

Supporting Successful Transitions to Kindergarten for Children with Special Needs

by Claudia Avalos-Snyder and Kirsten Haugen

Moving up to kindergarten means getting to know new teachers, places, activities, and expectations – all at once. In contrast to most preschools, “developmentally appropriate practice is less common in kindergarten, and primary teachers face many constraints and pressures that teachers of younger children are not yet experiencing in the same intensity [although preschool appears to be next in line for ‘pushdown’ curriculum]” (Jones, Evans, & Rencken, 2001). For a child with special needs – developmental delays, physical or sensory challenges, communication challenges, social or behavioral differences, or significant health concerns – the transition process becomes much more complex. Fortunately, early educators are in a unique position to contribute to a smoother transition process by becoming more informed, building relationships, supporting the family, following a clear transition timeline, collaborating with the receiving school, and above all, supporting each child to feel safe, welcome, and competent in the new environment. Many of these ideas can be implemented over time and will benefit all children in your program.

Children with Special Needs Face Unique Transition Challenges

Some transition challenges may stem from meeting the unique characteristics and needs of the child, while others relate to the logistics and impact of changing programs and services or to addressing policies and legal requirements:

- **Changes in curriculum and expectations:** Children with special needs may take longer to adapt to a new setting and structure due to differences in abilities or learning styles or the lack of necessary accommodations and supports. “Although academics may be becoming increasingly more important, research shows that social skills are what most affect school adjustment” (Ladd & Price, 1987; Ladd, 1990).
- **Involving the family:** As the center of the child’s life, the family needs to be part of the transition process, if not the lead. Each family has its own strengths, priorities,

and challenges, and some families may need more support than others.

- **Re-qualifying for services:** Not all children who qualify for special education support as preschoolers will continue to qualify under the different diagnostic criteria used in primary education. Other children who have not previously needed special supports may require them as they enter kindergarten. To avoid disruption or delays in meeting a child’s needs, the team must take steps to ensure the child qualifies for services prior to the start of kindergarten.
- **A dual enrollment process:** Tracking both the standard process for enrolling in kindergarten (orientations, registration deadlines), as well as special education procedures including meetings, assessments, individualized education planning, and so on, requires additional time, planning, and energy on the part of families.
- **Shift in organization of services and procedures, roles, and responsibilities:** Most often, a transition from preschool or early intervention programs to a K-12 special education system will include a change in service providers, and the structure, delivery, and even funding of services.
- **Transfer of records:** When multiple agencies are involved, and no clear intra-agency agreements are in place, difficulties with exchange of records can prove to be a major barrier to a smooth transition. “Due to confidential-



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ity of records parents need to be involved in such transfers, which in itself may occasionally prove problematic” (Janus et al., 2007, p. 632).

- **Training and preparation:** Oftentimes, the staff at the receiving school may need additional training or support to meet a child’s needs, such as adapting activities and materials for children who are visually or hearing impaired, or adapting and implementing a specialized behavior plan.

Become Informed

Understand and support the transition process for all children by becoming familiar with the kindergarten programs and options in your area. Obtain contact information for the district and school offices and other programs that coordinate services for children with disabilities. Find out if there are advocacy or support groups for parents of children with disabilities. Develop a basic understanding of special education laws and procedures and how they are implemented in your area. Wrightslaw.com and similar advocacy organizations provide legal information, as well as links to state agencies and advocacy groups. Obtain resources from your local school districts, advocacy organizations, and agencies to assemble a small library of websites, handbooks, articles, newsletters, and forms to share with staff and families. “Each community is unique, and the transition process needs to be developed in accord with the needs of families and programs” (Brault et al., 2005, p. 22). There is no one-size-fits-all, but most states or districts have handbooks or other materials available online that address the transition to kindergarten, with sections or additional handbooks on the transition process for children with special needs. Many include especially helpful timelines and worksheets.

Build Relationships

Introduce yourself to the people and programs that will serve the children from your program in the future. Arrange to visit and observe kindergarten classrooms, including those serving children with special needs, to get an idea of each program’s pedagogy, resources, environments, and expectations. Get to know the specialists who work with children with disabilities. When it comes to sharing information about a specific child and transition, the relationships you’ve invested in will pay off in improved communication and trust.

Build a Transition Team

The relationships you nurture will help you and the family to build the best possible team to plan and oversee the child’s

transition. This transition team will include the parent(s) or other primary caregivers, teachers, and administrators from both the sending and receiving schools, advocates and current and future specialists as needed, including occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, school psychologists, nurses, and any other relevant personnel who together can provide a comprehensive, well-rounded view of the child’s current development and the best fit for the child among available placement and service options. Anyone who has worked with the child recently and has input that would help the child to be more successful in her new environment should be consulted. Throughout the transition, the team will work with the family to ensure they understand their child’s current development and needs, feel informed and empowered to make placement decisions with input from the team, and are fully aware of and comfortable with their options.

Support the Family

Families, specifically the parents, primary caregivers, or guardians, face many challenges when their child with special needs moves into kindergarten. They often must follow the standard enrollment process for all children at the same time they’re learning about, evaluating, and advocating for special programs or services for their child with special needs. Early educators can help by keeping up to date on local timelines, procedures, and requirements for enrolling in kindergarten and accessing special services:

- Find out about the typical kindergarten enrollment process.
- Put dates for events such as open houses and suggested enrollment activities on your program calendars. Ask the primary schools in your area to help you notify families about these events, and any enrollment requirements or deadlines.
- Help families of children with special needs negotiate the dual process of enrolling in kindergarten and qualifying (or re-qualifying) for special services.
- Help families locate advocacy organizations and special services in the community, as well as parent groups or perhaps other families who have already transitioned from your program.
- Share the transition resources you’ve collected, including relevant websites, printed handbooks, and newsletters from federal, state, or local agencies and advocacy organizations.

- Many states or advocacy agencies have handbooks specifically for families. Help the family obtain copies at the very beginning of the transition process.
- Some families may need help to make sense of the complicated array of transition tasks and resources, but it is critical to help each family remain a key part of the process as much as possible.

Follow a Timeline

If a child is currently receiving special education services, or if you suspect a child may need special education support in kindergarten, begin the formal transition process at least a year in advance. Typical timeline activities include the following:

- **Fall:** A year before the start of kindergarten, give all families information about kindergarten options and procedures. For any child with special needs (formally identified or not) discuss any concerns you or the family has about the child's upcoming transition, and provide them with information about the transition process and how the team is formed. If all agree, formally refer the child for an assessment and begin forming a transition team.
- **Winter:** By winter, families of children with special needs are on a dual track: most schools offer open houses, tours, and informative events for all prospective families, while at the same time the transition team should begin observing and reviewing potential programs to determine if the program will fit with the child's unique skills and needs. Some families may need help making this assessment. Gather the child's records and obtain written permission from parents to share it. Begin the assessment and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process, and contact potential team members (teachers, administrators and specialists) from the receiving school(s).
- **Spring:** Typical activities for all families include completing enrollment forms (including health and immunization records) and attending orientations. Remind families that orientations also offer a good chance to meet other families and even set up summer play dates with future classmates. For children with special needs, the assessment and IEP must be completed, with participation from the receiving school. Identify any needs the receiving school might have for support, training, and records. Ensure the family has appropriate contact information for the new placement and specialists and a timeline for activities they must complete prior to school.

Is This the Right Program?

Providing families with a simple checklist of what to look for in a kindergarten classroom will help them assess and compare any classrooms they may visit in relation to the skills and needs of their child. You and the family might customize the list for a given child, but consider these general questions from Karr-Jelineck (1994):

- How many steps are given at a time in directions?
- What types of words are children expected to understand?
- How does each individual child compare to the other children?
- How long are children expected to sit still in a group?
- How often do children speak out of turn or move around when they should be sitting?
- How much independence is expected?
- What type of work in small groups and as seatwork is being done?
- Where might my students with special needs need extra help?
- What kind of special information can I pass along to the teacher about each child?

- **Summer:** For most families, preparation includes shopping for school supplies, talking about the new school, and in some communities a home visit from the new kindergarten teacher. If a child has special needs, the team must also ensure the receiving school has all necessary paperwork, as well as any related equipment, materials, training, and strategies to meet the child's needs. Some children will benefit from a visit to the new teacher and classroom before the first day of school, when other children aren't present. A child with autism may need to establish a sense of familiarity and safety, while children with sensory impairments can learn how to be in and move around the physical space. If a child uses mobility equipment, make certain the child can navigate classrooms, hallways, and bathrooms.
- **Fall:** As the children start in their new school, find a time to check in with the families and new teachers of children with special needs to ensure each child has started school as planned and is settling in, and that any arrangements for training or special services have been fulfilled.

Collaborate with the Receiving School

Building ongoing relationships with kindergarten programs will help you understand the qualities of each and which will

likely offer a good fit for specific children with special needs. Established relationships with the receiving school and specialists will open up channels of communication when you need to share information, recommendations, concerns, and support. Your program is responsible for sharing with the transition team your understanding of the child's educational abilities and needs, and giving input on an appropriate placement and supports. During the actual transition process, be sure that the receiving district and placement have all the necessary paperwork, including legal documents such as assessments, education plans, and standard enrollment forms, such as immunization records and demographic forms.

Support the Child

Above all, the most important way to prepare a child for kindergarten is to continue doing what you already do well. Giving a child the opportunity to develop skills and experiences in preschool is an integral part of the transition process. You've already begun preparing the child for the transition to kindergarten by providing a safe, nurturing learning environment. If you can provide this, you help the child feel at ease and happy to be in a school setting. Once you establish trust in the preschool setting, you will also learn things about the child and his style of learning, which can be a helpful insight for the child's future teacher.

Expose children from time to time to some of the more structured activities that may occur in a kindergarten setting. Introduce the child to routines and taking responsibility for belongings. A visit from the future teacher to your classroom or a visit to the new placement during a school day might be a fun adventure. Consider planning a joint play time or story time — don't forget to take photos.

Conclusion

As early educators, the day-to-day experiences and nurturing you offer set your young children on a path to a positive and successful education. When a child has special needs, added attention to the transition process provides critical support for the child's journey. The connections and planning you invest in before and during a child's transition will impact both the child's and the family's future school experiences for years to come.

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