



The Transition Process for Young Children with Disabilities: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the number and types of programs available for young children has increased. As a result, the transition of young children with disabilities has become more complex, resulting in an increasing need for improved transition process for both children and their families. The literature in early childhood transition contains evidence of the organizational complexities and the resulting problems experienced by children, families, and professionals who provide services. Recent research in transition has provided valuable information about the individual variables that impact this complex transition process. Much of this research has focused on the transition of children (with and without disabilities) between and among agencies. Given some of the distinguishing characteristics of the transition process for young children with disabilities and their families, there is a need for a conceptual model that will provide guidance for new research, provide an organizational framework to integrate the current literature in transition, and begin to lay a foundation for improving transitions and their outcomes. This paper presents a conceptual model that describes how the complex interactions of multiple factors interact to influence the transition process for young children with disabilities during the early childhood years. This ecological model is based on the premise that the ultimate goal of a successful transition process is the child's entry and success in the primary school program.

The Transition Process for Young Children with Disabilities: A Conceptual Framework

Young children with disabilities and their families experience many types of transitions. According to Kagan (1992) these transitions occur horizontally, changes in programs across a day or week, and vertically, changes in programs across time or as children experience a need for different or expanded services. Although both types of transition experiences are important for young children with disabilities and their families, the proposed conceptual model focuses on vertical transitions that occur at regulated points for young children with disabilities, specifically the transition experiences from early intervention to preschool and from preschool programs to kindergarten.

At age three, children with disabilities and their families experience transition when they move from early intervention to preschool special education services, sometimes changing providers, settings, and approach to intervention. At this time, they also may be participating in other early childhood programs such as Head Start or child care. During the fifth year of life, a child with a disability typically transitions to school most commonly to a kindergarten program.

During the first five years of life, the number and complexity of transitions experienced by young children with disabilities and their families are numerous and complex. These mandated transition experiences have been documented to be stressful, inefficient, and problematic for children with disabilities, their families, and agencies engaged in the transition process (Kochanek et al., 1997).

Moving from program to program and from provider to provider requires adjustments for both the child and family. Program models, philosophy, and staffing patterns often vary significantly across agencies serving infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners. As transition points are encountered, all families may have concerns about finding appropriate services, maintaining continuity of services, and meeting the changing needs of their child and family (Hanline, 1988). However, the stress felt at transition periods is exacerbated for families of young children with disabilities (Fowler, Chandler, Johnson, & Stells, 1988; Karr-Jelinek, 1994).

An increasing need for improved transitions for young children with disabilities and their families has emerged in the past two decades. Three major factors contribute to this need. First, the enactment of Public Law 99-457 expanded opportunities for young children and their families to receive early intervention and preschool special education services. As a result of this law, the numbers of young children receiving services prior to age five has increased dramatically from approximately 32,693 infants and toddlers and 265,000 3- to 5-year olds in 1985 to 267,923 infants and toddlers and 647,000 3 to 5-year-olds in 2001 (OSEP Report to Congress, 1988; 2004). The federal law provided the impetus and administrative infrastructure to implement needed services; however, this infrastructure included a division in the administration of the federal program across two age ranges: infants and toddlers (birth to

age three) and preschool (three- and four-year-olds). Although the preschool program is housed within state departments of education, states may choose a lead agency for the infant and toddler program and are given flexibility in the design of the service delivery models used across programs. This has resulted in great variability between the early intervention and preschool service delivery systems, not only across states, but often within states as well (Harbin, McWilliam, & Gallagher, 2000).

Second, while the number of programs for young children with disabilities has increased, there also has been a general proliferation of public programs for at risk and typically developing young children. Demographics of today's families have changed, resulting in a higher need for out-of-home care for both single and dual parent families with young children (Children's Defense Fund, 2003). Moreover, the need for early childhood programs and the understanding of the importance for, and benefits from, early childhood services on later school success also has become a catalyst for expansion of early care and education programs at the state and federal levels; examples include the expansion of Head Start programs, the establishment of Early Head Start (U. S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2001; 2002) and the increase of state-funded public pre-kindergarten programs across the country (Blank, Schulman & Ewen, 1999).

Although many policy and demographic factors have converged to influence the transitions experienced by young children with disabilities and their families, it is the complexity, divergence, and episodic nature of the early care and education system in the United States that necessitate quality transition planning.

As the field of early childhood (including early intervention and preschool special education) has responded to the increasing need for early childhood services at both the state and federal level, programs have been developed across numerous agencies for a variety of purposes. Such programs include child care services, Title 1, Head Start, early intervention, Even Start, and public preschool, all of which are housed and administered through separate organizations and initiatives (Harbin, Rous, & McLean, 2005). As a result, the funding streams, regulatory requirements, administration, program guidelines and even research foci have often been disparate and sometimes even contradictory. This lack of continuity among programs, coupled with an absence of systems designed to support and facilitate the transition process often make the transition for children and families difficult (Love et al., 1992).

The literature in early childhood transition contains evidence of the organizational complexities and the resulting problems experienced by families, children and professionals who provide services. For example, Entwisle & Alexander (1998) found that a child's preschool experience and initial transition to school had a direct impact on the child's later success, both academically and socially. Children who experience poor transitions may be more vulnerable to mental health and adjustment problems, have less academic success, and have more difficulty with social relationships with their peers. These results are potentially compounded when children have been diagnosed with disabilities and are in need of special services.

Recent research in transition has provided valuable information about the individual variables that impact the transition process

for children, families and professionals. Much of this research has focused on the transition of children (with and without disabilities) between and among agencies. In response to the increase in the number and types of early childhood programs and the fragmentation of the early childhood system, much of the research in transition has shifted to a more ecological perspective underscoring the inherent complexity in understanding and effecting the early care and education context in the U.S. (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998).

Although transitions are unique experiences for all young children and families, the transition experiences of young children with disabilities can pose significant challenges for the child, families and professionals. These challenges result from several distinguishing characteristics of the service systems for young children with disabilities. For example, the transition process for young children with disabilities is more regulated than the transition process for typically developing children participating in early childhood programs. Specific regulations are provided regarding when and how transition planning should occur. This includes specific expectations related to data collection and documentation of transition experiences by local providers and state agencies. In addition, young children with disabilities, specifically those with significant disabilities, often have limited access to high quality, inclusive early childhood programs. Therefore, transition planning must take into consideration not only what needs to happen to prepare the child and family for the transition process, but also whether or not there are appropriate environments to which the child will transition. Given some of the distinguishing characteristics of the transition process for young children with disabilities and their families,

there is a need for a conceptual model that will provide guidance for new research, provide an organizational framework to integrate the current literature in transition, and begin to lay a foundation for improving transitions and subsequent child outcomes.

A Comprehensive Transition Conceptual Model

The conceptual model presented in this paper is based on the research literature, a systemic ecological orientation, and prior theoretical work on transition. The conceptual model is proposed to describe how the complex interactions of multiple systems interact to influence the transition process. In addition, the model delineates key interagency variables that are posited to impact the preparation and adjustment of young children with disabilities as they move between and among programs. This model draws from two complementary theoretical frameworks, bioecological theory and organizational systems theory, which provide a theoretical lens to understand the complexity involved in the transition experiences of young children with disabilities and their families.

The first theoretical framework used to undergird this model is bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bioecological theory builds on earlier ecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986); emphasizing the person-place-context understanding of human development. This model focuses on understanding development and child outcomes as an interaction between the developing child, his/her environmental context, and the timing of the particular process being examined. Within this

ecological model, the importance of microsystem influences on child development, such as family and school/program, are highlighted as well as broader contextual influences. This proposed model of transition focuses on the dynamic interplay between systems, whereby the relationships and processes that occur among families and multiple programs intersect to influence the experiences of children with disabilities and their families in the next environment.

Organizational theory encompasses many different theoretical frameworks that focus on explaining and predicting the ways in which organizations and people behave. These frameworks include organizational structure, culture, systems and change (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2004). In the area of education, organizational systems theory has been used extensively to help understand complex organizations and systems, with a focus on understanding the interconnectedness between systems. Within a systems theory approach, Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, and Richert (1997) present a model that supports a shift from a hierarchical and bureaucratic way of thinking about organizations to a more ecological approach. The proposed model for transition includes this ecological approach to systems thinking and includes specific attention to relationships, networks and partnerships. These elements are posited to influence practices and policies at multiple policy levels which in turn influence the experiences of young children with disabilities and their families *as they move through the early care and education system*.

The model is based on the premise that the ultimate goal of a successful transition process is the child's success in the

next environment, which in the case of a three year old child with disabilities is the preschool program and for a five year old is the primary school program. The model is depicted at two distinct levels. The first model, which reflects the traditional ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), delineates specific elements within the ecological context that are proposed to particularly influence the transition experiences of young children with disabilities and their families. In particular, factors related to individual providers, individual programs, local service systems, and state systems. This depiction allows for a specification of the more distal provider, community, and state factors that are proposed to be operating and influencing the transition process.

Figure 1.
Ecological Contextual Factors

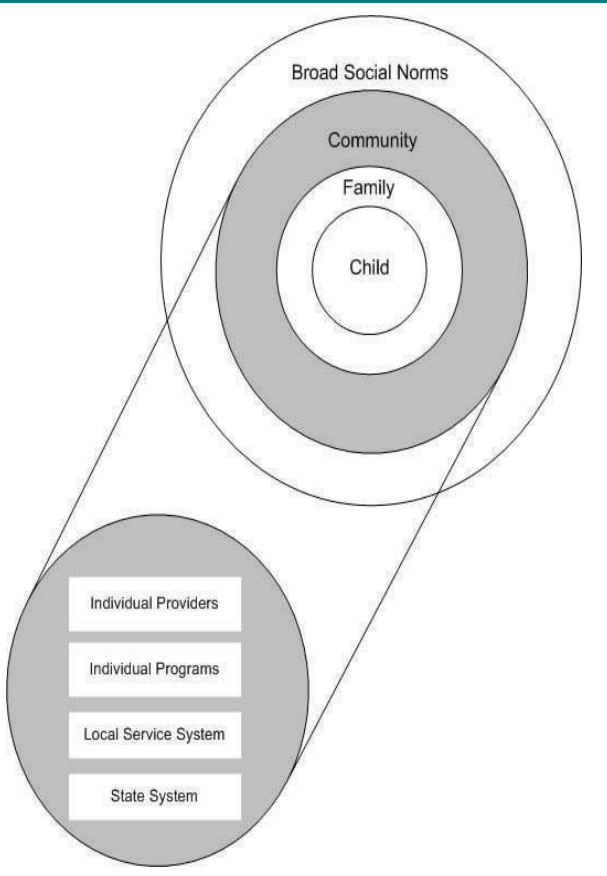
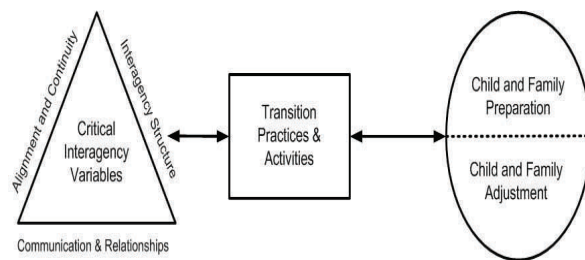


Figure 2. Transition Process



The second level of the model illustrates the specific program and community factors that most heavily influence the transition process and the immediate outcomes of child and family preparation and adjustment. We present a more detailed description of each of the major components of the model below.

Ecological Contextual Factors

The transition model provides a means to begin to understand the interplay between child and family factors with agency and community factors specifically as they relate to the transition process. The following section describes some of the key aspects of the ecological framework in relationship to the transition process.

Child Factors

The child is at the center of the transition process during the early childhood years. Characteristics of the child are critical to a high quality transition process at the individual child level, as well as at the community systems level. The bioecological model highlights the importance of genetic factors, as well as environmental factors, in understanding the trajectory of a child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

These individual child factors should in-

form the transition practices of all children (Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999). In the case of children with disabilities, distinctive characteristics of the child that need to be considered for transition include nature and type of disability as well as child age. Individualized planning for young children with disabilities is a central element of supporting effective transition practices (Rosenkoetter, Whaley, Hains, & Pierce, 2001). In the complex case of transition specifically, the child's date of birth has a direct impact on when the transition process occurs. For example, federal regulations that guide implementation of early intervention services mandate that children must transition out of early intervention at age three, unless the state has developed specific policies to allow the child to remain in early intervention services (IDEA, 2004).

Family Factors

Families who participate in early intervention and preschool special education services represent a diverse population. This diversity includes several dimensions that influence the family's ability to participate in, and receive support during the transition process. Professionals who facilitate the transition process must consider the resources and needs of families, and recognize that transitions do not occur in isolation from the social supports on which families normally rely (Hanline, 1993). Family culture, income and resources, and the family composition (e.g., foster families, single parents) influences the ways in which the family makes decisions and significantly enhances or diminishes their participation in the educational system (Moles, 1993). In addition, families hold different expectations and attitudes about early childhood programs and

transition to kindergarten specifically (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000).

Other factors that may affect the transition process include the family's experiences, including their own parenting experiences and their previous as well as current experiences with the education system (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). These experiences can influence the expectations that the family has for their child, as well as the nature of their involvement and their interactions with the child. Other factors that families bring to the transition process include: family concerns and priorities, knowledge of rights and service options, ability to advocate, supports from family and friends, and the ability to adapt to change.

Community Factors

From an ecological perspective, children, families, and service providers are directly supported, both economically and socially, by the communities in which they live. Within this context, there are several broader community factors that can potentially affect the transition services available to families and children (Harbin, et al., 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The *resources* available for early childhood programs can be directly influenced by the *economic status* of the community (Edwards, 1980; Van Horn & Van Meter, 1977), the *political will* within the community (Harbin & Shaw, 1998; Van Horn & Van Meter, 1977), and the value the community places on the development of young children (Harbin, McWilliam & Gallagher, 2000). Additional demographic factors, such as geographic status (e.g., urban, rural), level of violence, and the job market also should be considered.

Within the community, there are four specific levels of variables that specifically influence the transition process for young children and families: provider, program, service system and state.

Provider factors refers to the providers who work directly with the child and family and who have a great deal of responsibility for facilitating the transition process. Since professionals in early childhood have a wide range of educational backgrounds and represent many disciplines (e.g., PT, OT, early childhood special educator), the education, training, and experience of these providers, including their professional discipline must be considered as potential contributing factors to the nature and success of the transition process (Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994). Another important factor is the provider's knowledge of the skills needed by the child in the next environment. Additional training related to transition can play a role in their ability to support the transition process and can help shape their overall philosophy for service delivery and transition planning (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn, 1990). Personal characteristics such as interpersonal skills, ability to work well with adults and children, and temperament must be considered, given the key role of communication and the importance of relationships in the transition process.

Individual program factors refers to the diverse and divergent programs that serve young children, which combine with the importance of continuity in transition planning to make the overall design of programs a consideration in transition planning, specifically related to quality and overall philosophy. The transition process is greatly influenced by the community of learners and cli-

mate for learning (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000). This includes not only attention to specific instructional techniques used to facilitate learning, but also attention to the environments in which these services are offered. The administrative structure of the program also plays a key role in the transition process, specifically the support and philosophy of the leadership and management, the program policies and procedures, and the funding structure, specifically as it relates to supporting staff in their participation in quality transition practices (Harbin & Salisbury, 2000; Salisbury, Palombaro, & Hollowood, 1993). Processes which support shared leadership, decision making and program evaluation (Jang & Mangione, 1994) and transition procedures that identify tasks, timelines, and responsibilities help staff plan for transition, while reducing traditional barriers to planning and collaboration, such as disagreement about policy implementation and responsibilities, duplication of services, and lack of knowledge of other parts of the system (Rice & O'Brien, 1990).

Local service system factors refer to the current early childhood service delivery system, which includes numerous agencies and organizations within a community. These services and supports are unique to each community and are based on community priorities, needs, and resources. Therefore, there are various service system factors that can positively or negatively impact the individual transition process for children, families and providers (Rous, Schuster & Hemmeter, 1994). The overall system model in place within the community, and the various programs models and array of options available to families must be considered as having potential

implications for the transition process (Harbin, et al., 2000). The need for collaboration across individual agencies within a community also has been identified as having an impact on transition (Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1999). Therefore, interagency linkages and interagency leadership (e.g., local interagency committees), as well as the resourcefulness of the community and community leaders should be considered when exploring transition services and supports (Harbin, et al., 2000; Salisbury, et al., 1993).

Finally, *state factors* refers to the fact that state agencies are charged with general oversight and support for programs providing services to young children and families. The state plays a major role in the design of the service delivery model at the local level (Harbin, et al., 2000; Harbin et al., 2004). Leadership within the state can inhibit or facilitate the quality of services across the state and can provide the appropriate infrastructure to support quality practices, including state policy, technical assistance, and financial support (Harbin et al., 2004). As with the local level, the nature of communication and relationships across agencies at the state level can have an impact on the relationships among agencies at the local level. The state's overall commitment to young children and families and quality services also is a consideration (Harbin et al., 2000).

The Transition Process

The second level of the conceptual model provides specific information on the transition process, which is defined as the interaction among critical interagency variables, transition practices

and activities and immediate outcomes related to child and family preparation and adjustment. The following describes the essential elements of these factors as they relate to the transition experiences of young children with disabilities and their families.

Critical Interagency Variables

Transition is an interagency process that involves multiple parties including families and various agencies. The proposed model identifies three critical variables that influence the quality and nature of the transition process. The first critical variable, communication and relationships, is grounded in the belief that the foundation of service delivery is the communication and relationships between people (Harbin et al., 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997; Thurman, 1997). Successful transitions in the early childhood years reflect processes that involve communication between and relationships among the child, family, service providers, and agencies within the community (Pianta et al., 1999).

The second critical variable is a supportive interagency infrastructure, which must be in place to allow for relationship building and communication between and among agencies and families (Harbin et al., 2004; Harbin et al., 2000; Harbin & Salisbury, 2000; Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn, 1990; Rous et al., 1999; Rous et al., 1994; Hanline, 1993). This infrastructure includes transition policies that are developed within and across programs that provide services, interagency agreements that outline specific roles and responsibilities for activities related to transition planning, and the formal and informal mechanisms that provide support for cross agency communication

and coordination (e.g., interagency councils).

The third critical variable is the alignment of programs and continuity of the service delivery system. The various providers of services in early childhood operate within divergent funding sources, administration, policies, curriculum and philosophies. Although programs do not have to be consistent across these dimensions for transition to be effective, an effective transition program supports continuity between programs that families and children move between and among. For example, attention to the types of learning experiences, the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum, and ensuring appropriate curriculum content and approaches, are integral to the curriculum design in quality early childhood programs (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Therefore, a portion of transition planning success is based on continuity of the curriculum (Repetto & Correa, 1996).

Research suggests, the greater the continuity across programs, curricula, and personnel, the greater the likelihood for successful transition (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). However, these discontinuities are numerous and can act as significant barriers to successful transition. These may include: a poor match of curriculum (more academic at kindergarten than preschool), a more complex social environment in the next environment, less opportunity for parental involvement and support (particularly at the transition to kindergarten), less connections for and with families, and less time with the teacher (Pianta, Cox, Taylor & Early, 1999). In addition, the alignment of therapeutic, health, and social services is of paramount importance as well. This discontinuity between the de-

livery and/or payment for therapy, health, and social services at transition (both at 3 year and at 5 years) is often cited as a powerful barrier to successful transitions. Program administrators and staff can further facilitate the transition process and ensure program continuity by providing developmentally appropriate curriculum for all age levels in all educational settings and (Glicksman & Hills, 1981; AYCF, 1987) and by engaging in strategies such as joint training and cross program visits so that professionals can exchange information about expectations and experiences for children so that these can be made more consistent (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Transition Practices and Activities

There are groups of practices and activities that have been linked to successful and smooth transitions. These transition practices and activities typically address child, family, staff, program, and community specific activities. For example, children are prepared for transition through participating in a variety of activities that allow them to learn about a new environment and through specific and intentional instruction/ intervention to help them acquire the behaviors necessary to be successful in the next environment. Families and professionals share with children the expectation of the next environment. Families are supported through the transition process through frequent collaboration and communication with professionals to individualize transition planning and practices. A variety of practices must be offered and flexibly designed to meet the individual needs of families (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Cross-program visits for families, staff, and children also play a vital role in helping build relationships, understanding, and knowl-

edge across programs (Rous et al., 1994).

Although many practices enhance the transition process, other practices have been shown to inhibit or negatively affect the transition process, resulting in transitions that are frustrating and problematic (Harbin, et al., 2000; Pianta & Cox, 1999). For example, in a recent national survey, kindergarten teachers indicated several barriers to successful transition planning. Some of these included not receiving their kindergarten roles until school started, no administrative support or funds to make visits to kindergarteners and their families during the summer, and little, if any, opportunity to develop transition plans or engage in transition planning (Pianta et al., 1999).

Within the proposed conceptual framework, transition outcomes are defined as the level at which child and families are prepared for and adjust to the transition into a new environment. The following describes the essential elements of the preparation and adjustment process as they relate to the transition experiences of young children with disabilities and their families.

Child and Family Preparation

The nature of the transition process (e.g. practices and activities) influences the effects of the critical variables on the preparation of the child and the family for the transition process. As children and families participate in the transition process, a number of transition activities can be implemented that support preparation for the transfer to new settings and/or services. Preparation of children and involvement of families in the transition process has been linked with more successful transition outcomes (AYCF,

1987; Glicksman & Hills, 1981; Rous et al., 1999). As it relates to child preparation, the transition literature is replete with information on which specific skills should be targeted in an effort to ease the transition into preschool, kindergarten, and primary programs. These behaviors are typically categorized as a) social and classroom conduct, b) communication, c) task-related, and d) self-help (Chandler, 1993). In addition skills and dispositions related to independence (i.e., communication with others), self-help skills, to follow varied directions, and to use materials appropriately may also be influential (Gamel-McCormick & Rous, 2000; Hemmeter & Rous, 1997; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook & Wong, 1995; Rule, Fiechel & Innocenti, 1990). For children with special needs, teachers should specifically focus on child preparation to maximize prosocial and age-appropriate social skills and responsiveness to various instructional styles and different environmental structures (Katims & Pierce, 1995).

Families should be involved early and often in the transition planning process. To support families' preparation, they must be seen as partners and primary decision makers in their children's care and education (Mangione & Speth, 1998), and classroom staff and interventionists should develop reciprocal relationships with parents (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). In addition, supporting the parents' or caregivers' involvement in the child's learning and development (e.g. reading to their child, setting routines, using a positive approach to discipline, and increasing their child's language skills) is linked to smoother transitions and their outcomes (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Transition preparation involves provid-

ing information and activities that are idiosyncratic and based on family needs (Chandler, 1993). Relationships with family members must be nurtured and respected as critical resources before, during, and after transition; and family strengths must be a focus of the transition practices (Pianta, et al., 1999)

Child and Family Adjustment

The type of preparation for the transition process described above can affect the nature of the adjustment of children and families. Children may be faced with very different environments and often have significant difficulties adjusting to new programs and activities (Kakvoulis, 1994). The research literature has provided significant data to suggest that a child's skill level in communication, engagement, and behavior heavily influences the ability to successfully transition and adjust to new environments (e.g., Katims & Pierce, 1995; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995; Gamel-McCormick & Rous, 2000). Therefore, the model acknowledges that the child's adjustment is the most proximal influence to child outcomes. However, the family's adjustment is believed to influence this important relationship between child adjustment and outcomes after transition. Families' access to knowledge and support during the transition process, as well as their ability to advocate for their child's specific needs during transition planning have been linked with more positive results (e.g., Meier & Schafran, 1999; Byrd, Stephens, Dyk, Perry, & Rous, 1991; Wheeler, Reetz & Wheeler, 1993; Mangione & Speth, 1998; Jang & Mangione, 1994).

Child Success and Outcomes

As mentioned previously, the ultimate

goal of transition planning is to ensure that children are successful in school and that they are able to achieve academic and social success. Therefore, the conceptual model proposes that these important child outcomes are most highly influenced by the child's and family's adjustment to new programs. Ramey & Ramey (1994) provide some early markers of successful transitions that included very specific outcomes related to children, such as a positive attitude about school (e.g. they like school and look forward to going to school regularly) and steady growth in academic skills. Family outcomes include parents and guardians who are actively involved in their child's education and value school (Ramey & Ramey, 1994).

Implications

Over the past 20 years, progress has been made toward the identification of scientifically-based practices associated with successful transitions for young children and families. The literature has primarily focused on the mechanics of effective transition procedures, but little is available on the complex interactions among the components at all levels of the ecology and their influences on child success during and after transitions. Although the evidence in the literature is fragmented, there is evidence of the organizational complexities and the resulting problems experienced by families, children, and in many instances, the professionals who provide services. In summary, research suggests that addressing the child's entire ecological context is essential in planning and implementing effective transitions (Pianta & Walsh, 1997); however, practice has focused primarily on child skills and

abilities (Meisels, 1999; La Paro & Pianta, 1998).

Consequently, federal monitoring reports and state evaluations indicate that transitions have been and continue to be extremely problematic, and it is often the component of service delivery with which families are least satisfied (Kochanek et al., 1997). Therefore, if we are going to improve the experiences and outcomes of those involved in transitions we need to understand: 1) the complex interactions and relationships among variables in the ecology, 2) how these complex interactions are linked to the child's success in school; 3) if the factors and their interrelationships are the same for the transitions at different times; and 4) how to address populations that are likely to experience the most difficulty during and after transitions.

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