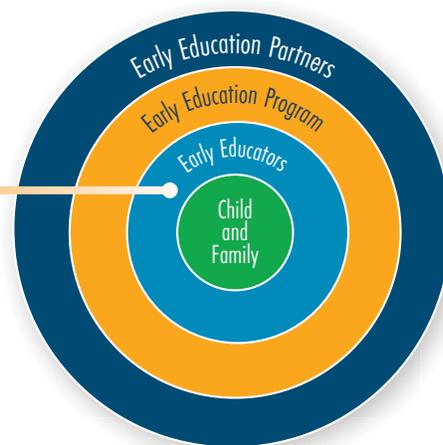


SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS: Early Educators Partnering with Families



Transition Into and Out of Early Education Programs

Every year, children and families transition into and out of your program. Whether moving from home to an early education program or from one early education setting to another, transition presents children and families with opportunities and challenges. Transitioning to a new environment can be exciting and interesting, but also challenging and stressful. Collaborating with families to create well-planned, respectful practices can help make transition a positive experience for all children and families, as well as for you and others who work with them.



Whether you are a teacher, caregiver, or home visitor, you can make a difference for children and families transitioning into and out of your early education setting. You can offer guidance, assurance, and continuity across the sending and receiving programs. To support transition effectively, you can partner with families to:

Learn about the child’s background, strengths, and needs

Share information and resources

Plan to support the child’s adjustment to the new learning environment

This brief provides guidance to help early educators—Early Head Start, Head Start, and child care teachers, caregivers, and home visitors—support children and families transitioning into and out of early education settings. Such transitions could be between program options (home-based to center-based, part-day to full-day), between groups (infant room to toddler room), or between organizations (Head Start to child care, Head Start to kindergarten). Regardless of the type of transition, you will find information, strategies, and resources here to use when collaborating with families.



Welcoming the Sanchez Family to the Head Start Center

Helping children and families feel welcome as they enter your program lays the foundation for children's success and family engagement in children's learning. Let's see how teachers Jada and Alex welcome and support the Sanchez family . . .

Reyna and her husband Carlos enrolled their three-year-old twin boys, Ricardo and Raymond, in Las Cruces Head Start. Their 16-month-old son, Arturo, is enrolled in the Las Cruces Early Head Start home-based option. As soon as the boys were accepted, their new teachers, Jada and Alex, scheduled a home visit to get to know the children and family. They brought photographs of the center and a bilingual booklet about going to preschool for the family.

Jada and Alex did a lot of listening during the home visit and asked open-ended questions. They learned the boys were dual language learners. They love to talk on the telephone with their *abuela* (grandmother) who speaks Spanish and lives in Guatemala. Raymond proudly showed Jada and Alex chilies and *elote* (corn) growing in his father's garden and how he could dig with a shovel. The teachers took note that Raymond's vocabulary in Spanish was well-developed. Jada and Alex noticed that Ricardo didn't talk much unless he was directly spoken to, but his facial expressions showed he understood what others said. When they spoke to him, he hid his face under his father's arm. Because he was shy, the teachers did not learn much about his expressive language skills. Raymond told Jada that Ricardo likes to strum his father's guitar. Jada asked Ricardo if he would like to show it to them. He hesitated and then pointed to the guitar on the wall.

Jada and Alex invited the whole family, including Arturo, to visit the classroom a week before the twins' first day. Raymond excitedly asked if he could go on the slide he saw in the photographs. He jumped up and down when Alex told him, "of course."

Reyna, Carlos, and the teachers ended the visit by discussing how the boys might respond to their first day of school. They also talked about what their family could do to prepare for the big day. The teachers shared that some children adjust quickly, and others take a little longer before they feel comfortable and enjoy the new setting. The teachers also talked with Reyna and Carlos about the mixed feelings some families experience when their children go to out-of-home care for the first time. After the teachers left, Reyna admitted to Carlos that she was happy for the boys but was a little worried and even sad that they would be going to preschool. She wondered, would they miss her? Would they be safe in their new school? Would their teachers like them? Would they do well?

What's happening here?

Most children and families who are enrolled in Early Head Start and Head Start receive a home visit from the child's teacher or caregiver before their first day in the program. Home visits can set the stage for building positive relationships with the family and provide opportunities to learn about the family's story. Let's look at how the teachers connected with and learned from the Sanchez family.

The Sanchez family:

- Welcomed the teachers into their home
- Shared information about their boys' interests (garden and guitar)
- Talked about other important family members in their boys' lives (grandmother)
- Learned what to expect on their boys' first day of attendance
- Shared their feelings and concerns about their boys going to preschool with each other
- Planned a family visit to the classroom before the twins' first day



The teachers:

- Shared materials about and photographs of the program
- Asked general open-ended and some specific questions to get to know the family
- Learned the family's (preferred) home language is Spanish
- Learned some aspects about the family's culture (Guatemalan ancestry, interest in music and gardening)
- Followed the family's lead by listening, observing, and interacting
- Took note of the boys' temperaments and language development (Raymond was outgoing, active, and talkative; Ricardo was shy and quiet)
- Noticed the boys' close relationship with their family
- Discussed that going to preschool is a big step for both the boys and the family and it takes time for everyone to adjust
- Talked about what the family could expect and how they might prepare for the boys' first day
- Reassured the family that over time the boys would adjust to and enjoy the program

Making Transition Successful

How and why children respond to transition and new experiences in a particular way is in large part due to their developmental level, individual temperament, and previous experiences (see *Supporting Transitions: Using Child Development as a Guide*). You may wonder:

- Where is the child developmentally in regulating behavior and communicating feelings? What support does the child need?
- How well developed are the child's receptive and expressive language skills? Can the child engage in simple conversations in their home language? In English? Is the child able to express basic needs and wants, such as asking for water or to go to the bathroom?
- Is the child excited by a new setting and people? Is the child "slow to warm up"? Does the child need a little time to feel comfortable around new people and in a new place? Or is change—even with time to warm up—challenging for the child?
- How does the child relate to new people and situations? Does the child seek help from a familiar adult when in a new situation? What support does the child need?
- Is this the first time the child has been in an early education setting? If not, how did the child feel about and respond to previous early education experiences?
- How does the child manage changes in daily schedules and routines? Does the child need advanced verbal, auditory, or visual cues or other prompts?
- Have the child's previous transition experiences been healthy and positive or difficult or traumatic?

The answers to these questions can help staff and families think about how a child will likely respond to entering or leaving your early education setting. It is important to keep in mind that each child is unique and may respond differently. Some will run off and play on their first day, others may cling and cry—all of which are appropriate! A child's reactions will likely reflect their development in multiple domains. As a child matures and gains language, social, and self-regulatory skills, transition may become smoother.

Successful transitions are also highly dependent on whether a child feels safe and trusts the adults who care for them. The child's sense of safety and trust builds on their family's trust in the program. Families who signal positive feelings about the setting and the teacher to the child help the child feel positive, too. The child feels more confident about the setting, develops trust in the teacher, and is ready to engage in learning. A child who feels safe and secure does better socially, emotionally, and educationally.

Children Need Support During All Types of Transitions

This brief focuses on transitions to early education programs and those from early childhood programs into elementary school. The concepts and strategies presented, however, apply to all types of transitions. These include transitions between classrooms, age groups, and program options within the same program. Whether a child transitions from a family child care home to a center-based classroom, an infant group to a toddler group, or a home-based option to a center-based option, the child and family need the kinds of supports discussed in this brief.

Families experience the transition along with their child. They may feel excited, sad, or anxious, and may even experience grief as their child transitions into or out of your setting. Frequent, regular communication with families will nurture secure, positive relationships. It will also help children and families feel comfortable in a new setting. Developing mutually respectful relationships is the critical first step on the child's road to success (see *Supporting Transitions: Using Child Development as a Guide*).

Teachers, caregivers, home visitors, and family service workers can also experience loss when a child or group of children transition out of their setting. Knowing this can help staff prepare themselves, as well as the children and families, for the transition. Programs can use professional development, reflective supervision, and coaching opportunities to assist staff to prepare for and plan post-transition strategies. For example, staff may want to send a letter to wish the child and family well after they have moved on (for more information on supporting staff, see *Supporting Transitions: Program Policies and Practices*).

2016 Head Start Program Performance Standards Part 1302 Subpart G—Transition Services §1302.70-72

The 2016 Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) include transition regulations that all Head Start grantees must follow. It is important that Head Start staff know the standards to ensure their practices for transitions from Early Head Start to Head Start, Head Start to kindergarten, and between programs are in compliance. The standards call for family and community collaboration and implementing strategies and practices that support successful transition.

Learn: How can I partner with families to learn about their child's strengths, interests, and needs that could affect their child's responses to transition?

Learning about and connecting with children and families are the essential first steps in creating smooth transitions as children and families move into and out of your setting.

As children and families transition INTO your setting:

Listen to the family's story. Learn about and value the family's perspective to understand their hopes and goals for their child.

- What is their cultural background?
- What would the family like you to know about their background in regard to their child?
- What language are they most comfortable speaking?
- What talents, interests, and values does their family have?
- Who is included in the family's day-to-day life? Who is important in the child's life?
- What are their hopes and expectations for themselves and their child in your program?

Learn about their child.

- Inquire about their child's temperament, attitudes, and personality using open-ended questions. What gets their child excited? How does their child manage stressful situations? What soothes their child?
- Ask about their child's preferences. What name do they like to be called? What foods do they like best? What are their favorite things to do?
- Learn about their child's health history and development. Do they have any concerns?
- Find out what the family's caregiving routines are so you can hold, feed, sing to, and comfort the baby, toddler, or child in a similar way.

As children and families transition OUT OF your setting:

Meet with the family well before their last day to discuss the child's current level of development and progress towards their school readiness and family goals.

- What new skills has the family observed at home?
- In what ways do they feel their child has matured and is prepared to move into the new program or school?
- In what ways do they feel the transition out of your program will be challenging for their child?

Listen to the family's perspective on the upcoming change. Be responsive to their questions, concerns, worries, and ideas.

- How do the family members feel about the transition to the new setting?
- How are they preparing for it?
- What questions do they have?
- What supports do they need?
- Share your own feelings about the child and family moving on.
 - > What have you enjoyed most about working with the family's child?
 - > What are some things you will miss?
 - > What are some fond memories of the family's child you will keep?

Sometimes families move suddenly, or there is not enough time to prepare for the transition. Program policies can address how to sensitively handle these abrupt departures (see *Supporting Transitions: Program Policies and Practices*).

Share: What information and resources can I share that will support children and families as they transition?

Sharing information with families and children about what to expect can help them build a sense of familiarity and confidence and decrease their concern. Providing information and materials about useful resources can reassure families that there are supports available in their community they can connect to.

As children and families transition INTO your setting, share and discuss:

- The best ways for families to communicate with staff during the early stages of their child’s transition (for example, how can they get timely answers to their questions or share information?)
- The daily schedule and what the child will be doing throughout the day
- The Head Start open door policy, inviting families to stay with the child in the classroom for a few hours or days, if possible, to help the child and family adjust to the new setting
- Ways you will care for and comfort the child who is shy or anxious, or becomes upset
- Ideas on how family members can be engaged in their child’s learning, such as volunteering in the classroom or doing activities at home with their child
- A list of available resources your program offers, such as events and opportunities for families to meet, children’s book lending library, clothing exchange, etc.

As children and families transition OUT OF your setting, share and discuss:

- Opportunities for families to learn about the new early education or kindergarten program, such as orientation meetings, open houses, enrollment days, or kindergarten “round-ups”
- Information about the registration process and documents they must provide the new program or elementary school, when available
- Information on how the new environment and expectations of their children will be similar to *and* different from your program
- Internet and print resources for families on transitioning, including resources on transition services for children with disabilities (see *Where to Learn More: Resources* on page 14)

Plan: How can I partner with families to plan supportive transitions?

Recognizing families as children's most important teachers and advocates is central to planning with families. Planning should always be a conversation in which families and staff make decisions together. Depending on your program's policies and a family's schedule, transition planning with families can consist of informal discussions, a written plan, or both (see *Creating Transition Plans with Families* on page 10).

As children and families transition INTO your setting, discuss and plan:

- How you can work together to support their child as the child enters your program
- How families prefer to be informed and updated on how their child is doing (for example, in person or via telephone, email, or text message? If their child is upset after drop off, who should be contacted and how?)
- What family members might do at home to ease their child's transition, such as
 - > talking with their child about where they will be going and when
 - > reading books about going to child care or preschool
 - > setting up nighttime and morning routines that will help their child to know what to expect, such as taking a bath and laying out the child's clothes the night before

As children and families transition OUT OF your setting, consider yourself a link to the next early education program:

- Plan transition activities in your own setting to help children adjust to the upcoming change, such as
 - > creating a memory book of the events and activities the children remember and the people they knew in your program
 - > keeping photos of the children for classmates to look at so they can remember their friends
 - > making a countdown calendar to help the child understand the journey of moving from the current setting to the new one
- Help arrange for the child and family to visit the new program, and, if many children are transitioning to the same program or school, schedule a field trip for the children and families to visit it

Creating Transition Plans with Families

Creating a clear transition plan with families promotes continuity of services. Plans include steps to prepare the child along the way for the big changes. Include the following information in each transition plan:

- Name of the program or school the child is transitioning to and the date the child will start. (Note: If the child is “aging out” of your program, the family members may not know where their child will be going next. If they have not identified a new program yet, provide them with options.)
- The child’s records that will be sent to the receiving program with written permission, such as assessment records
- Activities that families and staff can do to ease the transition and help the child adapt to the new environment

The HSPPS require Early Head Start programs to begin planning with families six months prior to their leaving the program to ensure all necessary arrangements are made for their children’s next placement and to prepare their children for the transition.



Helping the Sanchez Family Bridge the Transition from Head Start to Child Care

Let's revisit the Sanchez family to learn about their children's next big transition . . .

The Sanchez family let the Head Start staff know they are moving, because Carlos found a job in a nearby town. Reyna plans to enroll in a vocational nursing program that offers onsite toddler care for Arturo. Ricardo and Raymond will need full-day child care, which is not available in that community through the nursing program or Head Start.

The twins' teachers, Jada and Alex, set up a meeting with the family to discuss their needs and to plan for the boys' transition to full-day child care. The family said they would prefer having separate meetings with the twin's teachers and one with Arturo's home visitor. This way they can focus on issues specific to their toddler.

The meeting began with the teachers listening to Reyna and Carlos talk about the growth they had noticed in their preschool boys. Carlos said Ricardo was much more confident and not as shy with other children and adults—but he still feels anxious when big changes happen. He said Raymond was able to wait longer and follow home rules better. Jada and Alex talked about the boys' growth and development and how they might feel about moving to a new program. The family and teachers discussed how the boys might feel about moving and the change in programs. They all agreed that Ricardo would need a little more assurance than Raymond.

Together, they created a transition plan for each boy that included things the family could do at home to help each prepare for their move and new program. They also discussed strategies that Jada and Alex could use in the Head Start classroom. Some of the ideas in the plan included:

- Reading developmentally appropriate books about child care with the boys
- Talking about how child care could be *different*, such as staying for a longer day, making new friends, having new teachers, and taking a nap
- Talking about how child care would be the *same*, such as having toys to play with, books to read, a playground, and lunch time
- Helping the twins make a “Goodbye Head Start, Hello Child Care” book
- Showing website photos of the program the boys will attend
- Planning for each boy to have a transitional object to comfort them while in child care (for example, a necklace for Raymond from his father and a postcard for Ricardo sent from his grandmother)

Jada and Alex provided the Sanchez family with contact information for the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency in their new town and explained that one purpose of the agency was to help families find child care. The Sanchez family completed transfer of records consent forms, so once the boys are registered for their new child care programs, Head Start can transfer their sons' assessment and enrollment records.

What's happening here?

Ricardo and Raymond developed and matured a great deal during their year in Head Start. As they learned the routines and began to trust their teachers, they felt increasingly comfortable and gained self-confidence. This set a strong foundation for their next big change—moving out of Head Start and into child care.

Let's look at how Jada and Alex partnered with Reyna and Carlos to learn about their children's strengths and needs, shared information and resources, and planned to facilitate Raymond and Ricardo's adjustment to the new learning environment.

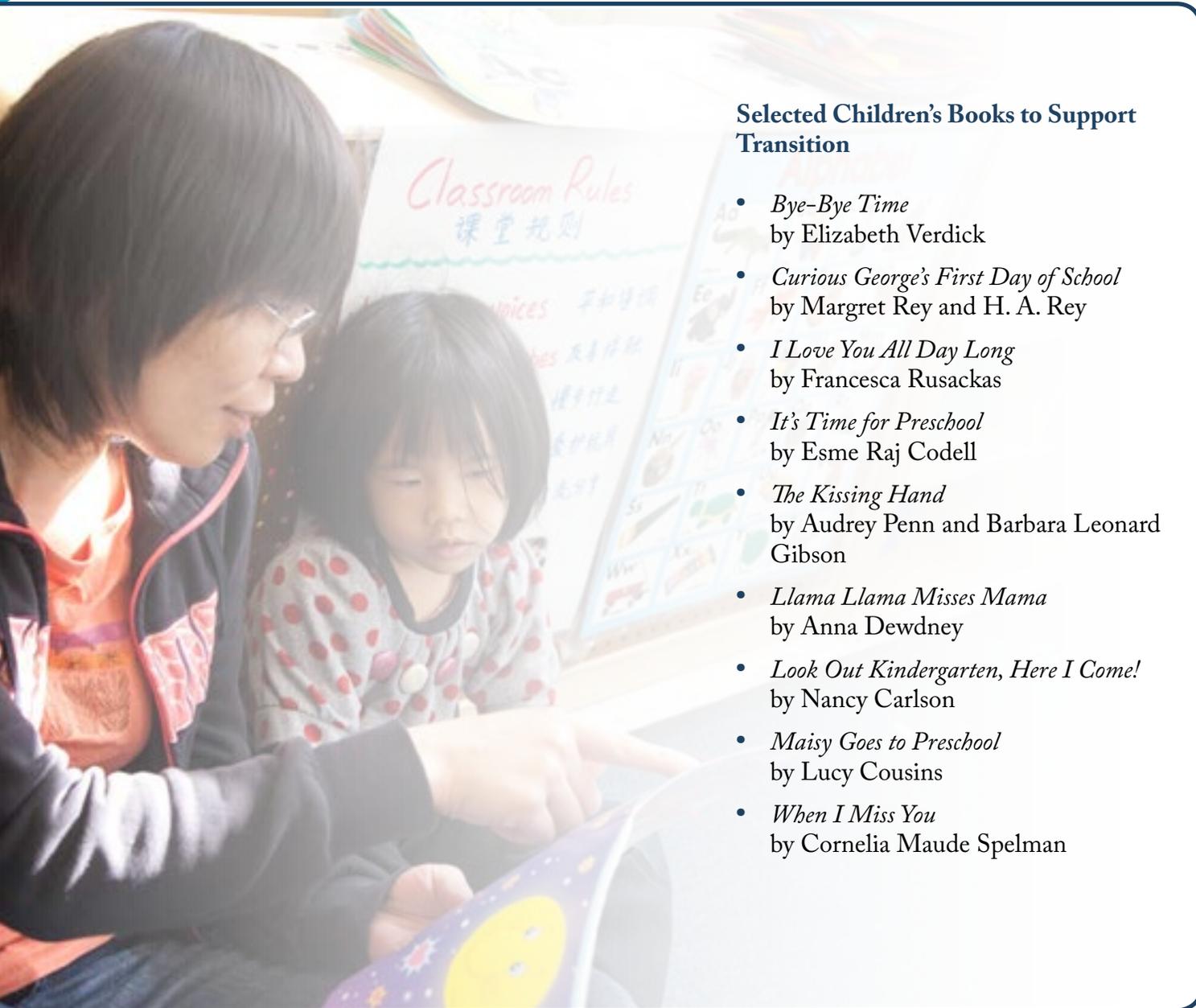
The Sanchez family:

- Shared how they viewed their children's growth and development
- Talked about how they expected their children to respond to the program change
- Thought of things they could do at home to prepare their children for the change



The teachers:

- Listened to the family's observations of the children at home and school
- Shared ongoing developmental progress of each child
- Talked about the family's and children's feelings related to change
- Co-created a transition plan with the family that listed things the family could do at home and those the teachers would do in Head Start
- Referred the family to an agency to help them find full-day child care in their new community
- Agreed to transfer child assessment and enrollment records to the new child care program with written permission from the family



Selected Children's Books to Support Transition

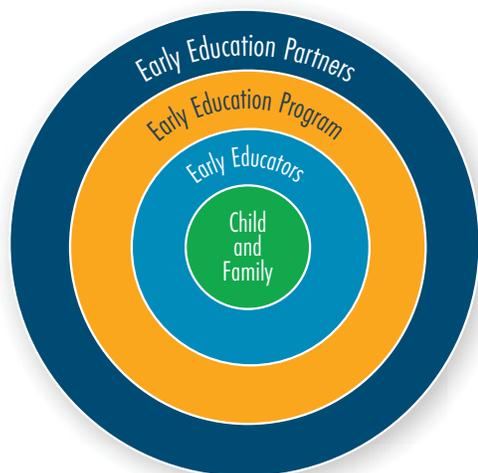
- *Bye-Bye Time*
by Elizabeth Verdick
- *Curious George's First Day of School*
by Margret Rey and H. A. Rey
- *I Love You All Day Long*
by Francesca Rusackas
- *It's Time for Preschool*
by Esme Raj Codell
- *The Kissing Hand*
by Audrey Penn and Barbara Leonard Gibson
- *Llama Llama Misses Mama*
by Anna Dewdney
- *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!*
by Nancy Carlson
- *Maisy Goes to Preschool*
by Lucy Cousins
- *When I Miss You*
by Cornelia Maude Spelman

Putting It All Together

Transition into and out of your program can be made easier for children and families to manage when collaborative and well-planned transition services are in place. Teachers, caregivers, home visitors, and families can partner together to learn about each child's background, development, strengths, and needs; share information and resources; and plan supportive transition practices. Together they can create responsive, individual transition plans that facilitate each child's adjustment to their new learning environment and make it a positive experience.

Where to Learn More

Transition Briefs in This Series



SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS:

Using Child Development as a Guide

Early Educators Partnering with Families

Program Policies and Practices

Working with Early Education Partners

Resources

Family Engagement in Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/rtp-transition-to-kindergarten.pdf>

Get Ready for Kindergarten! Activity Calendar for Teachers

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/transition-calendar.pdf>

Get Ready for Kindergarten! Activity Calendar for Families

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/transition-calendar-family.pdf>

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework 2015

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework>

The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework: Promoting Family Engagement and School Readiness, From Prenatal to Age 8

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/pfce-interactive-framework>

News You Can Use November 2011: Transitions

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/news-you-can-use-transitions>

Planning for Transitions: Action Plan Outline (for children with disabilities)

https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/Disabilities/Services%20to%20Children%20with%20Disabilities/Transitions/disabl_caf_00001pdf_091605.html

Transition to Kindergarten Webpages on the ECLKC

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/transitions/article/transition-kindergarten>

Transition Strategies: Continuity and Change in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers

https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/resources/ECLKC_Bookstore/PDFs/transition_strategies.pdf

Understanding Family Engagement Outcomes: Research to Practice Series—Positive Parent-Child Relationships

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/rtp-parent-child-relationships.pdf>

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Effective Transition Includes Supportive Classroom Practices

Nurturing, predictable environments give children a sense of stability and provide them with consistency and security. Here are some things you can do in your program to individualize your interactions, the environment, and daily routines as children transition into your program.

- **Supportive interactions**—Support children based on their age, temperament, developmental level, culture, and interests.
 - > Learn how to greet each child and family in their home language and to pronounce their names correctly.
 - > Have one staff person present to connect with each child and family for at least a few minutes upon arrival while other staff supervise the rest of the children.
 - > Identify a staff person to be the primary teacher or caregiver to each new child as they adjust.
 - > Tune in to those children who need a little more support. Give them a chance to observe until they are ready to join in. Guide them to materials or activities you know they enjoy.
 - > Suggest the family allow their child to bring a “comfort” item from home, such as a blanket or small soft toy.
 - > Facilitate peer interactions and social connections (for example, ask a child with strong friendship skills to be a “welcome buddy”).
- **Environment**—Create an environment that makes all children and families feel welcome and connected.
 - > Post a sign that welcomes children and families in their home languages.
 - > Post photos of staff with their names for families.
 - > Set up a family photo board that children can view. Show the board to families and ask each family to bring in a photo of their family to post. Laminate copies of family photos so children can carry their loved ones with them throughout the day.
 - > Invite families to share ideas for familiar materials that would authentically represent their culture and language, such as fabrics, containers, and games. Include these materials in the environment.
 - > Label the environment in the languages that the children and families speak.
 - > Post a picture of the schedule in their home languages at children’s eye level. Include photographs of the daily activities and the time each occurs.
 - > Have a soft, quiet space available for children who want to watch activities from a distance before they begin interacting.

- **Routines**—Help children adjust to the program by establishing consistent and predictable routines.
 - > Set up simple activities that children and families can do together as they arrive that will encourage families to stay for awhile (for example, puzzles and table games).
 - > Establish predictable routines so children know what will happen next.
 - > Help children know what is expected of them by showing and not just telling them what to do. For example, say and model, “Here’s how you hang up your jacket,” or “This is how to put the books in the basket.” Provide picture cues too.
 - > Give children advance notice when the daily schedule is going to change. Use visual cues such as moving the picture schedule (see above) to signal the change.
 - > For infants and toddlers, follow daily routines that are as similar as possible to the routines in the child’s home.
 - > For preschool, follow consistent routines and daily schedules that provide clear expectations.