

## **Moving Forward with the Transition to Preschool through Collaborative Planning**

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*“Planning a transition takes time, communication, patience, and sensitivity to the needs and emotions of the family and their child. Planning in advance will minimize the stress caused by changes the family will experience, reduce fears of the unknown, help families to build new relationships with staff and become involved in the new program, support the child during the transition process and help him or her adapt to the new environment”  
(Lavada Minor, 1997).*

Some of the more difficult and stressful periods in a family’s life occur when their child is transitioning from one level of service or schooling to another. The transition from early intervention (birth to 36 months old) to preschool can be intimidating and scary in large part because families do not know what to expect and don’t really understand how the services and interventions for their child will change and be implemented. The unique needs of a child who is deafblind require that this transition is done with thoughtful care and in collaboration with many people, including the child’s family.

We have met many families over the years that have asked us questions like, “How will I know if this is the right program for my child?” or “How can I let her new teachers and therapists know everything she has overcome and accomplished?” Others have told us of their disappointment and confusion with assessment reports that don’t seem to describe their child completely and seem to focus primarily on their child’s limitations and deficits. Many talk of their fears about moving into school systems. They did not know how they could contribute to the development of the IEP (Individualized Education Program), including during the assessment process. We would like to share our ideas for answers to those concerns and worries we hear from the families we support.

### **The parent’s perspective**

*Myrna Medina, our Family Engagement Specialist and parent of a child with deafblindness, understands first hand the emotions, expectations, and responsibilities parents experience during transition.*

When we first hear the word “transition” or start talking about it, we do not know what it really means, especially when we are talking about transitions of our young children. As little as we may know about this “transition” period, we do understand that it means a move, a change and a process. As a parent of a child with multiple disabilities, I can tell you that working with the special education system is not always an easy and pretty path filled rainbows and unicorns. However, we can help as much as possible to make these transitions as easy and smooth process as possible. I believe that this first transition in your child’s educational life is the most important for various reasons.

First, parents realize and face the reality that their precious and vulnerable children will start a new journey on their educational lives. It can be a journey that starts with leaving a secure home environment or a small center-based program, which has been a welcoming family-oriented program designed to meet the unique needs of both the child and family. All of the previous services your child received from birth to 3 years old were written in a legal document called the Individual Family Services Plan (IFSP), which also considered supports and services to address the family’s needs. Now the child

will be transitioning to a new program that is student-focused and is guided by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) which includes goals, services, and supports to meet the child's unique needs. Parents still have an important role in any decisions made about educational services and supports.

Second, we need to remember that as our children grow older, they cannot remain in a program beyond what is appropriate, and that eventually they need to move to a different program in a new system, and the plan will now be student oriented and not family focused. This first transition is difficult for our children, but I think it is *even harder* on parents. We are leaving behind an environment that was cozy and that welcomed us as a family. We are now moving onto a school that is bigger in size, includes more children, longer school hours and definitely more student focused. It is one of the biggest events in our child's life and the life of our family. As parents we need to start this transition knowing as much information about the process as possible to make this scary move as smooth as possible. The basic information that we know at the beginning will grow with our experience. The more prepared we are, the smoother the transition. There are many strategies parents will learn and use over the years, and some of them will work and some of them won't work. It is important always to remember that we are talking about our child, their needs and well-being.

Third, the parents need to start learning the special education system and all the things that are involved in it such as parents' rights, assessment processes, important time lines, special education acronyms and terminology, roles and responsibilities of service providers, just to name a few. It's true that any transition can be very frightening due to the uncertainty of what lies ahead. One of the best things to do to help overcome this fear and uncertainty is to be prepared, ask lots of questions, and expect answers.

We must realize that we are human beings and will make mistakes, but also remember that we are equal partners in the educational decision making process (even though it may not seem like at the beginning). Yes, it is true the professional service providers know more that you do about special education and services, but it is also true that as the parents we know our child best.

Finally, during any transition or any time we are discussing our child's rights or our own parental rights, we need to play the role of an "advocate". We become our child's voice, but we have to remember that the most important role we have to play is to be our child's advocate and not forget the focus is our child's education. Sometimes we parents confuse what "we need" or "we want" with what "our children need" to succeed. We must stay focused on sharing with the team what our child needs. That is our right and responsibility as parents — to advocate for our child's needs, not our own.

### **The need for careful and thoughtful transition planning**

Children who are deafblind have very unique educational needs and determining a child's skills and educational support needs can be a challenge for a new team. There are few reliable standardized assessments that are normed or appropriate to use with this population. There is also the need to look very closely and thoroughly at so many areas of the child's skills and development beyond just the areas of vision, hearing, and cognition and this requires time and considerable consultation and collaboration to get it right. For most children with deafblindness, especially those with additional disabilities or medical/health issues, a collaborative team approach is needed to ensure accurate assessment results since so many areas of development are interconnected. Finally, the fact that the transition to preschool is a huge event in the family's life cannot be overlooked and care and consideration must be given to the family's experiences with their child and early intervention services up to this point. The family should be encouraged to actively participate in the assessment in an informed and supported manner.

Three key practices to utilize at this important transitional point in child's life are **1)** discover the family's story, which will reveal a lot of important information about the child as well; **2)** use a collaborative assessment approach in order to gain the most complete and accurate profile of this child and their needs; and **3)** engage in interactive discussions about the child's development, skills and support needs with other team members, important members of the child's family, and current early intervention service providers. We have seen these types of practices contribute to comprehensive plans that have led to successful transitions for many preschoolers.

## **Specific practices to utilize**

### **Early intervention providers (sending team)**

- Let families know what to expect during the transition process to preschool and start planning together about key information to share with school team.
- Give information to families about upcoming trainings about IEP process or preparing for transition to preschool.
- Assist the family with connecting to local support services (e.g. family support groups, family resource centers, service providers you may know in the child's local school district, state deafblind project staff).
- Share with the family the ways their participation in their child's program and services may differ in a center or school based program rather than a home program. Offer strategies for ways they can get involved at their child's new school or program and effective ways to communicate between home and school.
- Share the most recent assessments and progress reports with receiving team.
- Assist the family in putting together a packet of information, or a personal passport about their child and family. (For more information about creating personal passports see *Valerie's Passport* and *Knowing the Child: Personal Passports* <http://www.cadbs.org/resources-spring-2013/>)

### **School district (receiving team)**

- Consider and appreciate the enormity of the transition for this family.
- Provide clear verbal and written explanation of the assessment process and IEP meeting and service placement discussion.
- Strive to collaborate with the other service providers completing assessments so that the final assessment report provides an accurate, strength-based portrait of this child, their current and emerging skills and specific support needs.
- Hold parent training activities (e.g., "Learning About the IEP Process") and make strong efforts to reach the families with children under the age of 3.
- Contact and consult with local deafblind specialists or service providers with experience serving children who are deafblind during the initial assessment process and the transition into a new school program.
- Don't forget to gather input from the family. Ask them about their family, their child, and their hopes and goals for their child.

- Conduct assessments in natural settings that are familiar to the child.
- Provide the family with information about programs and services and supports that are available, including visits to see programs that are offered.

## Family

- Develop a personal passport or “All About Me” book/packet about your child and family.
- Attend family training activities on the IEP process and roles and responsibilities of families.
- Talk to other parents who have already gone through this transition for support and suggestions.
- Ask district staff to consult with deafblind specialists and the child’s current intervention service providers.
- Reach out to local deafblind specialists for advice and support.
- Contribute as much information as you can to the specialists conducting the assessments. The receiving school agency will likely ask you to complete written questionnaires or they may want to interview you in person. Let each specialist know what you have shared with the other specialists.
- Write up a list of the services and supports you think your child needs and be prepared to present it at the meeting. Prepare a statement to make at the beginning of the meeting about your child and family and what you hope to gain from the meeting.
- Visit the receiving school or program, possibly with your child and one of early intervention service providers.
- Remember YOU are the expert on your child.
- It often helps to bring a photo of the child to the meeting to keep everyone focused on this unique child.

We hope families and service providers will find these suggestions helpful. The success of this first transition is so significant for each child and family. Successful transition planning builds trust, leads to positive outcomes for children, and provides teachers and service providers with the plans and tools they need to meet a child’s unique educational needs. A successful first transition builds the foundation for future successful transitions.

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