

PARENTS SPEAK OUT

A Tale of Two Transitions: Emma and Zoe

By Nancy Peeler

I have two children, Emma and Zoe; both participated in early intervention, at different times and in different states. The two state and community early intervention systems were VERY different, and we had some very good experiences, and some experiences that could definitely be improved. In the end, we learned a lot as parents and have carried much of that learning forward as our girls move through school. I would like to share our transition stories with you, in the hopes that it may be of use to you, too, as your children grow and learn.

Emma was enrolled in early intervention in Massachusetts in 1993. We had a great service coordinator/provider, who worked closely with us to help us recognize what we were already doing to support Emma's development. She also supported us to explore and add other strategies and services. I am so grateful for the successful early intervention experiences we had, as they went far in preparing us for the future! They helped us learn to focus on the positive and possible, and what we could do to make that happen.

Emma did well in early intervention and made some great gains, but we were still concerned about her development as she approached her 3rd birthday. We knew early intervention was ending. Because we had some friends who were special education teachers, we had some idea of what was next. But we clearly needed more information. It was scary – were we going to lose the support that we valued so much? What if Emma didn't qualify? What if we didn't like the school? What do you mean, put a three-year-old on a bus? What if...???

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Our service coordinator started helping us prepare for transition well ahead of the big “T” date. Emma’s birthday is in October, so we started talking and thinking about the ‘next steps’ and gathering information in the spring, so we would be ready to move forward in the fall when school staff came back to work. Some of the things we did to PREPARE for the transition included:

Gathering Information

- We thought about what was important to us as we moved forward – what did we want for Emma? What kind of preschool? What about Kindergarten and elementary school?
- We talked with our service coordinator, our day care provider, neighbors, and friends about preschool programs – what was available, what was each one like, what about cost, etc.
- We learned about a transition workshop we could go to – we had information from both our service coordinator and a posting at our doctor’s office.
- I went to the transition workshop to understand the IEP process – from evaluation through development of the plan – how it was similar, how it was different, and how to use our knowledge and voices to make sure the IEP would be built around Emma’s needs.
- We had many nervous discussions with our service coordinator, since it wasn’t clear if Emma would be eligible for special education.

Supporting Emma’s Development

- Early intervention conducted a final evaluation so we could check Emma’s current progress and identify her strengths.
- We requested a special education evaluation to find out if Emma was eligible.
- Once we knew Emma was eligible for special education and we knew our options, we decided that the preschool program offered through the district was a good match for Emma and for what we wanted for her, both in preschool and looking toward the future.
- We met with the school district to develop an IEP and had our service coordinator participate in the meeting with us.

Helping Emma (and us!) Adapt and Participate

- We visited the two classrooms to which Emma might be assigned, talked to the teachers and other staff, and learned what her day would be like and what skills she would need to participate. Since Emma already went to a daycare a couple of days/week, and some of the same kids would be in her preschool class, we were comfortable that she would quickly grasp what was happening in the classroom, and be able to adjust to being with the other kids.
- We met with the therapists, so we would know who they were, where they would see Emma (in the classroom), what they were going to focus on (great information – much more detail than what was written in the IEP!).

- We learned the school ‘rules’ – for example, no toys from home, etc.
- We discussed our status with ‘potty-training’ and how the school would handle our situation, accidents, etc.
- The teacher shared tips and ideas to help the transition go smoothly – for example, taking a favorite stuffed animal in the backpack for the bus ride, who would have to stay in the backpack once at school, but could peek out so Emma could see him if she was feeling lonely.
- We met the ‘bus’ driver (mini-van, actually!), so it wouldn’t be a strange situation when the bus pulled up at our door the first day of school.
- We developed a plan for communication – a notebook that would travel back and forth in Emma’s backpack, both for the teacher to use and for us to read and send messages back.
- We took Emma to visit her new preschool classroom!
- We started to visit the school playground evenings and weekends, so Emma was more familiar in general with the school and associated it with the fun things (swings!) on the playground.
- Emma helped us pick out a small backpack for her carry back and forth to school.

Built Our Own Skills and Capabilities

- We talked often with our service coordinator, who helped us to think about our questions, concerns, and reflect upon what was going well. She gave us tips for moving forward – and supported us to take the lead in doing so.
- Because we made the phone calls and met with the people at school (the first time with our service coordinator, and subsequently just with the school staff), we started to develop important relationships before school even started. Those relationships carried through, and made the transition much easier.

Once October and Emma’s third birthday rolled around, we were ready for school! Scared, nervous – especially about the bus – but ready. We knew Emma was ready to be with a larger group of kids and would have a great time at school. We were confident in the teacher’s skills and that she and the classroom aide would warmly welcome Emma. We knew that they had the same goals for Emma that we did. So, off we go. But, transition didn’t end there, we still needed to ADJUST and figure out, well, the things we still didn’t know!

Gathering Information

- We used the notebook to share information back and forth between school and home. It was new and hard to do at first, but did turn out to be a good means of communication. Eventually use of the notebook tailed off, but it was a great tool for the adjustment period.

- We talked with Emma about what was happening at school (based on what was in the notebook!). While she didn't tell us much, it still established that what she had to say was important and that we valued what happened at school.

Helping Emma (and Us!) Adapt and Participate

- We visited the school whenever we could. The teacher had indicated that we were welcome to visit school at any time, so we did! Although we both worked, there were a few days that we could be available to pick Emma up, and we would go early so we could see some of what was happening, chat with the teacher, etc. Making sure, of course, to call the Transportation Office to cancel the bus for those days!
- When the school asked for parent volunteers, we did everything we could to be there, again, so we could be involved and informed.
- We participated in any school conferences that were set up. Initially, we planned additional contact with the teacher, assuming that it might be needed during the adjustment period.
- We greatly missed our early intervention service coordinator. She was great and had been so supportive of us. She called us periodically to check in, and we stayed in touch. We knew she was there if we had questions or needed assistance that we couldn't get through the school.

Supporting Emma's Development

- We talked a lot about Emma's engagement with the staff and other kids – an area of concern for all of us. The staff made extra efforts in this area, and those extra efforts paid off.
- If the school or therapist sent home ideas for things to do to support Emma's development, we did as much as we could to carry through on their suggestions.
- We also used our common sense, and when we heard about an activity or topic at school, we tried to build on that at home. When school made 'goop', we got the recipe and we made 'goop' at home; when school took nature walks, we tried to take a nature walk in our own neighborhood, so some of the learning would be extended into our home life.

Built Our Own Skills and Capabilities

- When we knew other families whose children were in the same school or class, we talked to them and shared information, which helped us to be better informed.
- When the school established an advisory council, I joined, both to support and affirm their activities, and because it was another great source of information for us as parents. We also had the chance to share what we liked about school and what had worked for us, so that it could be useful to others.
- We went back to our early intervention program when they presented their Transition workshop the next year and talked about our experience with transition. Some things that had seemed

especially BIG and scary turned out not to be, and it was a perspective I wanted to share with others.

Our three-year-old preschool year went really well; Emma made great progress, and we grew more confident about school and about her future. Then, shortly after the start of the next school year, when Emma turned four, we moved to Michigan. Talk about a difficult transition! Special education plans and philosophy do not necessarily transfer smoothly from one state system to another. But, that's another story...

Emma's younger sister, Zoe, was 8 months old when we moved. As Zoe grew up, we realized that she also had some delays in her development, and we again reached out for assistance from early intervention.

The system in Michigan was very different; it was built around special education ideas and principles, since Michigan offers special education from birth through age 26. Zoe was evaluated for eligibility for both Early On (early intervention) and for special education at the same time and was found eligible for both. We had both an IFSP and an IEP in place. Zoe received services, grew, learned, progressed, and in the fall before her birthday (February), we started thinking again about transition.

This transition was to be very different in some respects; we did not need a referral for special education services, since Zoe was already enrolled and had an IEP that carried through well beyond her 3rd birthday. We already knew the therapists, and because I was working for the local early intervention program, knew quite a bit about the local preschool programs. Also, Zoe had a winter birthday, which meant that she wouldn't start preschool until fall (local practice was that children couldn't be added to the special education preschool after December, and the community preschool programs were usually full). I was also in the unusual position of being my own 'service coordinator' since I was employed by the local program as a Service Coordinator for other families. When transition time came, I was reminded to make sure I wrote a Transition plan for Zoe and get it in the file on time. So, as a family, we did some planning to PREPARE Zoe and our family for the next steps:

Gathering Information

- Again, we needed to think about what was important to us as we moved forward – we already knew that we wanted Zoe in a community preschool program the next fall, and after that she would be at the same elementary school as her older sister.
- We had researched preschools for Emma when we moved to town. I had been helping other families explore options and had access to a great listing of local preschools at our Library, so we were in good shape.
- I had family in town, and they were very helpful in identifying resources, asking questions, and supporting us to make decisions.
- We were already part of a support group of families whose children were in Early On and/or special education; we continued to go to the meetings, and ask questions of other families, advocates, and agencies in our community.

Supporting Zoe's Development

- We had heard about some 2 ½ year old preschool classes, which met only once/week, in very small groups, but structured like a preschool class would run. It seemed like a good idea for to help Zoe get ready for preschool in the fall. It meant juggling work hours to get here there, but seemed worth the effort, so we signed up.
- Since we both worked, Zoe continued at her daycare and had lots of opportunity to play and interact with other children and adults in that setting, which helped her continue to practice her functional skills.
- We decided we would continue to have Zoe's therapeutic services separate from any type of school or daycare activity – it worked better for our schedule, and it just wasn't worth the fight to try to get them integrated, although we felt that was probably the best model.

Helping Zoe (and Us!) Adapt and Participate

- Zoe turned three over the winter and wouldn't start preschool until the fall. Because her IEP was already in place and just continuing, there was very little adaptation. Our IFSP ended, but the services were already in the existing IEP, so there just wasn't a big change. However, we still thought about things we could do for the fall, when the next part of our transition would happen.
- We went to the Open House for the preschool we were interested in (for fall) to meet the teachers, see the classroom, and make sure it was what we wanted to pursue.
- We made the decision that we wanted a preschool separate from daycare, because of the different structure it would offer, as well as the opportunity to interact with other adults and children.
- We deliberately chose a cooperative preschool that required families to work in the classroom, so we could be involved and informed.
- The preschool was at our church, so Sunday School was held in the same classroom where Zoe would go to preschool. Attending Sunday School that spring and summer helped her to be familiar with the space and some of the toys she would encounter in preschool.
- Over the summer, we picked out a new backpack for school with the Zoe's name on it, just like her big sister.

Built Our Own Skills and Capabilities

- Around the time of Zoe's transition, both my husband and I participated in a Parent Leadership Program related to Early On. We learned so much – we gained broader knowledge and perspective, we met parents from across the state, and we had time to reflect on ourselves, and how we might choose to be leaders on behalf of our children and family, or beyond.

- While we weren't working with a service coordinator and our transition when Zoe turned three didn't bring big changes, we had learned quite a bit during Emma's transition. The second time around was definitely easier! The planning and decisions were much easier because we knew what we wanted and what to expect. The smooth preparation for Zoe's transition confirmed what we had learned, and supported us to feel that we had a pretty good knowledge and skill base to lean on as the girls grew up.

Winter, spring, and summer passed, Zoe started three year-old preschool, and our transition continued. Special education evaluated Zoe's development and decided that she was no longer eligible for services. Although we didn't exactly agree on all counts, we were definitely in agreement that it was time to ADAPT and move on.

Gathering Information

- Because we provided the transportation to preschool, we had daily communication with school at drop off and pick up. As with Emma, we talked at home about what was happening at school, and heard from Zoe about what was going on. No, she didn't say a lot, but sometimes there were some great stories!

Helping Zoe (and Us!) Adapt and Participate

- We missed our contact and conversations with some of the therapists we had known during the previous two years, but it wasn't too difficult a change because we really hadn't seen them over the summer anyways. And, we knew how to reach them if we had questions or needed assistance.
- We worked in the classroom regularly and knew the teacher and the other children fairly well. We also became better acquainted with the other parents.
- We participated in extra school activities, like family dinners and open houses.

Supporting Zoe's Development

- We talked about Zoe's development with the teacher. She knew about her past delays, and helped us monitor how things were going, and whether we needed to go back and ask for support again.
- We made use of what we had learned in the past about supporting our children's development and continued to use those same ideas. We read at home regularly, visited playgrounds, nature centers, etc, and tried to connect school learning with our day to day lives.

Built our own skills and capabilities

- We made a point of getting to know other families whose children were in the same school or class, talked to them and shared information, which helped us to be better informed.

- Eventually I became part of the preschool Advisory Board, again, because it was another great source of information for us as parents. We could contribute back to the school and other families.
- We continued to be connected with parents of other children who had been in Early On and/or Special Education; while the support group ended and new activities began, I am still friends with many of these parents today.
- Being connected with the parent leadership project opened the door to other trainings, information, and connections that definitely came into play for us as we thought about both Zoe and Emma and their futures. We gained skills and tools that we use to this day across the settings and situations we find ourselves involved in.

Our children are now in middle school and high school; although we don't use any kinds of special education services, we continued to use what we learned along the way. We had a particularly hard transition at one point in grade school, and in the midst of the situation, realized that we were already well equipped to handle it! Today, we use the same strategies we did when the girls were young:

- We get to know the school staff, from teachers to principals and in between.
- We are connected with other families; we talk to other parents and their older students, to learn what they did, what they experienced, what they suggest.
- We participate on parent committees and boards; go to school conferences, open houses, and parent nights; and email with teachers. We let them know that we are interested in learning about the school and how we can be involved.
- We also make sure they know we are available, and that we care and are invested in our children and their schools and education.
- We share information about our children that will help the teachers and schools assist our children on their path through school.
- We take advantage of learning opportunities at the schools, so we can be prepared for what is coming down the road – curriculum changes, after school programs, next level of school, college, etc.

I hope our story and suggestions may be helpful to you as you go through your own transition. At first it all felt so overwhelming and different and frightening; now, I know there are ideas and strategies that we parents can use to help us as we move down the road of life with our children.

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