren’t ready for school and they should do a second year of kindergarten. If the child does a second year of kindergarten they’re likely to have more challenges... it [should be] about the school being ready for the child.’

(Early Intervention Teacher, Dandenong)

A question was raised about the notion of child readiness for school, with one participant asking: ‘How many years of kinder does a child have to do before they’re socially/emotionally ready?’ (Dandenong). A kindergarten team leader added:

'And another thing that we have found difficult is the Early Years Evaluation assessment that many local schools do, because in my experience, it has been stressing for families to have that assessment before their child begins school. [Families] feel like their child is not up to scratch of what the school is hoping to see, and that's been really challenging. Last year I had a child who got all red [colour assessments indicating the child is having difficulty] apart from one orange [medium level ability] on the EYE assessment, and it is just heartbreaking to have those discussions with those families and say, 'There are so many great things about your child.' And for a family to feel like the school is only looking at that. Yeah, it's hard to support a family through that [low achievement result], and it's about building those relationships and those connections, and communication so that the family feels comfortable to talk to you about what's going on and that they're feeling like that; and having discussions with the school in regards to that.'

(Dandenong)

There is some confusion with families about the best kindergarten and school starting age for their children. It was recommended by focus group participants that these conversations about the ideal age for a child to start kindergarten and start school needs to happen early, even before children turn three.

'Families are really confused at the moment as to when to start their children at kindergarten and when to start their children at school. We're trying to have lots of conversations around when is the right time, because families know now they have one year at kindergarten. When to start is creating a lot of anxiety for families. They ask, 'What's the best age for my child to start?' So my hope would be that if we can engage early with families that there are lots of opportunities to have conversations before the children reach three/three and a half years, and those questions are asked.'

(Dandenong)

Educators liaising with many schools

Transitioning to school from preschool can be complex as children might be transitioning to 40 different schools in the area. This can create added pressure on preschool teachers knowing which schools to develop relationships with. Below is one example, where early childhood educators can be faced with the daunting task of liaising with up to 40 schools:

'Some of the complexities we see is that we might have one kindergarten but children going off to up to 40 different schools, so how do you do transition well as a kindergarten educator with that complexity? I think also picking up the theme around families' knowledge of what early education or school education looks like is a big issue.'

(Dandenong)

'The other one is court ordered families, families who are under child protection or have access orders, and this is creating some challenges within the kindergarten space. Information sharing across kindergarten to school, or across all families is difficult, but it is so essential to get right for children to be able to arrive at school with family support behind them.'

(Dandenong)

Access to suitable venues to work with families

Not having suitable venues to work with families and children is an issue that a supported playgroup coordinator raised along with a solution to the problem:

'[We have an issue finding] free venues. That's a resource that you can't do without and it needs to be something that's really fitting and respectful for families. Not just being shown a room that's cold and dark and say families can go in there. It needs to be spaces [provided within] schools or kindergartens and having that process written into policies that this is a space for families to use.'

(Brimbank)

In summary, this section has reported on focus group data focusing on practices that support children and families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions. It also considered the challenges and barriers early years professionals face when supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions.

Focus groups – families

Potential family focus group participants were identified during focus group meetings held with early years professionals. Representatives from services and organisations identified families experiencing vulnerability and who they had recently supported and might be willing to be potential focus group participants. Families were invited to participate in focus group interviews by service providers, professionals, and organisations, with whom the families already had an established and trusting relationship. A total of 19 family members experiencing vulnerability from rural and metropolitan areas participated in focus groups, including: Shepparton, Swan Hill, Geelong, Frankston, Knox, Werribee, Pakenham, Berwick, Tooradin and Footscray. The interviews were a combination of telephone interviews and face-to-face focus groups with a duration between 10 minutes and 45 minutes. The families provided valuable insights about their experience and their child's experience when making the transition to ECEC or school.

SUPPORTING EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY

The importance of a welcoming and responsive environment

What worked well during early years transitions according to many of the focus group participants, was when educators, centre directors, primary school teachers, principals and other professionals welcomed the family and took the time to get to know the children and their individual situation. Families experiencing vulnerability said that they often lacked confidence approaching ECEC services and schools, making the transition challenging. Yet, if professionals were welcoming, accommodating and willing to offer additional support, this made a huge difference to their levels of confidence and enthusiasm. Many of the families selected primary schools for their children based on the 'welcoming' feel (or not) they provided. For example, a refugee parent (Footscray) said:

'I visited numerous schools and the one I selected was the most welcoming and showed me that they really wanted my child to come to their school'.

Similarly, a parent of a boy with additional needs selected a school that was the 'most welcoming' and this parent described it as a school that 'really wanted my son to come to their school' (Berwick). The quality of interactions with staff members from a school made a difference to families, with regards to their final decision about which school they would choose for their child/ren. A parent experiencing financial hardship (Shepparton) said she 'liked talking to the principal' who seemed to focus on the preschool children as individuals, and that the principal made a point of knowing all the children's names. The parent seemed to be pleasantly surprised by this approach and made the comment: 'The principal said that she tries to remember all the kids' names, so that's pretty big...'

A welcoming approach made this particular parent feel more at ease and confident of the care the school would provide for her preschool daughter. She said that if her child was upset at school (in Prep/Foundation), she knew teachers would notice and her daughter would be looked after: 'It makes me happy to know that if my daughter was upset and that, that they [the teachers] would notice that.' (Shepparton)

An Out of Home Care (OoHC) carer (Outer Eastern Melbourne) describes how receptive the principal was of their family's situation during transition to school:

'You can really tell that the principal was making an effort to make sure that we felt comfortable. We [were given] all the contacts in the school that we needed to have. They were great at saying "This is our kindness room and this is our plan and this is what we'll have in the room for her [the child]" so they are all set up [and prepared for her arrival at the school].'

In addition, the carer noted that she felt really 'listened to' by the teachers at this school and this understanding shown by the teachers was important to her:

'[We said to the school staff] please tread carefully [with this child due to her particular situation] they did and they listened to us. They listened, they didn't just assume that because they were teachers they knew the best thing to do for her [the child], and I think that's really important.'

A refugee parent (Footscray) discussed the ease at which his children transitioned into school and attributed this to his children having already made the transition to long day care and kindergarten previously. He explained:

'My children had attended child care, which they found difficult at the start. It took them 2 weeks to settle in and enjoy the experience and form relationships with the educators. They then attended kindergarten which they settled into well, and this in turn supported their successful transition to school.'

Case study – a welcoming experience

Kay (pseudonym), an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman from regional Victoria (Shepparton) experiencing vulnerability, spoke about her daughter's transition to school. Kay's daughter was in the process of making the transition from kindergarten to school when we caught up with her. Kay had three visits to the primary school with her daughter, and in addition her daughter visited the school a few more times with her kindergarten group.

Kay was new to the transition to school experience as her daughter is her first child in her family to go to school. Kay said she was really nervous at the thought of visiting the school and was worried about her daughter's reaction to school as she 'is very shy' and she thought her child would cry and not like school. Instead, Kay found that:

'she [her daughter] actually just takes off into the class. She is a shy girl so I thought maybe she wouldn't like it [school], but she loves it.'

Kay was pleasantly surprised that her daughter took to school so well and found teachers at the school to be welcoming which meant her daughter wanted to attend. When asked what made the transition experience positive for her daughter, Kay replied 'I think the teachers were very lovely'. It helped that Kay's daughter 'loves the size of the playground, and loves having a cousin at the same school in Grade 2.'

Kay spoke about the guided tours of the school for families, and the detailed information about all the different aspects of the school program and what families and children could expect to happen. Healthy eating information was highlighted and a local council member came in to talk about the importance of drinking water as opposed to soft drink. Kay thought that the teachers 'covered about everything' including a useful school tour, information about the learning programs, healthy eating tips, what children should keep in their school bags and so on.

When asked if there was anything that could be improved within the transition to school experience for her and her daughter, Kay said 'no, I don't think so'. Kay felt that the information she shared on the enrolment form was helpful for her and her child as they asked what her goals were for her daughter and about her child's personality, which supports the school knowing children well in order to better support them through the transition process.

Two other refugee parents from the Footscray area noted that the transition from home to school was relatively smooth for them and their children. One parent recalled how a director of a childcare centre and educators in a kindergarten were very supportive of his child, who was quite timid to begin with. They specifically assured this parent

that they would look after his child, and help him with his interaction with other children. This was comforting for the father to know. The other parent mentioned how welcoming the principal and teachers were when he first took his daughter to school. He added that his daughter benefited from regular parent-teacher meetings where he received 'useful advice' on how to help his child with her academic work and overall development. He described how happy he felt when seeing his child smiling in the new school environment.

Acknowledging diverse family backgrounds and experiences

Acknowledging diverse backgrounds and experience, along with being respectful of families' individual situations, plays an important role to support families experiencing vulnerability during early years transitions. Participants noted how well some professionals did at communicating effectively with them, and other families thought that there could be further improvements where early years professionals could be more understanding and respectful of diverse family backgrounds.

A family member (Pakenham) said that schools need to have highly professional staff who understand complex family issues and can effectively support children experiencing vulnerability during transition. Similarly, a refugee parent noted that ECEC centres should have at least one educator who is trained to work in a multicultural context, specifically to work with refugee children. He observed that when he took his newly arrived child to a child care centre for the first time, 'the childcare worker talked to her in English assuming that she could speak the language'. He specifically mentioned that when his daughter started at the child care centre, she used to tell him that she did not want to go to the centre and he attributed this reluctance to a lack of specific support for her to adapt to the new environment (Footscray). Two parents with refugee backgrounds (Ethiopian) said that they value education for their children, but they lacked the knowledge on how to help them learn well and relied on teachers and professionals to explain the Australian schooling system to them (Footscray).

Another refugee parent expressed frustration about the lack of teacher awareness about cultural difference, race and racism. She noted that experiences of racism and other related incidents constrain students of African origin from focusing on their studies – eventually leading to low academic achievement. She commented:

The prejudice is that African origin students as a group are seen as low achievers. For example, although she knew her son is to be academically above average, he was given a mark of 'standard'. She went to the school and asked the teacher why she gave her son a 'standard' mark. Her response was that he was not attentive, and he would correct the mark accordingly.

(Footscray. Excerpt translated into English)

The same parent stressed that for families with non-English backgrounds, language is a critical factor in their engagement with the school. Due to language barriers, often parents do not respond to correspondence from their children's schools. As a result, many parents have little or no knowledge about expectations of the school, and how they should be interacting with teachers. Similarly, another parent noted that less advantaged families need to be informed about the expectations of the school in their own language. They said the feeling that they got from the school without speaking the language is: 'join the crowd, and good luck!' (Footscray).

Additional supports for families experiencing vulnerability making transitions

Additional supports for families experiencing vulnerability making transitions were apparent when speaking to family members. Examples of these are provided in this section.

For one OoHC family (Outer Eastern Melbourne) their experience of an early years transition was positive and they spoke highly of the additional support provided by the child's kindergarten teacher, the family case manager and DHHS practitioner. There was uncertainty about how long the children would be placed in this family's care, so they had to wait for some time to see if the child was able to complete the full transition to school when staying with them. In this situation the child was able to make the full transition to school while in their care, with the family member noting how supported she felt:

'The school kept in touch with us for the entire term four. The Chaplain's been in touch with us, the principal's been in touch with us a few times, just to make sure that we knew what we needed to bring, the dates for the transition. They really gave us the sense that they understood, that this was a different transition for this child because we'd never done this [transition to school] before, and she'd [the preschool child] obviously never done it before. But they were able to show us the things that they were doing for her, like the individual attention.'

The carer noted that the school and other professionals gave her additional time and support:

Case Study: Additional supports assisting families

A mother, experiencing financial hardship, has three children with additional needs all attending different schools for varying reasons (Berwick). Her youngest child was due to make the transition to school in a couple of months' time when we spoke to her. The family have been supported by a key worker from an integrated service, and according to the mother this did help with the transition to school process, along with choosing an appropriate school for her child who was transitioning to school. The mother explained that what made a positive difference was that she used some funding that was initially made available for her child's Autism, to send her child to a speech pathologist. This particular speech pathologist also ran group sessions to support her child making the transition to school, which the parent said was most beneficial. In addition, the school provided an integration aide to assist the child through the transition and to participate in orientation days.

It helped that teachers were flexible with the school rules, which helped the child with additional needs to participate. For example, her child refused to sit on the floor with her legs crossed so she was able to sit on a chair at the back of the group. The parent noted that the use of photos in a social story book were a key strategy to support transition. The child remained at the primary school for six months until it was decided it would be more beneficial for the child to attend a specialist school. Her child transitioned 'really well' to the specialist school and the parent says the reasons for the smooth transition were that her child was unable to abscond from this particular classroom, there were less children in the class, and it was not an open-plan classroom.

'The school explained things a little bit differently for her [the child] and they were very careful about their expectations. We've had a lot of discussions about emotional regulation, about what school's going to look like. Perhaps for her that may be different to children that were coming from a different background...'

One family member (Frankston) discussed how effective the *HIPPY* program was for her and her daughter. She explained that by participating in the *HIPPY* program it gave her the 'basic building blocks' to support her daughter preparing for school. The mother said:

'I participated in HIPPY with my daughter. We started when she was aged four, in kindergarten, and then we transitioned to school and we stayed in the program all the way through Prep. It is great for us because it gives you the confidence that you're teaching the child the right things. Talking to the child a lot, and lots of reading.'

Furthermore, the mother explained that her daughter has had high anxiety, and the skills taught and shared in the *HIPPY* program has meant that her daughter was more confident transitioning to school:

'A lot of the things they did in Prep were exactly what we've done in HIPPY. So for her [daughter], she has high anxiety, she doesn't talk in class. For her that [the program] was just brilliant, because she had that confidence that she said - "I know this stuff," you know? She knows it.'

The mother recalled a comment made by a Prep/Foundation teacher who had said: 'I can tell the kids that have done the *HIPPY* program, and the kids that haven't', indicating that the *HIPPY* program has made a difference to children's knowledge and skills in preparation for school.

A parent of a child experiencing vulnerability (Tooradin) acknowledged how crucial it was for her key worker to assist her with her daughter's transition to school. The parent said that her key worker provided her with so much information about where to get support and 'held her hand through many moments of stress and on unfamiliar ground'. The key worker supported the parent and gave her strategies, for example in the situation when strangers point at her daughter and laugh, due to her disability. Initially this parent lacked confidence making the transition with her daughter to kindergarten and it was the support of the key worker that provided her with behaviour guidance strategies for her daughter, mentoring and advice that made all the difference.

A refugee father of three children (Werribee) discussed the ease at which his children transitioned into school, and attributed this to the following reasons:

- Prior experience of transition through attending childcare, and the kindergarten
- Exposure to English from ABC children's television programs
- Children being naturally inquisitive and sociable
- Information was provided about what to expect at school
- Kindergarten teachers provided experiences to support children's academic skills and they took preschool children on excursions to broaden their knowledge of the local community
- Teachers and educators formed positive relationships with children
- Family interest in their child's education

A parent of a young boy experiencing vulnerability was supported through transition by the family's case worker, an early intervention (EI) specialist (Pakenham). The parent found the support given by the EI specialist was invaluable in supporting the transition to school. This included the development of specific skills within the child, parent information and group work to practise social skills, initial support in encouraging the parent to visit a number of schools and make an informed choice. The EI teacher acted as an advocate for the family and went well above her expected duties, as this advocacy work was not part of her role. As an additional support an integration aide was employed to support her son at school, providing boundary training and making sure he felt safe in the playground.

Ways to improve early years transitions for families experiencing vulnerability

Family members had different suggestions about ways to improve early years transitions. Many of the suggestions are to provide better access to services and professionals to be able to provide additional supports for them and their children through transitions.

One refugee parent (Werribee) thought that his child's transition to school experience could have been improved if his child could have spent more hours at 4-year-old kindergarten. This father would like to see more funded hours for the kindergarten year (more than 15 hours), as according to him, this will assist children making the adjustment to school and the longer hours expected at school.

One family member (Frankston) suggested making the *HIPPY* program more accessible for families experiencing vulnerability, as she had such a positive experience. This parent noted that where her daughter went to kindergarten and school there were so many children repeating the preschool and Prep/Foundation years, a program such as *HIPPY* could make a positive difference to more families. The only issue with the *HIPPY* program according to this parent was the lack of access for other families in need. She explained that if families lived outside a certain area, there was no funding available for the program and she could see this caused issues in her area.

An OoHC carer (Outer Eastern Melbourne) would like it noted how challenging it can be for children in OoHC and their carers to make an early years transition. One of the main difficulties faced by OoHC families according to the carer, is due to the uncertainty of children's situations, not knowing in advance where the child/ren will be living in a few months' time making it difficult to plan ahead. What really helped in this situation from the carer's perspective, was the additional support she received from the child's kindergarten teacher, case worker, school principal and others, who were all so understanding and responsive to the child's situation.

A parent of a young boy experiencing vulnerability (Pakenham) said that there is a lack of free advocacy services to support her in meetings with the school when problems arise. She advocates that it would be beneficial if a professional could assist her, so the communication between her and the school could be improved.

A refugee parent (Footscray) made the suggestion that ECEC centres should have at least one educator who is trained to work in a multicultural context, specifically with the skills to effectively support children who have recently arrived in the country, with another family member wanting to ensure that they have access to professional staff who understand complex issues (Pakenham). Many of the family members stated how important it is for educators to consider the complexities of the contexts these children find themselves part of and that if they can have early access to services and professionals it would make a positive difference.

Another refugee parent (Footscray) said that his community, an Ethiopian community in Melbourne, values education for their children but often families lack the knowledge on how to help children learn well at school and succeed academically. Therefore, this parent made the suggestion that there should be an after-school tutorial for families specifically designed for children experiencing vulnerability. This could be part of the transition or orientation program, specifically tailored for those who have recently arrived in the country and are not familiar with cultural understandings and educational practices expected at a local primary school. According to the parent, the training should focus on how the Australian education system works so that parents clearly know their roles and responsibilities in their children's learning and development. This would go a long way in improving his and other families in his situation knowledge. This would go a long way in improving his and other families in his situation knowledge. The final suggestion made by this parent is for all ECEC services and schools to actively promote multiculturalism and inclusivity, with many other focus group families sharing this view.

Summary of findings

This Practice Review has collated views and accounts of professionals, educators, teachers, and families, while also considering the findings from the DET Rapid Literature Review (Kochanoff, Krakouer, Mitchell & Trevitt, 2016) related to how best to support early years transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances. The central aim of the Practice Review was to add further insights by responding to the following questions:

- What effective or promising practices are being implemented by ECEC services and schools to support children and families experiencing vulnerability during key transitions (including transitions from home, out-of-home care and/or other programs/services to ECEC services and to school)?
- What are the gaps in service quality, professional learning and networks/coordination mechanisms for supporting positive early years transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability?
- What are the options and findings for the Department and the ECEC sector to improve support for children and families experiencing vulnerability in transitions?

The summary draws together the main research findings across the Practice Review and Rapid Literature Review and this informs the options, as set out in the final section of this report. The options are for the consideration of the Department of Education and Training, and the broader sector, on the ways in which support for children and families experiencing vulnerability during early years transition can be strengthened.

Collaborative networks

Across the Practice Review and Rapid Literature Review data there are synergies. The strongest of which is the importance of services and organisations working collaboratively, knowing and valuing each other's remit, and sharing information to ensure families are adequately supported during transitions (White & Winkworth, 2012). Services taking a collaborative approach are strongly associated with positive outcomes for families and communities (McArthur & Thomson, 2011; Nair, 2012), and this includes involving families in the decision-making process (Freiberg, Homel & Branch 2010). Developing collaborative relationships across services and sectors leads to shared understandings about practice, integrated ways of working and consistent approaches to transitions, all aiding transdisciplinary practice (Cartmel, Macfarlane & Nolan, 2013). Survey and professional focus group data point to the factors that need to be in place in order to establish and maintain strong transition networks. These factors include dedicated time for professionals to meet and to be active within networks, developing protocols for information sharing that consider confidentiality, along with having key services/organisations represented. Some early childhood professionals mentioned that Child Protection often sat outside of these information sharing networks, making it difficult to support families in an integrated and collaborative way. Findings and research literature illustrate that having a champion, facilitator or designated leader to assist with maintaining a transition network can make a positive difference (White & Winkworth, 2012). This person is crucial in coordinating the network and ensuring that it functions effectively. It is recommended that this role is recognised in early childhood professional workloads and position descriptions, otherwise it relies on the goodwill of the lead person. Early childhood professionals have explained that this practice is not sustainable if this is not recognised as part of their professional work.

Effective and highly functioning collaborative networks already exist in Victoria and these need to be showcased and replicated in other sites. The Rapid Literature Review recommends that good practice guides for transdisciplinary networks should be included in teacher education courses and professional learning activities so that this knowledge is shared and understood by professionals. This type of information is already available with the recent publication, the *National Interdisciplinary Education Framework for Professionals Working in the Early Years* (Australia Government, Department of Education and Training, 2016). This resource is designed to be used to inform education curriculum for preparing early years professionals across disciplines and is most suited for the purposes discussed here. The framework focuses on the diverse demands of multiple professions, qualification levels and workforce agendas in an interdisciplinary educational context. It contains a statement of common outcomes for children from birth to five years, an interdisciplinary map highlighting training and professional requirements in selected children's

services professions and a statement of universal essential elements (knowledge, skills and attributes) required for working with children from birth to five years of age. This framework can be viewed and downloaded at the [Flinders University website](#).

The literature reveals that services and individuals working in isolation can be a challenge for professionals who wish to support children and families (Press & Woodrow, 2005). There might be limited or no access to a transition network, or competing funding, or a focus on their own organisation's agendas without consideration of others. These issues can create barriers and prevent seamless transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability, whereas developing reciprocal links across services is recognised as important in engaging families (Soriano, Clark & Wise, 2008).

Effective and promising practices

While the Rapid Literature Review was able to separate effective or promising practices into types of vulnerability (children and families who have experienced trauma, children living in Out of Home Care (OoCH), refugee children and their families, and children and families affected by intergenerational poverty), such clear cut divisions were not as evident in the Practice Review analysis. Practice, within these data, spoke more to the tailoring of transition practices and approaches to the uniqueness and diversity of each family. Tailoring transition processes and activities were seen as a respectful and effective way to ensure the needs of each child and family experiencing vulnerability who were part of early years transitions were met and this should occur as early on as possible. The data and findings of the Practice Review and Rapid Literature Review centered on the importance of getting to know each family and their circumstances as a way of making transition processes appropriate, accessible and responsive to each family. Building relationships with families was seen as supporting this work (Barnes, 2003).

Within the Practice Review data there is some defining of specific practices and approaches that are aligned with types of vulnerability, especially those related to working with children and families who have experienced trauma, working within regulations for children in Out of Home Care, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families. However, it must be noted that professionals reported that they support families holistically and do not separate out individual vulnerabilities families might have. Many of the families that were supported by professionals were experiencing 'multiple disadvantages' which equates to more than one form of vulnerability and disadvantage, whether it was social, economic, psychological or health related (Department of Social Services, 2015). Research confirms the views expressed by professionals in the Practice Review that holistic approaches are best implemented to meet the complex needs of families experiencing multiple vulnerabilities, and 'integrated services and whole family policies and interventions' as a positive way forward (Davidson, Bunting & Webb, 2012, p. 7).

Resources for supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions can vary, depending on a number of factors. Resources such as personnel and time, teaching and learning resources, information and support for families, and funding all play a part in enhancing the type of support given to families, or the lack of support. Personnel and time has been mentioned by professionals as the greatest resource, as people and time are needed to develop relationships with organisations, to connect with support staff and schools and to ensure smooth and seamless transitions. Time to properly carry out enhanced transition related activities with children and families experiencing vulnerabilities was considered a major issue for many services, along with maintaining collaborative relationships with others across services (Astbury, 2009).

Professionals noted how beneficial it would be if all families experiencing vulnerability had access to a funded kindergarten program for three-year olds, not just the small group of families that currently have access to this support. They maintained that due to the length of time it takes to carry out assessments and to get referrals during kindergarten for four-year olds, if children attended a kindergarten program for three-year olds it would provide children with two years of preschool education and professionals with adequate time to build relationships with children and families.

Partnerships with families

Establishing connections with families and building trusting relationships was considered essential as a way of not only gathering more information about each family and their situation, but also as a way of assisting children and families to feel valued, informed and connected (Anning et al. 2007; Attride-Stirling et al. 2001). Early childhood professionals who engage in partnerships with families respect the uniqueness of every person and family. They share their professional expertise and knowledge with families and create culturally inclusive environments where

families' expertise is viewed as valid, significant and valuable (DET 2017). Feeling connected and valued depends on professionals having time to spend working with families as well as ensuring effective communication between services and families. The Practice Review noted many ways in which the usual forms of communication had to be adapted by professionals to be more aware and respectful of family experiences. Changes included professionals talking issues through with families rather than relying on written documentation, and professionals following up written communication with a phone call to check family member's understanding, giving smaller amounts of information at a time, and having information translated into community languages. Assisting families to understand the significance of early education appears vitally important in order to ensure transition activities are valued so that children attend. This links to a positive start to school for children, families and teachers.

It takes time and effort to develop positive and trusting relationships (Mitchell, Wylie & Carr, 2008; Goodfellow, 2006) therefore educators and professionals with dedicated time to support families can enhance the relationship. The type of support noted in the Practice Review included professionals assisting families to complete forms and to access services, being available to families when they need to connect, and referring them to specialist services. Other support provided by professionals includes attending school visits with families, holding meetings between families and specialist services, attending transition events with children and families along with providing transport to transition activities where required.

Acknowledging families' diverse backgrounds and working *with* families rather than *doing things to* families was a key theme that arose from the Practice Review findings. Included in the description about how professionals can effectively and respectfully work with families was being open to understanding diverse backgrounds of families, taking an interest in their personal situations, and by listening attentively to families' personal needs (Soriano, Clark & Wise, 2008). An issue of significance for families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions was the school environment, and whether school staff members were understanding of their situations and were welcoming, or not. Families experiencing vulnerability said that they often lacked confidence approaching ECEC services and schools, making transitions challenging. Yet, if professionals were welcoming, accommodating and willing to offer additional support, this made a huge difference to their levels of confidence and enthusiasm. What worked well during early years transitions according to many of the focus group family members was when educators, centre directors, primary school teachers, principals and other professionals welcomed them and took the time to get to know their children and their individual situation. Having a support person or key worker designated as the main contact for each child and family experiencing vulnerability facilitates relationship building and can act to overcome barriers the family may be experiencing. 'Key working' is an integrated and coordinated approach providing emotional, practical and specialist support to children and their families across care, education and health (Mengoni, Oates, & Bardsley, 2014) and can generate good outcomes for children and families (Beecham, Sloper, Greco & Webb, 2007).

According to family members, part of a welcoming environment is where families' diverse backgrounds and experiences are both acknowledged and respected. Barnes (2003) notes cultural awareness and sensitivity as one of six factors essential for the engagement of families experiencing vulnerability. Family members noted how well some professionals did at communicating clearly with them and taking the time to get to know their children. Other family members suggested that there could be further improvements so that early years professionals could be more aware and respectful of diverse family backgrounds including cultural differences.

Building professional knowledge, skills and attitudes

Building professional knowledge, skills and attitudes to working respectfully and effectively with children and families experiencing vulnerability needs consideration (Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2009). This is a finding of the Rapid Literature Review as well as the Practice Review. Professional learning related to working with children and families who have experienced trauma was considered extremely worthwhile, as was knowledge related to cultural awareness, vulnerability more generally especially relating to identifying children experiencing vulnerability. Also identified in the Practice Review were a host of resources and websites which would be useful for early childhood professionals and their work with families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions.

The *Transition Learning and Development Statement* (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) 2009b) featured in the Practice Review as a useful document for professionals and the main source of information transfer between services. The *Transition Kit* (DEECD, 2009a) seemed to be less well known across the sectors but where it was being used, it was applauded for containing extremely useful information about transition. Pre-service early childhood education and care training was suggested as a place where more information could be disseminated relating to working with children and families experiencing vulnerability, especially during times of

transition. In addition, the Rapid Literature Review findings maintain that a clear, structured roadmap of resources, programs and referral information relevant to children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability, on a regional basis is curated. The Practice Review highlights the documenting of effective practice as exemplars and case studies to share.

Further research

Identified within the Rapid Literature Review and the Practice Review is the need for the further facilitation of program development and evaluation specific to children and families experiencing vulnerability making early years transitions. A lack of formal evaluation of programs and what are deemed as 'effective practices' means there is a dearth of data related to the effectiveness of what is currently in place across Victoria. Informal evaluations highlight anecdotal 'success' stories but more formal, rigorous evaluations need to be developed and implemented.

In addition, having an ability to evaluate a program or initiative's effectiveness and impact on families would assist professionals in being able to secure further funding and resources. However, as one child protection worker points out, occasionally there are evaluative components attached to project funding and these activities can be too ambitious with limited resources and this can take valuable time away from working with families themselves. Therefore, there needs to be a balance between project outcomes, evaluation expectations and time to carry out the important work with families.

Options

Option 1

Formal networks are established, or existing networks built upon, that have the scope to collaborate around transition to school processes and practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability

These networks will have the capacity to work with families in a more holistic way, such as streamlining referral processes, reducing duplication and sharing of information across the services. It is important that schools are key players in these networks, and that the networks are sustainable with supporting policies and procedures in place.

Option 2

Robust evaluation systems are embedded across the cross-sector network to provide evidence of impact to improve transition practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability

Having a systematic process to document and assess programs and initiatives enables promising practices to be identified and replicated across the sectors. The assessment of the impact of many programs, strategies and actions supporting families and children experiencing vulnerability is often informal, ad hoc or non-existent.

Option 3

The revised VEYLDF and Transition to School Kit be promoted more widely across sectors

Promoting these resources widely will increase the likelihood of them being taken up by services. This has the potential of facilitating shared language, discussion and actions around effective transition practices across sectors. Many programs featured valued these aspects of practice.

Option 4

There is a focus on building the capacity of staff working with children and families experiencing vulnerability with targeted professional learning delivered across the sector

Professional skills and knowledge benefit from enhancement with regard to working respectfully and inclusively with children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. It is recommended that professional learning is delivered cross-sector to support transdisciplinarity and consistency of practice and that pre-service teacher education better equips educators and teachers to work with children and families experiencing vulnerabilities.

Option 5

Each network has a designated 'leader' who can champion transitions at network meetings and is recognised for this work

Programs reported the benefits of having a designated leader to support the group to keep transitions on the agenda of networks, raising awareness of the complexity of transitioning children and families within the locality.

Option 6

Increase the participation of younger children experiencing vulnerability in early childhood education and care, for example fully-funded kindergarten programs for three-year-olds across Victoria.

Having younger children (0-3 years) in ECEC programs assists with identifying children experiencing vulnerability and connecting them into services early in life, with the aim of mitigating and reducing the effects of disadvantage

Option 7

Communication and confidentiality protocols that are easy to navigate and timely, and are jointly developed by networks that enable the sharing of information across services to better support the transitions of children and families experiencing vulnerability

Programs that shared information had a better informed services system and promoted the building of trust between services and personnel.

Option 8

A 'key' transition person at school is aligned to each child and family experiencing vulnerability

Programs that had a dedicated key transition person enabled a trusting relationship to develop with children and families. This person could be a primary school teacher or support worker. This can enhance understandings, tailoring of transition processes, and sharing of information between the school and family.

Option 9

Funding options are considered to allow for ECEC educators and primary school teachers time and resources to work effectively with each other, and more intensely and closely with families experiencing vulnerability

Time management was considered a major barrier for all services. Through having designated time and resources professionals will be able to be more supportive of children and families experiencing vulnerability.

Option 10

A strategy to facilitate better understanding and utilisation of the Transition Learning and Development Statement within schools is developed

Some participants indicated a limited understanding of how to use the Transition Learning and Development Statement, especially taking a strength-based approach when articulating vulnerabilities. Further support is required to ensure shared understanding, common language use relating to transitions, child development and learning. This has the potential to significantly influence transition processes and build continuity of practice across ECEC and school settings.

Option 11

Case studies documenting promising practices are recorded and disseminated so effective practices can be replicated across Victoria

Exemplar case studies shared across the sector will address issues of consistency and cohesion in practice and promote critical reflection and professional dialogue.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: QUALTRICS SURVEY

The Transition Practice Review Survey was created in *Qualtrics*, encompassing multiple choice and open-ended responses to enable qualitative and quantitative data collection. The information and questions provided to respondents is included in its entirety as follows, the survey is not accessible and the following is not a functional form.

Transition Practice Review Survey in Word

Introduction: You are invited to participate in the 'Support for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability in early years transitions: practice review', funded and supported by the Victorian Department of Education and Training and conducted by Deakin University researchers Professor Andrea Nolan and Dr Anna Kilderry.

This project will identify and map the existing supports and effective practices in relation to early years transitions for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerable circumstances, especially transition to school. Information will be collected via a survey designed for professionals across disciplines who support children and families experiencing vulnerability in a direct or indirect way during times of transition. This includes children and families experiencing trauma and those associated with child protection, refugee families, children in out-of-home care, children affected by intergenerational poverty, and other forms of disadvantage. The survey results will inform focus groups to be held across Victoria.

The focus groups will capture a deeper understanding of existing programs and strategies that enable positive transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. At the end of the survey there is an opportunity to nominate yourself to be a participant in a focus group. An outcome will be a set of recommendations about how best to support early childhood education and care professionals and primary school teachers to improve transitions for families and children at risk of experiencing vulnerability, including working in transdisciplinary teams. This practice review will also inform the 'Transition: A Positive Start to School' initiative.

Taking part in the research is voluntary. It is anticipated that completing this survey will take approximately 20 minutes. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. Deciding not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Deakin University.

Once you have read the Plain Language Statement (accessed by clicking the link) and agree to participate in the survey, your completion of the survey implies consent. Any identifying information such as your name and the name of your workplace will be replaced with a pseudonym throughout the research project. Survey participants can elect to have their service / setting / organisation be in the draw to win one of 5 iPads to be used for educational purposes. The winning services will be randomly selected. We appreciate your time and expertise.

DEFINITION: Key transitions = including transition from home, out-of-home care and /or other programs/services to ECEC services and to school.

DEFINITION: Vulnerability = children vulnerable to child abuse, neglect and exclusion including children and families affected by trauma especially those known to Child Protection and Family Service, children at risk of intergenerational poverty, refugees and children in out of home care.

Question 1: I agree to take part in this survey:

1. Yes
2. No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to End of Survey

Question 2: State your name

Question 3: Please enter your qualifications and the year they were obtained

1. Name of qualification
2. Year Awarded

Question 4: Number of years' experience in the early childhood education and care sector (please select)

1. Under 12 months
2. 1 to 3 years
3. 4 to 9 years
4. 10 to 15 years
5. +15 years

Question 5a: State the name of your organisation

Question 5b: State your position within the organisation

Question 6: State the suburb or town where your work is based

Question 7: State the postcode of your workplace

Question 8a: Do you play a role in supporting children and families through transitions?

1. Yes
2. No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to What do you see as a positive transit

Question 8b: What is your role?

Question 8c: Do these transitions include children and families experiencing vulnerability?

1. Yes
2. No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to What do you see as a positive transit

Question 8d: What makes these children and families vulnerable? (choose all those that apply)

- Trauma (1)
- Child protection issues (2)
- Refugee families (3)
- Children in out-of-home care (4)
- Poverty (5)
- other forms of disadvantage (please name here) (6)

Question 8e: What resources have you found useful in your transition role /work with children and families experiencing vulnerability?

Question 8f: How do you use these resources?

Question 8g: Do you change your approach for children and families experiencing vulnerability during times of transition?

1. Yes
2. No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to What do you see as a positive transit

Question 8h: What changes do you make?

Question 9: What do you see as a positive transition to early childhood services or schools for children and families experiencing vulnerability?

Question 10a: Are you aware of effective transition processes and practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability in your region? (For a 'yes' response, please provide as much detail about these as possible in the text box below, such as the name and location of the transition program/practice, and contact details for key personnel if known and publicly available).

1. Name
2. Location
3. Key Personnel

Question 10b: What processes are in place to assess the impact of these programs and practices on positive transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability?

Question 11a: What would you see as non-negotiable to support children and families experiencing vulnerability during transitions?

Question 11b: How would this differ depending on the type of vulnerability that the children and families are experiencing?

Question 12: What would you see as the barriers to supporting effective transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability?

Question 13: Are you involved in or do you know of any existing transition networks/ groups that are operating in your region that support children and families experiencing vulnerability? (ie. a group of colleagues that meet to discuss and share ideas around transition). If yes please provide the details

1. Name of the network/group
2. Location
3. Name and contact details of one of the members if it is publicly available

Question 14: Do you see any gaps in the coordination mechanisms for supporting positive early years transition for children and families experiencing vulnerability? Please comment.

Question 15: I engage with the following professionals. Where you indicate that you engage with a professional, in the associated text box, please specify who initiates this engagement and the nature of this engagement.

- Primary school teachers
- Early childhood educators
- Speech pathologists
- Maternal and Child Health Nurses
- Child Psychologists
- Social Workers
- Family Day Carers
- Family Services Professionals
- Child Protection Practitioners
- Other (please specify)
- I do not engage with any professionals

Question 16: How is information relating to children and families experiencing vulnerability transferred between ECEC services and schools and other services during times of transition?

Question 17: Have you undertaken professional development related to transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability?

1. Yes
2. No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip to What could your workplace do to better...

Question 18: Detail the professional development you have undertaken related to transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. Please list the name of the PD, the organisation running the PD, and the cost associated with attending the PD if known.

1. Name of the PD
2. Organisation running the PD
3. Associated cost
4. How effective was the PD? (not/moderate/very effective)

Question 19: What could your workplace do to better support you in your transition work with children / families experiencing vulnerability?

Question 20: Is there anything else you would like to mention related to this topic?

Question 21a: Would you be prepared to be a participant in a focus group on this topic to be held in rural, regional and metropolitan areas around the State of Victoria?

1. Yes
2. No

Question 21b: If yes please add your name and contact details.

Question 22: Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. If you would like your service / setting / organisation to be in the draw to win one of 5 iPads for educational purposes please add your email address here.

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.
Your response has been recorded.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY RESPONDENT ORGANISATION AND ROLE

The Tables below provide details of survey respondents by DET Region and Area, their organisation type and their role within the organisation.

North-Western Victoria

Mallee

Organisation	Role
P-10 / P-12 College & College	Principal, Prep Teacher, Lead Teacher
Primary Schools	Principal, English as an Additional Language Coordinator
Rural City Councils	Early Years Coordinator, Children's Advocate and Enhanced MCH worker
Community Childcare	Advisor
Department of Education and Training	Koorie Engagement Support officer, Early Childhood Performance and Planning Advisor
Department of Education and Training Specialist Children's Services - Early Intervention	Social Worker
Family Support Service provider	Regional Manager of Family and Community Services
Family Care Service provider	Team Leader Home Based Care, Playgroup Coordinator
Preschool	Director - ECT, Ed Leader, Nominated Supervisor
District Health Services	Early Years Coordinator
Disability Service Provider	Early Childhood Intervention Professional- Speech Pathologist

Loddon

Organisation	Role
Council Kindergarten, Preschool	Kindergarten Teacher, Teacher/Educational Leader
Department of Education and Training	Koorie Engagement Support Officer
Department of Education and Training, Specialist children's services	Physiotherapist in the early intervention team
Primary School, District School	Teacher Foundation, Leading Teacher Wellbeing
Long Day Care Community	Educational Leader

Hume Moreland

Organisation	Role
Preschool	Early Childhood Teacher / Educational Leader
Playgroup Victoria	Early Years professional
Vic Foundation for Survivors of Torture	Early Years professional
Disability Support Services Provider	Family Services Coordinator; Coordinator
Specialist School	Assistant Principal

Organisation	Role
Council	Best Start Facilitator

North-Eastern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Higher Education Institution	Senior Lecturer
Local Councils	Maternal and Child Health Nurse; Coordinator; Team Leader Family & Children's Services; Coordinator Children and Community Development; ECT; Universal Maternal and Child Health Nurse
Early Childhood Intervention Service (Not For Profit)	Team Manager
Community Protection Service	Executive Manager Early Years
Preschools (Council; cluster managed and Community)	Kindergarten: 4 year old teacher, Teacher and co-ordinator; Kindergarten Teacher; Teacher, centre Educational Leader, member of Pedagogical Leadership team for the cluster

North-Eastern Victoria

Ovens Murray

Organisation	Role
Junior College	School Disabilities and Welfare Team Leader
Department of Education and Training	Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO); Early Childhood Performance and Planning Adviser
Shire Council	Maternal and Child Health Nurse
Primary Schools	Principals
Kindergarten	Director
Childcare	Director

Goulburn

Organisation	Role
Kindergartens	Kindergarten teacher; Kindergarten Teacher & Acting Early Years Services Coordinator
Shire Councils	Team Leader Maternal and Child Health and Immunisation
Department of Education and Training	Senior Transition Officer
Community Education Provider (School/Kinder co-located)	Curriculum Coordinator; Kindergarten Director
Occasional Care Centre	Service Leader
Primary College, P-12 College	Business Manager, Principal

Outer Eastern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Mission Australia	Early Childhood Professional
Primary School	Foundation Teacher; Assistant Principals; School Chaplain and Maternal & Child Health Nurse
Children's Centre	Director
Council	Maternal & Child Health Nurse; Supported Playgroup Facilitator; Preschool Teacher/ Educational Leader; Coordinator, Early Years Strategy Planning and Evaluation; Project Officer, Early and Middle Years Planner
Children's Centre; Preschool (Council run)	Educational Leader; Teacher and Educational Leader
Maternal Child Health	Nurse - universal service, Maternal Child Health Nurse
Family Day Care	Director
Community and Family Centre	2IC and Educational Leader
Community Health Service	Community Nurse

Inner Eastern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Aurora School Early Intervention	Specialist Teacher
Department of Education and Training	Manager Inclusion Access and Participation

South-Eastern Victoria**Outer Gippsland**

Organisation	Role
P-8 College; Primary School	Principal; Principal
Community Childcare provider; Children's Centre & Kindergarten	Kindergarten teacher; Director, Kindergarten teacher
Private Early Learning Centre	Centre Manager

Inner Gippsland

Organisation	Role
Community Childcare provider	Educational leader/ 4 year old group teacher; Early Years Practice Leader
Early Learning Centres (NFP and private)	Centre Director; Director/Teacher
Kindergarten	Teacher

Bayside Peninsula

Organisation	Role
Preschool	Kindergarten Teacher
Primary School	Prep teacher
Children's centres	Quality Supervisor; Early Childhood Teacher
Council	Team Leader Maternal Child Health Nurse
Specialised Training Service	Early Childhood Education and Care Specialist
Out of School Hours Care	Early Childhood Professional

Southern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Primary School	Foundation teacher
Kindergarten	4 year old group teacher
Out of School Hours Care	Early Childhood Professional
Local Council	Kindergarten teacher; Kindergarten Teacher / Educational Leader / Nominated Supervisor; Best Start Facilitators; Playgroup Development Officer; PSFOs; Team Leader Children's Services Support
Volunteer Not-for-profit organisation	Community Impact Coordinator
Family Day Care providers	Nominated Supervisor; Educational Leader; Team Leader; Team Leader Family Services; Early Intervention Teacher
Early Learning Centres (cluster and private)	Centre Director; Director
Mission Australia	Early Childhood Professional
Children's Service	Director

South-Western Victoria

Western District

Organisation	Role
Shire Council / City Council	Coordinator Maternal & Child Health/ Immunisation Services; Team Leader of Education and Care (Kindergarten Cluster); Coordinator Parenting and Child Services
PreSchool, Kindergarten	Directors; Director/teacher; Teacher; EC Teacher
Department of Education and Training	Specialist Children's Services - Early Intervention Worker
Primary School	Classroom teacher; Foundation/One class teacher
Child and Family Centre	Educational Leader/ room Leader/ Parent Support and Child Development Officer
Ozchild, Council – Health and wellbeing program	Aboriginal Early Years Support Educator - (Playgroups & Home visiting model), Early Years Educator through the SEIDS programs - OZCHILD, Supported Play group facilitator, Early Years Professionals
College	Teacher
South West Healthcare FaPMI (Families where a parent has a mental illness)	Early Years Coordinator

Barwon

Organisation	Role
Council Health Service - Colac	Child First Co-ordinator, Family & Children Services Coordinator
School; College	Principal; Teacher; Community Team Leader 0-8 years, Community Liaison: Early Years Family Engagement
Child, Youth and Family Service	Coordinator Early Years; Youth Services Team Leader
Private Early Learning Centre	Kindergarten Teacher
Private Support Services	Early intervention advisor/Special education preschool teacher; PSFO
Playgroup Victoria	Not stated
Childcare (Council)	Early Childhood teacher; Centre Director; Kindergarten Teacher
Geelong Kindergarten Association	Four year old kindergarten teacher
Child and Family Centre	Kindergarten Teacher, Educational Leader & Nominated Supervisor
Aboriginal Co-operative	Family Services Team Leader

Central Highlands

Organisation	Role
Shire Council; Local Council	Best Start Community Facilitator; Manager MCH and Immunisation; Kindergarten Team Leader
Private Preschool; Community Preschool	Nominated Supervisor/ 4 year old educator; Kindergarten Teacher/Educational Leader
Department of Education and Training	Koorie Engagement Support Officer
Primary School	Principal; Foundation-2 teacher

Brimbank Melton

Organisation	Role
Family Service Provider	Playgroup facilitator and play helper
Child and Family Health Service Provider	Playgroup facilitator and play helper
Community Health Care Provider	Occupational therapist with the child health team
Kindergartens; Children's Centre (Private; Community and Not for profit)	Educational Leader; Educational Leader/ Teacher; Four-year-old teacher, Nominated Supervisor and educational Leader; Teacher in Charge; Director and Kindergarten teacher; Diploma Educator
Early Childhood Intervention Service	Early Childhood Intervention Professional
Playgroup Victoria	Early Childhood Professional
School	Principal
Councils	PSFOs; Playgroup Support Officer; Bicultural worker

Western Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Council	PSFO; Maternal and Child Health Nurse Project Officer; Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Nurse; Maternal and Child Health Nurse; Kindergarten Teacher/Team Leader/Educational Leader; Team Leader Maternal and Child Health; Centre coordinator; Team Leader Early Years Sector Support and Family Strengthening; Pedagogical Leader; PSFO
Childcare Centres; Preschool; Long Day Care Centre	Director; Kindergarten Teacher; Educational Leader; ECT; Assistant Coordinator
Family Day Care Provider	Co-Director/Operational Manager; Director; Operator Director (South Sudanese Community)
Department of Education and Training	ECIS Intake Worker; Senior Transition Officer; Visiting Primary School Nurse; Manager MCH
Child and Family Health Service Provider	Early Childhood Professional; Manager
Specialist Children's Services	Psychologist and Key Worker

Organisation	Role
Community Health Service Provider	Program Manager IFS and specialist children's services and counsellor
Kindergarten & Childcare Provider (Not for profit)	Area manager
Foundation House	Early Years Professional
Commission for Children and Young People	Officer
Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO)	Support Worker
Church and international charitable organisation	Parenting Support Practitioner
Community based employment and training provider	National Disability Coordination Officer
Out of School Hours Care provider	Early Years Professional
Primary School	Principal

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE – PROFESSIONALS

The following schedule was developed and used for focus group meetings with professionals to ensure protocols and questions asked were consistent with the project guidelines.

Transition Practice Review: Focus group Schedule – Professionals

- Ensure all participants are greeted and given their name badges
- Collect signed Consent Forms before the session begins. If participants don't arrive with their signed forms then have them sign a spare form
- Have refreshments available on arrival and encourage partaking throughout the meeting

Activity (1 – 5) / Timing

Activity 1: Introduction (allow 5 minutes):

- Acknowledgement to Country
- I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we are gathered and pay my respects to their Elders both past and present.
- General welcome & introductions
- Reason for meeting

Activity 2: Background for project & work to date: Transitions - Practice Review and focus group Meeting (allow 3 minutes):

- This practice review will identify and map the existing supports and effective practices in relation to transition to school for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability. This includes children and families experiencing trauma and those associated with child protection, refugee families, children in out-of-home care, children affected by intergenerational poverty, and other forms of disadvantage.
- A state-wide survey has been circulated to professionals across early childhood services and schools. This survey has informed focus groups which are also being held across Victoria.
- An outcome of this review will be a set of recommendations to the Department about how best to support primary school teachers and early childhood professionals to improve transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability. The findings of the practice review will also be used to guide practice and will be reflected in the 'Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit'.
- We anticipate that the focus group Meeting (regardless of the format) will take approximately one hour, I will ask a series of questions related to successful transition initiatives that have been implemented by the group; network; area; individual organisation.
- (A copy of the questions has been provided, you may like to write notes and leave with (me) at the end of the meeting, any additional information can be included as data for this focus group meeting.)

Activity 3: Notes for facilitator (allow 5 minutes)

- Refer to the 'plain language statement and consent forms' - copies available, please read complete and leave with me (facilitator);
- Remind participants that the meeting will be audio recorded and details of names / people and organisations will be anonymised and de-identified;
- Participants are requested to be respectful of each participant and to maintain confidentiality;
- Chair of meeting: TURN ON RECORDER / moderate; time keep; wind up meeting.

Activity 4: Questions to prompt discussion. NB. Remind that the responses will be audio recorded. (allow 50 minutes – check timing):

1a. Please describe the intentional actions you take as an individual or as part of a group, to support transitions for children/families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage and explain how these actions support children and their families.

1b. Does this differ depending on the type of vulnerability? (trauma and those associated with child protection, refugee families, children in out-of-home care, children affected by intergenerational poverty, and other forms of disadvantage).

2a. What resources do you use to support you in this process and do you know the costs involved?

- Personnel – absorbed in the role; separate payment in the role
- Purchase of (physical) resources
- 'In kind'
- Other

2b. How do you/could you sustain these targeted transition programs?

3. What processes are used to assess the impact of programs/strategies/initiatives on positive transitions for children and families experiencing vulnerability?

4. What do you see as the barriers that have to be overcome to implement this program/strategies?

5. What works well to ensure the success of transition for children/families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage?

6. How crucial is the support / involvement of networks/ multidisciplinary teams in supporting these transitions

7. What makes these multidisciplinary teams and networks successful or not in this transition space?

8. Any other comments - TURN OFF RECORDER

Activity 5: Notes for facilitator (allow 5 minutes):

- Thank you participants for your time and valuable input
- Reiterate confidentiality; follow up procedure for complaints / counselling (refer to PLS for contact details)
- Reminder that the information collected will be anonymised and de-identified and will become part of a final report to DET.
- We have contact details for the Project Manager if you would like any further follow up

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS – FAMILIES/PARENTS

The following schedule was developed and used for focus group meetings with families/parents to ensure protocols and questions asked were consistent with the project guidelines.

Transition Practice Review – Focus group Questions – Families/Parents

Focus group questions will focus on the Transition initiative the Focus group members are involved with. These questions will ask about:

1. Please tell us about you and your child's transition to school experience.
 - What happened?
 - How were you and your child involved?
2. What were the best things about this for you and your child?
3. How could this have been improved to better support you and your child during the transition?
4. Any other comments you would like to make about the transition to school process for you and your child

APPENDIX E: PROFESSIONAL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT ORGANISATION AND ROLE

The Tables below provide details of professional focus group participants by DET Region and Area, their organisation type and their role within the organisation.

North-Western Victoria

Mallee

Organisation	Role
Rural City Councils	Early Years Coordinator, Project Officer, Director Community Wellbeing
Department of Education and Training	Early Years Koorie Engagement Support Officer, Early Childhood Performance and Planning Advisor
Family Care Service	Program Coordinator and Access to Early Learning Worker
Preschool / Kindergarten	Kindergarten Teacher; Director - ECT, Ed Leader, Nom Supervisor
Support Service	Educator

Loddon

Organisation	Role
Out-of-home-care provider	Participation Support Facilitator - Preschool Early Years Unit
Department of Education and Training	ECIS Intake Officer Early Childhood Intervention Services Intake

Hume Moreland

Organisation	Role
Vic Foundation for Survivors of Torture	Early Years Professional
Local Council	Access to Early Learning Facilitator

North-Eastern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Department of Education and Training	Early Childhood Performance and Planning Leader; Early Childhood Performance and Planning Adviser; Senior Transition Officer
Primary Schools; College	Principal; Pathways & Transition Coordinator; Teachers; Leading Teacher of Positive Behaviour Support and Wellbeing
Local Councils	Best Start Leader; MetroAccess Officer (disability portfolio); Preschool Field Officers; Maternal and Child Health Nurse; Community Renewal Officer; Early Years Coordinator
Community Health Service Provider	Senior Transition Officer
Children's Services Advocate	Executive Director
Kindergarten	Kindergarten Teacher

North-Eastern Victoria

Ovens Murray

Organisation	Role
Kindergarten	Director
Community Childcare Agency	Early Childhood Resource and Development Officer

Goulburn

Organisation	Role
Kindergartens	Kindergarten teacher;
Local Councils	Best Start Coordinator; Acting Manager Children's and Youth Services
Department of Education and Training	Senior Transition Officer; Early Childhood Performance and Planning Adviser
Welfare Agency (Not for Profit)	Team Leader Communities for Children

Outer Eastern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Department of Education and Training	Senior Transition Officer (Acting); DET Early Childhood Performance and Planning Adviser
Primary School	Leading Teacher; Prep Teacher
Council	Best Start Community Facilitator; Project Officer, Early and Middle Years Planner; Project Officer – Early Years Team;
Preschools & Kindergarten (cluster managed; DET funded; Independent)	Educational Leader; Teacher and Educational Leader; Teacher, centre Educational Leader, member of Pedagogical Leadership team for the cluster; Manager
Maternal Child Health	Nurse - universal service
Migrant support service	Settlement worker
Family support Service	Team Leader – Housing & Support
Community Health Service	Midwife/Community Health Nurse

Inner Eastern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Australian Childhood Foundation	Early Years Professionals
Department of Education and Training	Manager Inclusion Access and Participation
Preschool (Council)	Preschool Teacher/ Educational Leader

South-Eastern Victoria

Outer Gippsland

Organisation	Role
Community based service agency	Practice Leader for client services

Inner Gippsland

Organisation	Role
Department of Education and Training	Koorie Engagement Support Officer

Bayside Peninsula

Organisation	Role
Kindergarten Cluster Management provider	Assistant Manager; Senior Intake and Assessment Worker for Child FIRST
Primary School	Prep teacher
Not-for-profit organisation that works toward a vision of an Australia free of poverty	Coordinator
Council	Coordinator Library Engagement
Foster care provider	CEO

Southern Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Early Childhood Development Service	Early Intervention Teacher
Local Council	Kindergarten Teacher / Educational Leader / Nominated Supervisor; Best Start Facilitators;
Volunteer Not-for-profit organisation	Manager Strategic Development
Family Day Care providers	Early Intervention Teacher
Primary School	Welfare Officer
Out of School Hours Care provider	Nominated supervisor
Vic Foundation for Survivors of Torture	Support Worker
Children's Service	Director
Community School	Linking Learning facilitator / teacher

South-Western Victoria

Western District

Organisation	Role
Shire Council / City Council	Senior Nurse Maternal & Child Health; Team Leader of Education and Care (Kindergarten Cluster; Koorie Engagement Support Officer; Parent Support & Child Development Officer; Children's Services Manager
PreSchool, Kindergarten	Teaching Director; Kindergarten Teacher; Director
Primary School	Principal; Classroom teacher; Foundation/One class teacher
Ozchild, Council – Health and wellbeing program	Aboriginal Early Years Support Educator - (Playgroups & Home visiting model), Early Years Educator through the SEIDS programs - OZCHILD , Supported Play group facilitator, Stepping Stones to School Facilitator

Barwon

Organisation	Role
Council Health Service	Early Years Worker (Maternal Health Nurse)
School	Campus Principal;
Child, Youth and Family Service	Coordinator Early Years; Team Leader; Early Learning Development Officer - Health Promotion
Early Learning Centre	Director
Childcare (Council)	Kindergarten Teacher
Kindergarten	Educator
Child and Family Centre	Kindergarten Teacher, Educational Preservice Teacher
Aboriginal Co-operative	Family Services Team Leader

Central Highlands

Organisation	Role
Community Services Organisation	Early Childhood Development Coordinator
Early Years Management Service	Early Years Professional

Brimbank Melton

Organisation	Role
Department of Education and Training	Service Support Manager
Community Family Services Provider	Partnerships and Service Development Coordinator
Community Health Care Provider	Speech Pathologist; HIPPY Coordinator
Children's Centre	Centre Director
Councils	Playgroup Support Officer; PSFOs
Foundation House	Support Worker

Western Melbourne

Organisation	Role
Council	Team Leader Maternal and Child Health; Education and Planning (Pedagogical Leader)
Child Protection Society	Early Years Support Worker
Department of Education and Training	Early Childhood Performance & Planning Advisor Service Support Advisor

APPENDIX F: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES AS IDENTIFIED IN THE SURVEY

The Table below provides details of professional development as identified by survey respondents.

Name of PD program	Name of PD organisation	Cost of participating	Effectiveness
Anxious and Agitated Children	Jo Lange	Not known	Effective
Berry St Education Model	Berry Street	\$800	Effective
Best Interest Case Practice Model	MDAS (Mallee District Aboriginal Services)	Not known	Effective
Bridges out of Poverty	Department of Education and Training Darebin	Nil	Very
Bridges Out of Poverty	Noahs Ark	Not known	Effective
Bridges out of Poverty Anglicare	Yarra Ranges Council	Free	Not rated
Calmer Classrooms	Berry Street	Not known	Moderately
Child Protection	Australian Childhood Foundation & Department of Education and Training	Not known	Very
Child Protection	Pinke Luel Meth Family Care	\$65	Very
Coaching Young People for Success	Leaders Training Program Life Business Consultancy	Not known	Effective
Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities	Bastow Institute	Not known	Very
Common Risk Framework Level 1	Communities for Children	Nil	Very
Communities for Children Brimbank	The Smith Family	Nil	Moderately
Child Protection Society	Yarra ranges Council	Free	Not rated
Cultural Diversity Training	VICSEG (Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups)	\$200 per person	Very
Developing a Shared Language Approach to Transition	Darebin	Not known	Moderate
DHS (Department of Human Services) Role	DHS (Department of Human Services)	None	Effective
Effects on Trauma	Murdoch Institute	Not known	Not rated

Name of PD program	Name of PD organisation	Cost of participating	Effectiveness
Engaging Vulnerable Families	Visy Hub Brimbank	Nil	Moderately
Engaging Vulnerable Families	Department of Education and Training	Not known	Not rated
First Aid, Asthma, Anapalahaxis	Pinke Luel Meth Family Care	\$250	Very
Food handling	Pinke Luel Meth Family Care	\$60	Very
Fun Friends	N/R	Not known	Effective
Irabana	N/R	Not known	Very
Kathy Walker Play-based Curriculum	N/R	Unknown	Effective
Pop up Play	N/R	Not known	Effective
Saving Childhood	Mildura Council	Nil for parents	Very
SKIPS (Supporting Kids In Primary Schools)	SKIPS	Free	Very
Smalltalk Training	Parenting Research Centre	Not known	Very
Social and Emotional Literacy	Austin Health	Unsure	Very
Sunsmart	Pinke Luel Meth Family Care	\$50	Very
Toxic Stress and Trauma in Young Children	Australian Childhood Foundation	Nil	Very
Transition to School Pilot Professional Learning	Department of Education and Training	Nil	Moderately
Transition Statement Debrief Session	Yarra Ranges Council	Free	Not rated
Trauma Training: online	Australian Childhood Foundation	Free	Moderate
Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework	Tracy Columb, Project Officer	Not known	Not known
Working to Influence	Department of Education and Training	Not known	Very
Working Together Workshop	Yarra Ranges Council	Free	Not rated
Working with Families to Support Young Children's Learning	Darebin	Not known	Very

APPENDIX G: ESTIMATED COSTS OF PROMISING PRACTICES AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP DATA)

The participants provided details of programs/initiatives and professional learning opportunities which are shown in the Tables below.

Table 9: Details of Program/Initiative

Details of programs/initiatives are shown in the following Table.

Name of Program/ Initiative	Organisation	Cost
Funds available to families experiencing intergenerational poverty	Government funding	\$120 per family to purchase school uniforms
Continuing Linking Learning Network	Philanthropic funding	\$14,000 per annum to pay for dedicated workers to be employed to enable teachers and educators to meet fortnightly

Table 10: Details of Professional Learning

Details of professional learning opportunities are shown in the following Table.

Name of Professional Learning	Organisation	Cost (*It is unclear whether these are the total cost per person or program/initiative)
Cultural Diversity Training	VICSEG	\$200 per person
Berry St Education Model	Not specified	\$800*
Child Protection Seminar	Pinke Luel Meth Family Care	\$65*

There are a few reasons why programs and initiatives are difficult to cost, explained below.

Funding of transition programs and initiatives is problematic to cost accurately due to the way the sector works with and supports children and families, as much of the work is embedded into professional roles. As an example of this, a Family Support Worker might not be provided with an actual allocation for working with families experiencing vulnerability during transition to school. Instead, they might see their work with all families as part of their everyday work and choose to support families experiencing vulnerability in different ways, for example driving a family who can't afford transport to a school so they can enrol their child.

Funding transition programs and initiatives across the sector varies depending on the funding source and resources utilised by services. For example, project funding might be comprised from a mixture of local, State and philanthropic sources all with slightly different aims and objectives and project work might be part of the work the agency does, making it difficult to separate out actual costings.

Isolating transition to school programs and activities from other programs and activities aimed at supporting families experiencing vulnerability is difficult to do as the sector has a range of programs that are provided for all families from early on in children's lives. One example of this is a supported playgroup held at a primary school where parents/carers are invited to 'stay and play' with their young children. In this situation, teacher time will not necessarily be costed, and the costs for a Family Support Worker to be present would be subsumed in the role. Any other resource costs might be picked up by the school and not easily identifiable (such as room hire, materials, and so on).

Much of the funding discussion held with focus group participants related to 'teacher release' funding. This funding allows educators and teachers the time and opportunity to be released from teaching to be able to attend transdisciplinary network meetings where a number of professionals can work towards supporting families experiencing vulnerability.

Survey Respondents and focus group participants spoke about the ad hoc nature and lack of funding for programs and transition activities for working with children and families experiencing vulnerability. They explained that without these programs and transition activities being formally evaluated and assessed it is difficult to provide evidence about a program's effectiveness, and therefore makes it difficult to apply for further funding.