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It's a Matter of Timing: Laying the Foundation for Successful Preschool to Kindergarten Transitions

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Abstract

It's a Matter of Timing:

Laying the Foundation for Successful Preschool to Kindergarten Transitions

Children with special needs receive a myriad of services within the early childhood preschool setting. For most children, the child's parents coordinate this process. Under the IDEA, schools are charged with planning for and facilitating the transition of children with disabilities from one educational setting to the next. A smooth transition plan should be developed to maximize the benefits of an effective preschool program in kindergarten. This article addresses the procedures for a fluid transition from preschool to kindergarten for students with disabilities discussing parental roles and critical aspects of the transition timeline.

Under the IDEA, schools are charged with planning for and facilitating the transition of children with disabilities from one educational setting to the next (infant/toddler programs to preschool, preschool programs to school age programs, middle childhood programs to secondary programs, secondary programs to post-secondary programs). The intent of planned and coordinated transitions

across settings is to facilitate a “seamless system” of services for the student and his/her family that promotes successful developmental and educational outcomes.

IDEA has defined transition services to mean:

“... a coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that (A) is designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; (B) is based upon the individual student’s needs, taking into account the student’s preferences and interests; (C) includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation.”

Transitions from one educational context to another are an intricate part of the educational process. Transitions are not only important and inevitable functions of the educational systems; they are often stressful for children, families, and school personnel. Children with special needs receive a myriad of services within the early childhood preschool setting. The dual role that early childhood intervention specialists embrace creates the opportunity to provide seamless intervention services to young children. However, as children move from their preschool environment to kindergarten services the equation becomes much more complex. Multiple staff members now take on the role that was once dedicated to one teacher.

The foundation of a successful transition is based on the care and preparation the early childhood team has taken to ensure the smooth passage of their students into the kindergarten program. Differences in program format from preschool to kindergarten necessitates systemic care be taken in planning for early childhood transitions. For most children, the child’s parents coordinate this process. For a child with a disability, the transition planning is complicated by the number of players and issues to be addressed. Young children with physical, learning, and behavioral concerns require careful planning to ensure that their educational plans are transferred, picture prompts are in place, and familiar routines maintained.

To optimize the transition process, a transition team must be put in place.

Effective transition teams have developed transition procedures, have a philosophy, and evaluate their effectiveness. Their purpose is to identify the potential concerns and anticipate the challenges that the child with a disability and their family might face in the receiving program. An effective team incorporates written procedures to ensure the likelihood of critical activities taking place in a timely manner. Once a plan is in place, the diverse educational needs of the child can be met and relevant information can be shared.

To maximize the benefits of an effective preschool program in kindergarten, a smooth transition plan should include: 1.) To support and empower the family as an equal partner in the process; 2.) To promote the adjustment of the child and family to the new program; 3.) To enhance the child's successful participation in the new program; 4.) To promote continuity of services; and 5.) Finally, to enhance collaboration among all stakeholders (Ross-Allen & Fox, 1991; Prendeville & Ross-Allen, 2002). In order to achieve these goals, the following procedures have the potential to maximize parental cooperation and decrease student anxiety:

Procedures for a Smooth Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten

1. Establish the Child's Educational Team

- Parents
- School personnel from exiting and receiving teams
- Private therapists
- Professional supports (Private Agencies, CITE, etc.)

2. Identify Student's Strengths and Needs

- Complete transition profile including academic strengths and weaknesses, student's personal preferences, and the family's unique needs

3. Develop Student Support Plans

- Develop support plans including special education and related services

- Identify challenging behaviors and plan to respond to behavioral needs
- Plan for safety needs (Example: wheelchair evaluation plans; health plans)

4. *Develop Team Support Plans*

- Identify services needed to meet goals and objectives
- Identify training needs of staff, child, and family

5. *Monitor Progress and Review*

- Student progress
- Team functioning
- Effectiveness of the procedures and timelines

Given thoughtful implementation of these steps, the adults in the child's life can establish a plan of action that can best meet the child's learning needs. A smooth transition in this formative year will build self esteem and confidence. Parents of children with disabilities look forward to their child's social, emotional, and academic growth with a degree of apprehension. With successful transition planning, this apprehension is replaced with confidence as the child's academic and behavioral levels are recognized and paired with the requirements of the kindergarten curriculum.

Schools may inadvertently set themselves up for transition failure by not recognizing the importance of thoughtful coordination of the timeline. Transition timelines typically begin in early spring for most schools. This late date of onset limits critical activities such as parental and staff observations of programs and children. Parents no longer have the chance to see the beginning of the kindergarten year where all children are learning new routines. By starting the transition process in early spring, parents are robbed of the opportunity to see the kindergarten program in the fall when teachers' expectations will be the same as the expectations their child will have to face. In the spring, parents observe seasoned kindergarten veterans who appear to know-it-all! Furthermore, collaboration and dialogue is minimized with parents when the process of transitioning is rushed. In an attempt to get finished, parents' role as a

team member is reduced. If the transition process begins in the fall prior to the child starting kindergarten, parents have an opportunity to be active team members and explore their child's educational options.

A successful transition depends upon a timeline of dependent events. To optimize the transition process, an educational transition team must be put in place in the early fall of the preschool year prior to kindergarten. The following timeline addresses this need with a detailed plan of critical transitioning activities that ensure the child's success:

<Insert Figure 1 here>

The timeline of events listed allows all constituents to be active, engaged team members. Beginning the school year by gathering the team and establishing the chain of events ensures that the family's wants and needs for their child are met. The child truly has a unique team of people invested in their success.

An active transition team determines the child's strengths and weaknesses as well as the training needs to assure the child's needs are being met. Preschool staff observes the kindergarten programs and the kindergarten teachers observe the child with a disability in their preschool setting; a setting where they are comfortable and successful. Parents are given the opportunity to view their child in their current setting as well as observe the potential future setting. As the school year unfolds, the child's multi-factored evaluation is completed and the Individualized Education Plan is written for the following year. The least restrictive environment is chosen for the child with a disability based of the academic needs represented by the child's goals and objectives. Once the least restrictive environment is chosen, the child can observe their new classroom. Some children may need multiple visits with their time slowly increased until they feel comfortable with the new location. This may require transitioning social stories to be written as well as picture prompts and other visual supports. Once these pieces are

put in place, children can participate in all of the traditional transition activities such as Kindergarten Orientation.

Transition services are a series of coordinated activities that are designed for a specific student with one goal in mind: the successful movement of a child with a disability from one educational setting to another. According to Rosenkoetter, Hains, and Dogaru (2007), transitioning is not just one point in time but a series of activities that ease the stress of the child's movement from one location to another. With mindful planning in a timely fashion, we as educators can lay the foundation for a child's successful transition.

Sidebar I

Why Transition Planning?

- PL. 99-457 and PL. 102-119 mandate transition planning
- Good beginnings avert later challenges
- Participation of the family contributes significantly to the child's adjustment
- Written procedures ensure the activities occur on a predictable schedule
- Unique needs of the child are met
- All relevant information is share

Sidebar II

Young Children with Special Needs:

Concerns with Common Practices in Transitioning

- Spring timeline begins too late and limits critical activities for transition planning
- Late onset of transitioning minimizes parents ability to see early kindergarten expectations and programming
- Reduces collaboration and communication between professionals in different programs
- Negates true teaming in an effort to "get finished"

- Parents role as a true team member is reduced or negated

Sidebar III

Ideas for Successful Transitions for Children with Disabilities

By Erica Sauer, MA

Integrated Preschool Teacher, Weirton, West Virginia

(Personal commentary, 2007)

- Select the child's kindergarten teacher ahead of time. This allows the kindergarten teacher to feel like part of the child's team immediately.
- Allow the child to participate in the kindergarten class for a short time each week. The child can attend the classroom accompanied by the pre-K teacher or aide until the child feels comfortable to attend by themselves. The activity the child participates in should be appropriate for them and encourage socialization with the other kindergarten students. Over the course of the year the pre-K student should have the opportunity to experience a variety of typical kindergarten activities.
- Take field trips with kindergarten. Pair pre-K students with kindergarten students.
- Provide pre-K families with access to a lending library. Supply the library with books about going to kindergarten.
- Take pictures of the child participating in the kindergarten room and have them create their own dictated book about their experiences that they can take home and look at over the summer.
- At the beginning of the year, allow the child to visit the classroom and the teacher before school begins to view where they will be sitting, where their locker is located, where the bathroom is located.

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Figure1

Critical Activities Children with Special Needs

Timelines

Month	Activity
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Gather Child's Unique Team · Identify Student's strengths and weaknesses
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Team members make initial observations of incoming students for following year · Parents to observe Kindergarten · Complete MFE/IEP as necessary
November	
December	
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Preschool staff should complete student profiles · All kindergarten special education staff should schedule observations of incoming students · Kindergarten teachers to observe preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Meeting with Director Preschool staff (P to K transition)
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Preschool IEPs and MFEs –receiving elementary staff to attend all meetings
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Transition plans completed and in place: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Including transition social stories, pictures prompts, and picture schedules
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Preschool students to visit elementary · Kindergarten Orientation
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Change building location on Server · Summer visits to new classroom