

**Submission  
No 37**

**INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS  
WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR  
FAMILIES**

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## **Early Transitions for Children with Disabilities**

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**Coral Kemp** is a part-time academic at Macquarie University and a special education consultant. She has been involved in the education of children in both regular and special education settings as a teacher, early interventionist, consultant, deputy principal and program director, for two state departments of education, the NSW Association of Independent Schools, two community-based disability organisations and Macquarie University. Coral's research interest is early childhood special education and until recently was the convenor of the Postgraduate Certificate in Early Intervention at Macquarie University. A model of early intervention support for children with disabilities in childcare, that was initially developed by Coral, was funded by the federal government in 2004 as an innovative program. While Coral's research has covered a range of early intervention she has published her own research in the area of early transitions and has supervised the research of three students also conducting transition research. Coral has a PhD in special education and is a member of the coordinating committee for the International Society on Early Intervention.

**Dawn Chadwick** is the manager of the STaR Childcare Support Program. This is a government funded program of support for children with disabilities within childcare centres. Her background in special education and early intervention is extensive. This includes teacher-in-charge of a school for children with high support needs, special education consultant, co-ordinator of a research based inclusive early intervention pre-school and consultant in early intervention. She has worked closely with families, trained staff and collaborated with a wide range of professionals in the early

intervention field. She completed her Masters (Honours) thesis in the area of transition to school for young children with disabilities and has lectured, presented and published in the area of early intervention for young children with disabilities/developmental delay.

## **Summary**

In the following submission we have commented on (1) transition into early childhood education for the first time, and (2) transition from early education into primary school. In addition to providing background information, including best-practice strategies, we have listed concerns that we have about the way in which these transitions are implemented in NSW and have made recommendations for improvement. There has been agreement by researchers and practitioners over the past 30 years that transitions are challenging times for all children but particularly for children with disabilities and their families. In order for transitions to be successful they need to be planned well in advance and children, families and receiving services need to be supported throughout the preparation and follow-up phases. Successful transitions need to be adequately funded and must involve collaboration with families and between services.

## **Best practice approaches to ensure seamless and streamlined assistance during transitions**

Promoting successful transitions is an important goal of early intervention because early transitions are thought to contribute to subsequent positive or negative transition experiences (Rous, Teeters Myers, & Buras Stricklin, 2007). Over the past 30 years, the challenges of early transitions for children with disabilities, their families and the

children's sending and receiving services have been outlined in the literature, particularly in the United States. Early transitions include the transition from home to centre based early intervention services, the transition from home to a segregated or inclusive early childhood service and the transition from an early childhood service to school. For young children with disabilities in Australia, the transition to school (mainstream schools and classes in particular) is, perhaps, the most challenging of the early transitions as this represents significant changes in the kinds of support that the children and their families receive. Although children with disabilities commonly attend inclusive early childhood settings such as preschools and childcare before moving to school, they generally receive specialised early intervention services concurrent with attending these programs, and their early childhood special education teachers and therapists commonly provide special education support to the staff in those settings. This means that the staff providing specialist services that the children have received from the point of diagnosis continue to provide support even after the children move into inclusive early childhood settings. This continuity is generally broken once the children enrol in formal school programs.

Transition involves three phases: (a) preparation, (b) the point of change, and (c) the follow-up period. There appear to be no generally accepted time periods for the preparation and follow-up phases. What is generally accepted by all who write about this topic is that transitions need to be planned well in advance, and that they require close collaboration across (a) the services that the child and family are already receiving, (b) the child's family, and (c) the services that that the child and family will receive in the future.

### *Transition into early childhood education for the first time*

Transition from home to centre-based early childhood services, such as preschool or childcare presents a challenge for the child, the family and centre staff.

Children are moving to new and unfamiliar environments where there are different expectations and demands than those previously experienced. Families need to hand over some of the responsibility for their child to others and to trust in the ability of others to support and nurture their child. For many parents/carers this will be the first time that they have been separated from their child, which can be very stressful if the child is vulnerable and has significant health problems. If the child is moving into an inclusive setting, families may be concerned that their child will not be accepted by all adults in that setting or by the other children or their parents. They may worry about how the staff at the centre will receive advice from their child's other service providers. Centre staff may be concerned about how they will be able to provide for the child's needs, particularly if the child has significant health problems, needs specialised equipment or has challenging behaviour.

For some families, finding a centre willing to take their child may be a challenging first step in the transition process. This is more likely to be the case when the child has high care needs because of significant medical or developmental issues or the child has extremely challenging behaviour. For these families, once a centre has been found care needs to be taken that the necessary supports are in place from the outset in order to ensure a successful transition. Supports may include specialised equipment, formal and informal training of staff, additional staff.

If the family has concerns about how well the child will be accepted by other children and their families, it can be useful for centre staff and/or a family member to address the centre community before, or immediately after, the child commences the placement at the centre. This can be done in writing or via a meeting of families. Where parents have chosen this option they have reported it to have been very successful. However, not all families with children with disabilities are happy to identify their child as having a disability.

Once a decision has been taken to enrol a child in a centre, a transition plan should be formalised with input from the family, the centre staff and other relevant service providers. Informal visits to the centre by the child and parent/carer prior to enrolment can assist the child to become familiar with the new environment and for centre staff to get to know the child and the child's needs. It can provide an opportunity for the staff and family members to ask questions and for concerns to be addressed before they become serious problems for the family or the centre staff. The plan should document the role of all personnel working with the child in preparing for the child's entry to the service and for supporting the child once he or she has entered the service. Ideally, indicators that the transition has been successful will be identified in advance and the process will be reviewed at a time agreed by the family and centre management.

#### *Transition from early education into primary school*

Transition to school has been generally recognised as a stressful time for all children and their families. The transition from early childhood settings, in particular inclusive preschool and childcare, to school is an important milestone in the lives of children

with disabilities. The importance of early school experiences to subsequent academic and social performance is acknowledged in the literature (Maxwell & Eller, 1994; Rous et al., 2007). Five-year olds just beginning their school careers are coming to terms with themselves as students and adjusting to new peer groups and the new and, often, foreign expectations of the school environment. The transition from early childhood services to school is thought to be especially challenging for young children with disabilities and their families (Rosenkoeter, Hains, & Dogaru, 2007).

The early intervention literature addressing the issue of transition to school identifies difficulties for (a) the children, (b) the families, and (c) the kindergarten teachers (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn, 1990; Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994) in making the transition to school and suggests that for transition to be successful for these children and their families, transition planning that addresses the difficulties of all three groups needs to be considered. Transition planning should address the support needs of families, children and teachers and should involve a collaborative relationship between preschool services, including early intervention services, families and school services.

Although there is no agreement in the literature as to the ideal length of the preparation and follow-up phases for the transition to school, at the beginning of the year before a child's enrolment in school, it is common for early intervention and other prior-to-school services to identify those children who will be going to school the following year. This allows time for the families to choose appropriate school options and for transition plans to be developed in collaboration with families and other service providers and for those plans to be effectively implemented.

While it is generally acknowledged that it is more important for the school to be ready for the child than the child to be ready for school (Salisbury & Vincent, 1990), there is no doubt that the transition to school for children with additional needs will be easier if children are prepared prior to school entry (Chadwick & Kemp, 2002; Kemp & Carter, 2005). Preparation for school will include teaching the child skills that are valued by classroom teachers. Australian researchers (e.g., Chadwick & Kemp, 2000; Kemp & Carter, 2005), who investigated skills that teachers indicate are necessary in order for children to be successful in their classrooms, identified classroom skills (e.g., following teacher directions, attending in a group, completing tasks), self help skills (e.g., independent toileting, eating and drinking, taking responsibility for property) and social skills (e.g., separating from parents, and relating appropriately to adults and peers). These findings supported early findings from studies conducted in the United States (e.g., Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995).

Once a school has been selected for the child, planning for the point of transition and the follow-up period needs to occur in collaboration with the school and, where appropriate, relevant system personnel. As part of the preparation phase, it is valuable to include a program of orientation visits to the school. In a survey of teachers of all children with identified disabilities in the New South Wales state education system in 1997, Chadwick and Kemp (2002) identified school orientation programs as correlating significantly with the teacher perception of the success of the transition to school.



Parents of children with disabilities also need to prepare for the change to their role as their children move from early childhood programs to school. They will need to relate to a new group of professionals who will not necessarily engage them in the same way as those providing their prior-to-school services. This will involve them in negotiating how they will communicate with the school on an ongoing basis and what role they will play in their child's education. Their role as part of the team making programming decisions for their child is accepted in early intervention. Depending on the school policy, this may not always be the case once the child starts school. Assisting parents with adapting to these changes is an important role for the early intervention services as is providing families with the skills to be advocates for their children in the years ahead.

If the transition and subsequent placement of the child is to be successful, the child's teacher must be given the necessary supports to cater for the children's needs. These supports may include direct supports such as teacher aide assistance or in class consultancy support or indirect assistance such as professional development to assist them to cater for the learning needs of the child with a disability in their classroom, and to work collaboratively with other service providers.

It is important that transitions are evaluated so that the process can be improved. An important measure of a successful transition is how well the child is included in the next environment. The success of the inclusion can be measured in a number of ways. The perception of the success of the child's inclusion from the point of view of the school staff, in particular the classroom teacher, and the parent is primary among these. More objective measures would include, the ongoing inclusion of the child and

child outcomes as measured by attainment of goals and objectives set by the classroom teacher in collaboration with the family and support personnel.

## **The adequacy and accessibility of appropriate support for children and their families**

### *Transition to early childhood services*

#### Concerns

- Families of children with high support needs have difficulty in finding appropriate placements.
- Generally, for working parents needing formal childcare for their child with a disability, there is a limit of five hours of paid additional support. For families of children with high support needs, this is a problem if centres cannot take children without the additional support.
- Families have concerns when early childhood practitioners are not able to cater for the needs of children with disabilities in their centres because they do not have the necessary skills (a training issue). This problem has been identified particularly for childcare in New South Wales (Llewellyn, Thompson, & Fante, 2002).
- The ability of some staff in early childhood settings to work in a collaborative relationship with families and other services may be an issue.
- In childcare there is a lack of time to collaborate with others.
- Early intervention services are unlikely to implement systematic transition programs to assist with the move into early education services. Early intervention services may provide consultancy once the child is enrolled in an early childhood centre but generally no formal transition process is

implemented.

- Little or no pre-service training in how to work collaboratively with other professionals is available for teachers and early intervention staff.

### *Transition to school*

In recent years education systems appear to be providing much better transition to school programs for the general population of children. The intensity of these programs differs from area to area and across schools in the one area. Guidelines for the transition of children with disabilities from prior-to-school to school programs were developed at regional level and later centrally by the NSW Department of Education from the late 1990s. These guidelines addressed the importance of working collaboratively with families and other service providers and of planning each phase of the transition. Unfortunately it appears that in recent times the recommendations made in these guidelines are not always followed by school executive.

The importance of the collaborative relationships to the success of early transitions is generally acknowledged in the literature (Rous et al., 2007). However, when parents of children with disabilities were asked to comment on their transition experiences in an Australian study (Kemp, 2003) some reported that they had not been included as equal partners in the transition process and expressed concern as to the level of collaboration between the preschool and school services. When the teachers of these children were asked to identify the factors relating to the success of the transition to school and to the success of the kindergarten year, they identified the support of the families as being most important and generally rated the success of the kindergarten year more highly if they had felt that they had been supported throughout the

transition period. The families of the children with disabilities identified the support of the teachers as being a critical factor in the success of the first year of school.

Early intervention and other prior-to school services are generally involved in the preparation phase of the transition to school by (a) assisting individual families to locate and communicate with the school their child will be attending and (b) preparing both the child and the family for the changes that they will experience once the child moves to the school setting. This will often involve assisting with child visits to the school in the term before school, teaching the child 'school survival skills' such as sitting and attending in a group, following teacher directions, independence in self help skills such as eating , drinking and toileting, and working with families to assist them in their communication with school systems, principals and teachers as necessary. Prior-to-school services are often involved, also, in passing on information to schools, and working collaboratively with schools to determine how best to meet the child's needs once the child begins school. This may involve a discussion of the type of program that might be needed and the supports that the teachers will require.

Unfortunately prior-to-school services are generally not as involved in the follow-up phase, which families have suggested does not always receive the level of support needed to ensure success (Kemp, 2003). Because it is recognised that planning for successful transitions is an important goal of early intervention and funding is available to support this, the preparation phase of transition to school is generally better.

### *Concerns*

- School transition planning

- School placements are often not finalised by the Department or proposed school until the last minute.
- The teacher in whose class the child will be placed in the following year is not always selected prior to the end of the year before the child begins school. This can lead to problems with planning and executing the orientation of the child and preparing the teacher to receive the child.
- There can be a lack of strategic planning in teacher selection (often the child with additional needs is assigned to the class of the most inexperienced teacher).
- Refusal of the school to participate in a planned transition in collaboration with the prior-to-school service and the family (e.g., not participating in a collaborative planning meeting with families and before-school services) is not uncommon.
- Lack of transparent communication with families (not informing parents of their rights) has been an issue with some transitions.
- Follow-up phase
  - Generally the school services do not acknowledge the expertise of the prior-to-school services.
  - There is little funding for prior-to-school services, in particular early intervention services, to support the child's enrolment in the first few months at school.
  - Not all early intervention programs employ staff with knowledge of the school system, thereby creating difficulties with communication between sending and receiving services and unrealistic expectations of

school staff.

- Families often feel excluded from involvement in their child's program once the child is enrolled in school.
- There is little support from within the school systems for classroom teachers who are including children with disabilities in their classroom.

## Recommendations

- Systemic support for transition
  - Assistance for families to find appropriate prior-to-school and school placements for their children with disabilities
  - Commitment to a collaborative partnership with families and other services
  - Professional development and on-the-job support of staff at early childhood and school levels
  - Enforceable guidelines for schools planning transitions for children with disabilities including:
    - Timely decisions on placement
    - Purposeful selection of staff
    - Organisation of orientation visits
    - Parent involvement
    - Involvement of other services
- Targeted funding for comprehensive early transition programs
  - Funding should have strict accountability tied to it to ensure that there is a comprehensive and systematically implemented transition plan.
  - The transition plan should include a preparation component, for

example orientation visits prior to enrollment where the support needs for children, staff and families can be assessed and steps implemented to address these.

- For those children transitioning to school, an important component of this preparation will be preparing the child for school learning. This can be implemented in the before-school settings and will include teaching school survival skills such as sitting and attending in a group, following direction and task completion.
- Support for the child, and receiving service staff, within the context of the new placement (early childhood centre or school), by the sending services should be addressed in the transition plan.
- A plan for supporting families through the transition process, including the establishment of clear and ongoing lines of communication with the receiving service should be a focus of transition planning.
- Evaluation of all components of transition programs should be part of the accountability process.

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