

Supporting Families in Transition between Early Intervention and School Age Programs

By Cheryl Johnson, Ed.D.

The transitions between early intervention and preschool services, and later preschool and kindergarten, are emotional for all parents as they watch their little ones grow. Add a disability such as hearing loss, and these emotions are magnified. Issues associated with the disability intertwined with the responsibility of making the right choices for their children's future often results in a time of uncertainty that is exacerbated by an education process that can seem unwelcoming.

Part C to Part B Transition

Most difficult for families is the change from the family-focused services of early intervention (Part C) to the child-centered education programs of Part B. In Part C, family involvement is mandatory and parents are expected to be the decision makers for their child's services. Throughout the Part C years, families are taught and encouraged to provide and advocate for their children's needs. Then when they enter Part B programs at age 3, the school assumes the primary educational responsibility. During this time, the values and priorities of the parents may not match those of the educational team. The chart accompanying this article provides a comparison between Part C and Part B requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) including details of the provisions that pertain specifically to hearing loss. The IDEA requires a minimum 6 month transition period from early intervention to preschool. This period is filled with the evaluations and meetings that are required by the law, and families often feel rushed to make decisions. As a result, parents frequently feel the need for additional conversations to answer questions about their child's potential services. *The extra time not only helps to ease some of the feelings of uncertainty but also begins to build a positive relationship with the school personnel.*



Making the Transition Process Family Friendly

What can schools and parents do to make the transition process and preschool experience meaningful and productive? The first and most essential step is to build strong partnerships between families and schools. Successful outcomes are most likely to be reached when both the school and family are working together toward the same goals. Some additional steps to support a transition into preschool are suggested below.

1. Prepare for the IFSP/IEP transition meetings.

Families should visit preschools and meet with the preschool teachers and other staff prior to the transition meeting. It is often helpful for parents to bring along another parent or family member or the family's early intervention specialist so that there is someone with whom they can discuss their visit. The preschool teacher may be willing to meet with the family members in the home. Parents may also want to bring another person to support them at the transition meeting. Parents should be familiar with their rights as well as service obligations for their child under Part B of IDEA prior to the transition meeting.

2. Think of preschool as transition.

Another consideration is to recognize that transition doesn't have to happen in 6 months. If we think about the entire preschool experience as the transition between early intervention and school-age programs, we can combine the benefits of family-focused services with the language and social experiences of early education programs.

3. Maintain consistent and effective communication.

Families need to feel that their input is valued. Schools should listen carefully to what families are saying. Weekly written information and follow-up phone calls from the school help maintain open communication. Parents should be encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification of information.

4. Establish roles and expectations together.

Families need a game plan. They need to know what to expect from school as well as what is expected of them. Discuss this relationship with your child's school so that everyone is clear about respective roles and responsibilities.

5. Continue home visits.

Home visiting is the hallmark of early intervention programs. Why should they end with the transition to Part B? Home visits give teachers and parents an opportunity to maintain consistent, effective communication. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to support and provide information to parents, to view the child in the familiar environment of the home, and to observe the communication styles used in the home.

6. Flexible programs and schedules.

Young children entering preschool for the first time may not be ready for the same preschool experience as that of older preschool children. Parents can discuss with the school the amount of time that their child will attend preschool. For some children, a combination of home-based support and preschool may be most effective.

7. Use the Communication Plan.

The methodology biases of professionals have caused parents perhaps more consternation than any other aspect of raising and educating a child with hearing loss. It is **communication**, not the method that is critical to the child's development. Families and school professionals should use the Communication Plan to determine how the child's communication needs will be accommodated and supported.

8. Establish a parent support group.

Parents benefit from getting together to share and learn from one another's experiences. Elicit the help of a "seasoned" parent to assist the school to organize the support group and to plan the activities. Child care, carpooling, other transportation options, and snacks help with attendance. Establish a calling tree to communicate with parents and to remind them of events. Provide interpreters to accommodate deaf/hard of hearing or non-English speaking family members.

9. Facilitate kindergarten visitations.

Begin kindergarten visitations in the winter and spring prior to entrance into kindergarten to develop a rapport with the teacher and familiarity with the school and classroom. Be sure that the kindergarten teacher has all pertinent information and understands the child's IEP needs, goals, and services.

Moving into Kindergarten

For many families, navigating the formal education programs of kindergarten and school-age services and the legal process of IEPs seems overwhelming. Just as the transition from early intervention to preschool needs attention, the transition to formal education requires preparation as well. As children are ready to enter kindergarten, there are specific transition activities which make the process run smoothly. The United States Department of Health and Human Services (1987) reported the following benefits of transition planning between preschool and kindergarten:

A strong dynamic parent and professional partnership is critical if we are to achieve a positive outcome for our children. Schools cannot educate children alone. We recognize the value of parent support and involvement and that with one another's support, our children's educational experience will be enhanced. Let us do everything in our power to cement and sustain this commitment so that our children may have every opportunity to become successful contributing members of our communities.

References:

US Department of Health & Human Services. (1987). Easing the Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten. US Government Printing Office.

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Benefits of Transition Planning

For Parents:

- Increased confidence in their children's ability to achieve in the new setting.
- Improved self-confidence in their own ability to communicate with educational staff and to effectively influence the education system.
- A sense of pride and commitment in their ongoing involvement in the education of their children.
- A greater knowledge and appreciation of early childhood programs and staff.

For Teachers:

- Increased knowledge of the children and enhanced ability to meet individual needs.
- Increased parental and community support.
- More resources and a larger network of professional support.
- Increased awareness of the preschool program in the community.
- A renewed sense of professionalism and pride in their efforts to reach out to young children and their families.

For Children:

- Continuity with earlier education experiences.
- Increased motivation and openness to new experiences.
- Enhanced self confidence.
- Improved relations with other children and adults.
- A greater sense of trust between teachers and children.