Terrific Transitions

Ensuring Continuity of Services for Children and their Families

SERVE

Improving Learning through Research & Development

Terrific Transitions

Ensuring Continuity of Services for Children and their Families

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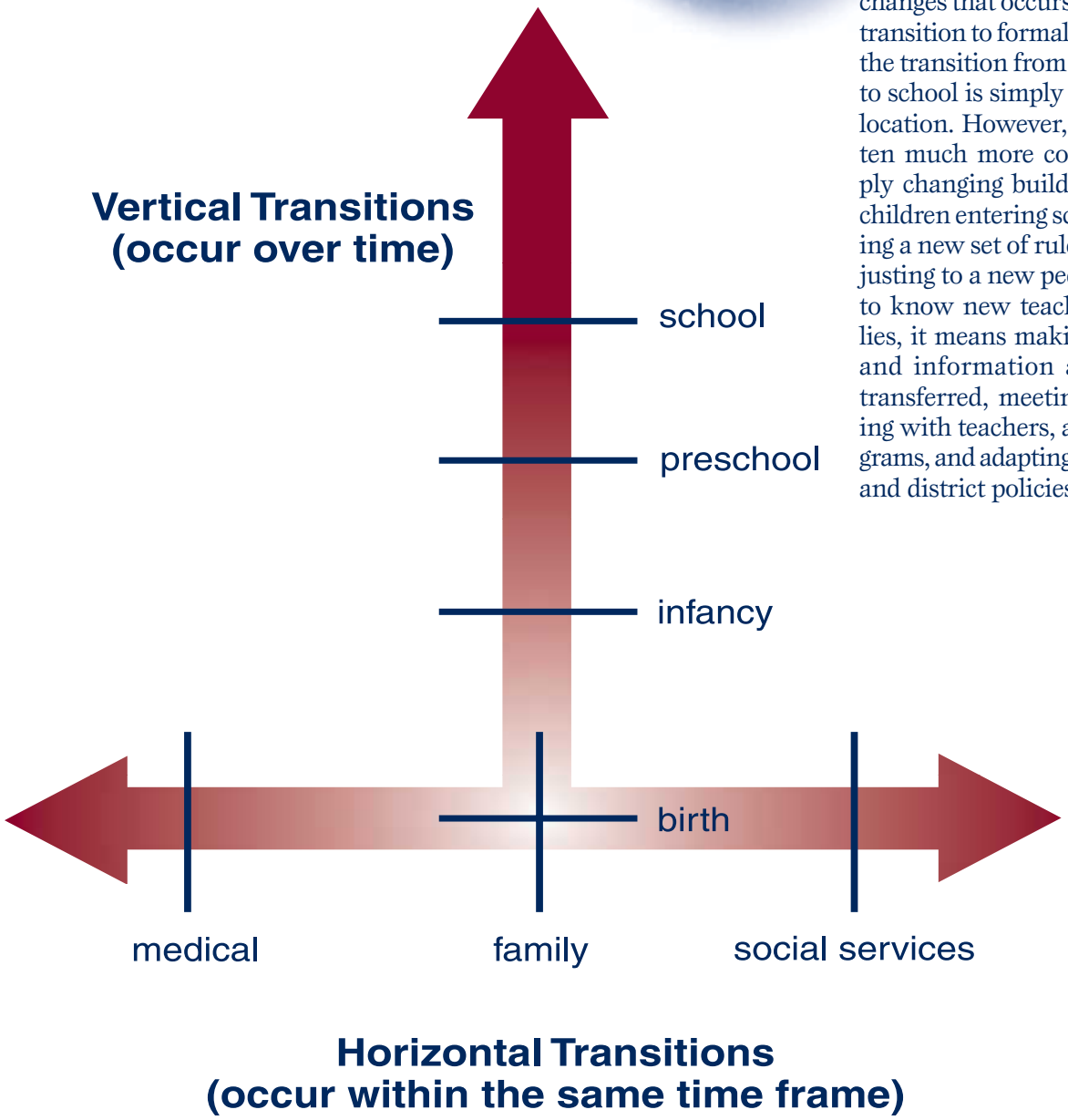
Transitions and Continuity

Transitions

Defining Transitions

In the field of early childhood care and education, the word *transitions* has traditionally been used to describe those changes between different types of activities. More recently, *transitions* has been used to refer to differences in services among environments, agencies, or institutions (Lombardi, 1992). The most significant transitions seem to occur as children move from home to preschool, preschool to early elementary school, or school to after-school activities. They also occur as children and families seek and receive health and educational services from a variety of providers.



The focus on transitions first began with the increasing prominence of pre-kindergarten and mandated kindergarten programs in the early '80s and with the recognition that one of the most significant changes that occurs in a child's life is the transition to formal school. On one level, the transition from home (or preschool) to school is simply a change in physical location. However, this transition is often much more complicated than simply changing buildings or settings. For children entering school, it means learning a new set of rules and behaviors, adjusting to a new peer group, and getting to know new teachers. For their 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.

Horizontal and Vertical Transitions

Kagan (1992) has described two types of transitions: horizontal and vertical transitions. Horizontal transitions refer to movement across various settings that a child and his or her family may encounter within the same time frame (Regional Educational Laboratories Early Childhood Collaboration Network, 1995). For example, Sarah is a special-needs child who lives at home and attends a local preschool where she receives physical therapy, speech therapy, and support from a social worker. Sarah routinely sees a variety of people and makes transitions from one service to another each day. When those movements or changes are supported or smoothed by the various service providers, Sarah and her family experience horizontal continuity.

In contrast, vertical transitions refer to movement among care/education programs, health services, and social services across time (Regional Educational Laboratories Early Childhood Collaboration Network, 1995). For example, Sarah received rehabilitative services through an early intervention program during her infancy. Now, she receives special education and related services through the public school system. As she continues to grow older, she must make transitions from one service setting to another. Sometimes, service providers do little to share information or link their services. At other times, they work hard to collaborate and coordinate their efforts. Strong vertical continuity means that there is a connection between services provided early in a child's development and those provided at later points in time (Regional Educational Laboratories Early Childhood Collaboration Network, 1995).

The ideal, of course, would be for horizontal services to remain in place over time as a child progresses vertically from home (or preschool) to school through the care and education system.

Continuity

Providing Continuity

Efforts to help smooth children's transitions evolved out of a concern that, for some children, movement from one activity to another—or from one environment to another—is often overly abrupt and may interfere with the child's ability to adjust. In order to deal with transitions, processes need to be developed that make it comfortable and easy for children (and their families) to move and change from one program to another. Continuity (and discontinuity) refers to the experiences children and families have as they move from one environment to the next (Love, Logue, Trudeau, & Thayer, 1992). If the two environments are similar or compatible, there is a continuity of experience. That is, when rules and expectations established in the first environment are maintained, children are able to make a smoother transition. However, if the two environments are different or incompatible and children and families aren't prepared for these differ-

Early Signs of Successful Transitions to School

How will you know if the process developed in your program or school has been successful in helping children, parents, educators, and communities? According to Ramey & Ramey, 1994, some early signs are

- Children will like school and look forward to going to school.
- Children will show steady growth in academic skills.
- Parents will become actively involved in their children's education—at home, in school, and in the community.
- Classroom environments will promote positive feelings for both teachers and children.
- Teachers, staff members, and families will value each other.
- Schools and programs will celebrate cultural diversity in their communities.
- Developmentally appropriate practices will be visible within the classroom.
- The community will show consistent investment in the education of children and will strive to increase available learning opportunities.

ences, then children may experience discontinuity as they make the transition from one environment into the next. For these children, the behaviors learned in the first environment are no longer appropriate, and new behaviors must be learned (Love et al., 1992). In studying transitions, researchers have found that when transitions are eased, supported, or smoothed, the gaps between activities, experiences, or services are "bridged," and continuity results.

Creating continuity means building bridges for the transitions that young children and their families naturally move through. Educators, social service providers, and others are learning the importance of working together over time to assist children and families as they make these necessary transitions through the care and education systems.

Elements of Continuity

To ensure continuity of experience for children and their families, a number of elements have been identified. For example, Kagan (1992) offers the following five strategies that are most effective in promoting success:

- Written transition agreements between Head Start programs (and other early childhood programs such as early intervention and childcare) and schools, which delineate roles and responsibilities
- Attention to children's needs, including the transfer of names and records
- Planned transition efforts that function throughout the year
- Training for parents that educates them about the school system and available services
- Visits by school staff to Head Start (and other public and private) programs and vice versa

Similarly, Love and his colleagues (1992) have identified three activities they believe are most effective in promoting a successful transition to kindergarten: (1) coordinating pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs (including curriculum and orientation visits for families), (2) establishing communication between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten staff, and (3) involving parents in transition activities.

In 1995, researchers from the Regional Educational Laboratories' Early Childhood Collaboration Network identified the following eight elements critical to the development of continuity. According to the Laboratory Network, all eight elements should be addressed in order to achieve overall continuity.

(1) Families are an integral part of the home, school, and community partnership and the primary decision makers concerning their children's care and education.

(2) Home, school, and community partners share leadership and guide decision making.

(3) Care and education, health, and social services focus on the full range of needs and circumstances of individual children and their families.

(4) Services are consistent with the home culture of the families, and communication is provided in the home language.

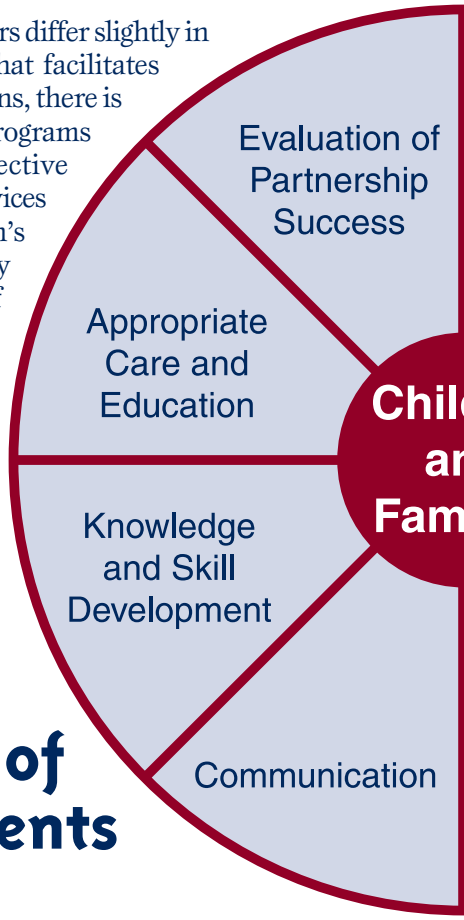
(5) Home, school, and community partners maintain open communication and respect confidentiality.

(6) Home, school, and community partners work together to build their knowledge and skills and the capacity of community services.

(7) Care and education services are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

(8) Home, school, and community partners document their efforts and use evaluation information to improve policies, programs, and practices.

Although researchers differ slightly in their notions of what facilitates successful transitions, there is agreement that if programs are to provide effective early childhood services throughout children's early years, they must share many of the listed elements.

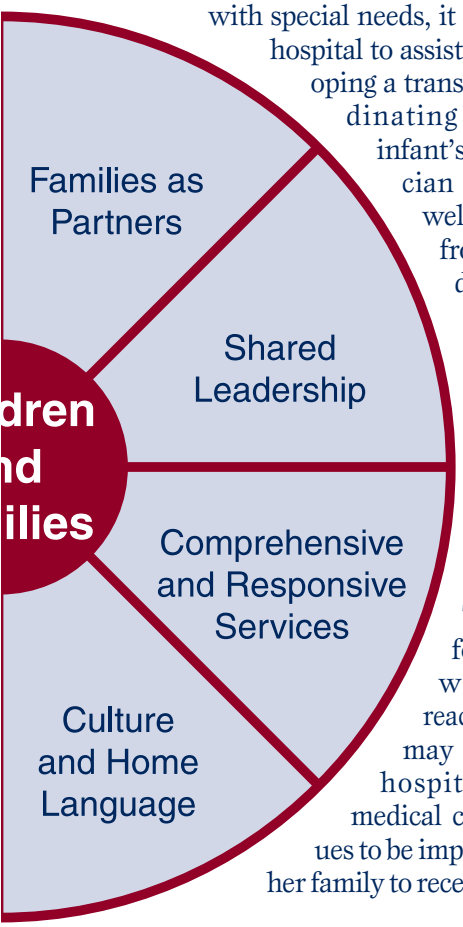


Wheel of Elements

Transitions in Special Settings

Special Needs

Until recently, most of the education research on transitions focused on young children's entry into school; however, this often is not the only transition for which children and families must prepare. This is particularly true of children who have special needs. When a newborn infant has been identified as at-risk for developmental delay, the transition from hospital to home can be very stressful. Even when infants are healthy and show no signs of illness or physical difficulty, new parents often feel anxious, apprehensive, and a bit overwhelmed. In the case of Sarah, a child with special needs, it is important for the hospital to assist the family in developing a transition plan and coordinating efforts with the infant's primary care physician or pediatrician, as well as representatives from the local health department (Healthy Start, Maternal and Infant Program), infant-toddler services (local interagency coordinating council, service providers), and others (Bridging Early Services Transition Taskforce, 1995a). Likewise, when Sarah reaches school age, she may once again require hospitalization for her medical condition. It continues to be important for Sarah and her family to receive support and help in preparing for these necessary return visits. Sarah's classmates and teachers, as well as her family, may also need assistance when she prepares to leave school to be hospitalized for medical care.



As children grow and develop, the programs they attend and the services provided by the various agencies will change. For example, the home-based intervention program may shift to services being provided in a center-based program. Additionally, programs that previously focused on providing medical services may give way to educational services as the child becomes older and more independent (Swan & Morgan, 1993).

The federal laws concerning early intervention and preschool special education programs create several differences between programs that may affect children and families during transition. Understanding the differences between the laws that govern early intervention and those that govern services to three- to five-year-olds may help families prepare for the changes that will occur. It is critical that families understand the differences in the programs and how the new program will address their children's changing needs. Some of the changes that might occur between early intervention and preschool programs include

- Location of services (home-based versus center-based)
- Inclusive settings versus segregated settings
- Frequency and availability of services
- Options and requirements for family participation

To prepare special needs children for change and ensure that transition will unfold smoothly, it is important that parents, family members, educators, and service providers communicate well in advance. Researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Donegan, Fink, Fowler, and Wischnowski, 1994) point out these six strategies to prepare a child for an upcoming change:

- Begin early.
- Talk about the new setting in positive ways.
- Encourage the child to ask questions and express fears.
- Engage the child in concrete experiences.
- Teach the child specific skills and routines that will be useful in the new program.
- Communicate and share information between programs in advance.

They also point out the following additional strategies that families and providers can use following initial entry into a new setting to ensure a successful adjustment:

- Incorporate information obtained from the sending program and family into the receiving program plan.
- Maximize parental involvement and support during the initial entry and adjustment.
- Individualize communication with the child's family.
- Adjust expectations for the child's behavior.

Culture and Language

While it is important to consider a child's special needs when planning for transition, it is also important to take into consideration the child's home culture and language. When children move into settings outside the home, they often encounter people and experiences that are unfamiliar to them. This is particularly true of children whose families may be recent immigrants to this country, migrant families, those who use only their native language in the home, and families with limited skills in their native language and/or in English. Facilitating transitions and creating continuity for young children and their families hinges on supporting the family's culture and language (Regional Educational Laboratories' Early Childhood Collaboration Network, 1995). For programs serving a highly diverse population, the policies and practices developed by the program must demonstrate respect and appreciation for the culture and language of the children and families they serve. In practical terms, this may mean

- Hiring staff from the community who reflect the community linguistically and culturally in order to reach out to families and involve them in meaningful ways (Fleck, 1995)
- Ensuring that children have an opportunity to see familiar cultural articles in the learning environment
- Providing opportunities for children to learn and communicate in their home language

Simply gaining an understanding of the home language and culture of the children and families being served and providing opportunities for communication can help align expectations and smooth transitions.

To learn more about how to ensure continuity for non-English speaking children in early childhood settings, read next about what two programs in Florida are doing to promote transitions and support the family's home culture and language.

Exemplary Programs

Like many of Florida's communities, Okeechobee County and Volusia County schools serve a diverse population of students, including a large migrant population. Like other migrant communities, there is a high percentage of families who speak Spanish as their primary language. As a result, many of the children enter school with limited-English proficiency. This language limitation, coupled with other factors such as low-income and poor literacy rates among adults, makes early school success difficult for these children.

Okeechobee County Migrant Pre-K Program

The Okeechobee County Migrant Pre-K Program is designed to help schools connect with families and make the transition from pre-k to kindergarten a positive experience. The county has responded to the needs of the migrant community by implementing a number of services.

- Hiring a school-based migrant aide to provide academic assistance to students in grades K-2
- Conducting regular home visits
- Providing bilingual teacher aides
- Maintaining low teacher/student ratios
- Locating pre-k classrooms on the school campus
- Arranging for migrant pre-k students to tour kindergarten classrooms prior to the conclusion of the school term
- Ensuring that all migrant pre-k staff are included in staff development activities and school faculty meetings
- Providing English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) training to all migrant pre-k teachers
- Conducting a summer home-based outreach program to reinforce readiness skills
- Providing a school-based migrant advocate who can assist families with academic, social, and health services

Pierson Montessori Center

Located in Volusia County, Pierson Montessori Center is an early childhood program that enrolls 80 children from birth through five years of age. The Center is located in rural northwest Volusia County to serve its predominantly Mexican farmworker community. Pierson Montessori Center has been recognized by both the American Montessori Society (AMS) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as a model program.

In an effort to facilitate children's transition from preschool into elementary school, Pierson Montessori Center has focused on two important factors within an overall framework of philosophy and pedagogy: supporting children's home language and culture and interfacing with local schools who will be receiving children from Pierson Montessori Center.

From the time that they enter the program until they leave, children are related to and instructed in their home language. Children are provided daily instruction in their home language, and use of the home language is built into children's experiences at the center. This means that books and stories are read to children in their home language and that home culture is reflected in the activities and materials provided.

The philosophy of the Montessori program places great emphasis on the child as an individual and maintains that a child's early years are of crucial importance for optimal development. The highly individualized nature of this approach greatly facilitates children's acquisition of home language prior to the acquisition of a second language for the development of true bilingualism and biliteracy.

Connecting with local schools is also part of Pierson Montessori Center's efforts to facilitate children's transition. Staff from the center have visited local schools and observed kindergarten classrooms. Similarly, school personnel have been invited to tour the center and observe children in the context of the program. Staff periodically meet with kindergarten teachers and school principals to discuss teaching philosophies and expectations, in hopes that such dialogue will create a greater mutual understanding and appreciation. Prior to movement from preschool into kindergarten, children are provided with an opportunity to visit future classrooms and meet future teachers. The instruction of these children also begins to change, moving from self-directed activities to more teacher-directed activities.

A critical component of this program is linking families to appropriate services. Because many of the families are unaware of available resources, as well as apprehensive about accessing them, staff members make every effort to bring families and community service agencies together.

Outcome

As a result of these programs, young children are entering school better prepared and ready to learn. The majority of children from Pierson Montessori are doing well in their respective schools and grade levels. Test scores and report card indices are generally in the upper percentiles. According to Okeechobee County teachers, children who participate in the Migrant Pre-K Program demonstrate greater readiness for kindergarten than children who did not participate in the program. There is also evidence that student attendance is improving. Since formation of the program, children's attendance in preschool has improved dramatically and remains steady throughout the year.

For more information about these programs, contact:

Okeechobee County Schools
Oliver Harwas, Migrant Advocate
700 SW Second Avenue
Okeechobee, FL 34974
941-462-5025

Pierson Montessori Center
David Cipolloni, Program Consultant
592 S. Volusia Avenue, County Road 3
Pierson, FL 32180
904-749-6995
904-749-6997 FAX

Transition Planning

Preparing for Change

When a child moves from one agency or program to another, it can be a very distressing and upsetting time. Just as politicians have "transition teams" to assist them with their new roles, children and families need teams to help them prepare for change. Preparing children and families for change is called *transition planning*. For special needs children, the federal law requires that planning for transition begin at least 90 days prior to the child's third birthday; some states require an even earlier intervention (Chandler, Fowler, Hadden, Stahurski, 1995). For all children, planning for transition is an important step. (See "Sample Transition Timeline" in the Appendix.)

Facilitating Transitions and Providing Continuity

Birth, graduation, marriage, divorce, death—these are all major transitions in our lives. Other lesser transitions occur almost daily—the drive from home to work and the change from employee to parent. While these transitions might be stressful, they are expected. Unfortunately, sometimes children and their families experience unexpected events as they make transitions within the care and education system that trigger different thoughts and feelings. For example, some children and their families may feel excited and hopeful, whereas others may feel anxious and overwhelmed. It is important that educators recognize this and assist families in the process. (See "Preparing Your Family for Transition" in the Appendix.) Here are some ways to help families deal with those feelings:

- Provide information about the transition process.
- Connect families with others who have experienced similar transitions.
- Let families know that adjusting to transitions takes time.
- Encourage families to participate in their children's educational process.
- Include parents in decision making.
- Communicate on a regular basis with parents.

Working Together in Transition

Role of Administration or Leadership Team

Perhaps those most responsible for ensuring a smooth transition for children and families are the administrators or leadership team. It is the leadership of the organization that sets policies and establishes procedures designed to improve transitions. Often, various programs or agencies find it difficult to coordinate services due to differing administrative structures, funding sources, legal requirements, and program philosophies. An effective administrative structure not only demonstrates support at the top, but also sets the tone for future work (Byrd, Rous, Stephens, Dyk, & Perry, 1991). Administrators can promote successful transition efforts by

- Initiating and supporting the development of a transition plan
- Forming a transition team
- Serving as an active member of the transition team
- Proactively initiating contact with sending and receiving sites
- Sponsoring or hosting special activities or programs
- Allocating resources to support transition efforts
- Seeking and sharing the latest information on effective transition programs
- Scheduling staff time for planning and working together
- Providing incentives for involvement
- Modeling collaboration

Exemplary Programs

Transitions into kindergarten at J.A. Thompson Elementary are made with "Red Carpet Style!" Located at Vero Beach, Florida, J.A. Thompson Elementary is a public school of approximately 500 students. The campus is home to a K-5 program, several exceptional student programs, as well as a Head Start program.

Creative teachers, strong administrative support, a desire to ensure a smooth transition into kindergarten, and a family-friendly philosophy have led to the creation, development, and implementation of three innovative transition programs: Tiger Cub Camp, Red Carpet Roundup, and Staggered Start.

Tiger Cub Camp

The Tiger Cub Camp, for future kindergartners, is a one week, half-day program held 2-3 weeks prior to the start of school. This unique initiative provides future students with classroom, whole group, small group, lunchroom, and playground experience in a relaxed camp-type atmosphere. Using a theme of school spirit (J.A. Thompson Tigers), students become familiar with the campus, rules and procedures, and school personnel. Teachers have an early opportunity to meet, work with, and observe students. Other services offered during Tiger Cub Camp include physicals and immunizations on site, parent involvement activities, and home visits.

Of course, Tiger Cub Camp requires funding and administrative support—grants, business partners, and collaborative efforts with other agencies both in and out of the school district are important. J. A. Thompson Elementary School has also been successful obtaining funding from the Full-Service School grant, and the August 1996 camp was funded by Indian River, Okeechobee, and Martin County Collaborative (IROKM). Collaborative efforts with the school district for transportation and food service, as well as with Head Start, have contributed to the all-around success of the program. Surveys conducted among the families and teachers participating in the program indicate that positive results are recognized and appreciated by all.

Red Carpet Round-Up

Red Carpet Round-Up is an enhanced spring registration day for future kindergarten students and their families. Parents and future students are invited to spend the morning in the kindergarten classrooms with the teachers and students. They experience firsthand thematic, integrated lessons; interact with the current students; and meet the teachers as they demonstrate what they do best…teaching! Pertinent registration information is presented, questions are answered, and fun is had by one and all. The children who participate in this adventure are the Head Start students on site, other preschool students who reside in the attendance zone, and younger siblings of any current students along with their families. An undertaking of this nature can only reach its potential with community collaboration and, again, administrative support.

Staggered Start

Staggered Start is a four-day program of staggered participation for the new kindergarten students during the first week of school. Students attend only one of the first four days of school in a small group with the entire class in attendance on the fifth day. This arrangement allows the teachers and students to learn about each other and experience school with a low teacher/student ratio. A waiver is required for this and can be written with the assistance and support of the School Improvement Team.

At J.A. Thompson Elementary, the transition from home to school for new students is taken in small, positive steps, making the journey enjoyable for everyone. Everyone starts the school year confident, comfortable, and ready!

J.A. Thompson Elementary School
contact:
Kim McCorrison, Elementary Specialist
1110 18th Avenue, SW
Vero Beach, FL 32962
561-564-3240

Some ideas for facilitating communication between sending and receiving programs include the following:

- Plan joint inservice training and workshops on topics applicable to both settings.
- Plan cross-program visitation.
- Schedule regular meetings and sharing sessions.
- Encourage communication via telephone, e-mail, or conference to discuss a particular child.
- Develop a packet that will follow the child into the new program. Include information such as work samples, likes/dislikes of the child, and strengths/needs seen in the child.
- Celebrate successes together.
- Use peer coaching to support and assist each other.
- Provide social situations where staff from both programs can meet.
- Develop written policies and procedures regarding transition.

Staff Development and Training

Well-trained staff at both the sending and receiving program are critical to the successful transition of children and families. It is important that members of both staffs have sufficient knowledge and skills to work effectively with each other. Knowledge of specific activities, goals, and personnel will help staff members maintain effective communication and will foster an atmosphere of understanding and trust, collaboration, cooperation, and teamwork (Byrd et al., 1991). To accomplish this, many programs have begun to provide training that is relevant to personnel from all programs (e.g., Head Start, childcare, preschool, and kindergarten). Joint training promotes continuity of services, builds relationships, eliminates an "us-versus-them" mentality, and helps to define the transition activities that will facilitate children's entry into the new program (Bridging Early Services Transition Taskforce, 1995b).

It is important that training be scheduled by program representatives to ensure convenience and accessibility. Programs may also find it helpful to share financial and organizational responsibilities. For example, one program may contribute to the actual cost of a speaker or consultant, while the other program provides the facility, refreshments, or materials, so that training is a joint investment (Swan & Morgan, 1993).

Preparing Children for Transition

To ensure a smooth transition between programs, it is important that staff members from both the sending and receiving program develop activities that will facilitate children's adjustment. Children need to know what is expected of them in the new program and need to be presented with opportunities to practice appropriate behaviors. They should look forward to the experience with a sense of excitement and anticipation, rather than a feeling of fear or dread. Transition activities for young children can include stories, games, role playing, and field trips. The following are tips that staff members from both programs can use to help plan and implement transition activities for children.

Tips for Supporting Children's Transition

If you are sending a child to another program, here are some suggestions that you may find helpful:

- Develop written policies and procedures that will guide transition efforts.
- Provide opportunities for staff to visit programs that will be receiving children.
- Participate in joint transition planning with receiving program.
- Offer parent education regarding receiving program.

- Inform parents that their children will be attending a new program. Invite them to participate in the transition planning with you (See "Sample Letter to Families" in the Appendix.)
- Talk to children about the differences between the sending and receiving programs.
- Encourage children to talk about any concerns or fears they may have about the new program.
- Provide opportunities for children to visit the new program several times, to meet staff and tour the new building.
- Arrange for the children to visit the new program while it is in session.
- Talk with the children about some of the rules that will be used in the new program and give them an opportunity to practice those new behaviors. For example, teach children using developmentally appropriate activities and games to line up and move in lines, if that is a rule in the new program.
- Ask children to write or dictate a story about going to their new school. Allow them to create a puppet show around the story they have written.
- Read stories to children that discuss changes or moves.
- Invite a kindergarten child or older sibling to visit the preschool and talk about the school he/she attends.
- Survey parents to find out what services or information they need to help their children make a successful transition. (See "Sample Family Transition Questionnaire" in Appendix.)

If you are receiving a child from another program, here are some suggestions that you may find helpful:

- Provide opportunities for staff to visit programs that will be sending children.
- Develop written policies and procedures that will guide transition efforts.
- Participate in joint transition planning with the sending program.
- Review records for new children entering the program and identify current skill level of these children. Adapt curriculum to their level and build from there.
- Provide new parents with a schedule of the best times to call or visit the program.
- Invite new parents and children to an open house. Offer a tour of the facility and make sure that parents meet staff who will be working with children.
- Talk about the new program with the children. Allow them an opportunity to ask questions and discuss any fears or concerns they may have.
- Provide an opportunity for parents and staff to meet, and allow parents to ask questions about their children's program. (See "Information About My Child" in the Appendix.)
- Review new procedures and rules daily during the first few weeks of class, and gradually fade these instructions.
- Use familiar curriculum materials from the sending program to supplement existing curriculum.
- Find out if new children know each other. Assign children to "buddies."
- Send a personal letter or note card to all new students welcoming them into the classroom.

Getting Families Ready for Transition

Families should be active partners with staff in the transition process. Parent involvement in the planning contributes to children's success in school. (See "Learning About Transition" in the Appendix.) The following list offers activities and suggestions that may be helpful to parents as they assist their children during periods of transition:

- Check with your child's current program for any documents or information to be sent to the new program. This information will be helpful in providing for your child's continued growth and development. Be sure that service providers have obtained written consent before allowing them to share records or other information.

- Keep a journal of your child's activities, skills, and interests. This may help you to provide quick information to those who will be working with your child.
- Help your child get excited about the new program. Talk often about the new activities he or she will do there and how much fun it will be.

- Help your child feel comfortable and more confident about the move by discussing any concerns or fears he or she might have.
- Visit and tour your child's new school or program.
- Ask if your child can bring a favorite toy or item from home to comfort him or her during this transition period.
- Be prepared to share any strategies or methods for working with your child.
- Try to meet all staff members who will be a part of your child's day in the new program (e.g., teacher, teacher's aide, bus driver, specialists).
- Ask your child's new teacher or specialists to observe your child in his or her current program.
- Talk with families of other children who are currently enrolled in the program.
- Find out what is being offered to new families and make a point to attend those functions (e.g., open house, observation opportunities, support groups).
- Help your child begin to develop some basic self-help skills such as independent toileting, handwashing, tying shoes, and buttoning and zipping clothes.
- Inquire about special transportation if your child needs to move from one program to another during the day.
- Involve yourself in school meetings such as PTA/PTO or school advisory council.
- Maintain ongoing contact with your child's teacher, either through phone calls, notes, or regular meetings, to discuss the child's adjustment and progress.

Evaluating and Monitoring Transition Activities

As with any program, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and its services. The primary purpose behind evaluation of transition activities is to determine if transition planning is having a positive effect on children and families. That is, are children and families able to move through the process with smooth, uninterrupted services (Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994)?

When evaluating a transition plan, it is important that there be procedures in place for conducting both formative and summative evaluations. A formative evaluation will track the implementation of services and monitor the system for difficulties. Information gathered during the formative evaluation will be used to improve the relationship among transition partners and the practices they employ. Some questions for transition partners to consider include the following:

- Is the transition plan effective in identifying children and families who need services?
- Are there policies and procedures in place that support transition efforts? If not, what are the gaps?
- Are the activities effective in smoothing the transition and ensuring continuity of services?
- How well is the collaboration between transition partners working?

In contrast, the purpose of summative evaluation is to determine if the services provided are helpful or effective. To answer this question, it is important that service providers collect data that help them to determine the impact of their policies and procedures. Outcomes related to providing continuity may include data related to the level of family involvement in different care or education programs, children's adjustment to a new care or educational setting, or children's developmental progress. A thorough evaluation will use a variety of data sources including surveys, interviews, existing records, direct observations, and meeting minutes (Regional Educational Laboratories' Early Childhood Collaboration Network, 1995).

Building an evaluation component into the transition plan allows transition partners to continually clarify their efforts and assess the effectiveness of their policies and practices (Melaville, Blank, & Asayesh, 1993). Information gathered during the evaluation can be used to fine tune efforts and set priorities for action. It also aids in communicating about the transition services to everyone in the community, including parents, schools, and community agencies (Regional Educational Laboratories' Early Childhood Collaboration Network, 1995).

State and National Initiatives in Transitions

Preparing the child for success in the future environment is a critical component of transition. As a result, specific practices and requirements have been mandated through legislation that will help children and families as they make the transition between home, preschool, and kindergarten settings. To date, much of the attention in establishing transition services has focused on those most likely to encounter difficulties in regular settings—special needs children and those from disadvantaged families (West Virginia Education Association & AEL, 1994). Of the laws relating to young children, there are three pieces of legislation that most directly relate to the need for states to establish transition services: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part H; IDEA, Part B; and Head Start. Part H (infants and toddlers) and Part B (preschool) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 102-119) were created to provide a seamless delivery of services for young children between birth and age 5. Head Start legislation encourages Head Start programs to coordinate and collaborate with other education and social service agencies to better serve children and their families.

In addition to the above legislation, Title I of the Improving America's School Act (PL 103-382) was enacted in 1994. Through this legislation, grants became available that would allow local school districts to develop and operate programs designed to assist low-income students and their families. This legislation stipulates that each district must prepare a plan for the transition of each child from Head Start, or other early childhood development programs, to kindergarten. The goal of this legislation is to create as much continuity as possible for five-year-olds entering kindergarten.

Although efforts to assist children and their families in the process of transition may differ slightly, most legislation requires attention to the following key elements (West Virginia Education Association & Appalachian Educational Laboratory, 1994):

- Serving underserved children or those with special needs and their families
- Establishing communication and coordination between service providers
- Involving families as partners in planning and decision making

When transitions are handled hastily, children and families may experience distress that leads to other difficulties. However, by developing a transition plan prior to a child's entrance into a new setting or program, both staff and parents can prepare for and ensure the delivery of appropriate services.

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Appendix

Sample Transition Timeline

(Adapted from Chandler, Fowler, Hadden, Stahurski, 1995)

This sample transition identifies what steps will be followed in the transition process, who is responsible for each step, and when each step will be accomplished, This includes steps that are required by law as part of the Individualized Family Service Plan (ISFP) and steps that are options to consider when developing a transition plan.

Date	Responsibility	
_____	_____	Hold the first planning meeting to begin the transition process.
_____	_____	Develop a transition plan (as part of the six-month IFSP review) and provide information concerning child and parent rights and options for services.*
_____	_____	Identify goals, objectives, and methods to prepare the child and family for transitions.*
_____	_____	The family provides consent for release of information to public school and other programs or services.*
_____	_____	Identify necessary evaluations to determine eligibility for special education and related services and conduct evaluations.*
_____	_____	The transition team discusses eligibility for (continued) special education services and other issues related to transition, and identifies future program options (MDC meeting).*
_____	_____	Members of the transition team visit program options.
_____	_____	If the child is eligible to receive special services, the transition team writes the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and identifies new program(s) and services.
_____	_____	The family and child visit the new program and meet with the teacher and related services staff.
_____	_____	The early intervention staff transfers records and contacts the new program staff to exchange information.*
_____	_____	The child starts the new program on the eligible or agreed-upon date.*
_____	_____	The family meets with the new program staff to assess child adjustment.
_____		Early intervention and the new program staff evaluate the transition process, including child adjustment and family satisfaction.

*** Steps that are required as part of the IFSP**

Preparing Your Family for Transition

(Chandler, Fowler, Hadden, Stahurski, 1995)

Transition can be an exciting time, one that can provide new opportunities for your child and family. It also can be a time of great change and adjustment. Your child or family may need to adjust to new teachers and therapists, new children, different schedules and daily routines, new classroom activities, and new options for parent involvement. You may find that both you and your child experience separation anxiety. It may be hard to "let go" of the staff and services in the early intervention program and to learn to trust and communicate with new staff. Your family may need to learn about the public school system, your child's and family's rights, new evaluations and technical terms, and how to advocate for the child when necessary.

All children and families make adjustments during transition. The amount of time required for these adjustments varies across children, families, and programs. It is normal to experience some uncertainty and, with that, some stress during transition. This is true for all families and children who start a new program, regardless of whether the child has special needs. Families who participate in transition planning report reduced stress. Some strategies that families have used to prepare for transition are listed below.

- Plan ahead for transition. Don't wait until the last minute to begin thinking about transition. Give yourself and your family time to make decisions and adjust to the changes that will occur.
- Realize that stress, uncertainty, and separation anxiety are normal emotions. Many, if not all, parents experience these feelings when their child starts preschool or kindergarten.
- Ask questions throughout the transition process. You have a right to obtain information about transition and to be involved in the transition planning.
- Attend transition planning meetings. Share information with the team about your child and your family, your resources, your priorities, and any concerns that you may have.
- Talk with other families who have made the transition from early intervention to preschool programs.
- Talk with members of your family about transition and some of the changes that may occur.
- Learn about your child's and family's rights, how to interact with new program staff, and how to advocate for your child in the new program.
- Visit different programs to help select the program that best meets your child's needs.
- Try to identify aspects of the new program that may be different or difficult for your child, and give your child experiences with those aspects before the new program begins. For example, if you think that your child will have trouble working or playing alone, you might give your child an opportunity to play alone for short periods of time each day.

Sample Letter to Families

This letter could be sent to each family whose child will be entering a new school or program next year. It can be personalized to fit your particular situation.

(Date)

(Parent name)

(Address)

Dear (parent's name):

I am writing to let you know that your child may be enrolled in a new school or program next year. Sometimes, when children are moving into a new program or school, the change can be scary and uncomfortable. Now is the time for us to begin thinking about and planning for the change. We want to make sure that when (child's name) begins (his/her) new program that (he/she) feels comfortable and confident about the move.

I would like to meet with you and discuss how we can best help (child's name) make a smooth transition into the new program. You will also have the opportunity to visit the new school/program as well as meet with new teachers and staff members.

Please call me at your convenience to set up a time. I believe that by working together, we can make this a successful transition for (child's name). If you have additional questions, ideas, or comments, I can be reached at (phone number) between the hours of ____ and ____.

Sincerely,

(teacher's name)

Sample Family Transition Questionnaire

(Adapted from Cook & Johnson, 1992)

This brief questionnaire may be given to parents to help them determine and/or clarify their needs and concerns. It also represents one way of learning more about what children and families need in order to make a smooth transition.

Read the following questions carefully, and circle your answers. Please add any additional comments or questions that you might have.

I need more information about or assistance in

1. Preparing my child for a new school or classroom — Yes No

_____

_____

2. Arranging a visit to my child's new school/program — Yes No

_____

_____

3. Identifying the school or program that my child will be attending — Yes No

_____

_____

4. Contacting other parents whose children are currently enrolled in the school/program — Yes No

_____

_____

5. Locating community services that may provide additional resources — Yes No

_____

_____

6. Understanding my legal rights and responsibilities — Yes No

_____

_____

Additional Questions or Comments:

Name

Information About My Child

This form may be given to parents as a way of eliciting information and involving them in the educational planning for their children. Teachers and caregivers can use this in an initial meeting with parents or send it home with the children at the beginning of the year (adapted from Kentucky Early Childhood Transition Project, May 1995).

These things please me most about my child:	These are things my child does well:	My child really likes . . .

Right now, I am most concerned about . . .	I would like my child to learn to do these things:	My child learns best when . . .

I think these services would help my child:	Our family could also use help with . . .	I would like to be involved in my child's program in these ways:

Learning About Transition

(Chandler, Fowler, Hadden, Stahurski, 1995)

An important step in promoting a positive transition for your child and family is learning about the transition process. At least three months before your child makes the move from early intervention to preschool, someone from the early intervention program will meet with you to talk about transition and work with you to develop a transition plan.* Some of the topics that should be discussed during transition meetings are the following:

- What is involved in transition?
- When will your child make the transition to a new program?
- What decisions need to be made related to the changes in service delivery?
- Who will be involved in making decisions?
- When will the decisions be made?
- What is your family's role in the transition process?
- Is your child eligible for special education and related services?
- What options are available (for example, community preschool, pre-kindergarten, self-contained special education)?
- How can you get information and learn about service options?
- What are the differences between early intervention and preschool programs?
- What are your child's and family's legal rights related to special education services?
- How can you prepare your child and family for transition?

Your family should feel free to ask questions during transition meetings and at any time during the year. Often it is helpful to make a list of questions or topics that you wish to discuss with program staff or the transition team. Space is provided here for you to write questions that you have or issues that you want to talk about.

* Federal law requires that planning for transition begin at least 90 days before a child turns three; in some states, such as Illinois, state law requires that planning begin even earlier, at least six months before the third birthday.

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SERVE is an education organization with the mission to promote and support the continuous improvement of educational opportunities for all learners in the Southeast. To further this mission, SERVE engages in research and development that address education issues of critical importance to educators in the region and provides technical assistance to SEAs and LEAs that are striving for comprehensive school improvement. This critical research-to-practice linkage is supported by an experienced staff strategically located throughout the region. This staff is highly skilled in providing needs assessment services, conducting applied research in schools, and developing processes, products, and programs that inform educators and increase student achievement.

As the new millennium approaches, SERVE is preparing to address emerging 21st-century issues, such as persistent achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, massive teacher training needs, rising numbers of limited-English proficient students. Committed to a shared vision of the future of education in the region, the SERVE organization is governed by a board of directors that includes the governors, chief state school officers, and key legislators from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, and representative teachers and private sector leaders. SERVE's core component is the Regional Educational Laboratory program. SERVE is one of ten organizations, funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, that provide the services of the Regional Educational Laboratory program to all 50 states and territories. These Laboratories form a knowledge network, building a bank of information and resources shared nationally and disseminated regionally to improve student achievement locally. SERVE has additional funding from the Department in the areas of Migrant Education and School Leadership and is the lead agency in the Eisenhower Mathematics and Science Consortium for the Southeast and the Southeast and Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium.

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