

**Amataina aoga mo tamaiti Samoa**  
*Starting school for Samoan children  
in homebased care and learning*

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## Contents

<b>Who are we?</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Our area of focus</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>What did we do?</b> .....	<b>3</b>
Talanoaga with educarers / parents (October 2016) .....	3
Talanoaga with the Schools (February 2016) .....	3
Talanoaga with the Health Team (March 2017).....	4
<b>What are we now doing differently</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Resources on transition to school for our Samoan fanau ma aiga</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>A new process to support transition before children turn five</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Where to next?</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>References:</b> .....	<b>7</b>

## Who are we?

Bright Futures homebased childcare and Learning, hereafter referred to as Bright Futures, is a community based early childhood service operating under the umbrella of Napier Family Centre, an organisation which offers a variety of services including budgeting, counselling, family education and childcare (centre-based and home-based).



We are two qualified and registered Samoan teachers who mentor and support Bright Futures educarers working from their own home. Our educarers are adults with certificate level four qualifications who teach and care for other people's children (up to 4 children at any given time) in their homes. Our home-based service offers a viable alternative for parents who wish to have their pre-school children learning in a home environment.

Within Bright Futures, we have a group of 10 Samoan educarers based in the Flaxmere suburb of Hastings. It is this group that is the focus for our inquiry.

## Background

The idea of this project came about in 2016 after discovering through discussions with educarers that our Samoan children were not well supported to transition to school. We also discovered that some parents were enrolling their children at school either on the day of or just before their fifth birthday. Educarers were not aware of Bright Future's transition to school policy and procedures. Therefore, the children and their aiga were not informed of the benefits of visiting the schools prior to starting school.

We felt as an early childhood service, we should be supporting children and their aiga to transition to school. However, our service policy, processes and procedures were not clearly explained to educarers and this was causing confusion and misunderstanding. They were written in English which was difficult for most educarers to understand, and there was no follow up check if educarers and parents needed support to take children on school visits.

What was most disappointing was that the children missed out on exploring and experiencing the school environments before their formal entry to school.

## Our area of focus

In 2016 we successfully applied for CORE Education's Pasifika Grant which gave us the opportunity to inquire into our topic further using CORE's online [UChoose](#) mentoring programme. As an organisation we were aiming to bridge the gaps we were currently seeing around the transition to school for Samoan children and fanau ma aiga through:

- reviewing policies, processes and procedures,
- working with children, matua ma aiga so they are well informed of their entitlement and rights, to have high expectations to receive quality services and education they deserve,
- working collaboratively with schools, educarers, the community and relevant services and agencies.

Ultimately, we wanted our Samoan children living in Flaxmere to have:

- positive sense of self and value of education as their rite of passage for the future,
- to see themselves as valued and competent learners and have a strong sense of ethnic identity within the wider community.

## What did we do?

### Talanoaga with educarers / parents (October 2016)

We held a talanoaga with the educarers who were currently working with Samoan children and fanau ma aiga in their home. Some of these educarers were also parents of children actively participating in our service.

We asked them about their own experiences of starting school as a child as well as their experiences as parents of children who were starting school. We felt this was going to help us understand the different values and beliefs within the group and give us the starting point we needed to begin this project.

From our talanoaga we learnt that:

- Many parents were unsure of the schools that were available in their area. This was especially for the fanau ma aiga who had moved here from Samoa or other regions within New Zealand.
- different experiences between starting school in Samoa and starting school in New Zealand meant that parents were not always familiar with what was expected of them here. For example, in Samoa, in some cases it was often the role of grandmother to take children to school.
- there was little in the way of appropriate information in the Samoan language. The language barrier was a big issue, especially if parents that did not speak or understand a lot of English and had to rely on other family members who were not always familiar with school processes themselves.
- often school communication was not well understood by the parents. This included newsletters, surveys and the enrolment process itself.
- there was a perception that there was not a lot of support within their community or, fanau ma aiga did not know where to go for support.

### Talanoaga with the Schools (February 2016)

Having heard from educarers and parents, we then wanted to get the schools' perspective. Our starting point was the four schools in the area where the majority of our Samoan children go when they leave Bright Futures. Our plan of action was to approach each school, to talk with the new entrant teachers and principals. Our initial discussions were with 4 schools in Flaxmere, however as the project progressed our focus was with 2 of the 4 schools although we had kept the other 2 schools informed. We were pleased to have some good, honest, robust discussions where everyone's views and values were heard and respected.

Their responses added to our insights about how we could better help with the transition process. The key things they raised were:

- wanting fanau ma aiga to have a better understanding of the school expectations, such as attending school regularly, coming on time, coming prepared with school bag, stationery and lunch, informing the school when they moved.
- wanting fanau to have better support around transition, such as getting them enrolled before they turn five (because of the risk of being turned away due to zoning or full capacity) and attending transition to school programmes.
- wanting matua ma aiga to be more informed of the importance of having health checks completed (vision and hearing testing, oral health) before children start school.
- the challenges of communication and understanding across both languages.

It was encouraging to see the openness and willingness from the schools and their support for the children and fanau ma aiga. The schools were just as open to suggestions and ideas as they were to giving us feedback and sharing with us their experiences and expectations.

## Talanoaga with the Health Team (March 2017)

Following the suggestion from schools about the importance of health checks, we met with three personnel from local health agencies. Again, we heard about issues of communication, expectations and understandings which meant that not all fanau got health checks before going to school.

## What are we now doing differently

Our discussions with the different groups highlighted a number of actions we could take to improve outcomes for our Samoan fanau as they transitioned to school. The inquiry itself also changed the nature of our relationship with some teachers in our local schools and with the health professionals.

Changes we have made include:

- Establishing a process of transition between home-based care, schools and parents which begins when children turn four,
- Developing a set of resources on transition to school specifically for our Samoan fanau ma aiga,
- Compiling in a carry bag containing school enrolment forms and information packs, Samoan pamphlet about what to do when their child turns four, a fan (ili) with a checklist on it, B4 School check information and healthy food resources,
- Providing advice and following up with parents once the information has been given to them,
- Strengthening links with other agencies and organisations responsible for children's health and wellbeing.

## Resources on transition to school for our Samoan fanau ma aiga

Creating appropriate resources was an important feature of this project. We spent a long time talking about the messages we wanted to include and what formats would appeal to our Samoan fanau ma aiga. Discussions with our mentor got us thinking about the limitations of putting information only in pamphlets and forms which are easily lost in busy homes.

We turned our attention to culturally valued household items, used by Samoan fanau ma aiga on which we could print our messages about transition to school, for example the fan which we have a checklist printed on one side, and a colourful pamphlet in Samoan and English.

During the drafting of the wording we consulted widely before making the final decisions. Feedback was welcomed by all those who were involved in the consultation process.

**The paopao** – a small Samoan outrigger canoe that symbolises a journey or a voyage.

We chose to use the paopao as a metaphor because of what we believe transition to school is about; a journey or a voyage that carries not just one person but the many involved. We also decided on proverb (alagaupu) to highlight the idea of a Samoan family moving together.

***Alo fa'atasi lo tatou va'a e maua ai le atamai mo le lumana'i***

***Let's row together for a smarter future***

The image and words were then printed on the following resources:

### ***Pamphlets***

Our colourful pamphlet comes in two languages – English and Samoan with photos of our children and parents. The information we have used in our pamphlet comes directly from our interviews with parents, schools and health professionals. We wanted to keep the pamphlet simple, readable, culturally appropriate and informative for parents and fanau ma aiga while also making it available to schools and services to use in the community.

### ***The ili*** – the fan

The ili / fan is used widely in all Samoan cultures to keep cool in hot tropical weather. It is commonly used at social gatherings, in family settings and at church. It is a well-known household item that many Samoan fanau ma aiga will have. We have had fans printed with tips and information to help parents when their child turns 4 years old.

### ***The ato*** - the bag

The idea of this is to hold all the information that parents and fanau ma aiga need to know about transition to school. It is convenient, and it stands out. Information included in the bag with the ili/fan and the pamphlet will be an information pack provided by the school, the B4 School Check pack (available in English and Samoan) and healthy lunchbox suggestions.

We believe that by putting our messages on a diverse range of familiar and useful resources this will start conversations and encourage parents, schools and service providers to come together and prepare children for their transition into school, and we feel we have achieved the consistency of messages across all of these resources.

## **A new process to support transition before children turn five**

As part of this project, we have begun to take a more active role in facilitating the transition to school for children and their fanau ma aiga

- When a child turns 4 years old, the parents are given a school pack that includes a pamphlet in Samoan or English, an ili, B4 School check information, healthy food information. If we are aware of the school the child will be attending, a school information pack is also included.
- The visiting teachers have a follow up conversation with the parents once they have had a chance to look through the pack. Options for schools may be discussed at this point or, any queries regarding the information given to them.
- Parents are encouraged to make contact with the school they have chosen for their child, or visits schools within their area.
- If parents are unable to attend a school visit with their child, then a Visiting Teacher will take the child in their place. However, parents are strongly encouraged to attend the first visit.
- Visiting teachers provide educators with our current Transition to School policy and procedure so they are aware of the process that is involved and can ensure that the children who are due to start school have a successful and positive transition.

## Where to next?

We intend to have follow up conversations in 2018 with the two schools that worked collaboratively with us during our inquiry project on transition to school. We want to know if they have noticed any difference with the Samoan children starting school from our service since the completion of the transition to school project.

As a service we are now in the process of reviewing our policy and putting in place more effective procedures that are simple and relevant to the needs of our community. These will be implemented to support a positive and successful transition for children and fanau ma aiga.

We plan to continue regular contact with health services and agencies that we have been working with during this project. We want to ensure that the families are well informed of the importance of having health checks such as vision and hearing, oral health and B4 school checks. We want to ensure that all our Samoan children are getting these done prior to them formally starting school.

We will continue to make ourselves available to support aiga ma fanau with the process of transitioning to school. Where possible this will include offering transport for school visits or an interpreter if needed. We can see that we make good use of conversations, notes and parent newsletters to remind parents about these things.

We see possibilities in networking with the three Samoan early childhood centres in our area to share experiences of transitioning to school for Samoan children. This will give an opportunity as a Samoan community to evaluate and improve the transitioning to school process.

## Conclusion

Our goal was to ensure that children, parents and fanau ma aiga were well informed about transition to school. We wanted them to be more aware of their entitlements and rights and also to have high expectations of quality education and services.

As a result of this inquiry we learnt that:

- language was often a barrier for our Samoan fanau me aiga and there was a lack of written information in Samoan specific to the context.
- Some schools had in place Samoan speaking staff and support staff to assist with translation and interpretation.
- there were parent assumptions that educarers were responsible for transition to school. (This is when we realised, that our own policy and procedures had gaps. Some of our processes weren't clear and did not meet the need of our diverse community.)
- we needed to be more connected with services that work with children prior to starting school, such as fanau ma aiga, schools and health services and other relevant agencies. Here, we found the following literature useful.

Dockett & Perry (2001) explain that effective transitions involve communities of individuals rather than individuals in communities. Bringing together communities of individuals to ensure a positive and successful transition to school for our Samoan children and their fanau ma aiga was what we had to do.

Peters (2009, p.74) has argued that, *“failure to take the full range of perspectives into account can lead to parents feeling disempowered and uninformed”*. It was the conversations and collaborative voices of many that helped us to look at our own organisation and how we could bridge those gaps between Bright Futures and educarers, parents, schools and relevant services for our Samoan children and fanau ma aiga.

Through this inquiry, we believe we have taken a significant step towards accomplishing a vital message of Te Whāriki and the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC). This is that *“children learn and develop best when their*

*culture, knowledge and community are affirmed and when people in their lives help them to make connections across settings” (Te Whāriki, p.20). We now see the potential for extending the kind of transition work we have started here through the Communities of Learning Kāhui Ako initiative, not just for us but also for other schools and Early Childhood Education (ECE) services.*

We were humbled by how everyone shared their experiences and reflections and could express themselves confidently in their own language.

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