

**EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION  
FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES,  
AGES THREE THROUGH FIVE:  
TRANSITION**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	T-1
THE ROLE OF TRANSITION.....	T-3
When A Child Enters Early Childhood Special Education Services .....	T-3
THE USE OF THE IFSP.....	T-5
Beyond A Child’s Third Birthday.....	T-5
THE ROLE OF TRANSITION.....	T-6
When A Child Exits Early Childhood Special Education Services.....	T-6
THE ROLE OF TRANSITION AGREEMENTS .....	T-7
THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM.....	T-8
SUMMARY.....	T-9

## APPENDICES

Appendix T-A	Transition Process from Infant Development Programs
Appendix T-B	Transition Process: Notice/Consent Summary
Appendix T-C	Comparison of Federal Requirements IFSP/IEP
Appendix T-D	Recommended 3 – 5 Transition Process from ECSE Programs to School-Age Programs
Appendix T-E	Potential Differences Between ECSE and Kindergarten Programs
Appendix T-F	Social/Survival Skills Critical for Successful Transitions
Appendix T-G	Kindergarten Classroom Checklist, Preschool/Kindergarten Teacher Questionnaire

# INTRODUCTION

The goal of the transition process is to ensure continuity in the delivery of comprehensive services that meet the needs of a young child with disabilities as he/she grows and develops. Transition serves as a vital component in providing comprehensive services for young children with disabilities. An effective transition includes (1) collaboration among educators and other service providers and family members throughout the transition process; (2) enlisting family members as equal partners; and (3) maximizing children's adjustment during movement from one setting to another. For transitions to be successful, the process must offer support for a child through appropriate assessment and curricular planning; support for the family through adequate preparation and their active involvement; and support for educators and other service providers through appropriate planning and ongoing communication promoted by administration. The transition process must include planned procedures that account for the cultural, family, and social influences that impact each situation.

The transition process can be an exciting and rewarding experience for all involved. It is a period of change, moving from the familiar toward the unknown. It signifies growth and development of the child and new opportunities for the enhancement of skills. Yet this process also presents challenges that may create feelings of trepidation for the child, family, educators and other service providers. Challenges for the child may include adjusting to a new physical, social, and

learning environment where expectations, teacher attention, and individualization may be different. These changes require a transfer of skills, which may create a sense of insecurity and stress for the child. Challenges for the family may stem from apprehensions regarding appropriateness of the new services, acceptance of their child in the new setting, the changing nature of their role, and preparedness of the educators and other service providers working with their child. A primary challenge of professionals from both the sending and receiving programs is maintaining accurate and ongoing communication. Educators and other service providers must be informed of eligibility requirements, program emphasis, service options, and child and family needs (Bricker, Odem, & Peck, 1993).

As with many other changes, transition to a new program creates challenges as well as new opportunities for growth. Conquering the challenges can give a child and family additional confidence to meet future transitions. Too much change, however, may create stress, anxiety, fear or confusion, and it may hinder a young child's ability to learn.

The goal in a smooth transition is to create as much continuity as possible for a child who is entering a new program in the community or school. Research has shown that:

- Whenever young children can experience success during significant transitions they grow in confidence and competence to manage later moves.

- Local planning by responsible teachers, families, and representatives from other community agencies can minimize discontinuity and enhance children's opportunities for success.
- Developmentally appropriate curricula provide continuity and promote early success for children with a diversity of abilities and previous experiences.
- Family members often contribute significantly to young children's adjustments to a new environment. To be comfortable participants, parents need information and encouragement. Their culture and goals families have for their children must be valued.
- Families who feel welcome are likely to continue active involvement in their children's education.
- Planned activities can help children and families cope with necessary changes and negotiate transitions successfully.
- Written procedures and timelines help ensure that transition activities occur on schedule.

Transition planning ensures that the special needs of a child and the family are met, necessary information about the child's special learning characteristics is shared, and special equipment and training are provided in a timely manner. Good beginnings help to minimize or avert later problems. When teachers, families and representatives of community agencies plan together, the transition process yields more satisfactory results. Planning can help a child and family reduce anxiety about transition and, instead, anticipate the exciting opportunities of the school years. (*Taking the Next Steps Together*, Iowa Dept. of Education, June 1996)

Two critical service delivery transitions occur for the preschool aged child with disabilities. Parents and professionals must negotiate both transitions on behalf of the child. The **first transition** occurs when the child enters early childhood special education services, and the **second transition** occurs when the child exits those services.

# THE ROLE OF TRANSITION

## When A Child Enters Early Childhood Special Education Services

Transition occurs at any time a child enters an early childhood special education service. The child may be moving from an early intervention program, home, or other early childhood program. The transition occurring in any one of these situations needs to be well planned, coordinated and implemented. Educators and other service providers should know the resources available to the family, begin the transition process early, and support the family throughout the transition process (Hanson & Lynch, 1995).

Federal requirements for both the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP) are given in Appendix C. Both the IFSP and the IEP are written documents that outline the service to be provided by Early Childhood Special Education programs. Outcome statements and goals must directly reflect the concerns and priorities identified by IFSP/IEP team members including the child's parents.

In North Dakota the agency providing services to children with disabilities from birth through age 2, is the Department of Human Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities. The IFSP used by service providers within this agency was developed according to Federal requirements (P.L. 105-17, Part C) along with input from Department of Public Instruction personnel regarding the requirements of P.L. 105-17, Part B. The IFSP used in North Dakota does

incorporate all required components of the IEP.

When a child transitions from an early intervention program, transition planning is mandated. Part C of Public Law 105-17 specifically identifies procedures required for transition. Two key timelines are identified in Part C regulations:

- the transition process must begin at least six months prior to a child's third birthday; and
- a transition plan must be developed at least three months prior to a child's third birthday.

Further, each child's Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) must address procedures to be implemented that initiate the transition and describe how families will be supported throughout this process. Procedural safeguards of parent prior written notice and parent consent must also be addressed throughout this process.

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Office of Special Education, and the Department of Human Services, Division of Developmental Disabilities, jointly developed a transition process. It assures that appropriate transitions occur for children exiting Infant Development services and entering Early Childhood Special Education services. See Appendix A, *Transition Process from Infant Development to Special Education Unit Services*, for a summary of this transition process.

The transition process is initiated on the child's second birthday and ends after the child's third birthday when the transition plan has been successfully implemented. Each required activity that is identified specifies a timeline for completion of that activity, identifies who is responsible for implementation of the activity, the function of the activity, and who is involved in the activity.

Procedural safeguards concerning the rights of parents must be addressed for two activities during these transition processes.

- The parent must receive written prior notice of a proposed joint meeting involving parents and professionals, from both the sending and receiving programs. This proposed joint meeting may include reviewing existing data, considering parent's information, and planning needed assessments of the child.
- Parents must give written consent if additional information must be obtained through formal assessments in order to determine program eligibility or identify specific service delivery needs. The agency identified as having primary responsibility for carrying out the evaluation process must obtain written consent.

If a child is determined eligible for preschool special education services, a joint IFSP/IEP meeting is scheduled. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, reauthorized in 1997, states that a two-year-old child with a disability who will turn age three during the school year may continue to be served through the IFSP, if such a plan

is determined appropriate by the IFSP/IEP team. Parents must receive written prior notice of the joint IFSP/IEP meeting and also sign consent for initial placement into special education services. See Appendix B, *Transition Process: Notice/Consent Summary* for a summary of parent notice/consent requirements.

Concern with continuity in the education and care of the young child is also seen in the new requirements of IDEA 97. The local "school district" must be part of the team that plans a young child's transition from early intervention to preschool services.

"By the third birthday of such a child, an individualized education program, or if consistent with sections 614(d)(2)(B) and 636(d), an individual family service plan, has been developed and is being implemented for the child. The local educational agency will participate in transition planning conferences arranged by the designated lead agency under section 637(a)(8)." [Section 612(a)(9)]

# THE USE OF THE IFSP

## Beyond A Child's Third Birthday

An IFSP (Individual Family Service Plan) is the written documentation required in IDEA for the early intervention services to be provided for children from birth up to age three and their families. For children three years and older, an IEP (Individualized Education Program) provides the written documentation for the child's educational program. As mentioned previously, IDEA 97 states that a two-year-old child with a disability who will turn age three during the school year may continue to be served through the IFSP if determined appropriate.

It is critical to note that because of the importance of the IEP as the statutory vehicle for ensuring FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) to a child with a disability, the parents' agreement to use an IFSP for the child instead of an IEP requires written informed consent by the parents that is based on an explanation of the differences between an IFSP and IEP (C.F.R. 300.342 – Note 3).

Although both IFSPs and IEPs outline the intervention plan for young children with disabilities, differences exist regarding the requirements of these plans. The four primary differences between the plans are:

1. The IFSP places focus on the family while an IEP is more child focused.
2. The IFSP requires outcome statements that describe the anticipated changes in the child and family while the IEP uses goals and objectives to describe the child's intended progress.
3. Part C of IDEA (ages birth to 3) recognizes the need to assist families in the transition process and to ensure continuity of services by requiring that a transition plan be developed for the IFSP as the child and family move from one service to another.
4. The IFSP requires that a service coordinator be identified to be responsible for implementation of the plan and coordination with other agencies and persons providing services to the child and family.

Federal requirements for both the IFSP and the IEP are given in Appendix C.

# THE ROLE OF TRANSITION

## **When A Child Exits Early Childhood Special Education Services**

The transition from an early childhood special education program into school aged programs may be less difficult for both professionals and the family. Although the service delivery methods may change, the overall service delivery system remains the same and is provided by the school. However, to facilitate a smooth transition from early childhood special education services, planning must begin early and all appropriate persons must be included.

As with all transitions, success occurs when communication among all key persons is accurate and ongoing. Such communication will help alleviate parent concerns for their child regarding how the child is developing, how he/she will be accepted in the new setting, how the child's unique needs will be met by the new program, and how the child will adjust to a new learning environment. Communication among educators and other service providers and parents will assure that specific child needs and expectations are identified and addressed, potential problems avoided, and trust is developed between all involved.

A child's IEP team may expand to include additional personnel appropriate to the transition planning process. The IEP team then becomes the primary source for any consideration of transition arrangements. The IEP team may outline plans for parent visitations to the receiving program, observations of the child by the receiving teacher,

observation of the receiving program by the sending teacher, or trial visits by the child to the new program. Further, the IEP team should review and revise the goals and objectives of the child's current IEP to reflect skills identified as necessary to ensure success in the new setting.

The transition process is initiated during the fall of the child's last year in early childhood special education services and ends after the child enters the new setting. Each required activity specifies a timeline for completion of that activity, and identifies who is responsible for implementation of the activity, the function of the activity, and who is involved in the activity. See Appendix D, *Recommended 3 – 5 Transition Process*, for a summary of this transition process.

Procedural safeguards concerning the rights of parents must be addressed for one activity during this transition process. When a child will be receiving services separate from his/her home school, a major change is reflected in the child's programming. Therefore, an IEP meeting between parents and professionals from both the sending and receiving programs must be held and parental consent must be given for the program change.

## THE ROLE OF TRANSITION AGREEMENTS

Transition agreements facilitate interagency collaboration by creating a formal process for sharing critical information about a child's transition from one program to another. Agreements ensure that:

- the information exchange occurs in a timely manner,
- all available resources are identified,
- specific transition activities are identified,
- the functions of the transition activities are clarified; and,
- roles and responsibilities are assigned.

Annual review of the agreement is a critical component of the overall transition process. Annual review will assure consistency in practice and enhance satisfaction of all participating members. A clearly written agreement will increase understanding between program staff and the family, reduce duplication of services, and allow the child to successfully move from one program to another (Chandler, 1990).

## THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM

Adaptations in curriculum made to facilitate a child's transition have traditionally focused on preparing children to enter large group, kindergarten or school age programs that have been academic in nature. Although the purpose of these adaptations may have been to ease the transition to a new setting for the children, they often created curricular adaptations that were developmentally inappropriate for the child. The end result has been a "misguided attempt to ease the child's transition" (Bredecamp, 1987). In order for curricular adaptations, to be developmentally appropriate, they must be made on a child-by-child basis, taking into account the child's present level of functioning, ability, family and cultural background.

Each child's IFSP/IEP team must consider differences in service delivery models as part of the transition process. Examples of potential differences of program components for Early Childhood Special Education programs and kindergarten programs are included in Appendix E. Transition enables children to succeed in the new program, rather than preparing the student to be academically ready for the new program. Examples of behaviors appropriate to this focus are included in Appendix F, *Social/Survival Skills Critical for Successful Transitions*.

In the past, transition efforts focused on preparing children and families for the differences that would be encountered between programs. More recently there has been a growing recognition that the key to successful transition is to ensure continuity of services both in and out of the classroom. Continuity in the following three key areas of Early Childhood Special Education programs can facilitate continuity of programs:

- developmentally appropriate practice;
- parent involvement; and
- supportive services for children and families. (Lombardi, 1992)

## SUMMARY

Transition assists children and their families as they move into new relationships with service providers or systems. Many parents have questions about what will be expected of their child in the new setting. In addition to the normal adjustments of beginning a new program, many children have special needs to be met during transition periods.

Transition assists teachers, support staff and care providers supporting children and their families during the move between services. Planning helps adults to share questions and information with each other to ease each child's transition. Cooperative transition planning among responsible teachers, support staff and care providers also helps them build services that create continuity for children and their families. Tools for planning a smooth process may be helpful. A Transition Checklist for school age personnel and several teacher interview forms are included in Appendix G.

Transition assists administrators of educational services and community service agencies who are responsible for initiating the community's plan for transition. Administrators can develop policies and practices to improve transitions. When they work together, agency administrators can provide information and services families need to support their children. Joint efforts can reduce miscommunication.

Cooperative transition planning among teachers, administrators, care providers, parents and support staff can help build programs that create continuity for young children with disabilities and their families.

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