

Making Connections: Easing the Transition to Kindergarten

By Polly Neill, High Scope Early Childhood Specialist

"Mariel talks a lot about going to kindergarten in the fall, but she also says that she is afraid she won't know anyone. I'm worried about all the academic pressure put on these kindergartners and I'm not sure that Mariel is ready for such a dramatic change."

-A Parent

"I get the class list in late August. I don't have time to call each child and parent that will be in my class." -Ms. McC., kindergarten teacher

"There is little or no interaction among the early childhood programs in our community. It's like we each believe that our program, curriculum, or approach is better than the others. We don't make the time to communicate with each other, let alone trying to establish a relationship with the kindergarten teachers at all the different elementary schools that receive our kids!" -Rosario F., education coordinator, state-funded preschool

The responsibility for ensuring that children have successful experiences transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and beyond



Connections between children, between children and adults, and between programs, schools, and community organizations help support transitioning children.

lies not just with a child's parents and family or with the kindergarten teacher but also with other elementary school staff, particularly the school's leadership (e.g., principal, assistant principal, school counselor), with the early childhood program that is sending the child, and with community agencies such as tribal government, churches, and

public health services. The most effective means of ensuring a happy and seamless transition into kindergarten is by setting up a team composed of key personnel from each of these interest groups.

In their invaluable guide *Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools*, Dr. Robert Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayre describe the potential problems that can occur when children transition from preschool to kindergarten:

Children face enormous discontinuities between preschool and kindergarten as they enter elementary school for the first time. These discontinuities, which also affect families and teachers, underscore

the importance of this period. For example, as children enter elementary school after preschool they and their families experience a substantial shift in culture and expectations, including more formal academic demands, a more complex social environment, less family support and connection, and less time with teachers due to larger class size and more transitions during the school day.

— Pianta, R.C & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003), p. 2.

about how going to kindergarten is similar to and different from preschool.

“ When a child whose first language is not English visits school, arrange for an older child who speaks the same language to show the family around the school and spend time with the younger child by playing a game or reading a book.

“ Arrange summer

playgroup sessions for incoming kindergartners so that they can make new friends prior to beginning school.

Connections Between Children and Schools

Children feel more connected when their school and preschool experiences are similar. Program/school staff and administrators can employ the following strategies to provide continuity.

Preschool teachers can

“ Provide books about change, growing up, and kindergarten that the children can read in the classroom and also take home to read with their families. (See *issue insert for a list of books on the transition to kindergarten.*)

“ Develop portfolios for children with special needs that include artwork, photos of the children playing, and any questionnaires that the parents may have completed. This way these children have a chance to claim an identity before they are put through a battery of screenings and tests.

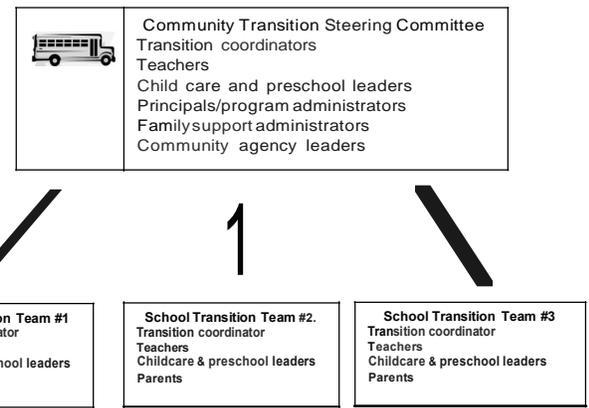
“ Arrange for the children to visit the school they will be entering in the fall and, if possible, get some pictures of them in the new setting that they can share with their families and use to remind themselves of what to expect.

Kindergarten teachers can

“ Provide class lists early so that teachers, families, and children can begin to communicate.

“ Send a personal note welcoming each child.

“ Set up an area in the kindergarten classroom (perhaps a corner of



— Adapted from *Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools* by Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003, p. 19)

the house area) with photos of parents and family, giving the children a place to "visit" if they feel homesick; or, if space is at a premium, simply make a family book with pages for every child's family.

“ Recommend that the school try a staggered start the first week (e.g., one-third of the children come the first day, one-third come the second day, one-third come the third day, and all come the final two days) so that children have a day to adjust to the new environment in a smaller group.

“ Provide high-quality kindergarten classroom experiences for all children. Because this year establishes the foundation of children's school experience, it is essential that every effort is made to ensure that kindergarten programs are of the highest quality. Strategies include lowering student-teacher ratios and ensuring productive use of time to foster children's learning.

Connections Between Families and Schools

Research shows that the more that families are involved in their children's education, the more likely children are to have positive outcomes (FACES, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as cited in Epstein, 2007). Families, schools, and, most of all, the children, benefit from the mutual sharing of information that must begin before the child sets foot in the kindergarten room on the first day of school.

Several of the tasks most important to the success of a child's kindergarten transition lie in the hands of the kindergarten teacher. Perhaps the most

If your community has more than one elementary school, you might consider establishing what Pianta and Kraft-Sayre call a "community transition steering committee" (p. 19), led by a transition coordinator and including community agency leaders, family support administrators, principals/program administrators, and teacher and early childhood leaders representing each of the individual elementary school transition teams. (See *Figure 1 for an illustration.*) The advantage of the community-wide steering committee is that it can address issues that affect all the schools, such as identifying possible transition barriers, allocating resources, empowering teachers to properly fulfill their transition role, creating realistic timelines, involving parents, and evaluating the entire transition process.

The rest of this article offers strategies adults can use to ease children's transition to kindergarten.

Connections Between Children

When children see familiar faces, they are more likely to feel comfortable in a new environment. Encourage parents to look for opportunities for their children to meet children other than those in their preschool classroom. Here are some suggestions:

“ Arrange for elementary school children from different cultures to be "pen pal buddies" with a child of the same culture who will be entering school the next year. They can share pictures and stories for their families to read in their home language.

“ Invite a former student who attends kindergarten to return and talk

important of these tasks is making a home visit to each family, allowing the kindergarten teacher, the family, and the child to get to know each other on territory that is safe and familiar to the child. If the families are reluctant, or perhaps embarrassed to invite the teacher into their home, the teacher might suggest a local park or playground as a place to meet. Here are some additional ideas for extending family involvement:

~ In June, send out a calendar of special dates to share with incoming kindergarten families. Include school holidays, days with reduced hours, special events, and perhaps the names and phone numbers of some parents to call with questions. Make the calendar inviting, cheerful, easy to read, and easily distinguished from the school district calendar that families get in their registration packet.

~ Host a back-to-school night or a family picnic before school starts. During this event, the children can do some simple activities and perhaps try getting on and off a school bus (if that will be new to them), and parents can get to know each other and set up car-pooling schedules. Additionally, you can use this opportunity to encourage family members to volunteer in the classroom, pointing out that while it does help the teachers, it pays big dividends for their child.

~ If you have an ice cream social in the spring or a fall festival after school starts, send invitations to all the early childhood programs that send children to your school and ask them to distribute them to the appropriate families.

~ If you are a school administrator, organize activities that will strengthen the relationships between families and schools. Make available (or even require) teacher training in building partnerships with families, particularly those from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Such training must be based on adult-learning principles and the best available research about child development and learning.

~ At your last conference with a transitioning child's parents, share with them the transition activities you have used in the classroom. If the child seems particularly fearful about the upcoming change, then set up a time to work with

the parents on a specialized transition plan for that child.

~ As soon as registration materials are available, have a parent meeting (offer food, child care, and transportation to ensure everyone's participation) and either ask the parents to bring their materials with them or get sets of materials from all the districts you will be sending children to. Invite a representative (preferably the kindergarten teacher) from each school you are sending children to, and any translators that may be necessary. As the families leave, give each family a card with the name and address of the school their child will be attending, as well as the phone number, principal's name, registration deadlines, start dates, and school hours. This may also be a good time to provide them with a list of after-school care options.

Connections Between Schools

Strong connections between feeder preschools and receiving elementary schools help children and their families make a smooth transition to kindergarten. Such connections cannot even begin to be established without effective communication between the two communities, based on mutual respect. Here are some ideas for strengthening connections between your preschool program and elementary schools:

~ Hold an open house for staff from all the district's early childhood programs and kindergarten classrooms. The first meeting could be hosted by members of the Community Transition Steering Committee and could include a brief presentation on the committee's goals, with the remainder of the time dedicated for staff from the elementary schools and preschools to plan their own open houses.

~ Before the school year begins, gather the program administrators together to discuss ways of meeting the needs of diverse families (something familiar to many early childhood programs, but not to elementary schools) and talk about the current transition process and ways to improve it.

~ Plan a number of joint workshops and inservice events — combine your resources.

~ If the kindergarten staff members are interested in seeing children's

preschool records, be sure you have written permission from the parents.

~ If your district requires kindergarten screening for academic skills, ask that it be at the preschool site so preschool staff can be present during the screening process and so the child is being tested in a familiar setting.



Adults can strengthen connections between early childhood programs and elementary schools through open houses, workshops, and in-service events.

Connections Between Community and School

The following strategies can help you connect your preschool program and local schools to the wider community:

~ Sponsor a full-page ad that lists the names of incoming kindergartners and welcomes them to school.

~ Hold community-wide workshops for all preschool and kindergarten staff on such topics as home visits, chronic illnesses, recognizing stress in children, and conflict resolution.

~ Ask the librarian at the local public library or the media specialist at the elementary school to prepare a list of books that will be helpful in preparing children for kindergarten; obtain copies to send home with each child and encourage families to read them together. (*Also see the issue insert for a book list.*)

~ Go into the community to raise awareness about the importance of smooth transitions. For example, stop in at churches, businesses, and malls and have information materials (with written translations) available to share.

~ Since many cultures regard particular elders in their community as their leaders and greatest teachers, make special arrangements to meet with such

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Supporting Parents of Children in Transition

By Betsy Evans, High Scope Field Consultant and Conflict Resolution Specialist

The picture of a weeping mom leaving her child on the first day of kindergarten is a familiar one to kindergarten teachers. Eavesdrop on a conversation in the teacher's lounge at lunch the same day and you may hear a kindergarten teacher saying, "It's so often like this. Mom (and sometimes Dad) are the basket cases — little Billy is fine!" If, in fact, little Billy is fine, it is probably because his preschool teachers provided his family with some strategies to use in anticipation of fears Billy might express upon learning that he will be leaving the program he has known for one or two (or more) years to start kindergarten. Or, it may be that the idea of kindergarten always seemed very cool and grown-up to Billy until it was his turn to make the change — and then it just seemed scary.

Children may express a variety of feelings after being told they will be leaving their preschool program and going to kindergarten soon. Sometimes these reactions are surprising and/or intense. For example, adults may notice increased sensitivity that results in more crying or other outbursts, interrupted sleep, nighttime or daytime wetting, refusal to engage in outings and familiar routines, and/or increased demands for attention and reassurance. These expressions often occur at unexpected times. Adults need to be patient and flexible in responding to children's emotional expressions and behaviors, while still gently setting limits when necessary.

As children contemplate the changes coming up, they may use strong language, saying things like "I hate my new school" or "I hate my old school" (even though they have loved it all year!). This often occurs because they are trying to figure out how to shift their

loyalties to the new program. Some children may begin to talk "baby talk" or engage in other

"baby" behavior as the transition approaches. However disconnected or surprising such behaviors may seem, it is best for adults to avoid comments like "You'd better not do that in your new school" or "That doesn't sound like a grown-up five-year-old." Such comments may only aggravate children's



When adults listen to children express their feelings about a transition, reflect back what the children say, and provide other forms of support, children are more likely to approach the change with a sense of control and confidence.

concerns about the transition.

Educating Parents

Teachers can offer the following strategies to family members to help their child explore his or her concerns about the new school:

Discuss the upcoming changes at times when your child is rested and not distracted by other activities.

Avoid telling the child what you think he or she should be feeling about the new school and do not expect certain responses from the child. Instead, listen carefully to whatever questions or comments the child makes upon hearing about the transition. Reflect back what the child says. For example, you might say, "It sounds like you really don't want to leave your school. It's been really fun for you there and it's hard to leave. What will you miss the most?" If your child makes a comment such as, "I hate my old school. It's for babies," you might say, "You're feeling very grown up and ready to go to kindergarten now,

aren't you? You are definitely not a baby any more."

~ If your child reacts to the upcoming change with angry outbursts or other immature behaviors, try to remember that these behaviors are not occurring because your child is being "bad." Avoid arguing with the child about hating school; rather than being literally true, such statements are simply your child's way of expressing his or her feelings about the transition in an assertive and concrete way. Your child may be overly excited about the change or, more likely, afraid. Simple comments

like "You sound upset about the change. It can be scary to do new things sometimes" can help your child see that you understand. You might even tell a story about a time when you were afraid of trying something new and what you did that helped.

~ Give your child extra attention in any positive way possible, while also setting limits on any hurtful behaviors. For example, you might say, "It seems like you're having a very hard time today. Hitting needs to

stop. When you're calmer, we can play a game or read a book together." Rather than reinforcing the unacceptable behavior, the extra attention you give your child will deeply reassure him or her that you are going to provide support through these difficulties. As a result, the hurtful behavior will very likely decrease.

~ Express confidence in your child's ability to make the transition; provide encouragement by giving specifics about the things that show he or she is ready for the new setting. You might say, "Let's think of some ways that you are ready for this change — you can put on your own shoes now, you can write the first letter of your name, and you even tell stories to your baby brother!"

~ Go to the library together and check out some books about experiences of other kids starting kindergarten. (See the issue insert for a list of suggested books.) Gradually your child will recognize that other children share

Empowering Children, Improving Transitions

By Pamela Wiltsey Weatherby, High Scope Certified Trainer and Early Childhood Educator, Ontario-Montclair School District, Ontario, California

The transition from preschool to the elementary grades is a developmental milestone for all young children, but it poses unique challenges for those with disabilities. In this article, we will look at some ways in which educators can ease disabled children's transitions throughout their school years by helping these children understand more about their specific handicapping conditions. Learning more about the nature of their disability improves children's self-concept and empowers them to become active participants in the IEP (Individual Education Program) process throughout the period when special education services are deemed necessary and appropriate.

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) provides timelines and requirements for services to disabled students ages 3 through 21. Each state is mandated to establish an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) before identified children turn 3 years old. This plan focuses on the family and contains steps to support children's transition to preschool or another appropriate setting. The IFSP helps family members and sending and receiving agencies become a transition team with specific roles and responsibilities. Although there are no provisions in the law to develop an IFSP as students with special needs move from preschool to kindergarten, the transition process has been set in motion and can be considered as part of children's individual needs in the future. It is also not a requirement that young children with disabilities be taught to understand as much about their disability as they are able to comprehend, but

this is nonetheless important because it enables them to begin advocating for themselves at an early age.

Parents, teachers, therapists, counselors, administrators, and medical teams play important roles in the lives of children with special needs. It is important that these adults begin to answer the children's questions about their disability using appropriate terminology and "kid friendly" language so the children can communicate with classmates before and after transitioning to a new program. It is also imperative that adults help children learn to communicate about meaningful activities and areas of interest during these developing years so adults can help build upon the children's strengths.

The following scenarios show how two young children with disabilities were able to successfully transition from preschool classes to kindergarten.

Brittany

Brittany was born with spina bifida. As an infant, she had surgery to close a lesion on the middle of her back and has a shunt that helps drain spinal fluid and prevent hydrocephalus. As an infant and toddler, she had a home teacher three days a week before making the transition to a special education class at age 3. Her IFSP and IEP provided her with the services she needed at the preschool level. These services continued as she entered a public kindergarten class. Brittany was very verbal and intelligent. The information she received from her parents about her disability and the instruction she received in the classroom from the teacher helped her answer questions asked by her new classmates. When asked why she couldn't walk, she could tell them that she had spina bifida and that is why she needed to wear braces and use a walker to help her move. She could also tell them that she loved to draw pictures and that her parents helped her save pictures in a scrapbook she could share with them someday. The most sensitive questions that the kindergarten students asked were about why she had to wear diapers. Brittany was able to answer that wearing diapers is a part of having spina bifida

and that is why she goes to the nurse's office every day. She could also add that she is learning to change her diaper all by herself!

Sammy

When Sammy was born with Down syndrome, it took a while for his family to accept the social and educational services that were available to them. Now, however, they are part of a support network, aware of their parent rights, and include Sammy as part of every IEP meeting. During the development of his IFSP, it was determined that he could attend a neighborhood preschool program. His IEP goals and objectives were written in the areas of speech and language, and he received services three times a week. Sammy and his parents became very attached to Miss Vicky, his preschool teacher, and Mr. Tim, his speech therapist, and therefore it was difficult for them when he turned 5 and was ready to transition to kindergarten. However, because of the services he had received and the open communication established among the family members and professionals working with Sammy, he was able to enroll in his neighborhood school and attend kindergarten with many of the friends he'd made in preschool. Mr. Tim was able to continue to provide speech therapy and Miss Vicky was able to meet and talk to Mrs. White, his new teacher, to discuss his strengths and interests. Sammy was able to verbalize that he was special because he has Down syndrome. He could also tell them that he loves books and plays with his dog every day. ~

References

- Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act*. Public Law (PL) 105 — 17 (04 June, 1997).
- Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act*. Public Law (PL) 18 — 446 (03 December, 2004).

Successful Transitions: An Overview

By Polly Neill

This workshop¹ explores what goes into creating and supporting successful transitions for children leaving preschool programs and entering kindergarten. Participants will (1) discuss what these transitions mean for children and families; describe the different entities that influence children's transition to kindergarten; and identify action steps for bringing their early childhood community together to create successful transitions for children.

What You'll Need:

- ~ Flip chart pad for each small group
- ~ Double-sided handout (see issue insert to create handout)

Opening Activity

1. Ask participants to think of two transitions they have made in their life (e.g., starting kindergarten, going away to college, getting their first job); one should be their earliest school transition.

2. For each of the transitions, ask participants to answer these questions: What are some of the feelings you remember having during each transition? How might each have been made smoother? If it was smooth, what helped make it that way? Ask participants to turn to someone they do not know and share their answers.

3. Once participants have had a few minutes to discuss their experiences, ask them if they think educators are doing all they can to help children through the transition from preschool to kindergarten and explain that this is what they will be working on during the remainder of the workshop.

Central Ideas and Practice

4. Discuss the following with par-

ticipants: For young children, the kindergarten transition is more than changing buildings or settings or learning to ride a bus. It means learning a new set of rules and behaviors, adjusting to a new peer group, and getting to know new teachers. In addition, some teachers still expect children to sit in one place and pay attention for extended periods of time. Simply because of increased class sizes, children will have to develop independent work habits. For the families it means making sure that records and information about the child are transferred, meeting and communicating with teachers, attending school programs, and adapting to established school and district policies. It also means learning to trust new adults in their children's life.

5. Review the federal mandates listed on the handout. Talk to participants about the diagram on the handout, which shows the different entities that must collaborate to positively influence a child's transition. Make participants aware of the books listed on the handout that can help children with transitions.

6. In small groups, ask participants to discuss the desired outcomes of transition planning for children and to make a list on the flip chart paper at their table. Ask that when they have completed their list they tape it to the wall for further discussion. When all the lists are posted, ask the members of each group to present their list. Examples of such outcomes for children include the following:

- ~ Join other children's play
- ~ Focus their attention on others in group situations
- ~ Develop greater self-confidence

7. Have groups go through the same process as above with a focus on desired outcomes for families. The lists might include items such as the following:

- ~ Initiate opportunities for children to interact with familiar and unfamiliar peers in large-group community settings

- ~ Learn to communicate effectively with educational staff
- ~ Have a sense of pride and commitment in their ongoing involvement in the education of their children

8. Have the groups go through the same process to determine desired outcomes for teachers and other staff. The lists might include the following:

- ~ Meet each child's needs more successfully
- ~ Establish a good rapport with parents
- ~ Gain more resources and a larger network of professional support

Application Activity

9. Ask participants to think about the families in their program or in a program they are familiar with and then pick out one or two of them that do not usually participate in the program's family activities. Talk about the benefits of parents' involvement in their children's activities. Ask participants to take about 15 minutes in their small groups to make up a plan that could convince these families to become more involved. (*Hint:* In LaParo, Kraft-Sayre, and Pianta's study of family and teacher satisfaction with preschool to kindergarten transition activities, 74% of families indicated that their work schedules prevented them from participating.) (LaParo, Kraft-Sayre, & Pianta, p. 279)

Implementation Plan

10. Tell participants that this workshop has presented a very brief overview of a rather complex issue and that one of the keys to ensuring a successful transition process is having an organized and mutually respectful early childhood community. Ask participants to think about all the different early childhood programs in their community and write down three things they could do to start bringing their early childhood community together around the issue of successful transitions for children. ~

This workshop is based on material adapted from Planning for Terrific Transitions: A Guide for Transition-to-School Teams -Trainer's Guide, part of a complete training package on kindergarten transitions produced by SERVE Center for Continuous Improvement at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a division of one of the Regional Educational Laboratories.