

Preparing for Transition from Early Intervention to an Individualized Education Program

Celebrate Change

Your child's third birthday is six months away, and you have been told that your family will be doing "transition planning" soon because the early intervention program ends at age three. This means your child may be moving from an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) to an Individualized Education Program (IEP). If your IEP team determines your child does not qualify for special education services there can be a discussion regarding community-based services that may be available to you and your child. Understandably, you are anxious, but want to prepare your child and your family ahead of time. After all, transition planning can bring great rewards for you, your child, and the professionals that work with you. Your child can learn to adjust to new people, programs, or settings; and professionals can gain insight into your child and the materials, equipment, and techniques that will help your child most. You can learn new skills and strategies that may help with future transitions.

Moving From "Family Focus" to a "Child Focus"

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), all children who qualify may receive special education services. Up to age 3, children are covered by Part C of IDEA. Part C focuses on helping the family meet the developmental needs of their child, such as learning to sit up, walk, or talk. These services are called "early intervention services." Typically provided in natural

environments, such as the child's home or child-care setting, these services and outcomes for the child and family are defined in an IFSP.

At age 3, supports and services change as eligible children move from Part C to Part B of IDEA. Preschool services are covered in Section 619 of Part B; services that your child is eligible for from kindergarten until high school graduation or age 21 are addressed in the rest of Part B. The IFSP is replaced by an IEP (Individualized Education Program). This important document contains goals and objectives to address the child's unique needs as he or she learns the skills needed to prepare for kindergarten. As much as possible, Part B services are to be provided in the least restrictive environment. That means that your child should be alongside typically developing peers in settings such as preschool, child care, or Head start programs if the team agrees this is the appropriate setting.

In addition, services and supports change as your child moves from Part C to Part B. Members of the team who helped you develop the outcomes specified in the IFSP may be different from those who will help to develop your child's IEP. Instead of working with a service coordinator, you will work with an IEP case manager.

Knowing What to Expect at a Transition Meeting

At least three months before your child's third birthday, your education team will call one or more

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transition meetings to discuss your child's needs and early childhood special education program options. This meeting could be combined with a regularly scheduled IFSP meeting. You and the team will address a variety of topics, such as goals, timelines, and team members' responsibilities; your concerns; the need for any further evaluations to determine eligibility for Part B preschool services; and your special education due process legal rights. In addition, you may want to discuss:

- Differences between early intervention and special education preschool services.
- Options for where your child may receive early childhood special education services, such as community preschool, child care, Head Start, or pre-kindergarten.
- Information such as student-to-adult ratio, length of day, and family involvement.
- How special education services will be provided in the preschool program you select.
- Development of a new IEP for special education services or an Individual Interagency Intervention Plan (IIIP) if your child lives in Mississippi and also receives county or health services.
- Ways to help professionals understand the unique strengths and needs of your child.
- Transportation to the new program.
- Strategies to make the process a positive one for your child.

Many decisions are made during the transition meetings. Feel free to ask questions then or anytime during the year. You might, for example, want to know:

- When will my child make the transition to a new program?
- Who will arrange for me to visit the proposed program?
- Who is my contact person if I have other questions?

Preparing Your Family and Child

Making transition decisions with your team is just the first step. The next step is to prepare your family and child for the new teachers, children, schedules, routines, classroom activities, and expectations. To help make the transition easier, try these tips:

- Plan ahead. Allow enough time to make decisions.
- Talk with other families about what the process was like for them.
- Learn how to advocate for your child.
- Make sure your child's medical, educational, and assessment records are up to date.

Be sure to include your child in the preparations. Knowing what to expect can help any child feel more confident going into a new situation. You might want to:

- Talk to your child about going to a new program and visit that setting.
- Read books about going to preschool.
- Provide opportunities for your child to play with other children.
- Encourage your child to communicate with others and ask for help when needed.