

The Special EDge

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The Big Shift

Changing from Early Start to Preschool Services

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If you are the parent of an infant or toddler with disabilities, you are probably receiving early intervention services through California's Early Start program. And you may have heard someone mention the "transition" that occurs when your child turns three years old.

"Transition to where?" you might ask. "Where are we supposed to be going? We've only just gotten settled with all of these people who are helping my child and my family."

Your service providers have most likely become a regular and familiar part of your life. You finally understand some of the dozens of abbreviations and terms floating around, such as IFSP, PT, OT, service coordination—the list can seem endless, but it is finally feeling almost natural. And now there is this talk about transition. It is almost as if a buzzer suddenly sounded and you are being directed out the door of a world that was just starting to become comfortable.

Transition is generally defined as "the passage from one place or condition to another." It is a process can be frightening and exciting at the same time. As it applies to families of children receiving early intervention services, transition in general means leaving a familiar pattern

of services and moving into another way of doing things.

You may wonder why you have to make changes in the first place and why the magical time for them to happen is when your child turns three. The answer lies with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law that ensures that all children, regardless of their degree of disability, will have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This law has two important sections: Part C, for infants and toddlers, birth to thirty-six months; and Part B, for children ages three to twenty-two. So, once your child turns three, the law requires your child—and you—to leave the Early Start program with its Individual Family Service Plans and service coordinators (Part C of IDEA) and move to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for preschool-age and school-age children (Part B of IDEA).

Most Part C service providers will not simply push you out the door into a preschool and leave you stranded. But before this specific transition takes place, you will want to gather information, think carefully about your options, and make plans. The strategies that I discuss below will help make your shift

smoother. And there are preschool service providers who will build relationships with you on the other end.

First, there are a few things you will want to know.

The services your child starts receiving under IDEA's Part B will look different in a number of ways. Typically, Part B services are not delivered to your

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Back to the Basics

Transitioning into new service systems means that the flow of new and confusing information increases, and the choices and decisions start to multiply. But regardless of the degree of stress or anxiety you're experiencing as a result of your child's disability, and irrespective of where she is along the path to adulthood, several very concrete, practical strategies will serve you well:

- Access information from a variety of sources, including other parents who have been down this road.
- Use online technology, but don't overwhelm yourself or your child.
- Organize, be it in a file or on a disc.
- Keep personal information readily available for easy access.
- File contact information of those agencies you are communicating with, and keep notes on whom you talked with, who said what, and what timelines and actions or follow-up plans have been agreed upon.
- Put requests in writing and keep a paper trail.
- Call or visit your local parent-directed resource center.

Ask, Ask, Ask!

Maybe the most important practical advice is to always ask questions. (Remember, there really are no "dumb" ones.) The jargon and acronyms related to disability can be overwhelming if you don't. If meetings or conversations become overwhelming, it is okay to say, "Please stop. I need a break!" Then take time to think about the discussion at hand, gather more information, and contact others who may help. You will be gaining knowledge and insight by doing this. And, by speaking up and asking when something is not clear, you will also be helping to set a higher standard of clarity for other families.

A friend will periodically remind me that our children with special needs did not come with an operator's manual. Unfortunately, no child comes with one.

Every new family will pioneer a new path built upon older trails carved out by earlier generations. And even though transitions may turn the old kids on the block into new kids, we will all be old kids again very soon. We have developed our survival kits, found good advisors and sources, and maintained a clear sense of our goal. If we have learned how to do one thing well, it is how to continually redraw our map as we better understand what our children want—and where THEY want to go. ♦

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child in your home, as they have been under Part C, but rather in a preschool (and then in a K-12) classroom setting. As a parent, you are still a very important part of a team that supports your child. But under Part B there is less emphasis on the needs of the family; the focus shifts to what the child needs educationally. The central vehicle for this educational support is the IEP that you and your child's teachers (and service providers) will work to develop for—and eventually with—your child. Your particular task is to bring to the team your unique perspective and knowledge as a parent. While you may not yet know all of the special education acronyms or the ins and outs of the Part B system, you do know your child better than anyone else. Your understanding, insight, hopes, and dreams for him or her are truly important. It is critical that you share them.

Each IEP team member contributes information about your child and his or her development, needs, and strengths; and then the team creates the most appropriate educational plan for your child. Don't forget that you won't have to figure this out all by yourself. You are part of a team.

The next important thing to know about this transition is that Part B has eligibility requirements that are different from those of Part C. The reality is that some children who receive special education services in Early Start do

not qualify for preschool services. This makes it critical that you talk to your service coordinator about where your child is likely to fit under Part B. If he or she is not eligible for services, you will want to look at other early childhood options to support him or her. These might include Head Start, state preschools, family child care providers, and other private or community-based preschools. Most of these are options whether your child continues to be eligible for special education services or not. Your service coordinator or your local resource and referral agency can help you identify the early childhood resources that are in your community (www.rnnetwork.org).

So, armed with some basic information, are you prepared to face the change? Most of us are not. Change can be frightening, especially when it involves going from the known to the unknown—and even more frightening when it involves our children. For whatever reason, this change is harder for some folks than for others. Certain parents can take change and uncertainty in stride, viewing them as part of a new, great adventure; others feel fear and trepidation but go along without much outward evidence of their struggle; and still others resist any change as long as they can, kicking and complaining the whole way. So perhaps the next most important thing for you to do is try to learn about yourself. Your transition from Part C to Part B services gives you a perfect opportunity to reflect on your own style for managing the unknown. You can help yourself—and your child—when you are able to bring a degree of self-awareness to the process.

Then, whether or not your child qualifies for services under Part B, the next important thing to do, regardless of the kind of disability your child has, is learn as much as you can about typical child development. Children with disabilities go through the same developmental progression as children

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without disabilities, although perhaps at a different pace or by using different strengths. All parents of young children, though, have common concerns about such things as toileting, bedtime, eating, and sibling relationships. Being familiar with developmental stages and milestones will help you know what to expect—and will help you advocate for a high-quality preschool program that supports your child's development.

Warning!! During times of change and stress, some of the confusing, uncomfortable feelings that you may have experienced when your child was born or diagnosed with a disability can return. These feelings of sadness, depression, isolation, or anger are often retriggered in times of uncertainty, and especially during the potentially stressful times of transition. Recognize that these feelings will not last forever and that they are part of the normal grief cycle. Also try to keep in mind that there will be many more transitions for you and your child as the future unfolds. Each one is an opportunity for learning new information that will help you build your skills and confidence in supporting yourself and your child and in managing change.

So what practical things can you do to prepare yourself and your child for the transition from Part C to Part B services? Seven things have helped me as the parent of a child with a disability:

- **Talk:** Before your child turns two and one-half, start talking to your service coordinator about what is going to happen when your child turns three—what meetings are required, and who needs to be there. Talk to your family, friends, and other parents about your ideas and concerns.
- **Ask questions:** Be sure you are clear on the kind of services your child is receiving. Then find out whether or not your child is likely to be eligible for special education services during the preschool years. Once this

question is answered, you can learn about the agencies and organizations that can provide any special help your child will continue to need. You can also ask what kinds of tests and evaluations are required. Who will do them? Where will they be done? How will decisions be made?

- **Gather information:** Learn as much as you can about the preschool options available so that you can make a choice based on what is best for your child. Are there private preschools, child-care facilities, or special preschool programs? What is a typical day in these settings? How are the services delivered? You may want to visit some programs so you can see how things work. Your service coordinator can help you plan visits and think about some questions to ask, such as the following:

Who are the children attending the class?

Are there children who will be good models for the development of social skills, language, and play?

Are the other children the same age as my child?

Where is the class located? Is it near my home?

In what ways can I as a parent be involved in the class or program?

Will my child need to be potty-trained in order to attend?

How will the staff handle my child's special needs?

What is the curriculum? What exactly will the program staff be teaching my child?

- **Think:** As you prepare for the transition meeting, take time to work out and visualize your wishes and dreams for your child. What would you like to see him or her be doing a year from now? Five years from now? Fifteen years from now?
- **Talk some more:** Ask as many questions you can think to ask of your service coordinator, early intervention provider, friends, doctors, and therapists. Then ask them if there

are important questions that you have not yet asked!

- **Get connected:** Call your local Early Start Family Resource Center (FRC) to learn how to become involved with other families with children like yours. Also, your Early Start FRC is a great place to learn about resources in your community, find information, and discover trainings on topics related to disability and special education. Each Early Start FRC is contracted to support transitioning families through parent-to-parent support groups and training. These often include parent marches and emotional support—all very important when you are facing changes of any kind.
- **Get organized:** Now is the time to gather all of those important papers about your child—assessments, reports, notes, and records of any kind. Sort them and make them readily available. A big, three-hole binder with dividers is one easy vehicle for doing this. You may also want to keep a notebook or journal to write down your questions, thoughts about upcoming appointments, and information the doctors or therapists give you. Then keep that notebook with you at all times.

Often, in our efforts to learn everything we can to help our children navigate the world, we feel as though our lives are swirling out of control. When I begin to feel this way, I start putting things in a to-do list. While I will confess that the act of making the list is sometimes as far as I get, just doing it helps me feel more organized and less helpless. And it helps me believe that the world of special education is manageable.

Gathering information, asking countless questions, and connecting with other families are all strategies that will help you prepare for the important transition you and your little one are about to make. So get ready, get set, go! Enjoy the adventures that lie ahead.

And remember to breathe! ♦