

CHAPTER 1

Successful Transitions into and out of Kindergarten

Supporting Children and Families

Eva Phillips and Amy Scrinzi

For many children, two of their most dramatic education transitions occur around kindergarten—their first participation in an elementary school setting and, at the end of kindergarten, entry into the primary grades. When children enter kindergarten, they essentially become citizens of two cultures—home and school. They must learn to navigate the new etiquette, rules, and conditions of the classroom, which are often different from those at home and in other familiar settings. While this is true regardless of ethnicity or cultural background (Lam & Pollard 2006), it is especially so for children whose home cultures are different from the school's. When all adults caring for a child—teachers, family members, care providers—work together to create positive, communicative relationships, the child and the adults will have smoother, less stressful transitions.

Factors Affecting a Child's Experience of the Kindergarten Transition

A transition is defined as a passage from one place or stage to another. The transition to kindergarten affects all aspects of a child's life: where they spend time during the day, who they interact with, what they feel, and how they behave. As active, participatory learners, kindergartners learn to make sense of and adapt to the new environment in creative and dynamic ways; some children do so more quickly and easily than others. This depends on many factors, including a child's individual characteristics and cultural experiences, whether or not they have delays or disabilities, and the child's experience or lack of experience in an

early childhood setting. For adults and children alike, change is stressful. But it can be especially unsettling for young children with limited experiences and few well-developed coping strategies.

Chronological or developmental age at kindergarten entry also greatly affects children's transition. The variation found in a kindergarten classroom can be huge. In a typical kindergarten classroom, there could be a spread of 2 to 2½ years in age—from about 4¾ to 7½ years old. This is a result of varying cutoff dates for kindergarten entry, children being held back a year—a practice called “redshirting,” a trend that lacks evidence of a relationship to long-term academic success, including for dual language learners and children with disabilities (Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski 2011; Sands, Monda-Amaya, & Meadan 2021; Sucena et al. 2020)—and a small percentage of children who are repeating their kindergarten year (another practice that has no research base to prove its long-term effectiveness). In reality, no matter the cutoff date, kindergarten classrooms are likely to include children whose ages vary by as much as 12 months or more. Classrooms will always include children who come to kindergarten ready for challenges as well as those who need more support. “Kindergarten is a time of change, challenge, and opportunity. Because of the great individual variation among kindergartners and the wide age range of kindergarten children, teachers must be responsive to developmental, individual, and cultural variations” (NAEYC, n.d.).

Teachers must also be aware of the different personalities of the children in their kindergarten classrooms, including those who are slow to warm up and those who are flexible and easygoing. Providing support for those children and all those in between is critical to smooth transitions. These factors deeply

influence children’s ability to transition from one setting to another, which is another important reason teachers and families must work together to support young children through these transitions. Adult relationships (between teachers and families and among teachers, especially kindergarten teachers and the preschool or prekindergarten teachers who taught children the year before they entered kindergarten) will make a great difference in how children experience the transition.

Supporting the Transition to Kindergarten

Transitions are not one-time events that only happen on the first day of kindergarten. They begin before children enter school and continue throughout the year. All parties, including the preschool setting and elementary school, play important roles in creating a successful transition for children and families. The importance of a strong relationship between the educators in those two programs within the community cannot be overstated. The transitional period will be more seamless for children and families when there is communication, collaboration, and alignment among preschools, child care programs, family child care programs, and the elementary schools in the community. “To promote ongoing learning and build upon early successes, both ECE providers and K–12 local education agencies (LEAs) must consider each other’s roles and coordinate their efforts . . . through alignment of transition goals, approaches, and practices” (Erlich et al. 2021, vii).

For example, if the kindergarten teacher understands the schedule, routines, and amount of time spent in uninterrupted play-based learning experiences in the typical community preschool, they are better able to mirror that at the beginning of the kindergarten year. The same is true when children transition from kindergarten into first grade. By ensuring some similarities in the schedule, routines, and learning activities, educators will help children feel more at ease. This critical alignment between programs greatly enhances the transition experience for children, families, and teachers.

It is also essential to remember to include special education administration, staff, and related service providers in transition conversations to maximize the positive experiences in the regular classroom

and minimize the time a child with a disability will be removed from classroom routines and activities. Administrators need to be proactive in determining how and when specialized services and specially designed instruction can be embedded into what is already happening.

Successful transition practices support children’s development of self-esteem, self-confidence, and independence. Creating culturally and linguistically responsive environments that incorporate families’ cultural and linguistic resources is crucial. All families will feel better prepared and more able to support their children if they know what is expected—within the context of and in relation to what happens at home—and that their traditions, culture, language, and expectations are valued (Rhodes, Enz, & LaCount 2006). A teacher’s understanding of children’s and families’ funds of knowledge not only strengthens their relationships but also enhances the instructional practices and transition experiences for all children. A child’s funds of knowledge can be described as

- › Academic and personal background knowledge
- › Accumulated life experiences
- › Skills and knowledge used to navigate everyday social contexts
- › World views structured by broader historically and politically influenced social forces (OSPI, n.d.)

Teaching and learning are directly related to funds of knowledge:

Gaining a better understanding of a student’s funds of knowledge can enhance classroom practices for both teachers and students. Using a funds of knowledge approach to understanding students’ overall sets of abilities and experiences can help teachers draw on these skills in classrooms to enrich their understanding of academic content while also motivating them during classroom activities. (OSPI, n.d.)

Good teacher-family relationships have endless benefits for children, including making the transition into school easier.



Help families understand the importance of maintaining their home language as English is introduced at school.

Advocating for Effective and Supportive Local Transition Policy

by Laura Bornfreund

Family visits, information nights, questionnaires, and beginning-of-the-school-year activities can help children and families adjust to new kindergarten classrooms. The behind-the-scenes work, however, matters most when creating seamless transitions for children and families as they move in and out of kindergarten. This work includes cross-grade-level planning and collaboration, relationship-building among elementary school principals and directors of early childhood programs, and better alignment of what happens in early childhood programs and the early grades of elementary school.

Think of a 4-year-old boy—let’s call him Isaac—who attended a high-quality preschool. His day included both child-initiated and adult-guided experiences in literacy, math, science, and social studies learning. He had ample time to explore his interests, play with his friends, and engage in pretend play. Isaac’s teacher helped him work through his emotions during a rough day and understand when a peer was having a difficult day as well. His teacher engaged the children in lots of hands-on learning in small group activities. He did very few worksheets.

When Isaac starts kindergarten, his day looks very different. While the content areas are the same, he often sits in his seat or with the whole group on the carpet. When he uncrosses his legs or gets wiggly, his teacher corrects him in front of everyone. The teacher expects him to work silently for much of the day. He has 20 minutes of recess every day after lunch—as long as he follows the rules. Sometimes, he has to sit out.

While some might think it is best for kindergartners to learn through more didactic methods such as whole-group instruction and worksheets rather than through active, hands-on play-based experiences, research does not support this (Barker et al. 2014; Yogman et al. 2018). We must address the chasm between what many children experience in preschool programs, Head Start, and other early learning experiences and the typical kindergarten classroom. Making meaningful change and narrowing the chasm requires a dedicated team of educators, staff, and school, district, and community leaders who are responsible for developing a kindergarten transition plan, reevaluating it, and making sure that every part of the school (curriculum, instruction, assessment, family engagement, professional development, and so on) aligns with what science says about how young children learn and develop.

As a kindergarten teacher, you are at the center of these critical transitions for children, and you need other partners, including your colleagues and administrators,

to make these transitions as successful as possible. In some school districts and states, school administrators are realizing the value of building their understanding of early childhood and developmentally appropriate practices. The National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National P–3 Center have spurred some of these efforts to strengthen early learning leadership with their publication “A Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades” (Kauerz et al. 2021). The competencies described in this publication address areas important for enabling seamless transitions in your school and community. You can encourage your principal to access this guide and other resources designed for administrators, such as the early childhood and learning toolkit from AASA (The School Superintendents Association) (AASA Early Learning Cohort 2022), and offer suggestions for creating more successful transitions.

Principals and other building and school district administrators are essential for establishing the conditions that make seamless transition and developmentally appropriate practices more possible. In my visits to pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms across the country, I learned how some leaders are doing this. In Washoe County, Nevada, for example, one principal shared that she worked with her first grade teachers to ensure they were engaging students in the same kinds of choice time and center activities as kindergarten. That same school principal shifted class sizes around, slightly increasing upper elementary classroom numbers to keep kindergarten class sizes smaller like in pre-K. In Ferndale School District in Washington state, all pre-K and kindergarten teachers include what district leadership calls an hour for uninterrupted work time that is not at the end of the day. They call it this to build educators’ understanding that in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades, children’s play is also their work—and a time when a lot of meaningful learning happens. During the uninterrupted hour, children choose from a teacher-curated list of activities that typically include dramatic play, art, blocks and other building toys, sensory table, and games. Sometimes teachers also set up activities that connect with something the children are learning about. In one classroom I visited, the teacher put items in the sensory bin with the direction for children to create a desert habitat. The Ferndale district is working to extend this practice into first grade classrooms too.

These are just a few ways school leaders can promote alignment across classroom environments and activities, enabling smooth transitions for students as they move in and out of kindergarten.

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Strategies to Support Smooth Transitions

Schools and families can work together to ensure smooth transitions to kindergarten. Here is just a sampling of effective strategies:

Prior to Kindergarten Entry

- › Consider your school’s transition team. Ideally, schools would have in place an organized community transition team consisting of preschool and kindergarten teachers, community child care representatives, pediatricians, special education personnel, administrators, and families to develop a community-wide strategic plan for transitions for the children and families. If such a team is not in place, discuss with your school administrator how to connect with children’s families and preschool teachers before the start of school.
- › Discuss and review with preschool teachers any shared individual portfolios, which may include work samples, assessment data, and information about each child’s interests and learning levels as well as strategies that have been effective with the child.
- › Invite the preschool teachers and children to visit the local elementary school to see a kindergarten classroom and to meet the teachers. Schedule time to visit the preschool classroom to see what the children are experiencing, as well.
- › Share thoughts and ideas with families about ways they might support their children’s transition into kindergarten, and ask them how you can best support their children.
- › Adapt or create a family survey to find out about family language, children’s interests, and parents’ hopes and wants for their children.
- › Determine if you need interpreters for families whose home language is not English.
- › Create documents in families’ home languages and terms they understand that provide information about programs, services, and school policies (Alanís, Arreguín, & Salinas-González 2021).

- › Plan and invite families to attend orientation activities and special events. Consider families’ work schedules and modes of transportation when determining the time of day and location for these activities.

Improving transitions for children and families requires careful planning, effective policies and practices, and sustainable funding. Educators can establish practices that put families more at ease, but the planning must begin well before the first day of school. On day one, teachers and schools should already have enough information to begin tailoring instruction, strategies, and environments to meet the needs of every student. (Bornfreund et al. 2022)

At the Beginning of the Kindergarten Year

- › Consider implementing a staggered entry plan for incoming kindergartners. Although there are many ways to do this, typically, small groups of children come to school each day for the first few days. This allows for a smaller teacher-child ratio so teachers can provide more individualized attention, support, and guidance.
- › Send a personal letter, postcard, or e-card in each family’s home language to all incoming kindergartners welcoming them to your class.
- › Initiate home visits if the family is willing, allowing an opportunity to meet each child and family at their home or another convenient location to begin establishing a partnership with one another in a one-on-one manner.
- › Provide families with an orientation packet of important information about the school and classroom, including a description of a typical day, school and classroom policies and procedures, and information related to learning standards and expectations. Have these available in families’ home languages; if necessary, identify a translator to create these documents.
- › Use questionnaires or surveys to gather information from families about their children’s home language, favorite books and songs, interests, fears, health, and so on. This will help you get to know the children and align instructional activities with children’s funds of knowledge, strengths, and needs.

- › Provide multiple avenues, such as a classroom message board, email, or interactive journal, for families to ask questions, share information, and give input on their child’s education. Gather information about families’ hopes and expectations.
- › Ensure that your classroom library includes a variety of books related to starting kindergarten and the variety of feelings associated with starting something new.
- › Make sure that the books and materials in your classroom offer a sense of belonging for children and their families by representing their cultures.
- › Provide opportunities for children to express their feelings about beginning kindergarten, including puppet shows, dramatic play center experiences, drawing, and writing.
- › Participate in common planning time (same-grade and cross-grade) on a regular basis to provide children with what they need to learn, grow, and flourish in an aligned system from preschool or pre-K through first grade and beyond.

Find the preceding transition strategies and many more in the resources listed in the sidebar.

When teachers and families develop respectful, reciprocal relationships founded on strong communication, they can work together effectively to make transitions smooth and help children adjust to their learning environment.

Kindergarten Transition Resources

Articles and Web Resources

- › North Carolina Ready Schools Toolkit. www.smartstart.org/ready-schools-toolkit
- › “North Carolina Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Transition Planning: Guiding Principles and Practices.” https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jsv0ftX3Ns-je8fZJfK_9HecHCSGIDaljCwnh-ABwSg/view
- › “Supporting the Transition to Kindergarten in Nevada: A Guide for Ensuring Equitable, Coordinated, and Sustainable Programming for Young Children Entering Elementary School.”

https://webapp-strapipaas-prod-nde-001.azurewebsites.net/uploads/nevada_kindergarten_transition_guide_63118a9fb3.pdf

- › “Toolkit for Using Policy to Enable Effective and Supportive Transitions for Children, Families, & Educators.” www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/toolkit-for-using-policy-to-enable-effective-and-supportive-transitions-for-children-families-educators
- › *Transitions and Alignment from Preschool to Kindergarten* by Bruce Atchison & Sarah Pompelia (2018)
- › “Transitions to Kindergarten” by Marie KIELTY, Angèle Sancho Passe, & Sherrie Rose Mayle (2013)
- › *Transitioning to Kindergarten: The Why, What, and How of this Important Milestone for Connecticut Students.* https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/essa/transitioningtokindergarten_whywhathow.pdf
- › “Transition to Kindergarten.” <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/transitions/article/transition-kindergarten>

Books

- › *Is Everybody Ready for Kindergarten? A Toolkit for Preparing Children and Families* by Angèle Sancho Passe (2010). Appendixes available here: www.redleafpress.org/Is-Everybody-Ready-for-Kindergarten-A-Tool-Kit-for-Preparing-Children-and-Families-P2462.aspx
- › *Reaching Standards and Beyond in Kindergarten: Nurturing Children’s Sense of Wonder and Joy in Learning* by Gera Jacobs and Kathleen Crowley (2010)

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