RESEARCH Brief

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A Child Outcome Framework for the Early Childhood Transition Process

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One of the major service components under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for young children with disabilities and their families is specific planning and support for transition as children exit Part C services and enter other programs (e.g., preschool special education, Head Start, public and private preschools). There is substantial literature which documents the challenges brought about by the need for transitions from one program to another (Kochanek, Costa, McGinn, & Cummins, 1997). In fact, the complexities of the challenges brought about by transitions have increased dramatically over the past two decades. Three major factors have contributed to the increased complexity of transition (Rous, Hallam, Harbin, McCormick & Jung, 2007). These include (1) expanded programs for young children with disabilities as a result of IDEA, specifically Public Law 99-457, (2) the increase in state-funded public programs for at-risk and typically developing young children, and (3) the divergent and complex design of the early care and education system in the United States.

The transition literature provides some insights into critical components of the transition process and the effects on children, families, and professionals (e.g., Shulting, Malone & Dodge, 2005; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). Some are specifically related to the stress it can induce (Kochanek et al., 1997; Karr-Jelinek, 1994; Hanline, 1988; Fowler, Chandler, Johnson, & Stells, 1988). Through the National Early Childhood Transition Center (NECTC), Rous and her colleagues (2007) proposed a conceptual framework based on the research literature, a systemic ecological orientation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986), and prior theoretical work on transition (e.g., Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999; Rosenkoetter, Hains & Fowler, 1994) to describe how the complex interactions of multiple systems combine to influence the transition process for young children with disabilities (Figure 1). This framework delineated key interagency variables and program practices that are posited to impact the preparation and adjustment of young children with disabilities as they move among programs (Figure 2). In addition to the ecological theory, this comprehensive framework draws from two other complementary theoretical frameworks, bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and organizational systems theory (e.g., Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2004; Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1997).

Within this conceptual framework, the proximal goal or outcome of transition planning and activities is to ensure that children successfully adjust to the new environment, both developmentally and socially, with an ultimate or distal outcome of academic success in school. Research literature has provided compelling data to suggest that the child's initial successful transition and adjustment to new environments is influenced by skill levels in communication, engagement, and behavior (e.g., Katims & Pierce, 1995; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995; Gamel-McCormick & Rous, 2000).

Related specifically to post-transition outcomes, Ramey & Ramey (1994) identified *early markers* of successful transitions for the child that included a positive attitude about school (e.g., they like school and look forward to going to school regularly) and steady growth in academic skills. For the family, an important marker included active involvement in their child's education.
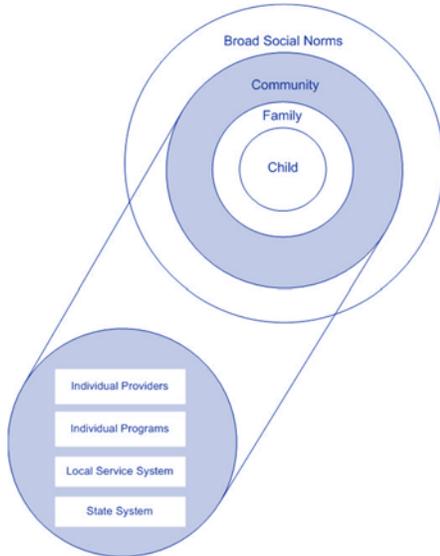
Figure 1: *Ecological Contextual Factors*

Figure 2. *Key Elements in the Transition Process for Both Sending and Receiving Agencies*

Using previous research and the conceptual framework for transition presented above that was produced by NECTC researchers, a more specific child transition outcome model has been developed to guide both research and practice related to successful transitions for young children with disabilities (Figure 3). This model is based on two assumptions; (1) there are specific inter-related outcomes that can be measured to indicate the *degree of success* of the transition process for children, and (2) these important child outcomes are most highly influenced by the child's adjustment to the program within a critical period of time. As children and families participate in the transition planning process, there are numerous transition activities that can be implemented to support the preparation of the child for new settings and/or services. By identifying key dimensions of positive transition outcomes, providers are better able to choose transition practices that are most supportive in preparing the child for the transition process and to identify the best possible program match needed to ensure successful outcomes.

Within the proposed transition outcomes model, there are three inter-dependent outcomes: engagement, adaptation, and continued growth and development. The first outcome is engagement, which is defined by McWilliam and Bailey (1992) as the child's ability to interact appropriately with adults, peers, and/or materials in the environment, for the age and ability of the child and the surroundings. The child's engagement influences and is influenced by the second outcome, adaptation to both the structure and culture of the new setting. This includes the formal structure (e.g., schedule, developmental or academic expectations, etc.) and the more informal structure (e.g., unspoken rules) of the setting or service. The final outcome is the continued growth and development of the child in the new environment, which also influences and is influenced by the ability of the child to both engage and adapt.

Essential to the concept of a transition outcome is the *critical window of time*. This refers to the time it takes for the child to actively engage, adapt, and continue along an expected developmental trajectory. This concept is in concert with other conceptualizations related to the time children need to adjust to new settings and services, such as those included in the literature for resiliency, regression, and recoupment. The critical window of time is generally between four and twelve weeks, but is based on the age level and intensity of the program. In other words, if a child transitions to a setting where he or she receives services one hour a week, the critical period of time is likely to be longer than for a child who is in a full day program that meets five days a week. In addition, considerations should be given to other key variables that may impact the adjustment of children, such as child, family and program attributes.

Figure 3. *Child Adjustment During and After Transition: Three Inter-related Outcomes*
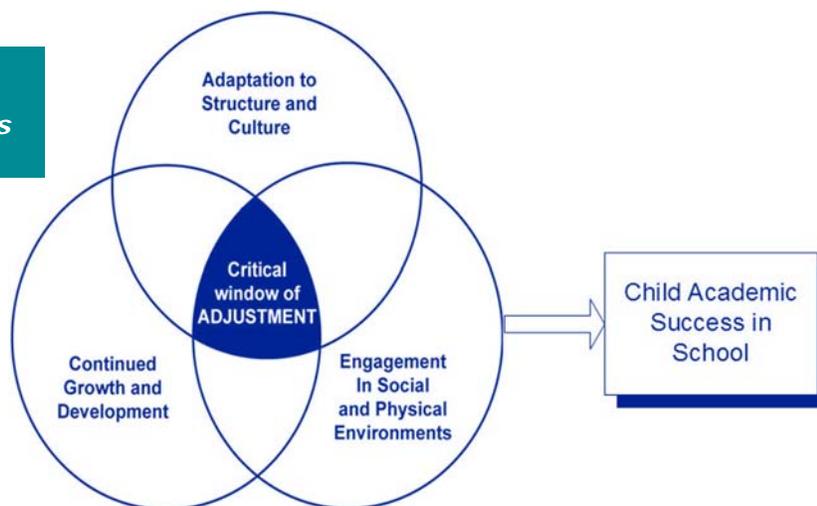
Inherent within this critical window is the concept that after this critical window, the child engages, adapts, and continues to grow and learn. However, the child's performance becomes more a product of the quality of instruction or intervention, rather than an indicator of successful transition planning and activities.

It is believed that this delineation of specific desired outcomes of transition will help move the field forward in increasing the effectiveness of transitions for young children with disabilities and their families. No longer are we merely focusing on transition policies and activities (i.e., what people do). The identification of desired outcomes helps us to set our sights on the results or effects of policies and actions: the actual growth, development, and performance of children.

This child outcome framework can be useful to policy makers, providers, families, and researchers. For *policy makers*, it sets a standard for measuring success. For example, policy makers could require states to report data in their Annual Performance Report with regard to child transition outcomes. Instead of a scattershot approach to selecting transition activities and hoping for the best, *providers* can use the child outcomes framework to be more systematic and strategic in collaboration with others in the selection of effective strategies and activities. Just as importantly, the framework provides guidance for measuring the success of the various transition activities selected for implementation. The outcomes framework can be helpful to *families* as well. Knowledge of transition outcomes can help families to be more informed consumers.

Families can discuss with providers how their transition activities are specifically designed to achieve these outcomes. In addition, knowledge about desired or intended outcomes can help families understand how particular experiences they provide to their child can play a part in achieving positive outcomes within the transition process. Finally, the child outcomes framework provides focus for *researchers*, as they design studies to better understand the complex nature of the transition ecology and its effects on children and families. NECTC researchers have used this model in the design and implementation of an empirical study of transition at age three and again at kindergarten for children with disabilities and their families. The findings from this study will help to validate the utility of both the child outcome and conceptual models produced by the Center. Consequently, a sound transition outcomes framework can contribute to assisting policy makers, providers, families, and researchers as they seek to improve these critical transitions and enhance the young child's success in school.

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