

RESEARCH TRANSCRIPT

Transition from Early Intervention to Preschool Research and Application

Beth

I think one of the things that families probably don't recognize that becomes clear after they've gone through the transition process is that you have to start thinking about things early enough to prepare both you and your child. So having time to look at, "What are the options for my child? What's going to happen with my child at age three?" But moreover, giving family's time to process that information, to think on that information over time, and to be able to come back over time to ask questions.

Nancy

I agree with Beth that it's really important to take some time to think about what it is that you want for your child and sort of thinking ahead to, "What are your dreams for your child? Are you thinking beyond preschool? Are you thinking that you want your child in the kindergarten at your school that your other children or their cousins or their neighbors go to, and what does that mean?" And even looking further down the road, you know, "What is it that you are hoping that is going to be happening for your child in their life," and go back and think about how you lay that foundation for that to happen in a way that you want to. I think that that's really crucial to take that time to think ahead where you're going. So going in to that conference you are not just thinking about it on the spot, you have had some time to sort of think through it.

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Beth

And so when we think about families being major decision-makers, part of what families need help with is figuring out, “When I get in this meeting, what is the culture of the meeting? What do I need to be prepared for that?” What are the kinds of things that we will put on that plan? What specific kind of information can I expect from the folks that are going to be participating, especially if it’s my first interaction with the public school or with the Head Start program, or whom ever you thought about inviting?” And giving the families some time, up front, to think about those things so that when they get into that conference they’ve had a little practice, even if it’s more of a role playing or a discussion practice about what’s going to happen.

Nancy

I think the other thing that’s really important for families to remember is that you go into this conference and it feels like, you know, “This is the end all, be all. This is an extremely important meeting.” But you can always ask to take a break in the middle of the meeting if you need to stop and you need to have a conversation with somebody else or ask some questions, you can have some conversation in the transition conference. And if things are not flowing or you need a break or whatever needs to happen, you can reconvene the meeting at a later time. Sometimes before you sign the plan and make the decisions...it feels lots of times like you go into these and you have to make a decision on the spot and the truth is that you don’t have to. And remember that you’ve always got options; there’s always time to plan the planning of what’s going to happen and build in doing more looking and then more decision making.

Beth

You really struck a cord, Nancy, with me. I think one of the problems that we’ve run into and we’ve identified this through our research studies, is that folks have begun to use the transition conference as a decision making time. The intent of the transition conference is to come up with a plan with the family about, “What is it I need? What information do I need? What kinds of goals and activities are appropriate for me as a family member to make an informed decision about where I should refer my child for services at age three?” And so the outcome of the transition conference is to plan and that plan should include goals for the child on, “What are we going to do to help get our child ready for the transition, and to be prepared to adjust? What are we going to do for the family?” A goal might be, “I really don’t know what I want, I’m looking at Head Start, I’m looking at the public schools, and the goal is I’m going to go visit each of those programs and get some information so I can make an informed decision.”

Nancy

And people do all kinds of things to help meetings be more comfortable. I mean, I've talked about taking a friend or making sure you sit next to your spouse or your service coordinator or you know, take cookies into the meeting. Have the meeting at a place where maybe you wouldn't normally do that. Have it at the library or have it at your church or some place that makes sense for you that can really set the tone so that you're really focused in on your child, rather than being focused in on a process that has to happen very quickly.

Ann

Now, Beth, in any of the research that you've done, have you run across thing happening in IEP conferences, such as parents really wanting an inclusive preschool for their child and the people at the conference saying something like, "Well oh gosh, that would be nice and we wish that that were available, but it's really not available. So you'll need to go to this more specialized program instead." Do things like that happen and if so, what do you recommend that parents should say if the professionals are making suggestions that they really think is not fitting with their vision?

Beth

That's a really good question and as much as I would like to say, "Oh my goodness, these things don't happen," they do. And I think that there are probably some things that families need to understand about the service system and then some tips to help them kind of navigate that system. And I think one of the things that we run into with preschool services for children is that there is not, typically, a general education environment in many states for which you can provide services, so we don't have classrooms for all three-year-olds in a lot of states. And so that concept then, of, "What do I do with my child while their in school? I want them to be with their peers," requires that the district...the school districts to be creative in terms of partnering with other programs to offer those opportunities. So that could be a childcare program where someone from the school system goes in and provides those services within that childcare setting. The reality is that sometimes, in districts, those creative ways are not always ways that they think they can accomplish. The bottom-line is that we're supposed to provide services to young children with disabilities in environments that meet their needs and that help us accomplish their educational goals. So for families, I think one of the things they can do is, during that period of time when you are thinking about getting ready to go to the transition conference and when you get to the transition conference...the first step is to ask those kinds of questions there so that you're saying to the local school system, "I'm really interested in my child being in this type of environment. What are some opportunities and how can we meet my child's needs?" Once they transition, and the child is receiving services sometimes it becomes a little more difficult to navigate that process and I think that what families need to do are lots of things that Nancy said already. One is to find a friend and someone that's, maybe, already been through this system, another parent to talk to about, "What are the best ways for me to approach this?" In every state there's a disability advocacy organization usually called Protection and Advocacy or...I don't know what it's called in other states. They're a great resource if you think that you want to explore a little bit about, "What are my options and what's the best way to approach the district about getting the services that I think my child needs?" And sometimes, if...it is really up to you...you can call the state department of education and ask questions, "Is this what I'm looking

for? Is this reasonable? What might be the best way to approach that?" I think the hard part is not to become...to turn it into a contentious situation where people dig in their heels and how do we begin to communicate about, "What is it my child really needs and what's the best way for us to package that, in terms of their environment?"

Nancy

I agree with everything that Beth said. I think that those are all good strategies and I think those are...it is true...I've had that happen to lots of friends, where what they have wanted for their child for preschool was different than what was being offered or what the community had put in place. And it does create a dilemma and that's why it's so important for you to be thinking about what you want. In addition to all the things that Beth suggested, I have to say that I think one of the best resources are your friends and your family and your neighbors; the people that you know in your community. When families in our community, that I live in, really were looking for an inclusive preschool that didn't exist...typically, there is one parent who had done something, but nobody knew about it...but if the parents started talking to each other or if they were going to visit preschools and they started talking to the teachers in the preschools in the community, somebody always knew about somebody who had managed to do something unique.

Nancy

And so through using those connections and having those conversations and asking questions, there's just a wealth of information out there. And the way it happens for one family and what gets setup and put in place isn't necessarily what you want for your child...but what can you learn from that...and if you manage to contact people...typically, parents who have been through this are more than happy to talk to other parents and say, "This is what I did." And sometimes what the conversation will be, "These were the compromises that I made." Sometimes it's, "Okay, I wanted my child to go to the same preschool as her older brother and it was," for example, "through our YMCA," or some sort of organization like that. And by talking with them and saying, "What can we do?" And then talking with the school district, sometimes you can find out that you can still receive services, but not necessarily in that preschool. So you need to think about, "Is that something that's going to still meet my child's needs?"

Ann

Great. That reminds me, Nancy, of a situation that we were in our son, who has a disability related to an adult program; it wasn't at an early childhood, but we started down one path and it was just started becoming clear that it was not working out. We were very confused about what to do and a friend said something that always stuck in my mind since and it was very helpful and it was, "No matter how far down the wrong road you go, if it's the wrong road then turn around." And that was so helpful to be able to have that freedom to turn around and to know that we're never stuck and that sometimes we can only learn through taking the wrong path and then we gain the insight that helps us take the right path. Well, we talked about some of these things before the meeting and during the meeting. Beth, from your research and also from your own experience, what is a problem that you've seen that sometimes comes up for families after the meeting?

Beth

Well, it brings up an interesting...kind of findings from the work that we're doing and in relation to what you're talking about, which we tend to call that period of adjustment of children after the transition. Are they adjusting to the new environment and in what ways are they adjusting to the new environment and is it a good adjustment or, as you all said earlier, do we need to think about something differently? One of the things that's really interesting is that families, in our studies, a great majority of families were very satisfied with the quality of the services they received in early intervention and their quality ratings actually went up once they got in preschool and they were happy. They also felt like they were getting about the right amount of services, both in early intervention and in preschool. So there's this kind of myth that sometimes families get less services or they're not quite as happy after transition and our research doesn't really show that.

Beth

Absolutely. I think the other good news is that families were reported that they were very satisfied and felt good about their child's quality of life, as well as the quality of life of the family. The key is, if you get in there and think things aren't really feeling good, then you need to make sure that you're talking to your teachers in that preschool setting about your child's adjustment and you need to have those conversations; you need to initiate, "How are they doing; or is there a way that we can communicate back and forth so that I can get a sense of how well Johnny's adjusting to this environment; and are there some warning signs that you and I need to be looking for so that we can catch anything really early, in terms of his ability to interact with the kids and interact with the environment and really adapt to this new setting?" And then let's talk about, "What do we do if we start seeing these things, how can we get on them very quickly and come together so we can look at how we address or how we make shifts or changes in what we're doing?" Sometimes it might just be a change of a strategy that the teacher is using in the classroom and sometimes it's that that environment really wasn't the best environment for that child and we need to make some bigger changes.

Nancy

It was making me think about...with our older daughter...when she went through her transition from early intervention into preschool. I remember that it was very frightening and when you start getting all of this information said to you to get ready for transition, getting ready, and having the conference, and implementing the plan. Change is hard and it was...it sort of, in our minds became bigger than it actually was. When we actually met the staff and we had the meeting, you kind of go in almost expecting the worst...and it's not necessarily the worst that's going to happen. We had to draw upon the fact that, we had people helping us to think about our decisions we had already made and we felt pretty good about our ability to make good decisions about our daughter. And everybody in our transition said, "You know, you're doing the right thing and you're asking good questions." We had relationships and I think that as those relationships developed, we really were able to do the things that Beth talked about, like going to the teacher. We didn't ever feel that we were in an adversarial relationship with the school staff. The teachers had the same goals that we had...that they wanted our daughter to do well. And just as often as we would come and say, "This is a concern," about even simple things, they would come to us and say, "Well, we noticed this, and here is some ideas." And that helped so much with that transition to build that relationship and for them to include you and help you to understand what you're new role is when you're at the preschool or your child's at the preschool and how that's different from when they were in early intervention, because it is a pretty significant change. But Beth really brought up a lot of those memories of the rules in preschool like you can't bring toys from home. Our daughter had her favorite stuffed moose and they bent the rule so that the moose could stay in the backpack and it could be unzipped so the antlers could stick out, so that she could see that he was there, but they were still following their rules. And you know, there's lots of creativity within that structure if you really look for it and you discuss, and you all have the same goal in mind.

Nancy

You can touch him and feel him, but he can't come out and play. It was a great way for our daughter to have one of those toys that was her favorite thing and her support object...her favorite moose and he could be there, but he wasn't replacing what was happening in the classroom.

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