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Early Childhood Transitions

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EARLY CHILDHOOD TRANSITIONS

In order to provide the best opportunities for children with special emotional needs and behavioral challenges to successfully adjust to kindergarten, professionals and family members need models of support that address policies, staff and family training and partnerships, and individual child-focused services. Moreover, transition must be conceptualized as a process that occurs over time, not as a short-term move from one environment to the next. In this article, we discuss a conceptual framework for transition support models for young children with disabilities and their families. We then highlight important transition components identified in the literature and those included in models of transition for children eligible for early intervention services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Lastly, we discuss a project being developed by researchers at the Regional Research Institute and Child Welfare Partnership at Portland State University. The goal of the project is to develop, implement, and measure the effectiveness of coordinated transition services to support the success of children who have emotional disabilities and their families as these children enter public school.



of school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). These findings reinforce the premise that effective strategies are needed to ensure that a child's first year of public school is a positive, successful experience. The overarching goal is to develop positive relationships between children, parents, and caregivers during preschool and during the process of transition to public school settings.

Findings from studies of children who do not have special needs suggest that the emphasis on academic skills and the demands to interact with larger groups of diverse children are the most difficult aspects of their transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1997). Children who have

social and emotional problems in the child care or preschool setting may have even greater difficulty when they enter the unfamiliar and very different environment of public school kindergarten. The transition to kindergarten disrupts the routines and patterns of interaction developed in preschool. Continuity associated with friends and sense of belonging established in preschool is also interrupted (Fowler, Schwartz, & Atwater, 1991).

Rationale

The transition into public school kindergarten marks an important rite of passage for children and their parents and plays a critical role in later school success. Some of the positive consequences of successful adjustment to school include development of positive peer relationships, cooperative relationships with teachers, and long-term social competence and academic achievement (Pianta & Cox, 1999). A number of studies show that individual school outcomes, especially academic achievement, remain very stable after the first two years

Transition Models

The ecological approach to understanding child development posits interdependence among social systems at the parent, family, and community levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Within this social ecology model, it is of little benefit to treat a problem in isolation, since any change that occurs will likely not be supported in the larger contexts of family and community environments. The context for the successful transition of children who have or are at risk of emotional disabilities is a model of support that takes place in the early stages of the preschool years and

evolves as children move from preschool through the first months of kindergarten. The hallmark of the model of support is a strengths-based approach to supporting each child and family.

Effective transition models to support children included in the special education population organize strategies to address the roles of the child, family, and service providers in preparing, planning, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of the activities (Fowler, et al, 1991). For example, an individualized assessment of the match between the child's skills and the skills required of kindergarteners is considered essential during the preschool period (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994; Rous, & Hallam, 2000). Such an assessment identifies the skill areas that will become the focus of teaching in preparation for transition. One role of the teacher is to actively encourage parent participation in planning and implementation during the preschool period. Prior to the transition, a team meeting takes place that includes the sending and receiving teachers, parents, school district special education coordinator, and any other formal or informal supports the parents consider key to developing the educational plan for kindergarten. Ideally, the parents and child visit the kindergarten classroom the child will attend and tour the school before the end of the school year and at the beginning of the year to orient the child and parent to the new environment. Considering the number of participants and range of activities considered important to effectively support one child and family, securing the means to coordinate a child's transition process becomes critical. Unfortunately, lack of time and funding to coordinate parents between school arrangements often poses a barrier to implementing these practices.

Public Law 99457, IDEA, and amendments to the legislation consistently identify transition as an integral component of the service delivery systems for young children with disabilities. However, only a small number of systematically designed transition approaches have been evaluated and findings disseminated. Two such efforts are summarized below.

The STEPS Model

STEPS (Sequenced Transition to Education in Public Schools) was developed as a model demonstration project from 1984 to 1987 in Lexington, Kentucky through a grant from the Handicapped Children's Early Education Program (HCEEP) and expanded to the national level in the mid 1990s. The purpose of the project was to assist communities in building a system to

facilitate the transition of children from one agency or program to another. The goals of the earlier projects were to (a) establish model sites across a state, (b) develop a statewide system of training and technical assistance, (c) include the STEPS' components in state policies and procedures, and (d) produce a replicable process. Goals of the current program are to (a) establish an administrative structure, (b) specify staff involvement and training needs, (c) establish options for family involvement, and (d) plan how child preparation and follow-up will occur (Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1999).

An evaluation of the model was conducted to ascertain the effects of the training and technical assistance provided to sites on the ability to develop community-wide transition systems (for additional information about the model and evaluation findings, see Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994, 1999). Seven sites participated in the evaluation. Findings suggest that agreement must be reached among community team members regarding the combination of specific transition activities that will have the greatest impact on the successful coordination of transition services for children, within the limitations of professional and parent time. Moreover, the need for ongoing technical assistance to community teams who may not have the skills and knowledge to influence policy change must be provided if in fact the systems change goals are to come to fruition.

The TEEM Model

The Transitioning into the Elementary Education Mainstream (TEEM) Project was developed and field-tested in Vermont, with federal funding from HCEEP. The goal of the project was "to develop a model that enables parents and staff from ECSE [Early Childhood Special Education] and elementary school programs to collaboratively establish and implement a system-wide transition process for planning transitions" (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen & Holburn 1990). Like STEPS, the model is not prescriptive, but rather provides school systems with information to assist in development of a system for providing transition services.

Evaluators measured professional and parent satisfaction with implementation of each best practice component and with the next placement decision for each child. There was a high degree of satisfaction regarding both transition activities and procedures and child educational placement decisions. However, it was beyond the scope of the evaluation to measure child adjustment and success in the next setting and to ascertain how the child and family were supported after the transition to

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public school took place. Again, the TEEM Model was designed to provide a framework for school districts and to develop and implement transition services for children identified as IDEA eligible.

A New Research Project

A research team from the Regional Research Institute and Child Welfare Partnership at Portland State University is engaged in a project to examine transition supports for children with emotional disabilities and their families as they exit preschool and enter kindergarten settings. The research has been supported through the Center for the Study of Mental Health Policy and Services and is conceptualized as three progressive phases:

Phase I. Preliminary information was collected from parents in Oregon who volunteered to share their experiences of the transition of their children from preschool to kindergarten. Parents shared information about (a) their child's adjustment to kindergarten; (b) helpfulness of preschool and kindergarten teachers or other school personnel before, during, and after the transition; (c) challenges faced by the family and child; and (d) what was learned as a result of the experiences.

Phase II. Six preschool settings will be selected to expand our knowledge of stakeholder perspectives and of site-specific transition support strategies. Three day-treatment programs and three Head Start programs will be selected. Twelve parents whose children transitioned from these settings during the previous school year, their children's sending and receiving teachers, and the disability specialists from each site will participate in the study. Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews. A comparison will be drawn between children receiving early intervention services (ECSE) and those not receiving those services.

Phase III. Using the data gathered in previous phases, we will work with families and other community stakeholders to design, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive transition model to support children who have emotional disabilities and their families as they make the important change from preschool to kindergarten.

Preliminary Findings

We invited parents whose children with emotional or behavioral problems had recently made the transition from preschool to kindergarten to share their

experiences with us. The following information was provided by a very small number of parents ($n = 6$), and should not be viewed as representative of all parent perspectives. However, the parents we interviewed came from rural and urban areas of the state, single and two-parent households, and middle and low-income families.

A content analysis of interview transcripts resulted in a number of common challenges faced by the parents who were interviewed.

- ◆ Changes of environment and circumstances were generally difficult for their children.
- ◆ Four of the six parents were not able to find out prior to the week before school started who the kindergarten teacher would be.
- ◆ Parents stated that their children "missed" their preschool teachers.
- ◆ Teacher skills and attitudes toward their children were critical to child adjustment and apparent level of enjoyment with school [parents thought that some teachers lacked the knowledge and skills to work positively with their children].
- ◆ Generally, parents were not aware of receiving systematic transition services as described in best practice literature for children in ECSE.
- ◆ Overall, parents perceived that professionals judged them unfavorably when they attempted to access information and make suggestions about how to prepare their children and themselves for the transition to public school.
- ◆ Two parents talked about experiencing difficulties in ensuring that their children received medication during the school day in the kindergarten classroom.

In the case of these six parents, there appeared to be little strategic planning and support provided to prepare their children for the transition to the kindergarten setting. In addition, these parents felt that some teachers were more prepared to positively support their children than others. Finally, parent professional partnerships appeared to be fairly weak in terms of preparation, transition, and follow-up planning and support for their children.

Conclusions

This article proposes a conceptual framework for developing effective transition strategies for children with emotional disabilities as they shift from preschool to kindergarten settings. There is a paucity of research and

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evaluation of transition support models for this population of children. Therefore, the initiation of studies that evaluate transition models designed specifically for this population of young children and examine short and long-term child outcomes is critical if we are to provide the types of support that will help children with emotional disabilities maintain gains made while in preschool and encourage their positive relationship with school and learning.

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