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Successful Transitions Between Programs

by Maurice Belote

For educators, transitions that students make from program to program happen so frequently that we can forget the significance of these events to children and their families. For families, transitions can be a time of uncertainty, fear, and doubt about new programs; this is particularly true of transitions from home-based early intervention programs to center-based preschools and from pre-school to elementary school. The following represents some strategies that might help students, their families and educational teams during transitions between educational programs.

Choose a specific date for the transition and stick to it. This may seem like a minor point but consider the following example. A student is slated to move to a new program on a specific date, but two weeks before the date, a vacancy opens in the new program so the student is unexpectedly moved two weeks early. This sudden and unexpected move might get in the way of all the planned transition activities on the part of both the school staff and the student's family. In addition, the student might not have the opportunity for the farewells with teachers and classmates. We must remember that without a well-planned transition to a new program— such as the case in which a student's bus simply drops them off at a new school one morning—the lack of access to information and the lack of control are sure to create a level of passivity in the student that will hinder his or her success in the future.

Collect all personal materials—including communication systems—and make sure they move with the student. Some equipment the student uses may not be able to be moved to a new program; there may be issues of ownership among educational agencies. But materials such as a communication system specifically developed for a student must move with the student if we are to give the student every chance to succeed in their new setting. It's surprising how often personal belongings of students get left behind during moves: pictures, books, puzzles, CDs, etc.

Provide the new program with as much useful documentation as possible. The new staff is sure to appreciate any documentation that might assist them to better meet the needs of the student who is new to their program. This might include a [personal communication dictionary](#), a [Personal Passport](#), videos of the student in various settings, etc. This information is likely to be much more useful than written reports taken from the student's school records.

Familiarize the student with the new setting. If possible, allow the student a few opportunities to visit the new program prior to the transition. Of course, these opportunities are essential when a student needs support and time to orient to the new environment, learn new routes, etc., often under the direction of an Orientation and Mobility Specialist. All students, however, are likely to benefit from these early visits which are sure to take away much of the mystery and fear of the pending move.

Establish time for the sending and receiving teams to meet. Whenever possible, it makes sense to provide two opportunities for the two teams to meet. The first meeting should occur prior to the move so that the sending program can provide as much information about the student to the receiving team, especially information that might not be in the child's file, e.g., personal communication dictionary, home-to-school log, etc. The second opportunity to meet should occur after the student has been in the new program for a short period of time. This is when the most questions arise—once new program staff has a chance to get to know the student and their idiosyncrasies.

Consistency of related services specialists and staff and/or one-on-one assistant. Whether a student is moving to a new school or merely changing rooms within a school, it might be beneficial if the student's related services specialists or staff, e.g., vision specialist, physical therapist, orientation and mobility specialist, etc. can follow the child to her or his new program. This will lessen the magnitude of the change; the location and classroom teacher might be new, for example, but at least some of the other familiar staff remains constant and this may make for a much smoother transition. We want to capitalize on the variables we have some control over, such as itinerants and one-on-one aides, since we have much less control over other variables such as buildings and teachers' classroom assignments.

Set clear and high expectations from the start. Resist the temptation to wait a few days to get to know new students before clear and high expectations are identified and set. Days turn into weeks and weeks into months, and suddenly the realization hits that time truly is fleeting.

Change is stressful. A child may exhibit many reactions to a change as monumental as a transition to a new program, especially if the child had been in the former program for a long time. Some students may be on their best behavior and provide staff with what's been called a honeymoon period, while others might be at their most obstinate and grumpiest worst. Whether a child exhibits some of these reactions or seems to show no reaction at all to the move, we have to remember that the stress of change will manifest itself one way or another—that's for sure.

Change is good. Change, as stressful and disruptive as it can be, can also be a positive force in many ways. It is said that when one door closes, another opens, and this open door can be the pathway to new experiences, relationships, and possibilities. The student who has been in a comfortable special day class preschool for three years might discover a world rich with new activities and language models in an inclusive kindergarten. The student who has been in a comfortable high school class might discover the excitement of job training and community recreation found in a transition program.

Schedule visits to the former program. Whenever possible, it is a great idea to have the student visit their former program. Among students in general education, think about how often they come back to visit former programs and teachers to relish in their own growth and maturation and to re-live the memories and good feelings of days gone by. For students who are deafblind, they may not have any idea what happens to former teachers, staff members and classmates when they transition to a new program. It may seem, to the child who is deafblind, that these former friends and teachers just vanished off of the end of the earth. In addition, the student who is deafblind has probably developed closer relationships with program staff than other students might, and it will help the student deal with feelings of loss if they can visit occasionally and keep these special relationships alive.