Transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay

August 2023

This evidence summary supports AERO's <u>practice guide for transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay</u>. It describes the evidence base behind the guides, synthesising insights from available research to connect to policy and practice.

This evidence summary is derived from a systematic review conducted with our partners at Monash University in May 2022 using the Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009).

The importance of a sense of belonging

For all children, an effective transition to school is defined as establishing a sense of belonging at school for a child and their family (AERO, 2022; Allen et al., 2018). This sense of belonging at school may include a feeling that:

- their teacher and peers like, value and accept them
- the curriculum is interesting, appropriate and relevant
- they are capable of succeeding at school
- their cultural identity is welcome and valued and they can 'be themselves' (AERO, 2022).

Sense of belonging plays an important role in transitions as it is:

- one of the strongest predictors of positive development in young people (O'Connor et al., 2010)

- a powerful protective factor for mental health and wellbeing (for example, Allen et al., 2022)

- a core component of student success at school (Allen et al., 2018)

- the basis for secure attachments from the earliest years of life (Over, 2016)

- a central part of the Early Years Learning Framework (DOE, 2022).

Practices to support transitions

Most children experience challenges as part of the transition to school. For children with disability or developmental delay (referred to hereafter as 'children with disability'), there may be additional diverse needs that can be supported in individualised ways (Brown, 2015; Spencer-Brown, 2015; Reimagine Australia, 2022). A commitment to meeting these needs reflects a rights-based approach to disability, underpinned by the rights of all children to access education (United Nations 2006).

There is limited research available on specific practices that have proven effective in supporting transitions to school for children with disability. The practices described here and within the accompanying practice guide are based on the best evidence we have from our synthesis of research and AERO's consultations. However, more rigorous evidence that can provide high and very high confidence of the effectiveness of certain practices is needed (see AERO's Standards of evidence). Insights into promising practices can nevertheless be drawn from general research literature on disability and inclusion, as well as from AERO's consultations with educators, teachers, school and service leaders, and transitions experts. Two key practices are detailed below – **collaborative partnerships** and **child-centred approaches**.

Collaborative partnerships

Collaborative partnerships between ECEC services, schools, families and allied health professionals are an important enabler of successful transitions to school for children with disability (Foster, 2013). However, research often identifies collaboration and communication as a challenge for this group (Lucas, 2013; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Schischka et al., 2012). Research points to 3 collaborative partnership strategies that can support effective transitions for children with disability and their families.

1. Build a team around the child

Collaborative partnerships enhance child-centred approaches by building a team around each child that works together in an integrated way (Reimagine Australia, 2015). Available research on building a team around a child with disability shows that:

- Parent and family involvement is a key factor in effective transitions (Daley et al., 2011), so transition activities should aim to increase parental involvement (Pears et al., 2015). Many parents and family members believe their involvement and advocacy in the transition planning process are important and can make a significant difference in outcomes for their child (Spencer-Brown, 2015).

- Parents of children with disability also appreciate when schools work with other service providers to facilitate their child's transition (Siddiqua & Janus, 2017).

- The team around the child can include collaboration within organisations, such as between school leaders, and the child's classroom teacher (Starr et al., 2016).

- Collaboration models need to be designed around practical constraints in each context, such as available time; or proximity of schools, ECEC services and specialist services or professionals (Farmer, 2021; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011).

2. Sustain collaboration throughout the transition

Effective transitions are more likely when the timing and planning of every stage of the transition process reflects communication, collaboration and consistency between ECEC and school teams (Farmer, 2021; Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Research examined on sustained (not just one-off) collaboration around transitions shows that:

- Collaboration provides clarity during the transition planning process (Spencer-Brown, 2015). Involving professionals from different disciplines can help prepare teachers to support each child (Starr et al., 2016; Villeneuve et al., 2013).

- Effective collaboration begins well before the transition itself and may include teachers meeting the child and family before the child starts school (Reimagine Australia, 2022); or visiting and observing the child's early intervention setting or preschool (Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Schischka et al., 2012; Starr et al., 2016).

- Transition teams who regularly meet with families before and during transitions can share their knowledge of teaching strategies, equipment, school logistics, and staffing needs (Underwood et al., 2019). Families also can contribute regular insights about the child's strengths, challenges and needs (Villeneuve et al., 2013).

- A timeline and plan around transition are beneficial for parents and families (Cumming & Smedley, 2017). Families appreciate updates on their child's progress, to help them to advocate for and support their child's development and learning (Hutchinson et al., 2014). Regular updates also facilitate collaboration in evaluating progress, addressing concerns and planning next steps in the transition process (Walker et al., 2012).

- The transition process can become stressful if families perceive that professionals working with their child are not using initiative, collaborating well or sharing information (Siddiqua & Janus, 2017). Uncertainty about staffing or personality differences are other stressors to navigate throughout the process (Lucas, 2013).

3. Share clear, consistent, accessible information

Trust and open communication – both formal and informal – help strengthen relationships between families of children with disability, their teachers and educators, and allied health professionals (Lucas, 2013; Villeneuve et al., 2013). Reviewed research on communication during the transition to school shows that:

- Sharing information early and often helps families understand systems, processes, and resources available to help their child (Starr et al., 2016). Families appreciate individualised, proactive communication and support during their child's transition (Daley et al., 2011; Siddiqua & Janus, 2017; Spencer-Brown, 2015).

- Appointing a middle person at the school to facilitate an agreed method of communication between the classroom teacher and the family can help ensure families know who to contact for ongoing information (Villeneuve et al., 2013).

- Many types of information can support effective transitions when they are communicated clearly among the team around the child. These include:

  – policies and procedures related to education planning, and the roles and responsibilities of the different parties involved (Villeneuve et al., 2013)

  – administrative information, such as class lists and financial support, released to relevant parties in a timely way (Fontil et al., 2020)

  – training and recommendations to support the child's learning (Farmer, 2021)

  – goals for the child developed collaboratively between the family and their teachers and educators (Foster, 2013; Spencer-Brown, 2015)

  – knowledge that families may hold about parental rights that can allow them to advocate meaningfully for their children (Spencer-Brown, 2015)

  – clear timelines for communication, as unmet expectations for receiving information cause stress for families (Starr et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2012).

- Communication between the team around the child's transition needs to be adapted to specific needs, preferences and circumstances. These include:

  – accessibility considerations for families as well as children; such as descriptive tags for images if a parent has a visual impairment (Curle, 2015)

  – language and cultural differences, which may affect communication styles, understanding, and attitudes to disability (Starr et al., 2016)

  – different philosophies on disability or transitions, which may necessitate different approaches for different families (Dockett et al., 2011)

  – circumstances that may affect families' ability to engage in the transition process, such as location and financial resources (Dockett et al., 2011).

Child-centred approaches

A child-centred approach to transitions is built around the unique qualities, strengths, dispositions, interests and needs of each child (DEEWR, 2011). It focuses on children's voices and rights, and is tailored, individualised and embedded within everyday teaching practices (Cologon, 2019; DEEWR, 2011). During transitions, educators and teachers can come together to make decisions about what will work best for each child, based on their needs, and with consideration of their interests and perspectives. Research points to 3 key strategies for supporting child-centred approaches for children with disability.

1. Cultivate positive relationships with children

Developing warm, trusting relationships with children with disability is essential for supporting the transition process (Lucas, 2013; Starr et al., 2016) and fostering a sense of belonging in the new school environment (AERO, 2022). Research into the importance of these relationships shows that:

- family members of children with disability value educators and teachers who are caring, supportive, competent, relaxed, understanding, positive and proactive when supporting their child's transition to school (Siddiqua & Janus, 2017)

- families of children with disability may require the support these relationships provide as they navigate the demanding process of achieving a formal diagnosis for their child (Underwood et al., 2019).

2. Build on children's strengths

A child-centred approach to transitions for children with disability focuses on what each child can do, and what they need to succeed in their own way. It rejects normative understandings of school readiness (Reimagine Australia, 2022) and instead examines whether the school environment and practices are ready for each child. A strengths-based approach to transitions is supported by literature that shows:

- Every child has the right to experience an education that is free from discrimination and provided on an equal basis (United Nations, 2006). In Australia, each state and territory department of education has committed through its various policies and frameworks to delivering inclusive education for all students. Inclusive education involves recognising the unique capabilities of every child.

- Children with disability can play an active role in contributing to their own successful transition to school when supported to build and apply relevant capabilities. This includes early and ongoing opportunities to participate in real-life experiences, further develop daily life and self-care skills, ways to interact with adults and peers, and understand school rules and routines (Mayo-Holmes, 2021).

- Child-centred attitudes and behaviours, such as noticing, recognising and responding (DEEWR, 2011), can support children with disability to express their knowledge, capacities, needs and interests in diverse ways.

- Valuing the uniqueness of each child also involves understanding their family culture, dynamics, values and priorities (Spencer-Brown, 2015; Walker et al., 2012).

3. Provide responsive teaching and support

Child-centred approaches involve creating environments that are responsive to the needs and rights of all children (Cologon, 2013). Recognising the rights of children with disability requires a commitment to meeting the needs of each individual child with whatever resources are available (United Nations, 2006). Available research on individual support for children with disability during transitions to school shows that:

- Transitions to school are effective when educators and teachers are given specialist support and appropriate resources to adapt physical environments to work effectively with children with disability (Walker et al., 2012).

- Additional effort may be needed when access to specialised services is limited, or when children do not meet eligibility requirements; both are identified as barriers to personalised support by parents of children with disability (Mazer et al., 2017).

- Orientation activities are beneficial for children with disability and their families (Reimagine Australia, 2022). This may include family visits to schools and early school registration, or play-based interactive events at the school (Lucas, 2013).

- Parents and family members can assist educators and teachers to understand and implement strategies that will work best for their child (Spencer-Brown, 2015), and the activities and tools they use at home that may help their child to experience a successful transition (Reimagine Australia, 2022).

- Lack of knowledge among teachers and educators about effective teaching practices for children with disability can result in a lower likelihood of appropriate, personalised experiences being planned and undertaken (Tepe, 2012). Therefore, provision of professional learning about disability is essential for supporting an equitable learning experience (Starr et al., 2016).

Our practice guides provide more information about the practical strategies educators, teachers, school and service leaders can use to support transition to school for children with disability. These and a range of other resources are available for free from AERO's website.

Acknowledgement

References

Allen K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick D., Hattie J. & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: a meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review, 30*(1):1–34.

Allen K. A., Boyle, C., Kern, M. L., Wong, D. & Cahey, A. (2022). Helping those that don't fit: impacts, causes, and solutions for students who don't feel like they belong at school. Holliman A and Sheehy K (Eds.), *Overcoming adversity in education*, Routledge, London.

AERO (Australian Education Research Organisation Ltd.) (2022). *Measuring effective transitions to school.* AERO. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/measuring-effective-transitions-school

Brown, K. (2015). *Ecological predictors of school service usage ad early academic skills in kindergarten children with developmental disabilities and delays* [doctoral thesis], University of Oregon. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36693558.pdf

Cologon, K. (2013). *Inclusion in education: towards equality for students with disability*. Children with Disability Australia. https://apo.org.au/node/36129

Cologon, K. (2019). *Towards inclusive education: A necessary process of Transformation*. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. https://apo.org.au/node/265286

Curle, D.M. (2015). An examination of web-based information on the transition to school for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. *Deafness & Education International*, *17*(2):63–75.

Cumming, T.M. & Smedley, E.N. (2017). Life span transitions for a student with LD: mother–daughter perspectives. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *52*(3):176–81. doi.org/10.1177/1053451216644826

Daley. T., Munk, T. & Carlson, E. (2011). A national study of kindergarten transition practices for children with disabilities. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 26:409–419. doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2010.11.001

DEEWR (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations). (2011). *Child-centred curriculum planning*. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/search?s=child-centred

DOE (Australian Government Department of Education). (2022). *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia V2.0.* https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks

Dockett, S., Perry, B. & Kearney, E. (2011). Starting school with special needs: Issues for families with complex support needs as their children start school. *Exceptionality Education International*, 21:45–61.

Farmer, J.J. (2021). *Perspectives of transitioning students with disabilities from pre-k to kindergarten* [doctoral thesis], Walden University. https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations/10120

Fontil, L., Gittens, J., Beaudoin, E. & Sladeczek, I.E. (2020). Barriers to and facilitators of successful early school transitions for children with autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities: a systematic review. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *50*(6):1866–1881.

Foster, K. (2013) *Self-reported early intervention transition practices of special education directors in Southwestern Pennsylvania: implications for policy and practice* [doctoral thesis]. University of Pittsburgh. http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/20437/1/KATHLEEN_FOSTER_ETD.pdf

Hutchinson, N. L., Pyle, A., Villeneuve, M., Dods, J., Dalton, C. & Minnes, P. (2014). Understanding parent advocacy during the transition to school of children with developmental disabilities: three Canadian cases. *Early Years*, *34*(4):348–363.

Lillvist, A. & Wilder, J. (2017). Valued and performed or not? Teachers' ratings of transition activities for young children with learning disability. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *32*(3):422–436.

Lucas, J.B. (2013). *The receiving special educators' perception of the transition process implemented for students with disabilities exiting preschool and entering kindergarten a multiple-case study* [doctoral thesis], George Washington University. https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/etd/m039k515r

Mazer, B., Dion, K. & Moryoussef, A. (2017). Utilisation and satisfaction with rehabilitation services in children with primary language impairment transitioning to school: parents' perspective. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, *64*(1), 45–56.

Mayo-Holmes, S. (2021). *A qualitative descriptive study on teacher perceptions of school-readiness for preschool students with learning disabilities* [doctoral thesis] Grand Canyon University. https://www.proquest.com/openview/31752d1d4b9f77c6e4c0ccd6d90297bb/

Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J. & Altman, D.G. (2009). Preferred reporting Items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *PLoS Medicine 6*(7), e1000097.

O'Connor, M., Sanson, A., Hawkins, M. T., Letcher, P., Toumbourou, J. W., Smart, D., Vassaollo, S. & Olsson, C.A. (2010). Predictors of positive development in emerging Adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *40*(7):860–874.

Over, H. (2016). The origins of belonging: social motivations in infants and young children. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B (Biological Sciences)*, *371*(1686):1–8. doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2015.0072

Quintero, N. & McIntyre, L. L. (2011). Kindergarten transition preparation: a comparison of teacher and parent practices for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *38*(6):411–420. doi.org/10.1007/s10643-010-0427-8

Pears, K. C., Kim, H. K., Healey, C. V., Yoerger, K. & Fisher, P.A. (2015). Improving child self-regulation and parenting in families of pre-kindergarten children with developmental disabilities and behavioural difficulties. *Prevention Science*, *16*(2):222–232. doi.org/10.1007/s11121-014-0482-2

Reimagine Australia. (2015). *National guidelines: Best practice in early childhood intervention.* Reimagine Australia. https://www.eciavic.org.au/documents/item/1419

Reimagine Australia. (2022). *Ready. Set. School!* Reimagine Australia. https://reimagine.org.au/practitioner/transition-to-school/

Schischka, J., Rawlinson, C. & Hamilton, R. (2012). Factors affecting the transition to school for young children with disabilities. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *37*(4):15–23. doi.org/10.1177/183693911203700403

Siddiqua, A. & Janus, M. (2017). Experiences of parents of children with special needs at school entry: a mixed method approach. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, *43*(4):566–576. doi.org/10.1111/cch.12443

Spencer-Brown, A. (2015). Parental expectations and perspectives as they relate to their children with special education needs (SEN) during transition from early intervention/preschool to kindergarten [doctoral thesis], Bradman University, accessed 16 May 2022.

Starr, E. M., Martini, T. S. & Kuo, B. C. H. (2016). Transition to kindergarten for children with autism spectrum disorder: a focus group study with ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and early intervention service providers. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *31*(2):115–128. doi.org/10.1177/1088357614532497

Tepe, J. H. (2012). *The transition from prekindergarten to kindergarten for children with and without disabilities: comparing engagement and value ratings of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers in transition-to-kindergarten activities* [doctoral thesis], University of Pittsburgh. http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/13912/1/Jennifer_Tepe_Dissertation.pdf

Underwood, K., Frankel, E., Parekh, G. & Janus, M. (2019). Transitioning work of families: Understanding trans-institutional power in early childhood programs and services. *Exceptionality Education International*, *29*(3).

United Nations (2006) Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRDP). https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html

Villeneuve, M. A., Chatenoud, C., Hutchinson, N. L., Minnes, P., Perry, A., Dionne, C., Frankel, E. B., Isaacs, B., Loh, A., Versnel, J. & Weiss, J. A. (2013). The experience of parents as their children with developmental disabilities transition from early intervention to kindergarten. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 36:4–43.

Walker, S., Dunbar, S., Meldrum, K., Whiteford, C., Carrington, S., Hand, K., Berthelsen D. & Nicholson, J. (2012). The transition to school of children with developmental disabilities: views of parents and teachers. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *37*(3):22–29. doi.org/10.1177/183693911203700304