

## **Planning for Successful Transitions for Children with Disabilities**

Katie Miller: Hello, everyone, and welcome to our session on Planning for Successful Transitions for Children with Disabilities. My name is Katie Miller, and I am with the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. And I am a content specialist with the National Center. Specifically, I focus on transitions most all of the time, and I am thrilled to be here with you talking specifically about how we can support children with disabilities or suspected delays, as well as their families in this context.

Let's go ahead and get started. Let's begin by looking at what we hope for, our learning objectives for the session. By the end of this session, we hope that participants will have a deeper understanding of what children with disabilities might experience as a part of a transition. And also, we hope that you will learn strategies for supporting them. We hope that learning specifically about some family experiences can help participants understand how they might be able to provide support and build relationships that promote positive outcomes for families and for children. Let's start by thinking about just transitions in general.

We know that transitions are hard, but we actually do know a lot about how to facilitate effective transitions. In fact, we do it every day. We encourage you to stop for a moment and think about the transitions that you might have made as an adult. It could be getting married, having children, moving, retiring, transitioning to or from in-person services. What we know is that the three practices of relationships, information and alignments – we also call those RIA – can help us to create successful adjustments, and they make a transition successful for children as well. As adults, we can make these things happen on our own. But of course, children need our help.

I'm going to pause for a moment and ask you to think about and perhaps reflect in the QA button if you're comfortable, what transitions have you gone through lately? What did that transition feel like? And finally, what made the transition feel better or worse? Were any of those three practices I listed of RIA supportive of a positive transition? Or could your transition have been better with one of those?

I'll pause for just a moment and let you reflect on that in QA or on your own.

OK, let's talk about what those R, I and A practices look like in the context of our early childhood work. When we began this work, we began thinking about the idea of transition to kindergarten specifically. And we pictured a bridge. We're thinking about children and families as they cross this bridge from our programs into perhaps a kindergarten setting. And as we continue to think about transitions, we really realized that these practices that we researched and that we determined from practitioners that were successful, actually really apply to a multitude of transition contexts.

We would really like you to specifically today imagine how disability services coordinators or DSCs, their teams, and community partners work together to support a successful adjustment.

And as our metaphor evolves, we envision perhaps our bridge might even have suspension cables above it to stabilize this foundation. We visualize the staff and the partners actively supporting and lifting the family and child as they walk across the bridge to that new setting, new situation, or new school.

Transitions that will be especially meaningful for DSCs and teams could include transition periods from eligibility to receiving services or interim plans. The age 3 transition from Part C to Part B services, and transitions to kindergarten for children already on an IEP. As we just discussed, those three key practices that really lead to some successful adjustment are building relationships, sharing information, and creating alignment between settings.

Now, each of these ingredients is of equal importance. It requires consistent and diligent communication between those involved. And it really should happen simultaneously throughout the transition process. What do those things mean, though? I want to explain just a little bit more.

Building relationships involves maintaining positive relationships with families, helping them to make connections with educators, specialists and community partners in a new setting and fostering relationships with key community members and agencies who can support the child and family through that process of transition. Information sharing includes communication with families in their home languages, preparing children and families for what to expect, and sharing data with new educators and providers. And then last but not least, alignment means establishing similarities when possible between the old and the new. This could involve establishing similar routines such as how educators and disability support staff contact families, or how children line up to go outside. It could include having members of both settings participate in professional development opportunities together. It could also include planning transition activities as a team, adopting the same assessment and placement criteria, or when appropriate, even standards and curriculum.

Let's look at each of these in a little bit more depth, and talk about some specific strategies that people in different roles might use to support those practices. The first is relationships. That's the very first plank in our bridge. Responsive relationships are critical to responsive transitions. As we know, all staff in Head Start programs build relationships by getting to know the unique strengths of each other and the families we serve. Building positive relationships with families and children really helps ensure that families are confident and ready to transition from home to program or between programs. Staff and administrators also create positive relationships with the receiving setting or elementary school to which the parents and children are transitioning.

Building positive relationships among and with staff creates a supportive environment which allows us to be successful. To learn from families, staff really do need to continue building those positive goal-oriented relationships with them. Transitions may be a challenging time for both staff and families. I would even say it probably will be a challenging time. It's a time when they need to continue trusting each other to assist families in making the best decisions for their

children even in uncertain times, like the ones they might be experiencing right now due to the COVID pandemic.

Let's look at some examples of strategies. DSCs, teams and program leaders might invite the new family to visit the Early Head Start or Head Start classroom in person or virtually. They might create social stories about the transition, create opportunities for families to meet other families that are going through transitions, or who have experience with the process. They can encourage continued leadership and advocacy for their child and themselves. They can help families connect with the educators, specialists, or community partners that will be providing services through the public school setting.

While we are discussing these activities under the area of relationships, you might have noticed that some can be applied to sharing information as well, which is our next plank. That second plank in our transition bridge focuses our attention on how sharing of information leads to positive and responsive transitions. Educators and family service staff share information about transitions by preparing children and families for what to expect. Communicating with families in their home languages and sharing data with the families in the receiving setting or elementary school, with permissions of course.

As with building relationships, preparing children and their families for what to expect helps children be confident and ready for the transition. The information that staff gather and share with families not only needs to be timely, but also accurate. It's a time to listen first and allow the families to fully let staff know where they are in the process. They need to be given time to understand the process and for staff not to make any assumptions.

Some specific strategies that disability service coordinators and teams, including program leaders might use would be to share data with both families in that receiving setting or elementary school in order to help sustain the learning gains children have made in their Head Start program. To share observations, IEP and IFSP goals and accomplishments with the receiving teacher. To follow up with families to determine if they have questions about the data shared from the teacher, and how they might want to continue to advocate for their child and participate in supporting their child's learning goals in the home setting.

The final plank in our transition bridge today relates to this alignment of settings that we have discussed. Let's jump right into some specific strategies that disability services coordinators, their teams and program leaders might use. In order to align with your program staff, we encourage you to share in joint professional development. You partner around transition activities, and ensure that curricula and assessments ensure families are partners in the development of IEP and IFSP goals and transition plans, in the review of curricula and in the review of assessment tools. Include families and observations that they have themselves made at home with their children, and encourage them to share their findings with staff. Participate in transition activities.

For example, virtual visits of classrooms and program options, virtual or in-person conversations with receiving staff and new specialists and dialogues with other families. Assist

the family in talking to the child about the challenges and the changes that they may encounter in transportations, routines, and classroom expectations. In-depth knowledge of your program, the receiving early childhood setting and how services are provided is key to ensuring alignment of policies and procedures, as well as practices. The information can be shared with accuracy and adequate planning conducted so that there won't be any surprises that can rock the process, which is already a challenging one for the families and the children. Let's pause one last time and talk about what other strategies do you use to ensure alignment during transitions?

Now let's move on and talk about some of the ways that our programs are already structured to support transitions. The great news is that there are a few particular performance standards that already relate to and support the work of responsive transitions for children with disabilities and their families.

In transitions from Early Head Start, a program must collaborate with families to implement strategies and activities that support successful transitions from Early Head Start, and provide information about the child's progress during the program year, as well as providing strategies for parents to continue their involvement in and advocacy for their children. Early Head Start and Head Start programs must work together to maximize enrollment transitions from Early Head Start to Head Start, consistent with the eligibility provisions in subpart A, and promote successful transitions through collaboration and communication. And a program must provide additional transition services for children with an IFSP at a minimum, as described in subpart F of this part.

It's great to know that our structure of our programs is already built to include transitions. In the Head Start area, transitions from Head Start to kindergarten should include collaboration with parents and enrolled children to implement strategies and activities that will help parents advocate for and promote successful transitions to kindergarten for their children, including their continued involvement, including helping understand their child's progress while in Head Start, helping families understand strategies used to provide academic and social support during the transition. Preparing families to exercise their rights and responsibilities in the new setting, including services and supports available to children with disabilities, and various options for their child to participate in language instruction educational programs, as well as supporting families' ongoing communication with educators and specialists, and collaboration with local education agencies to support family engagement.

Specifically for transitions between programs, standard support coordination with schools or other appropriate agencies to ensure children's relevant records are transferred to the school or setting. Communication between appropriate staff and their counterparts in the programs to facilitate continuity of learning and development. And of course, transitions services for children with an IFSP.

What does this engagement look like in the family perspective? Family engagement is really an essential part to our program foundations and program impact areas. Engagement and

transitions can start at any time, but it's really not too early to support families through these early experiences.

Some examples of family engagement might include working with prenatal families, supporting families with family services, including connecting with organizations to meet basic needs, like WIC, SNAP or food pantries. Supporting families with disability services, including connecting them with local school districts for assessments, supporting with enrollments, creating environments that are friendly to all cultures, languages and backgrounds. Supporting families to be a part of programs as leaders and advocates, including selecting curriculums, participating in parent committees and policy councils and becoming community advocates.

Developing strong relationships with families of infants and toddlers to discuss frequent ongoing developmental changes in the first years is important as well. These relationships will support children through transitions at various stages and support possible identification of delays and disabilities.

Let's look at a few ways that our frameworks continue to support families. Creating positive relationships with families is really the foundation of our work. As families achieve desired family outcomes, we know that outcomes for children are also positively impacted. We can work with families to set individual goals for their child and family through these strong relationships, and provide various supports to help families achieve these outcomes.

The Head Start Parent, Family and Community Engagement or PFCE framework is our roadmap of everyday practices to support our programs, systems and services. Having a child with a disability can influence these factors. And it's vital to recognize every family's unique situation, and meet families where they may be. In this way, we can walk alongside them to build mutual respect, trust, and a sense of belonging for any family who might walk into our program.

Specifically, we know that families of children with disabilities can be impacted across many of the Family Outcomes column that's identified in the PFCE framework, particularly family wellbeing, parent/child relationships, and family connections. Again, how a family reacts to a child's disability is influenced by many different family characteristics. But it's very likely that having a child with a disability will influence the support the families need to achieve positive outcomes.

To create successful relationships and outcomes, programs and staff must understand the child's and family's unique situation, characteristics, strengths, goals, and challenges. In our everyday practice and conversation with families, we want to adopt strength-based attitudes to show families that we want to work with them to find solutions to their goals and dreams, and create an environment of belonging. We want to acknowledge that all families have strengths. Families are the first and most important teacher of their children. Families are partners with a critical role in their family's development. Families have expertise about their child and their family, and families' contributions are important and should be valued.

When providing services for families and for children with disabilities and their families, there are likely to be many staff members involved. The disability services coordinator, the family services worker, health manager, mental health specialist, education staff, and more. When using a coordinated approach to disability services, it's important that part of the coordination amongst the team is a clear expectation about who provides what supports to a child and family, and how those different team members collaborate and communicate. Consistent communication amongst team members will result in more cohesive services for children and families, and clear, consistent messages to families. This is really important to decrease stress or burdens that families might feel.

Family engagement is the process that we use to build those genuine relationships with families, and positive relationships with families promote strong parent/child relationships, family wellbeing and better outcomes for children and families, as we just saw in the PFCE framework. But what does that successful engagement look like? When programs are able to engage families, families and programs can form a relationship that's characterized by trust, safety, caring, and mutual respect. Family engagement as a relationship-based approach means that programs pay close attention to the emotional quality of interactions, and understand that relationships are at the center of children's positive long-term development and learning outcomes.

Why is this important? For children, ongoing, intentional and meaningful engagement with families leads to relationships that support children's healthy development and school readiness. For families, effective family communication and engagement also promotes the safety, trust, caring, encouragement and hope that affect the wellbeing of both the child and the family. For providers, it makes it easier for providers to have conversations involving uncomfortable or challenging issues, such as concerns about development or behavior.

Let's pause for a moment again and reflect in QA. How can we support families' expertise through our relationship-based practices? And I'll pause for a few seconds for you to respond.

Thank you to those who were able to respond. We really appreciate your input. Let's look for one last slide about some characteristics of relationship-based practices that we've been discussing.

When you engage with a family, you help strengthen the partnership with them. There are six relationship-based practices that can help support family engagement. These practices are intended to guide what staff say and do with families to support open communication and promote better understanding. Reflecting on how we apply relationship-based practices can improve our efforts to strengthen relationships with families. As programs we want to acknowledge and reflect on the family's perspective and experiences, such as identifying a delay, reviewing IEP or IFSP goals or going through this pandemic. We want to support their family relationships, passions and competence by inviting families' input and using it and making decisions about the child and family, using simple, clear and objective descriptions of the child's development and behavior. Using parent observations and interpretations to inform

how you support the child's development. Reframing parents' emotions as passion for their child. And finally, sharing positive and specific information about the child with the family.

We want to help programs examine how they can support families and their children through many different kinds of transitions. As we have talked about, transitions can be challenging. But when families are prepared and engaged, it helps make a safe successful transition. Sometimes we think about transitions as a child event, simply moving the child from one classroom to the next. But this is exclusively child focused, and it's really not enough to help a child transition successfully. Instead, we encourage you to take a more complex or interactive web view of transitions. And ultimately, this can be more helpful to our process. In this way, programs are focused on sharing information, building relationships, and participating in alignment across all potential interactions.

Considering all of these factors that influence transitions can be more helpful to ensuring success for children and their families during transition periods as we mentioned, such as those from eligibility to receiving services, the age three transition from Part C to Part B, and transitions to kindergarten for children already on an IEP.

As programs and staff, we have our own stories too. We encourage you to make sure to reflect on your own experiences and strengths as you prepare to interact with families. Consider how you will approach families before an interaction when you plan and prepare. Think about where the meeting will take place and the setting. Wherever you meet, your warm, respectful and inclusive attitudes and behaviors can create a welcoming environment. Before an interaction, as you are planning, consider who would be the most appropriate person to lead in the conversation within your team. Talk about how you will balance the participation of staff and family members. During an interaction, when you partner with the family, recognize that family members are the experts on their family and their situation. Focus on their strengths. Ask if the family is open to what you have to offer before you give advice or information. Find out what they would like to do before you take action. And then after an interaction, when you follow up with family and access resources and support, complete any next steps you agreed to take during the conversation.

Connecting the family to systems of support can strengthen family wellbeing. But we do want to make sure to get a family's permission before making a referral. Respectfully make referrals and share only as much information as you need to make the referral. Be a warm referral and handoff. Make a plan with family members to access services or supports. For example, you might conduct the referral together through an in-person or even via phone call.

Communication is an integral part of fostering these positive relationships and engagement. In developing and strengthening relationships, we want to create spaces that support authentic interactions that are meaningful for families. We also want to provide opportunities for two-way communication with families and staff that's based on mutual respect and trust. Ensure that you know the family's preferred language. You may be sharing some very specific information about the child's diagnosis, services and other resources. We want to ensure that

this information is accessible. Acknowledge the individual before the situation that they may be experiencing. Recognize that their circumstance or situation does not define them.

Understanding staff and families' culture takes curiosity, sometimes patience, commitment, and a willingness to learn and to feel uncomfortable at times, particularly if they share information that may be difficult to process. It also takes courage and humility to reflect on your own experiences and understand how they affect your attitudes toward your work with families and staff. Listen to their stories. These unique stories influence how they view the world and others. Reflect on the strengths and what they think is important. What you learned from their story can inform your interactions with them. DSC and teams can use these perspectives to support planning for transitions. They can also think ahead to what questions that their team members, children and families might have, and seek answers and reassurance ahead of time.

Let's look at some of these questions for each of those groups a little bit more. First, we're going to consider some of the questions that families might have when approaching transitions, including the transitions we have discussed, as well as potentially returning to in-person services. Let's start looking back at our RIA practices and how they support transitions. We want to put ourselves in other people's shoes to help us prepare for this transition. What might the families be wondering?

In our example on the screen, we have two possible thought bubbles from a parent on preparing for the transitions. As shown, they might wonder, has my child's IFSP team changed? Will I know them? Can I have frequent virtual interactions with the physical therapist? They also might wonder questions such as, how will I get to know my child's new teacher or specialist? Will my child have a good relationship with other children? Will my child connect with his teacher? How will child information and progress be shared? And will my child be seen and loved? Will he or she be safe? Think about your responses to these questions and others that might come up. How can they build your relationship and trust with this family member? How would you prepare for interactions with this family member using the connected conversations approach to support them? We encourage you to reflect individually on these questions, and jot some ideas down on a piece of paper or in our QA. And we'll take a couple moments for you to process that. What questions might your families have related to building relationships?

All right, let's continue now with sharing information. Let's take a look at questions that parents might have around sharing information. As shown on the screen, what additional health and safety protocols have been implemented? How will I share information to update his or her IEP? The parent might also be wondering, will I still be able to spend time in my child's classroom? Can we still attend socializations with other families? And if not, will there be other ways to connect with other families? Will my child be moving around to receive services? And if so, what safety protocols will be in place?

Notice that in the questions, the parent has allowed us an opportunity to share information about processes and protocols that your program has set in place. Reflect on how you would answer these questions in your role. Think about being a guide from the side that intentionally



listens and supports a parent's wonderings and concerns. I'll pause for just a moment for you to reflect and think about what other questions your families might have around sharing information.

All right, let's continue and think about what questions that families might have around ensuring alignment. Let's look at the thoughts of the family members shown on the screen. What home routines can support her goals? Will there be updates from teachers to the physical therapist and speech and language professionals? More questions might include, can I bring items from home that I know my child needs for comfort? I wonder if the teacher will sing the same song we do at home during mealtime? I wonder if I could share it with them? My daughter likes to have a conversation when I change her diaper. Will the teacher do that too? What home routines can support her goals? Will there be updates from the teachers to the PT and speech language professionals? Let's pause for another few seconds while you reflect on the questions that your families might have around ensuring alignment. Remembering that ensuring alignment is both about how you connect home and school, as well as how you prepare information and prepare families and children to know what to expect.

OK, we started with talking about what questions that families might have around relationships, information and alignment. Next, we'll imagine what questions that children might have before, during or after a transition around these same areas. As we show on the screen, some questions that children might have include, will I know friends? Will I have the same teacher? And will he or she be there every day? How do I know that is my teacher when I can't see her face? Additional questions might include, will my teacher talk to me like my daddy or mommy when he or she changes my diapers? Will I have new friends? Will my teacher rock me to sleep? Can I have my sleepy lamb? In a visit with a new specialist, who is this new person sitting with my family and me? Let's pause for a few seconds and consider, what other questions do you think children might have around a transition? And feel free to include those in the QA if you're comfortable doing so.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts. Let's move on and consider a child's questions around sharing information. They might ask themselves, what will happen when my dad brings me to school? Can my family visit me in the classroom? Will we still have story time or circle time? Some additional thoughts might include, how can I get more food if I'm hungry? Will my teacher tell me a story using my home language? Can my teacher play with me while changing my diaper? What's going to happen when I arrive? Who will be there? Who will help me move around when needed? Will my family stay with me when my teacher visits my home or we go to play with other children and families? Let's pause for a moment and reflect on what questions that your children might have around sharing information.

Finally, let's consider the questions that children might have related to ensuring alignment. Will my caregiver know which song I like to hear at naptime? Can I share toys with my friends? Can I bring my blankie for naptime? Will the teacher know the special trick my dad uses to help me fall asleep? What else might your children wonder about ensuring alignment? If you feel comfortable sharing, please do feel free to put those in the QA box.

The final group that we want to look at but of course no less important is the questions that staff might have around a transition through the lens of our building relationships, sharing information, and ensuring alignment. Let's take a moment to consider their thoughts, including those thoughts of DSCs, teams and staff. The staff might wonder, how will I reconnect with families? Or how can I combine virtual and in-person strategies to build relationships with my team and community partners? Also, how can I leverage supplemental strategies and engagement opportunities to enhance the learning experience for both children and families in my program? Can the parents virtually visit the classroom to observe services, routines, and activities? How can I build relationships with new DSC team members or educators in new programs if there's been a lot of turnover? Once again, let's take a few seconds and reflect either to yourself or in the QA. What other questions might staff have around building relationships during transitions?

Next, we'll explore the thoughts associated with staff sharing information. As you can see on the screen, how are you going to inform families about our health and safety protocols? Will home visits be virtual or in-person? They might also wonder, how are we going to inform families about any changes in IFSPs or IEPs? How can I schedule home visits so that I do not cross contaminate homes and reduce exposure? Have any processes changed in sharing information with community partners? Make sure to take a few moments and think about the questions that your staff might have related to sharing information.

Finally, we want to consider the thoughts or wonderings of staff around alignment. Consider these questions. What's been happening at home since we last saw your child in-person? Or how do I share progress and development? Additional thoughts might include, will I be partnered with the same colleagues I was working with before? As a DSC, how can I partner with LEAs or local education agencies to align disability services? Will my agency be sharing information between providers that have served our families during COVID times? How will I find out what community partners are receiving American Rescue Plan funds to enhance their services for families? And how can I help families connect with Parent Information Centers? And what resources can I share to support this developing connection?

As you prepare for transitions, consider all of the information that we have shared today, including high-quality strategies, methods for family engagement, and considering the perspectives and questions that families, staff and children might have. Thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate your participation.