

Balgownie PS School Starters Playgroup

Report on 2011 pilot playgroup

by Kate Smith, Toni Lea-Howie & Donna Guest

Balgownie PS School Starters Playgroup got off to a roaring start in 2011. The pilot playgroup surpassed expectations with high attendance and widespread support from parents and carers of 2012 school starters and other families within the school.

It clearly demonstrated demand for a transition to school playgroup to complement the teachers' orientation program and it showed that parents and carers value this important step in giving their children the best start to school. Most rewarding for us was seeing our core goals achieved: of helping children and adults socially and emotionally adjust to this new phase of life.



Activities in the hall.

Feedback from our survey of parents early in 2012 was overwhelmingly positive and, likewise, the kindergarten teachers were very supportive and reported they had a more settled, confident group of children this year.

Our report here explains how the playgroup evolved, provides feedback from 2012 kindergarten families and teachers and notes our recommendations on how the playgroup should proceed. Information within the report may also be of use to other schools and groups wishing to establish a transition to school playgroup.

How the playgroup evolved

In early term three, 2011, the three of us – all parents of existing children at Balgownie Public School – developed a proposal to start a transition to school playgroup. With a background in early childhood and as a current University of Wollongong Early Years student, Donna had already tried to establish the playgroup in 2010 but with limited success, as she wasn't given the green light to hold it on the schoolgrounds and promote it effectively to target families.

However Donna was keen to give it another go in 2011 and teamed up with Toni and Kate. Toni had a child starting school in 2012 and has diverse experience working in the media and community settings. Kate is a qualified teacher who has done youth work and run playgroups and she and Donna both had children due to start in 2013. We all felt strongly that an effective transition to school playgroup would improve children's abilities to settle into school socially and emotionally and serve as an important community building exercise for the school.

Donna drew on figures from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) to support our anecdotal evidence that a transition to school playgroup was needed at the school. These figures showed that 29% of children assessed from Balgownie were seen to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains and 14% developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains.

We drew up a proposal and early in term three approached new principal Aloma Stewart, who initially suggested it be called Balgownie Public School Community Playgroup. With Aloma's support, it was agreed the playgroup be established as a pilot and run in term four out of the new school hall.



Morning tea under the COLA outside the hall.

We were keen to get a head start and gauge support for the initiative, so we ran two "meet and greet" mornings at Guest Park, Fairy Meadow, in the last two weeks of term three. The school posted our playgroup flyers with its mail-out offering families a 2012 kindergarten place at the school, so we knew we were reaching our target group and everyone was informed.

The "meet and greet" sessions were held on Thursdays from 9.30am to 11am in the park with a wet weather option of heading across the road to Little Stompers Indoor Play Centre. Fortunately the weather was kind to

us on both weeks. To our delight, 19 families including ourselves, attended the first session in the park on September 15, giving us a great start for our database.

The next step was drawing up the necessary paperwork to start the playgroup in term 4 and we began advertising it weekly in the school newsletter. We established an email account to send reminders to families on the database and prepared registration sheets with permission for photos to be taken, a weekly sign-in sheet to meet the school's legal requirements about onsite visitors, a term flyer and a weekly program.

The playgroup was held in the new hall every Thursday from October 13 to December 8, starting at 9.15am after school drop-off and finishing at 10.45am before the recess bell, except on December 1 when we relocated to Guest Park because the hall was to be used by students for Christmas concert rehearsals. In the hall we had a jar for a gold coin donation to help buy supplies and a morning tea roster.

We consulted with kindergarten teacher Cheryl Phyllis to ensure we had the teachers' support and that we were working in partnership with the school. We arranged a program of weekly activities to boost the effectiveness and appeal of the playgroup (see more below).

After our first morning in the hall in week one of term 4, we approached teachers in neighbouring demountables to check on noise levels and those we spoke to indicated this was not a problem and they were very supportive of the playgroup initiative.

In the second week of term 4, we discussed the playgroup's title with our principal Aloma to ensure it accurately reflected our objectives and she agreed we could change the name to Balgownie Public School School Starters Playgroup. We wanted to ensure the playgroup was aimed mostly at 2012 school starters but was also inclusive for families who felt their child would benefit from a longer lead time to prepare for

school or were unsure whether their child would be ready for school the following year. As such, there were some families with 2013 school starters who attended regularly. Families were also welcome to bring younger siblings to remove a potential barrier for attendance. Age appropriate activities were provided for younger siblings.

The following week on October 26 Toni spoke at the kindergarten orientation session to ensure we were promoting our playgroup to all incoming families and sending a welcoming, inclusive message.

What did we aim to achieve?

In our proposal for the pilot playgroup, we aimed to enhance, facilitate and support:

- the development of community within the school and extending to the local community;
- the social and emotional development of children;
- the children's familiarity with the physical environment of the school;
- links between children, parents and staff;
- the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere of the school; and
- the improvement of outcomes for children starting at Balgownie Public School.

The benefits of an effective transition to school program are well documented. Starting school is a major educational transition for children, families and educators alike. The basis of a positive transition to school for all involved is the establishment of collaborative and respectful relationships. Children who experience a positive start to school generally feel more confident, comfortable, valued and have greater success both academically and socially in their school lives (*Starting School* by Sue Dockett and Bob Perry, 2006).

What activities did we offer?

The term program comprised:

Week 1, Oct 13: Activities in the hall.

Week 2, Oct 20: Activities in the hall.

Week 3, Oct 27: Walking tour of the schoolgrounds including walk through kindergarten rooms.

Week 4, Nov 3: Visit to the library.

Week 5, Nov 10: Visit to the kindergarten rooms.

Week 6, Nov 17: Canteen visit.

Week 7, Nov 24: Activities in the hall.

Week 8, Dec 1: Meet offsite at Guest Park.

Week 9, Dec 8: Christmas break-up in the hall with a visit by Billy Backpack from Illawarra Transition to School Project.



Walking tour of the schoolgrounds.

The daily program included the following where time permitted:

- Free play (eg playdough, puzzles, train set, Duplo, toy dinosaurs skipping ropes, balls, hula hoops).
- Structured gross motor activities (eg parachute, obstacle course, skipping ropes, ball-catching games).
- Structured fine motor activities (eg cutting with scissors, colouring, craft).
- Morning tea (with an emphasis on the children developing independent lunchbox skills).
- Group time (eg stories and songs).

As this was a pilot playgroup, we brought some of our own puzzles, books and other materials from home. Librarian Jackie Birchall allowed us to borrow some of her resources including a large Duplo tub and bag of dinosaurs. Kindergarten teacher Cheryl Phyllis donated scissors that were no longer needed in the classroom and also let us borrow resources. We had access to the sports storeroom near the canteen and were able to use obstacle course equipment stored in the hall.



Billy Backpack was popular with the school starters and their siblings.

In the first couple of weeks Kate and Toni met on Wednesdays after school to carry tables and chairs from the old hall to the new hall, mostly with the help of our own children. This was a huge physical effort and fortunately Aloma then had several tables and numerous small chairs relocated to one of the new hall storerooms. On Thursdays we rounded up students to help with setting up and carrying extra chairs, resources and sports equipment from elsewhere in the school and then again to help with returning these items.

The beauty of it for children was that the term program slowly built familiarity each week. First, they became accustomed to the new hall, then we walked through the kindy rooms on our

walking tour, then we spent a fabulous half hour in the library where librarian Jackie Birchall read a book and conducted a great craft activity. On November 10 they spent half an hour in the kindergarten rooms with their parents and the 2011 kindy children while the teachers conducted activities. This worked really well as a warm-up for the orientation day the following week. The final playgroup was a big hit with the visit by Billy Backpack and showbags given to all children.

The added bonuses were visits to the hall by the principal and kindergarten teachers who would pop in to say hello at different times over the weeks. Parent Megan Hammersley also brought along a uniform display and order forms for a couple of weeks. We provided information about events such as the Lord Mayor's Picnic in the Park for 2012 school starters run by Illawarra Transition to School (TTS) Project, which is funded by Families NSW and managed by Illawarra Children's Services.

How many people attended?

We were amazed by the consistently strong turnout which surpassed our original expectations. There was only one quieter Thursday which we anticipated as it was the day after the first orientation day, so we knew the children already had exposure to the school once that week.

Another quieter day was on December 1 when we met offsite at Guest Park, but this was also expected given it was a busy time of year and it was an informal play rather than a structured program.

In total our contact list had 34 families who attended on at least one occasion. Of these, 29 were families with a 2012 starter who came at least once to the playgroup. This means we engaged 66% (two-thirds) of the 44 families who were offered a 2012 kindergarten place. Of the other five families who attended, four had a 2013 school starter (note: some of the 2012 school starters also had a sibling starting in 2013 but at the time we noted them just as a sibling) and one family was an existing parent at the school who dropped in with her toddler for a play.

As previously mentioned, our first “meet and greet” in Guest Park in term three on September 15 had 19 families attend in total, including ourselves as our own children form part of the 2012 and 2013 school intakes. The second meet and greet the following week had 12 families present.

Here’s a further breakdown of numbers for the term four playgroup in the new hall:

TERM FOUR	Adults	Total children	2012 school starters	2013 school starters &/or siblings	Total adults & children
Week 1, Oct 13	17	28	15	13	45
Week 2, Oct 20	16	25	14	11	41
Week 3, Oct 27	24	39	22	17	63
Week 4, Nov 3	18	28	18	10	46
Week 5, Nov 10	22	35	20	15	57
Week 6, Nov 17	13	21	13	8	34
Week 7, Nov 24	19	30	16	14	49
Week 8, Dec 1	Attendance records not kept as it was an informal play in the park.				
Week 9, Dec 8	21	32	17	15	53

As the figures show, we had a total average weekly attendance of 48 adults and children with an average of 17 2012 school starters attending each week which is a consistently high number.

The sustained high level of attendance demonstrates we met a demand and kept adults and children engaged with relevant activities.

Survey and participant feedback

We received regular verbal feedback from families who indicated the playgroup was a great initiative and that it was helping their children feel less anxious about starting school. One mother said she was sure her daughter handled the orientation day much better than expected due to exposure to the school during playgroup.

Another mother wrote in an email after the first playgroup in the new hall: “Well done on a great day. It was structured really well and all the kids seemed to have a great time. Although my daughter took a while to warm up, she told all her friends at preschool this morning when I dropped her off about what a great time she had at playgroup with all her new big school friends.”

A grandmother who brought her granddaughter, an only child, was so impressed with the playgroup that she mentioned the idea to her other daughter who’s a teacher at a Shellharbour school.

And a father gave the following verbal feedback: “That playgroup was awesome. My girl started school two years ago and she didn’t know anyone and cried for the first week until she made friends. But my boy, he met so many friends at that playgroup. Today you could just see the kids all happy and running up to one another. My boy told me, ‘There is my friend from my big school playgroup, dad!’ He is just so much more confident because he knows where to go and had already got some friends. I just hope you do it again next year for my youngest one. It was magic.”

In term one 2012 we conducted a survey that was distributed to all kindergarten parents and carers. We received 12 responses (27%) from the 44 kindergarten families. The majority agreed or mostly agreed that the experience had benefitted their child socially and emotionally in settling into school and had also helped them as adults feel welcome, informed and make social connections. Overwhelmingly the qualitative feedback was positive, reinforcing that we were on the right track with our delivery and highlighting areas that can be finetuned. Below are the questions and responses.

1. Did your child attend the School Starters Playgroup in term 4, 2011?

Of the 12 responses, 11 attended and one was a non-attende

2. If you did not attend the playgroup, please circle why not (more than one if necessary).

Child care reasons.

3. If you did not attend but had circumstances allowed, would you have liked to have attended with your child?

The one response said yes.

As a result of attending the playgroup:	Agree	Mostly agree	Mostly disagree	Disagree	Don't know
My child is more familiar with the school environment.	10	1			
My child is more comfortable at the school.	9	2			
My child has more understanding about school routines and what is expected.	5	5			1
My child is more socially ready to start school.	5	4		1	1
My child is more emotionally ready to start school.	5	4		1	1
As a parent I feel more familiar with the school environment.	9	1			N/A *
I feel welcome & included at the school.	9	2			
I feel better informed about the school.	8	3			
I have made social connections which are helping me feel more settled and comfortable at the school.	6	4	1		

**grandparent brought child to playgroup*

4. What were the highlights of the playgroup for your child?

- Interaction with the other kids, being on the school grounds, visiting the canteen!
- My son was excited, the fact it was at big school!
- Getting to play at “big school”.
- Seeing my daughter make a couple of little friends and slowly become more comfortable with the idea of starting school.
- Playing with his friends and time in the kindy rooms with the whiteboard and big kids.
- Familiarisation with the school grounds.

- The mini excursions to different parts of the school, meeting the kindy teachers and principal.
- Social, informative. Wished it had been there for my eldest. Abbey loved playing, especially the clompers.
- Meeting other children and familiarising with the school environment/procedures etc.
- Making friends before school started. Being familiar.
- Getting to know the other kindies and the variety of activities.

5. As a parent, what were the highlights for you?

- N/A I did not attend though wish I had so I could meet more parents. My mum loved it!
- Watching my son start new friendships ready for big school.
- Getting to know other parents of 2012 kindy children and seeing what a nice group they are.
- Library and kindergarten room visits, orientation on front office administration area.
- Tour of rooms, canteen exercise.
- Talking to other parents and watching the children interact.
- Meet other kindy parents and become familiar with school and routines.
- Baking treats, meeting other mums and chatting.
- Library visit/meeting teachers/confirming my decision to attend BPS. Excellent program and idea.
- Meeting other parents.
- The amount of effort the three parents put into this playgroup. Fantastic work.

6. Do you have any suggestions for improvements to the playgroup?

- No – sounds like it was very well run!
- Although I was able to make most Thursdays, perhaps every second week change the days as this will give working parents of a chance to make it.
- Extra facilitators are handy when numbers are big, especially when a facilitator has their own child to look after too.
- No, seemed to be about right.
- No.
- Get the coffee van! LOL we always missed it. But seriously it was great just as it was.
- It was great, but maybe some additional initial activities for the children to interact like the “name song” before the kids go off to do their tasks or singing common well-known songs to “warm the kids up”.
- I prefer it to be at the school. I found that when it was at the park it was too hard to meet other parents whilst looking after younger ones.
- I just would like to say “thank you ☺” for arranging this playgroup for kids (even though my kid couldn’t attend...). This will be a great program for years to come to help little ones to be happier when they start big school! Hope this will be a BPS tradition.
- I think they do a great job as it is.

7. Other comments:

- I think the playgroup sessions did more to make my daughter feel welcome than the school-organised – fantastic idea thanks to all involved. ☺
- My son had a strong social group to start with and was not worried about starting school. It’s hard to comment whether the playgroup benefitted him socially but he enjoyed it anyway.
- I find my child also benefitted from having a sibling already at the school.
- Days at the school are more valued than just a play at the park.

8. Do you have a child starting kindergarten in 2013?

Three of the 12 responses have a child starting in 2013.

Teachers' feedback

We interviewed kindergarten teacher Alison Kerema and Helen Pogson, who teaches a K/1 class, to record their observations about the playgroup.

Did the playgroup cause any disruption to classes, such as when we did the walking tour?

Alison: None at all. It was quite gorgeous to see them walking through. They were really excited and the kids in kindergarten were really happy to see them.

Helen: They need to walk through K/1. Even though I spoke at orientation, some parents still said they hadn't realised there would be one [a K/I class].

Was it manageable for you to pop into the hall to visit the playgroup?

Alison: Yes, more do-able for us up there [in the straight kindergarten classes] because one of us can stay with the children. I kind of didn't do much except stay for a few minutes and chat to a few parents.

Helen: I think it's important for them to know who the kindergarten teachers are. As long as it's a face they recognise instead of coming along [at the start of the year] and seeing a face they hadn't seen before. They don't have to know [who their class teacher is] but the teacher has to be seen.

What outcomes did you see this year which may be a result of the playgroup?

Helen: Lots of them knew each other and that's important because they were looking for people they recognised.

Alison: I realised one of mine who didn't attend was on her own a bit at the start of the year. If possible, it should be encouraged that all of them go. I reckon this group was very confident generally. They were happy to let go of mum and dad. I think they were more settled. I think my class was very settled at the beginning of the year, more so than previous years.

Helen: All those things . . . my kids were very confident.

How did this impact on the teaching?

Helen: You can get into it quicker. They know where the toilets are, they know where the library is. The place itself wasn't unfamiliar.

Alison: You're not doing routines so much. They get it quicker.

Is there anything more the playgroup can do to work in partnership with you to aid children's transition to school?

Alison: I think you pretty much had it down pat. If you run it again this year, it'll show us whether it's a fluke that this group was settled and mature regardless of the playgroup. If next year's group is the same, that's the winning factor. I think it's very worthwhile and also for parents who met at the playgroup.

Helen: The parents who were more confused hadn't been to playgroup.

Alison: I would like to see a bit more time with the new kindies coming in with us. Maybe one morning a week where six come up at a time, in small groups so they can blend in with the existing kindies with no parents.

Facilitator feedback

Kate Smith: “Last year when I discovered that Donna and Toni were interested in establishing a school starters playgroup, I was extremely excited and enthusiastic about being involved. Having an appreciation of the immense value in helping children transition more smoothly into their ‘big school’ life, I had been interested in transition to school playgroups for a number of years.

“I really enjoyed helping with the playgroup and I am extremely pleased with the success of it. I believe the playgroup was successful in a number of ways, including: the number of families who attended; the role the playgroup had in socially and emotionally supporting the children, parents and carers in preparing for ‘big school’; and also increasing the participants’ familiarity with the physical environment of the school.



Kate conducts group time with our eager school starters.

“The enormous support and encouragement from the school’s staff was vital in the success of the playgroup. I want to say a huge ‘thank you’ to the staff and also to the stage 3 students who regularly helped to set up and pack up the playgroup equipment and activities.”

Donna Guest: “I was so excited to see my idea come to fruition. Toni and Kate far exceeded my idea of organising this playgroup. Unfortunately for me, my university lectures were changed and I was unable to attend a lot of the playgroup sessions. Little hiccups like this didn’t affect the playgroup. Its flexible nature, our accommodating team and the overwhelming support of the principal, teachers, staff and families provided the key to the playgroup’s success. The only feedback I think would benefit next year is the importance of planning and having ‘get to know you games’ at the beginning of each session to assist the children with forming relationships and building their confidence. I can’t wait for next year 😊.”

Toni Lea-Howie: “I really loved the whole experience of being involved with this pilot playgroup. When Donna first suggested it to me, I knew how much my daughter would benefit as she was anxious about starting school and needed a longer transition. I knew our school’s two orientation sessions wouldn’t be enough for her. It was great being part of the team running the playgroup, which helped not only my daughter but I could see all the children become more comfortable as the weeks passed. It was a real buzz seeing that we were meeting a need with the high turnout. I got to know lots of incoming kindy parents and it was fantastic seeing them connect with one another.”

Highlights and successes

- Seeing children become more comfortable with the school environment and beginning to engage with one another as the term progressed.
- Observing the children’s eagerness and school-readiness, with most able to sit and listen to instructions and participate in activities.

- Watching the adults making social connections and seeing them become more relaxed with one another as the term progressed.
- The support of the parents and carers in bringing along morning tea and helping with pack-up which made our job easier.
- The support of the principal and teachers who allowed us to carry out a walking tour, visit the library, kindergarten rooms and canteen, thereby helping us run an effective playgroup with a varied and relevant program which gradually increased children's exposure to different aspects of school life.
- Knowing that we were meeting an important community need by facilitating the playgroup, as well as supporting our own children in their journey towards starting school.
- The added bonuses of a visit to the canteen, thanks to the volunteers working that day, which gave the children the experience of lining up to buy something, as well as uniform displays organised by P&C vice-president Megan Hammersley who helped answer parents' questions.
- Using the new hall which is a fantastic venue for community activities.



Free play activities helped build fine and gross motor skills while the kids socialised.

Challenges

- Providing a playgroup timeslot that suits everyone. It's really up to the volunteers facilitating the playgroup to find a time that is convenient for them. Unfortunately it's impossible to provide a time that suits all parents and carers but hopefully the majority of families have an opportunity to attend, if not every week then at least on some weeks.
- Managing younger children in the playgroup. We felt it was important to include siblings to remove a possible barrier for attendance. This means we needed to provide activities suited to younger children such as baby toys. However, the core focus still needs to be on school starters and meeting their needs to make the playgroup effective. Too many younger children would change the dynamic of the playgroup as they may be unable to sit still and concentrate on set tasks for longer periods and too many may prove disruptive to activities we're running for the schools starters, such as visiting classrooms. We need to discourage people from treating it as a general drop-in playgroup for younger children if they don't have a child who is a school starter in the year or two to follow because it detracts from the core purpose of the playgroup.
- Storage of equipment. It created a lot of extra work for us lugging our own tubs to and from our cars every week. Ideally it would be great to have a shelf to store some tubs in one of the hall's storage rooms to make the facilitators' jobs easier.
- Facilitating the group while looking after your own school starter can be a challenge, especially if they are clingy or need help.

Recommendations

- 1) There is an established demand for a transition to school playgroup at Balgownie Public School and we recommend that it should be run as an annual program which ideally begins earlier than term four on the schoolgrounds. *(Note: At the time of finalising this report in term two 2012, the 2013 School Starters Playgroup had already begun meeting monthly for a play in the park. Principal Aloma Stewart has also agreed to allow three playgroup mornings in the school hall during term three, which means the transition process is starting earlier this year.)*
- 2) Continue liaising and building the partnership with kindergarten teachers to ensure the playgroup complements the orientation program and children are well prepared for starting school.
- 3) Continue tracking outcomes after kindergarten children have started the school year to determine the impact of the playgroup on settling into the classroom routine.
- 4) A parents' dinner or weekend family barbecue could be held in November to engage with working families who are unable to attend the playgroup during the day.
- 5) Reinforce the message to families that grandparents and other carers are welcome to bring their school starter to playgroup if the parents or primary carers are working or unavailable.
- 6) Funds be sought through fundraising or grants to buy permanent playgroup resources. One suggestion is to hold a clothes and toy swap to raise money to buy resources.
- 7) Seek permission from the principal to permanently store a couple of tubs of resources and equipment in a storeroom in the new hall to ease the workload on volunteer facilitators.
- 8) Continue to add value to the playgroup by providing transition to school tips and guest speakers where appropriate. For example, visits by an early childhood nurse and KidSafe could be scheduled. Also links could be made with the grade fives who will be buddies the following year.
- 9) Ideally three facilitators are needed if numbers continue at the level of the 2011 playgroup.
- 10) Consider succession planning for facilitators each year by identifying parents with school starters in the years to follow with the enthusiasm and commitment to carry out the role. Provide an information handover and support, ideally overlapping old and new facilitators if possible.
- 11) Investigate the possibility of a general playgroup being established at Balgownie Public School if a suitable time is available to use the school hall or another appropriate area within the school to cater to parents with children who are too young for the School Starters Playgroup.



Donna sings the "name song" at the final playgroup for 2011.

