

School Starters 2016 Playgroup

Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School

Fairy Meadow

Report for Big Fat Smile – Illawarra Transition to School Project

Produced by Melissa Bowyer – May 2016

:: Introduction ::

As I was fairly new to the area, I had some concerns that my son, would not know many of the children he would be attending primary school with. All his pre-school friends were attending other primary schools. As the Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School is quite a large school, with up to ninety (90) children and three (3) streams per grade, I thought it would be useful if there was some way, he could meet other children before attending school. I also thought it would also be great if there was an opportunity for parents to also begin building relationships with one another, with the ability to become familiar with the school grounds.

I made an appointment in February 2015 with the School Principal Mr John Walsh and Parish Priest Fr Ron, to discuss this further. A few different ideas were discussed, and initially it was decided that a Parish based playgroup be formed, which would be fortnightly on an ongoing basis in the school hall and open to all Parishioner families with children under the age of five (5) years able to attend and activities provided. After due considerations and investigations, it was declared that the scale of this would be quite large, and would require substantial assistance from others on an ongoing basis, as well as further financial considerations to be explored.

As a result, the project was scaled down to a more specific group of people, which would be smaller and more manageable and more closely relate to the aims and original intention of the group – providing a mechanism for school starters and their families to meet. In June 2015, I met again with School Principal Mr John Walsh and Assistant Principal Mrs Sharon Smithers to discuss the new group. All parties were in agreeance and planning moved forward with their encouragement.

:: Initial Planning ::

Planning involved looking at how the group would be able to be executed, from advertising to program formation and program delivery. I contacted Big Fat Smile – Illawarra Transition to School Project and was placed in contact with Carrie Panozzo, who provided me with materials and suggestions for running the group. Carrie was an invaluable source of assistance throughout the planning and running of the program, particularly as I did not have a background in childcare, but rather in business management.

Group Name, Logo & Communication

I felt that a name suggestive of the main aim of the group was required, and so called the group “School Starters 2016 Playgroup”. I created a basic logo, by purchasing a stock image from shutter-stock and then utilising some design applications to amend this design to suit my requirements.

I used Gmail to set up a specific Gmail account which I could use for all communications with parents, the school and other support groups – schoolstartersplaygroup@gmail.com. I also set up a closed and private Facebook page to be used by parents for communication, photograph sharing and to place any notices.

Locations

I considered a number of locations, and tried to seek a balance between providing a casual environment as well as the more formal school grounds. I decided upon some initial play dates at the Guest Park Playground, combined with formal gatherings on the school grounds, utilising the school hall, as well as various rooms and outdoor areas within the school.

:: Program Informal Sessions – “Meet & Greet” ::

Initial Informal Stage Preparations

As I was managing this on my own, my aim was to keep the program simple but useful to participants and their families. I was also unsure at the early stages of what the interest, if any, would be for this program, other than been aware that there could be up to ninety (90) children involved. My approach, was to first commence with three (3) initial informal sessions, where the interest could be determined. This was planned as follows:

Date	Location	Involvement	Equipment	Food	Structure
Tues 1/9/2015 0915 -10:45am	Guest Park Playground	Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise	Use of park playground facilities	BYO lunch box morning tea & drink	1.Meet 2.Park Play Time 3.Morning Tea 4.Data Collection Forms
Tues 8/9/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	Guest Park Playground	Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise	Use of park playground facilities	BYO lunch box morning tea & drink	1.Meet 2.Park Play Time 3.Morning Tea 4.Data Collection Forms
Tues 15/9/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	Guest Park Playground	Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise	Use of park playground facilities	BYO lunch box morning tea & drink	1.Meet 2.Park Play Time 3.Morning Tea 4.Data Collection Forms

Advertising

Once the initial program was determined, I needed to develop ways of advertising the playgroup. My approach was to contact all pre-schools in the Wollongong CBD to Northern Suburbs areas and ask them if they had any students who would be attending the Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School for 2016. Of those who responded with yes, I asked for their email address, and sent a flyer to them of the program details above & my contact details. This was then placed in ‘parent pockets’ and on their notice boards. Due to privacy reasons, I was not privy to information relating to who the children were that were enrolled.

I also consulted with the school, to see if there was a possibility for my flyer to be sent out to prospective parents. This was arranged by the school, at a later stage, however not all parents received a flyer.

The response

I had an immediate and overwhelming response both to my mobile phone and email which were the contact details on the flyer, with thirty-seven (37) families registering for the program. This was higher than expected. With majority of parents both working, I believed this would be a barrier to attendance. However, many families saw the program as useful, and arranged to take time from work for a parent (both male and female) to attend, whilst others registered for a grandparent to attend. Some families opted to attend one (1) session whilst others opted to attend all three (3) sessions.

Privacy

In respecting the privacy of families, I created a basic template for parents to sign, which acted as a data collection mechanism (obtaining information such as parent/caregiver names, contact details, child name), as well as asking for permission to release photographs taken on social media and other reports.

Attendance

Parents, care-givers and children attended all three (3) sessions, completed the data collection information sheet, participated and consented to the taking of photographs to be shared on the private Facebook page. In total thirty-seven (37) children attended. It was interesting to see many parents exchanging personal contact details as well as interacting on Facebook.

Facebook

I actively utilised Facebook by encouraging parents to introduce themselves as an 'Ice Breaker' game. Many parents took the opportunity to introduce themselves, providing some background on their child and how they were feeling about attending 'big school'. Other topics were also discussed such as meal ideas for lunch boxes, and appropriate ages to commence school (i.e turning 5 or 6). Twenty-five (25) parents are still currently members of this group to the date of this report.

Photographs



:: Program Formal Sessions ::

With the three (3) sessions complete and successful, as well as positive feedback attained, I then had to consider a more formal program. I decided that a program to run over the end of term four (4) would be most appropriate, as it would act as a lead to the Christmas break, and hopefully the children wouldn't forget the experience by the time school commenced six (6) weeks later. My priority was to ensure that all sessions were held on the school grounds at the same time and day each week, so that the children could begin familiarising themselves with the surroundings and the routine of attendance.

I also wanted to devise a program which would look at the key areas which most children have trouble with when they start school. The aim was to eliminate some of that anxiety experienced by children.

External Involvement & Program

With a key theme developed for each week, I then needed to seek outside assistance with running the program. I consulted the Assistant Principal Sharon Smithers with my ideas, and she very readily accepted the program and assisted me to organise external assistance where required.

Session One: Involved contacting Carrie Panozzo at the Illawarra Transition to School Project to arrange, Billy Backpack as well as show bags for the parents and entertainment for the children.

Session Two: Sharon Smithers, the Assistant Principal led the children on a tour of the school. This involved the children been able to visualise all areas of the school, from the Church, different playgroup sections, toilets, art rooms, bubblers, school office, library, special education building and the different buildings and classrooms that house each grade of school.

Session Three: The school librarians, made some time to take the children to the school library and read them some stories with the current kindergarten year.

Session Four: This involved the 'lolly pop lady', demonstrating road safety, crossing roads at the school. Unfortunately this session was cancelled. This was due to a very large funeral been held that day, which saw majority of the school areas closed off for safety reasons.

Session Five: Our lovely canteen volunteers, gave of their time to open the canteen specifically for the children to have a tour of the canteen, and to be able to purchase some morning tea. This gave the children the opportunity to use their wallets/purses, and handle money to purchase their own food.

Session Six: For our final session before Christmas, I arranged Brinnie Sheen from 'Dragonfly Parties' to put on a Christmas show for the children. We followed this with a special morning tea, where all parents brought in a platter of Christmas delights to share.

Advertising

As I had gathered all contact details from the data collection template in the informal playgroup sessions, I was easily able to communicate with prospective parents via an email mail out and via Facebook group. In doing so, twenty-eight (28) parents/caregivers expressed interest to attend at least one (1) session, with some attending all six (6) sessions. This was a very positive response.

The program was developed as follows:

Date	Location	Involvement	Equipment	Food	Structure
Tues 3/11/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	School hall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise 2. <i>Billy backpack & Carrie</i> 3. <i>School principal</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of school hall & kitchen facilities 2. Use of chairs (musical chairs) 3. Use of audio equipment 4. Use of sporting equipment 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BYO lunch box morning tea & drink 2. Self-serve coffee/tea facilities in kitchen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet 2. <i>Billy back pack and Carrie</i> 3. <i>School principal meet</i> 4. Morning Tea 5. Attendance Sheet
Tues 10/11/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	School hall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise 2. <i>Sharon Smithers to assist with the tour</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of school hall & kitchen facilities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BYO lunch box morning tea & drink 2. Self-serve coffee/tea facilities in kitchen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet 2. <i>School Walkthrough Tour</i> 3. Morning Tea 4. Attendance Sheet
Tues 17/11/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	School hall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise 2. <i>Library Teacher to collect from Hall & show them around library & read a story</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of school hall & kitchen facilities 2. Use of library room 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BYO lunch box morning tea & drink 2. Self-serve coffee/tea facilities in kitchen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet 2. <i>Library Tour & Story Time</i> 3. Morning Tea 4. Attendance Sheet
Tues 24/11/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	School hall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise 2. <i>Lolly-pop lady to talk about road safety & a demo of crossing the road</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of school hall & kitchen facilities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BYO lunch box morning tea & drink 2. Self-serve coffee/tea facilities in kitchen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet 2. <i>Road Safety & Lolly-Pop Lady Demo & Talk</i> 3. Morning Tea 4. Attendance Sheet
Tues 1/12/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	School hall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise 2. <i>Canteen lady to talk about lunch orders & children to purchase their morning tea</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of school hall & kitchen facilities 2. Use of Canteen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BYO lunch box morning tea & drink 2. Self-serve coffee/tea facilities in kitchen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet 2. <i>Canteen Tour & Purchase Morning Tea</i> 3. Morning Tea 4. Attendance Sheet
Tues 8/12/2015 09:15 – 10:45am	School hall	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child attending school in 2016 & at least 1 parent or caregiver to supervise 2. <i>Brinnie from Dragonfly parties</i> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of school hall & kitchen facilities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BYO lunch box morning tea & drink 2. Self-serve coffee/tea facilities in kitchen 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meet 2. <i>Christmas Concert danceparty dressup</i> 3. Morning Tea 4. Attendance Sheet

Photographs



Photograph: Billy Backpack entertaining the children



Photograph: Big Fat Smile, Illawarra Transition To School Project – Parent Seminar



Photograph: Play Time, skipping roles and morning tea on the school grounds



Photograph: Library Story Time



Photograph: Dragonfly Parties Christmas Party Fun



Photograph: Dragonfly Parties Christmas Party Fun



Photograph: Dragonfly Parties Christmas Party Fun

:: Feedback ::

I received a great deal of positive feedback which I really appreciated, especially considering I had a business management background rather than childcare. Some of the feedback is shown below:

“It was a great program as the children developed friendships at the park initially which greatly helped my son when the school orientation started as he knew a few familiar faces. He then really enjoyed getting to know the school surroundings and more people in sessions on the school grounds. Highly recommend the Project as he settled in wonderfully to kindergarten” **Vanessa Morn**

“This was a fantastic initiative that Mel organised in conjunction with the Good Samaritan. Not only did the children and parents begin to form new friendships; they also had the ability to familiarise themselves with the school surroundings and various activities that occur in every day life in Kindergarten. The program gave my son confidence and definatley contirbuted to a smooth transition. Thanks Mel” **Kelly Panto**

“Thanks for everything Mel – your efforts were greatly appreciated! Merry Christmas to you and your lovely family. Looking forward to seeing you next year” **Mel Bourke**

“Laura came home and said she has had an awesome time, thank you for organising everything! Merry Xmas and we will see you in the new year! ... Laura loves that she has made some new friends and feels more settled.” **Melissa Cavenagh**

“What a great idea, and well done!” **Julie Brown**

“I love coming along with Lucia. Thanks for organising” **Lisa-Marie Brown**

“Thank you for organising... Jack came to all 3 meet and greet sessions and really enjoyed himself...I am looking forward to all the dates you have organised in November they sound fantastic” **Kylie Hawke**

"You should be proud of the experience that these families and children had. Our kindies were so settled at the beginning of the year and I'm sure your program had a great deal to do with that. Thank you so much"

Sharon Smithers, Assistant Principal, Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School

"Congratulations! We would love this group again.. Thank you" ***John Walsh, Principal, Good Samaritan Catholic Primary School***