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Transition: Early Intervention to Preschool

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Transition from Early Intervention to Preschool: A Literature Review

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) requires all Individualized Family Service (IFSP) plans to address transition. Early Intervention programs must initiate and discuss the transition process from early intervention to school-based services with each family at least 90 days before the child's third birthday. Transition should be a process of information sharing and planning for each individual family. The transition process can be very stressful for many families because services, service providers, location, and delivery of services change. Preschool is often a family's first experience with a school environment, successful collaboration and communication through the transition phase enhances the family experience and increases future success and outcomes for children and families. This project will review the literature on transition that will include: the transition process, family experiences including successes and barriers, and impact on school success. In this literature review, many scientific studies were reviewed to gain a deeper understanding of this subject.

Keywords: early intervention, transition

Transition from Early Intervention to Preschool: A Literature Review

A Literature Review

Early Intervention is a family-centered intervention program that provides services to eligible children and families from birth until the child's third birthday. Once a child turns three, they will transition to the next appropriate program. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires all Individualized Family Service (IFSP) plans to address transition. While this transition period can be a very exciting time for many families, it also causes a lot of stress and anxiety for other families. Through this transition, families will experience a great deal of change. Changes in what services are available, how services are provided, and changes to their intervention team. Families fear the loss of relationships with their early intervention team and fear forming a new relationship with a new team. For many families, preschool is their first experience in a school setting. The success of this transition is important for forming relationships with schools and developing partnerships to create successful future outcomes.

As part of the family life cycle, we all experience transitions (Pang, 2010). For young children the earliest transitions can be measured by developmental milestones. The transition from crawling to walking, babbling to talking, and home to school are some of the earliest transitions for a child. As parents and caregivers, we anticipate these transitions happening; they are expected. Expected transitions can bring about feelings of joy and happiness for parents and caregivers. But what happens when we are faced with the unexpected? The discovery your child has a disability, they aren't meeting expected milestones and you are now receiving support from an early intervention team. These are unexpected and can bring about feelings of stress, sadness, and anxiety. Unexpected transitions can turn caregiver confidence into doubt and fear about the future. The more severe the disability is, the more challenging transitions can be for a child and family.

Each year, more than one million transitions occur between early intervention services and early childhood special education programs (Brandes et al., 2007). Transition has been

defined as a “carefully planned, outcome-oriented process, initiated by the primary services provider, who establishes and implements a written multiagency service plan for each child moving to a new program” (McNulty, 1989, p.159 as cited Malone & Gallagher, 2009). A successful transition requires extensive planning and collaboration between the family, the sending early intervention team, and the receiving preschool team. Parents that report a higher comfort level with this transition process reported that they felt well prepared by their early intervention staff, they were involved in all aspects of the process and had ample opportunities to make decisions, have alternative choices and were comfortable with placements (Malone & Gallagher, 2009).

Parents and early intervention teams should partner throughout the transition process. Communication has been identified in a wide variety of research as a critical component to a successful transition. A successful transition promotes continuous growth and development for the child including adaptations to the structure and culture of the new environment. It also supports positive outcomes for families including increased self-efficacy as parents, and increased knowledge (Dogaru et al., 2009 as cited in Kruse 2012).

Transition can be a challenging time for many families. The loss of the known and the gain of the unknown is difficult. Families and service providers must work together and effectively communicate information and feelings throughout the transition process. The collaborative effort between parents and service providers will support the child, family, and the school. A collaborative, supportive team will increase future outcomes for the child.

Transition Process

One of the six foundational principles of IDEA is parent participation and it expects parent participation at every stage of the process (Whitbread et al., 2007). IDEA requires that early intervention programs initiate and discuss the transition process with each family at least 90 days before the child’s third birthday. Research indicates that the transition from early

intervention to early childhood special education is all too often a single event, a formal meeting that takes place at one point in time (Hanson et al., 2000 as cited in Kruse 2012, p. 46). This initial transition conference should be an invaluable source of information for parents as they enter the transition process from early intervention to school-based services. During this conference, service providers and families should work together to build a timeline clearly identifying the steps that will take place and indicating who is responsible for each step and when each step must be completed throughout the transition process (Brandes et al., 2007). Transition should be a process of information sharing, exploration, and planning for a child's future.

Each member of a child's team provides a different level of expertise. Parents are the experts on their child; they've known their child longer than anyone else on the team and know their child's likes and dislikes. Service providers are experts on the transition procedures and processes that are required to take place. The expertise of each team member should be valued and utilized. The information provided by each team member can be used to determine the child's needs and become a foundational building block for the transition plan. Once this plan is developed, each member of the team assumes the responsibility for completing their designated tasks.

Early intervention teams must consider each family individually throughout the transition process. Families should be viewed as equal partners and their input to the process is equally important. IDEA requires that this process is initiated at least 90 days before the child's third birthday; however, for many children and families, more time may be needed. The success of a transition can be dependent on the amount and clarity of communication and collaboration between parents, early intervention teams, and preschool teams.

Family Experiences

The transition from early intervention to preschool can be an emotional time for many families. These families are excited to watch their child grow and learn yet are scared and

stressed about the changes this growth can bring. The transition from early intervention to preschool-based services is one of the most difficult for a lot of families. Through this transition, families will experience a service shift from family-centered services and programming conducted in their homes to a school-based system where the school takes the primary educational responsibility for the child (Johnson, 2001). A successful transition will not only inform the parents of the changes that will occur but will also educate parents on what to expect during and after the transition. Transitions that lack partnerships between families and agencies will lead to conflict and a lack of trust.

Transition practices should be developed with the family in mind. Families should be considered as equal partners in the transition team (Hoover, 2001) and involved in every aspect of the transition process. Best practice indicates that the emphasis should focus on transition as a partnership with families (Roberts, Rule, & Innocenti, 1998 as cited in Malone & Gallagher, 2009). A carefully planned, well-organized transition conference will educate parents on the transition process and build a successful partnership between the parents, the early intervention team, and the receiving preschool team. When all involved parties have a clear understanding of their roles and expectations, children will benefit through the continuity of their educational services and supports. Parents will benefit by developing a greater knowledge and appreciation of early childhood programs and staff. Staff will have increased knowledge of the children and enhanced ability to meet individual needs (Johnson, 2001).

Transitions that are viewed as unsatisfactory or frustrating are often due to a lack of partnerships and communication between parents and professionals. Families report feeling dissatisfied with transition services due to the fact that family-centered practices were not implemented (Pang, 2010). Families report that they were unaware of the processes and procedures or were not given many, if any, choices in future placements for their children. Some families felt their only role was to provide a signature to complete the necessary paperwork (Kruse, 2012). Service providers that lack training may view transition as a process of

paperwork that needs to be completed before the child's birthday rather than a process of collaborating with families to develop and implement a transition plan.

Families will experience a wide range of emotions through the transition process. A well-planned transition will build trust between the family and early childhood programs, it will promote parent self-confidence as they understand the influence they can have on their child's educational services and supports, and it will encourage continued growth and development for the child in their new environment.

Future Outcomes

IDEA strongly supports parent involvement in the special education process. Parent participation is one of the six core principles. Successful parent-professional partnerships result in improved outcomes for students (Whitbread et al., 2007). Service providers must respect individual family preferences and incorporate them into service provision, understanding that each family has its own unique strengths, needs, and expectations (Pang, 2010). Understanding and respecting families as individuals, builds trust and rapport between families and service providers.

The transition from early intervention services to school-based preschool services is often a family's first experience with a school system. "School entry has turned out to be a significant developmental step for children and their families" (Dunlop & Fabian, 2006 p. 7). The success of this first major educational transition can set the stage for future educational experiences for the child and their family. Families who perceived that professionals did not share their vision for their child had a difficult time establishing and maintaining partnerships with staff (Kruse, 2012). The success or failure of this initial relationship can have a lasting impact because the success of the first transition is likely to influence subsequent transitions (Dunlop & Fabian, 2006).

Children are vulnerable and find it difficult to cope with change (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Interactions between children and their environment is paramount to their social-emotional,

cognitive, and communication skill development (Pang, 2010). Through the transition process, parents can work together with the school, collaborate and provide their child with a positive experience as they are transitioning into the school setting. When a child senses this positive relationship between their home and school, it will increase their motivation to accept this new experience. This acceptance improves child self-confidence and can facilitate a greater sense of trust between the child and their teacher. It also increases parent confidence in their child's ability to achieve in their new setting (Johnson, 2001).

The ability to collaborate with others is not a skill that comes naturally; it is a skill that takes time to develop. Through the transition process, parents and service providers must be able to communicate effectively, must feel as though they are a valued member of the team, and each team member must understand their individual role and responsibility as a member of the team. When parents and service providers work together effectively, the child's future outcomes increase.

Gaps in Research

IDEA ensures that children with disabilities are provided educational services to support their individual needs. Part C of IDEA provides services for children from birth through 36 months of age. States participating in Part C of IDEA are required to designate a lead agency to provide these services. A majority of States designate state health agencies to provide these services, while other states provide services through state education departments or family and social service agencies. Part B of IDEA provides services for eligible students ages 3 through 21 years of age. Services through Part B of IDEA are provided under state public school systems within each state.

A majority of the current research on transitions from early intervention to school-based services focuses on the family experience with the process. Experiences with collaboration and communication between parents and professionals. One area that I feel would benefit from additional research is the parent perspective of the transition process from Part C to Part B

services in states that operate Part C through educational systems versus programs operated by other state agencies. It would be interesting to compare perspectives and identify what parents report as satisfactory and what is reported as unsatisfactory with this transition. I would be curious to see how similar or different these parent perspectives are and if there is a pattern of experiences between programs operated through state educational systems versus other state agencies.

According to research, many young children with disabilities experienced a gap in transition as they moved from Part C early intervention services to Part B school-based services. I think it would be interesting to study the reason for gaps in services between early intervention and school-based services. According to Markowitz et al., (2006), 38 percent of children with disabilities ages 3-5 received early intervention services under IDEA Part C. Approximately 30 percent had a gap between the end of part C services and the beginning of school-based services. What are the reasons for these gaps and if we separate the data, is there a remarkable difference between Part C services operated through state education systems versus Part C services operated through other state agencies? What can we learn, if anything, about services and service delivery of early intervention services provided through varying agencies?

IDEA Part B serves all eligible children through a consistent lead agency, the public education system. IDEA Part C allows states to designate the agency that provides early intervention services. Further research on outcomes and parent perspectives of services provided through different agencies could help us understand if one system is more supportive than another. If so, this information could lead to a transformation in how early intervention services are provided nationwide and allow for more consistency and access to those in need.

Conclusion

Everyone will experience transition throughout their life cycle. Expected transitions can bring about joy and excitement, unexpected transitions can bring about stress and anxiety. For

families receiving early intervention services, the transition from family-centered home-based services to school-based educationally focused services can be very difficult. The ability of an early intervention team to clearly communicate and effectively collaborate with families as they experience this transition can enhance or diminish their future relationship with the school. It is important for service providers to work together to develop a plan, follow the plan, and provide the best services possible to support the needs of the child. A positive experience early on has a major impact on the family's confidence and the future outcomes of the child.

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