



Family Engagement in Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten

The National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) has created a Research to Practice Series on the Family Engagement Outcomes of the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework. One in the series, this resource addresses the “Family Engagement in Transitions” Outcome: *“Parents and families encourage and advocate for their child’s learning and development as they transition to new learning environments,”* and focuses on the transition to kindergarten.

This resource presents a summary of selected research, promising practices, and program strategies intended to be useful for Head Start, Early Head Start, and other early childhood programs.

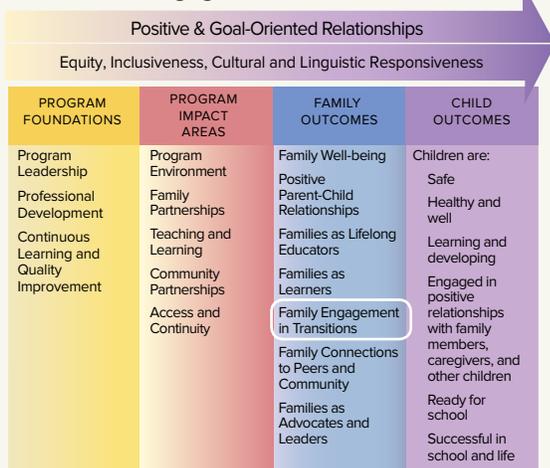
Introduction

Children experience many big and small transitions in their early years. Small transitions may include moving from playtime to cleanup, from hand washing to snack time, or from playing outdoors to coming back into the classroom. Big transitions might include moving from home to Early Head Start or Head Start, from being an only child to becoming a big brother or sister, or leaving Head Start to go to kindergarten. Of all of these transitions, the transition to kindergarten is one of the biggest. This is a major event in the lives of children and families, and a pivotal point for establishing the kinds of practices that can help sustain gains children have made in their early learning settings.

The transition to kindergarten can be a time of great excitement and joy for everyone involved. For children, it is an opportunity to learn new things, master new skills, and proudly declare, “I’m going to kindergarten.”¹ For families, it can bring a sense of delight as their children reach another milestone. For Head Start and other preschool educators, it is a time to reflect on the progress the children have made.

This transition can also be a time of uncertainty and concern about the unknown. For children, it may involve a loss of friends and teachers who have worked to win a place in their hearts. At the same time, transition involves a separation from a safe, familiar, and loving setting.

Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework



The Head Start PFCE Framework is an organizational guide for collaboration among families and Head Start and Early Head Start programs, staff, and community service providers to promote positive, enduring outcomes for children and families.

¹ For more resources on the child perspective, read “Transitions from the Children’s Perspective” on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC); and Dockett & Perry, 1999; 2003 (see full citation at the end of this document).



These changes affect many parents too. They face the realization that their babies are quickly growing up, and a sense that their children's dependency on them is fading. Some wonder, "Are they ready? Am I ready?" Many parents who have played a leadership role in their child's program might also wonder if the new setting will engage them in a similar way.

Preschool educators may experience a feeling of sadness at saying goodbye to children they have worked with for several years and worry what the next year will bring. For kindergarten teachers, it is a time to wonder, "Will my new group of children be ready, willing, and excited about working with each other and with me?" For community providers, particularly those in health services, it is a time to prepare their facilities and staff. In many states, there are appointments for health physicals and immunizations required for public school enrollment.



The Importance of Smooth, Successful Transitions: What We Know

Parent participation in transition activities prior to the new school year is strongly associated with children's self-confidence, liking of school, and overall happiness in kindergarten (Hubbell, Plantz, Condelli, & Barrett, 1987). When the transition to kindergarten includes opportunities for children and their families to learn about the new setting, build relationships, and experience continuity in curriculum, assessments, and relationship quality across their changing settings, children show greater school readiness (Hubbell et al., 1987; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008), reduced stress at the beginning of school (Hubbell et al., 1987) and stronger academic growth over the kindergarten year (Ahtola et al., 2011; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005).

When early childhood education (ECE) programs and schools actively engage families in their child's transition to kindergarten, and when they are responsive to families' efforts to participate in these transitions, families show increased involvement during the kindergarten year (Schulting et al., 2005). This is particularly important given that family involvement in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten relates to better social skills (Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010), higher academic performance in math and language literacy in kindergarten, and higher achievement through high school (Barnard, 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, & Bradley, 2003). In short, when children experience more stability in their early school settings and in the relationships with the adults in these settings, they perform better socially and academically (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Tran & Winsler, 2011) during their kindergarten year and beyond.

In order for children to feel safe and secure in their new learning environments, they need guidance, assurance, and as much continuity in expectations and experiences as possible (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). Parents need the same thing. As one Head Start mother shared with us, "I don't think there is a very good transition of parents...it is a huge shock for parents who were in this warm, welcoming, all-encompassing coverage of a Head Start program... then you go to the public school system and it's like culture shock." Programs can set the stage for how families will handle their children's future educational experiences and transitions (to first grade, to middle school, to high school, etc.) by engaging them in this transition from Head Start to kindergarten. Staff can share all of the information families will need and support their skills as advocates by being responsive to their concerns.

Transition practices need to be effective to make a difference. Effective transition practices are activities that teachers, families, and community members can use to create supports and foster familiarity across early childhood settings and kindergarten (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). These practices should be initiated early—prior to kindergarten—and should be tailored to the cultural, linguistic, and learning needs of individual children and families. They should also ensure that standards, curriculum, support services, and assessments for Head Start and kindergarten are carefully aligned (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Patton & Wang, 2012; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Head Start and other ECE programs can share these tasks with families, elementary schools, and other community partners. Collaboration and communication among everyone involved is the most important part of achieving successful and seamless transitions.

Promising Practices

In the following sections, we highlight examples of promising practices that Head Start and other ECE staff are using to engage families across learning settings to help support children as they transition to kindergarten. To learn about these practices, we talked to parents, administrators (associate and executive directors), healthcare staff, family development managers, and educators from a variety of settings. These settings included a health clinic, Head Start programs, and other parenting and early education programs from across the United States.

For each PFCE Framework Element described below, we provide examples of programs and promising practices. However, each program integrates multiple Framework Elements, making connections that increase the level of engagement and success.

Program Leadership: Using transition plans to create a shared vision

Head Start and school leaders share responsibility for ensuring successful transitions. Teachers have noted that a lack of guidance and support from leadership, including the absence of a district-wide plan, are major barriers to putting good transition practices into action (Pianta et al., 1999). One solution is the transition plan. Transition plans typically include a list of team members and their responsibilities; goals for students, families and staff; and steps to reach those goals. The best transition plans include the ideas of diverse groups of administrators and teachers from Head Start and kindergarten, parents, and community members. When members represent the different educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of children and families in the community, transition plans, forms, and activities are meaningful and understandable to everyone.

Transition plans promote collaboration. They include regular opportunities for joint training for early childhood and elementary school teachers. One kindergarten teacher reflected on her experience of bringing everyone together to form a transition team and plan. She said, "Making time to sit down with everyone at the table has made all the difference for our kids. They are coming to school ready to learn."

The Orange, New Jersey Public School District transition plan, for example, has a process for collaborating across pre-kindergarten programs and elementary schools (from kindergarten through third grade). Their plan includes ways to share information about individual children with their future teacher and ways to align the early learning curriculum with kindergarten and elementary curricula.

Continuous Improvement: Improving information-sharing practices within and across settings

Programs can use survey data, focus groups, and information gained from informal conversations with families, staff, and children about what worked and what didn't. This will help programs make ongoing improvements to existing transition practices (Smythe-Leistico et al., 2012). For example, a private non-profit that provides Head Start and Early Head Start and health and dental services to families in Rhode Island used input from families to improve their practices. They learned that parents wanted to be more involved in the sharing of child-level information with elementary schools. In previous years, staff informed parents about the information they were planning to share with the public school and asked parents to sign off on the release of information. In response to family feedback, the program decided to make a change during the 2011-2012 school year. The process became more of a conversation between the parents and the teacher. The release form was updated to include a section that asks parents, "What do you want the public school to know about your child?"

A New Jersey school district regularly strengthens a particular information-sharing practice. Each child in the district has a portfolio that is updated throughout the preschool year. It includes assessments, anecdotes, and examples of the student's work. Preschool and kindergarten teachers co-create the checklist of items to be included in each child's portfolio. Prior to the start of the school year, portfolios are hand-delivered to kindergarten teachers who use these packets to learn about their new students and inform their instruction. In the first month of school, preschool staff follow up with kindergarten teachers to discuss the quality of the portfolios and ideas for improvement.

Professional Development: Training staff to work with families and community partners

Teachers who have had specialized training in transitions report using more of all types of transition practices (Early, Pianta, Taylor, & Cox, 2001). Staff training may be one way to expand the range of transition practices that staff are ready to use. For its transition to kindergarten model, called *Ready Freddy*, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development trains elementary school staff on how to create a friendlier environment for families and collaborate with external community partners to help with door-to-door outreach and marketing related to kindergarten registration. They also use feedback and modeling to help *Kindergarten Club* (a summer club for at-risk children and families) staff, who are anxious about leading discussions with parents, speak to parents with confidence (Smythe-Leistico et al., 2012).

**Family Partnerships:
Empowering families to advocate for their child during the transition process**

Parents and teachers have to work together to meet the diverse learning needs of children. For children who need extra support, families can work with programs to understand their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and know about their school's compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Their children should continue receiving services begun in the preschool years that are still necessary in kindergarten. Programs can help families of dual language learners learn about their rights. Programs can also provide relevant information in the preferred languages of families, as well as English. All families need to feel empowered to exercise these rights and to seek out the community resources they need to do so (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Knowing these rights and successfully advocating for them in a new school can be difficult. Strong staff-family partnerships can help.

**Teaching and Learning:
Sharing child assessment data to engage families in children's development**

Early childhood programs can begin preparing families for the transition to kindergarten as soon as a child enrolls in the program. For example, they can respond to families' interests and concerns by sharing child assessment results with families in ways that are clear to them. Through this process, programs help families feel comfortable looking at, understanding, and talking about data (Weiss, Lopez, & Stark, 2011).

Project EAGLE Community Programs of the University of Kansas Medical Center, for example, use routine screenings, such as the Early Communication Indicator, to assess children's short-term learning. Staff plot the findings and create graphs that reflect children's growth and their use of multiple words. By sharing these graphs and having conversations about them with families, staff provide families with information to answer important questions: "Is my child developing normally?" and "What can I do to help him become more ready for school?" (National Family, School, and Community Engagement Working Group,

Lopez, Rosenberg, & Westmoreland, 2010). With the help of teachers, families can use the information about their children to take additional action to support their learning.

Strong partnerships between families, programs, and schools lead to greater success for children. For more information on how one Head Start program in Laguna, New Mexico prepares children and families for the transition to kindergarten see the Best Practices in Family and Community Engagement Video Series on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC).

**Community Partnerships:
Offering comprehensive services through back-to-school fairs**

Interagency collaboration has been found to have a positive effect on school readiness because of the increase in resources and professional knowledge that it brings (Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006). For a more effective approach to transitions, Head Start partnerships can extend beyond families and elementary schools to other community partners. Specifically, Head Start programs and staff can look for ways to partner with health, mental health, food and nutrition providers, and out-of-school organizations.

In Loudoun County, Virginia, for example, the Loudoun Community Health Center, the Junior League of Northern Virginia (JLNV) (an organization of female volunteers), and the Loudoun County Public Schools Head Start Program partner each summer to sponsor a Back-to-School Health Fair. Doctors, nurses, and clinic staff volunteer their time and services to provide free physical exams and immunizations required for kindergarten entry. JLNV volunteers provide each child with a backpack filled with supplies (donated by JLNV members, and local and national businesses) that are on the county's kindergarten school supply list.



Conclusion: Bringing It All Together

All Head Start Programs are committed to positive family and child outcomes, but programs can differ in many ways. Programs have families with diverse needs, different relationships with local schools and community programs, and a range of available resources. Some local schools are close distances to Head Start programs while others are difficult to reach. And Head Start programs enroll children with different temperaments, personalities, and backgrounds. All programs, however, can help promote successful transitions by exercising proactive leadership, demonstrating a commitment to continuously improve transition processes, and engaging in community collaboration. Head Start and other preschool programs and schools can help families understand new administrative processes, and they can support families' emotional experiences during the transition to kindergarten. Programs can also foster family partnerships that engage families in transition-related activities that reinforce parents' roles as teachers, learners, and advocates. These practices can help programs support children and families as they face the challenges of transitioning to kindergarten. Support from programs and schools can help families overcome their concerns about the upcoming transitions, and enjoy the excitement of the changes and opportunities ahead.

As programs, families, and communities work together toward the goal of engaging families in transitions, they are better equipped with information and skills to help children successfully move to new learning settings.

What Can Programs Do?

Form a Transition Team. Establish a collaborative team of parents, teachers, administrators, and community staff whose members are directly affected by the transition. Include team members that represent the different educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of your community to help develop forms and activities that are accessible to everyone.

Train Staff to Work with Families through Transitions. Offer professional development programs for your staff and encourage your partner elementary schools to do the same. Try scheduling joint training or home visits that bring early childhood and elementary school staff together.

Assemble a Kindergarten Transition Panel and Host a Panel Discussion Session with Families. Convene a panel of experts who can address the specific strengths and needs of your program and community. Panelists can include parents of current or former kindergarten students, teachers from schools and ECE programs (including Head Start), administrators, and representatives from programs that support the unique needs of families (e.g. early intervention for children with special needs).

Help Families Learn How to Advocate for their Children and Access the Appropriate Resources. Provide information to families about how to access extra support for themselves and their children once they reach kindergarten. Offer opportunities for families to share their children's strengths and challenges with their new school.



Develop Systems for Sharing Information. Collaborate with your partner elementary schools and families to determine what types of information should be shared.

Develop Community Partnerships to Address Children's Needs for Transitions. Work with partners in your community who can help ensure that children's physical, mental, and emotional health needs are met as they transition to kindergarten. These partnerships can and should be mutually beneficial. For example, during transition events, partners from "out-of-school time" organizations can talk to families about the importance of engaging children beyond the school day and use the opportunity to enroll students in their programs. Similarly, libraries can use the partnership as a new avenue to help families learn about their community's educational programs.

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