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# Disabilities & Transitions

Excerpts from a paper presented during a "Kindergarten Transitions" synthesis conference by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) in early 1998 in Charlottesville, VA. Mark Wolery of the University of North Carolina surveyed current literature for his paper, "Children with Disabilities in Early Elementary School," which is expected to be part of a book to be published by Paul Brookes Publishing Co. Inc.

## Transition Issues for Young Children with Disabilities

### Administrative issues

A common difficulty in the transition of children with disabilities from preschool programs to school-age programs is having multiple sending agencies and a single receiving agency. A commonly recommended solution is to establish a community-wide interagency transition policy.

A related administrative issue is the transfer of confidential records and information. Specifying what records are needed in the transition agreements helps clarify this.

Another administrative problem area can be the use of different eligibility criteria for preschoolers and for school-age services. The common solution to this can take two forms:

- Agreement about eligibility issues can be established through interagency work and policy review.
- Preschool staff should prepare parents for the possibility that the child's eligibility and/or diagnostic category may shift as children reach school age.

### Staff issues

Preschool staff often have inaccurate perceptions of the flexibility in elementary schools, while elementary teachers report needing more knowledge about children with disabilities. Training of both groups of staff often is necessary.

Staff may have decidedly different philosophies about the education of young children with disabilities. Focusing on the needs of individual children with disabilities and on the practices affecting that child is a tactic likely to result in more consensus about practices.

### Family issues

Families worry about the loss of the support network established when their child was in preschool, about how professionals in the elementary schools will treat their child, and about how their child will fit into the social climate of the school. Remedies to these fears include:

- Promoting strong information support systems for the parents while the child is still in preschool.
- Giving families comprehensive information about the transition and the elementary school.
- Allowing pre-transition visits to the classrooms targeted for the child.
- Providing pre-transition meetings among parents and staff of the sending and receiving programs.
- Identifying an elementary school staff member with whom the family can readily communicate.
- Connecting parents with other parents of older children with disabilities.

## Goals of transition services

- Ensure continuity of services
- Minimize disruptions to the family system by facilitating adaptation to change
- Ensure that children are prepared to function in the receiving program
- Fulfill, in some cases, the legal requirements of federal law

## Service issues

The current recommended practice in early childhood programs is to integrate services into ongoing classroom practices. The more usual pattern, however, is to provide such services through pull-out arrangements.

Considerable evidence suggests that children with disabilities fare as well developmentally in inclusive as in segregated programs, and they have superior social and behavioral skills when placed in inclusive rather than segregated classes.

## Outcomes for school-age children with disabilities

The identification of legitimate outcomes for school-age students with disabilities is an issue requiring consideration. Billingsley et al.'s three-part framework—promoting membership, social relationship skills, and competence—appears useful, flexible, and sufficiently comprehensive.

Another issue focuses on parents of students with disabilities, and two points are pertinent:

- Despite available process and procedures, parents do not appear to be integral parts of the individual educational plan process
- Parents on average do not perceive being in a positive relationship with the schools

**This issue appears to require fairly major adjustments to practices used by schools; understanding how to promote adoption of different practices and how to sustain positive family-school relationships are clear research priorities.**

Given the large number of adults who have regular contact with children who have disabilities, given the demands on these adults, and given the constraints of the situations, serious questions emerge about whether services for students with disabilities are adequately coordinated. Understanding how to promote and sustain coordination practices in early elementary school clearly is needed.

While a great deal is known about teaching students with disabilities, research continues to be needed in improving the efficiency of that instruction and its application in inclusive classrooms.

Some evidence speaks to the supports teachers need in providing instruction to students with disabilities; unfortunately, such supports do not, at least from the teachers' perspective, appear to be widespread. Thus, research aimed at making such supports more common seems important; however, as with other issues such investigations should focus on how schools can adopt and sustain the use of known supports and resources.

## Child Issues

**A number of studies provide consistent evidence that preparing a child with special needs for early childhood transitions does not entail teaching specific preacademic or readiness skills...Rather, it involves teaching generic, functional skills that move a child toward increasing independence and increasing active, appropriate engagement alongside typically developing peers in instruction, play, and social activities.**

*(See Atwater, 1994)*

## If you want to know more

Billingsley, F.F., Galluci, C., Peck, C.A., Swartz, I.S., & Staub, D. (1996). "But those kids can't even do math": An alternative conceptualization of outcomes for inclusive education. *Special Education Leadership Review*, 3, 43-55.

Atwater, J.B., Orth-Lopes, L., Elliott, M., Carta, J.J., & Schwartz, I.S. (1994). Completing the circle: Planning and implementing transitions to other program. In M. Wolery and J.S. Wilbers (Eds.) *Including children with special needs in early childhood programs* (pp. 167-188). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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**For more information, contact Loyd Little at (919) 966-0867 or email [loyd\\_little@unc.edu](mailto:loyd_little@unc.edu)  
Visit our website at [www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl)**