

# RESEARCH



# Brief

## Desired Family Outcomes of the Early Childhood Transition Process

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### Background

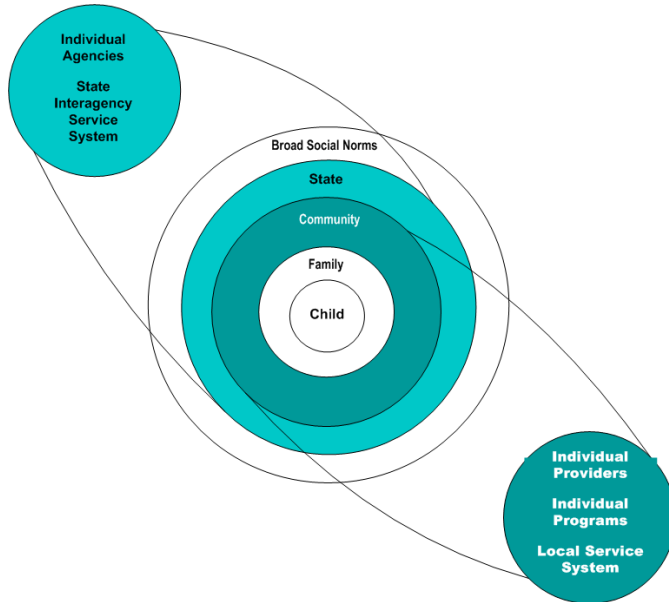
Transitions are often watershed events that present challenges for all young children and their families (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1999). However, transitions from one environment or program to another are often particularly stressful and frustrating for families of young children with disabilities (Fowler, Chandler, Johnson, & Stella, 1988; Hanson et al., 2000; Rice & O'Brien, 1990; Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, 1994). Consequently, in an attempt to address the concerns of families and professionals, federal policy makers crafted federal legislation and accompanying regulations which were intended to result in smoother transitions for young children with disabilities and their families. Researchers and professionals (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Fowler et al., 1988; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995; Katims & Pierce, 1995; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998), as well as professional organizations (e.g., Division of Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children) have identified *strategies* to facilitate more positive transitions for young children with and without disabilities and their families. However, despite the legal requirements and a host of recommended strategies suggested in the literature, both parents and professionals continue to report that they experience stress and frustration as parents navigate the transition process and adjust to new programs (Hanline, 1988; Harbin, McWilliam, & Gallagher, 2000; Kochanek, Costa, McGinn, & Cummins, 1997; Rous, Schroeder, Stricklin, & Hains, 2007). Perhaps one reason for continued problems in the area of transition is the absence of aligning evidence-based practice with a set of clearly defined outcomes of transition. This requires a more systematic understanding of the transition ecology.

### Understanding Transitions: A Conceptual Framework

The transition literature provides some insights into the components of the transition process. However, the literature fails to provide a cohesive picture of the ecology of the multiple transition factors and variables and their complex interactions (Rous, Hallam, Harbin, McCormick, & Jung, 2007). Thus, in an attempt to assist the field to more fully understand the complexities of transitions, researchers at the National Early Childhood Transition Center (NECTC) proposed a comprehensive and cohesive conceptual framework (Rous, Hallam et al., 2007). This unique **Transition Conceptual Framework** is based upon: (a) the research literature; (b) contemporary theoretical frameworks that include ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979a, 1979b, 1986), bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and organizational systems theory (e.g., Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1997; Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2004); (c) prior theoretical work on transition (e.g., Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, & Cox, 1999; Rosenkoetter et al., 1994); and (d) family empowerment theory (e.g., Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994; Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000).

The **Transition Conceptual Framework** developed by Rous and her colleagues (Rous, Hallam, et al., 2007), utilizes an ecological approach to depict that transitions for young children with disabilities are influenced by the complex interactions of child and family characteristics, as well as the multiple systems at the community and state level in which children and families are embedded (Figure 1). Figure 2 more specifically delineates critical state and community variables that are posited to impact the preparation, and subsequent adjustment, of young children with disa-

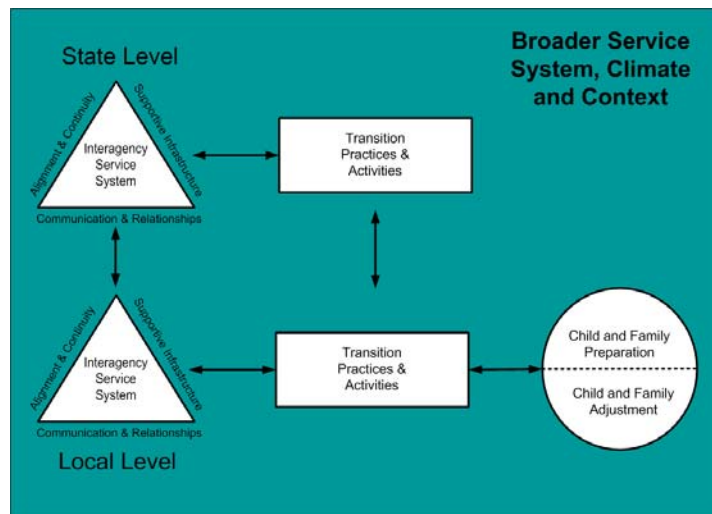
**Figure 1  
Ecological Contextual  
Factors**



abilities and their families as they move between and among programs. At the state level, the nature of the interagency service systems (depicted by a triangle), and the transition practices of individual state agencies (depicted by a rectangle), interact with one another to create a state approach to transition. This state level approach is influenced by the broader service system, climate and context of the state (depicted by the shaded area in Figure 2). These important state level elements have an impact on their local counterparts (e.g., the interagency service system and the local service agencies). These local counterparts are embedded within a broader service system for all children and families, as well as the climate and context of the community (e.g., political leadership and support, community resources, value placed on supporting children). These broader contextual factors influence the nature of the local interagency service system, which in turn has an impact on the transition practices used by the individual programs at the local level. Taken together all of these elements play a role in shaping child and family preparation for, and adjustment to, new programs/services, which is seen as the desired outcome of successful transitions (depicted by a circle). For a more complete

description of the important and systemic transition elements depicted in Figures 1 and 2, see Rous, Hallam et al. (2007).

**Figure 2  
Key Elements in the Tran-  
sition Process for Both  
Sending and Receiving  
Agencies**



## Understanding Transition Outcomes

A particular contribution of the *Transition Conceptual Framework*, is the recognition of the importance of transition outcomes for both children and their families as depicted by the circle in Figure 2. The literature is replete with the myriad of things that can go wrong during transitions. Historically, our concept of outcomes was framed by what we *didn't want* the results of transition to be. *First*, and foremost, we *didn't want* children to regress, or fail to continue to develop new skills; also we *didn't want* them to feel lonely, isolated, or unsuccessful in their new environment. *Second*, we *didn't want* families to feel frustrated, angry, powerless, uninformed, or unable to help and support their child; also we *didn't want* families to feel excluded or to disengage and become uninvolved in their child's services and program.

The accountability movement has made us more aware that it is necessary to delineate more specifically what we *do want* to accomplish, as a result of the public's investment in service provision (Bailey et al., 2006; Harbin, Rous, & McLean, 2005; Hebbler, 2005; Lesko, 2005; Roberts, 2005). The specification of how we expect children and families to benefit or behave can serve as a guide in selecting appropriate intervention strategies and developing policies to support interventions that are designed to achieve desired transition outcomes. Consequently, Rous and colleagues recognized the need to go beyond the "global" outcomes of preparation and adjustment they identified in their original *Transition Conceptual Framework* depicted by the circle in Figure 2. These researchers identified a more specific set of *inter-related* child outcomes, for the purpose of more effectively guiding policy, practice and research related to successful transitions for young children with disabilities. These three more specific transition outcomes for children are described below.

**Child Outcomes.** Within the *Transition Conceptual Framework* (Rous, Harbin, & McCormick, 2006), the broader *proximal* outcome of transition activities is the ability of children to have the necessary skills to adjust to, and succeed in the new environment. The ultimate or *distal* outcome is the child's success in school (Figure 3). Successful transitions and school success can help provide a foundation for success in life as the child becomes older.

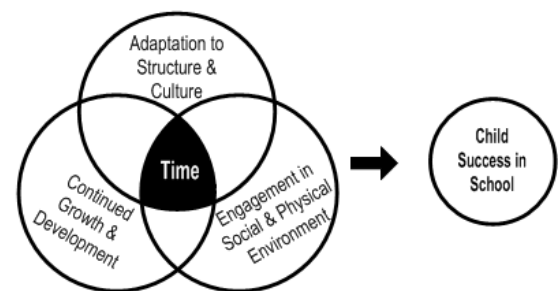
Conception of child outcomes within the *Transition Conceptual Framework* is based on three fundamental assumptions: 1) there are specific *inter-related* outcomes that can be measured, 2) the measures are able to indicate the *degree of success* of the transition process for children, and 3) the child's adjustment to the program needs to occur within a *critical window* or *period of time*.

Rous et al. (2006) identified three proximal outcomes that influence the child's successful transition and adjustment to new environments (Figure 3). These important child outcomes are: 1) **engagement** (McWilliam & Bailey, 1995), 2) **adaptation to both the structure and culture of the setting** (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Gamel-McCormick & Rous, 2000; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995; Katins & Pierce, 1995), and 3) **continued growth and development** (e.g. Gamel-McCormick & Rous, 2000; Johnson et al., 1995). Time is an important variable in achieving successful transition outcomes. It takes **time** for the child to actively engage in, and adapt to, the new setting or program, while continuing along an expected developmental trajectory (Rous et al., 2006). See Rous et al. for a more detailed explanation of each of the child outcomes mentioned. Once the child outcomes had been identified and described, NECTC researchers also recognized the importance of identifying critical family outcomes of successful transitions.

## Identifying Family Outcomes

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognizes the importance of the family in promoting their child's growth and skill development (Bailey & Bruder, 2005; Bronfenbrenner,

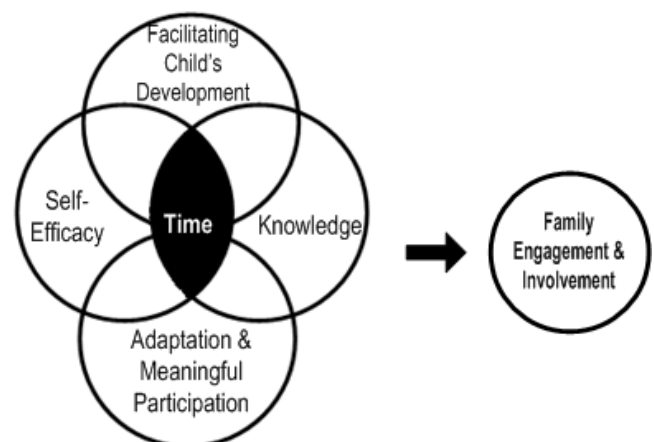
**Figure 3**  
Child Proximal and Distal Outcomes for Transition



1975, 1979a, 1979b; Roush & McWilliam, 1994). One of the primary goals of the federal law is to enhance the family's capacity to meet the special needs of their child. Another goal of the legislation is that families actively participate in the decisions regarding their child's services and service settings. The use of a family-centered approach to service provision is expected to result in beneficial outcomes for families, which in turn facilitate positive outcomes for their child with disabilities. Respect for the knowledge and values of families, as well as attention to family concerns related to their child with special needs and to their family's well-being, are common ingredients of a family-centered approach. The family empowerment or family-centered approach (e.g., Dunst et al., 1994; Turnbull et al., 2000) provides a strong theoretical foundation for the specification of family outcomes of transition.

A number of researchers have developed broad theoretical frameworks of family outcomes that relate to child progress during and after interventions (Bailey et al., 1998; Bailey & Bruder, 2005; Harbin & Neal, 2003; Harbin et al., 2004; McConnell et al., 1998; Turnbull et al., 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). The proposed Family Transition Outcomes model described in this Research Brief builds on the robust literature regarding family outcomes in general, and family transition outcomes in particular. The Family Outcomes portion of the broader **Transition Conceptual Framework** is based on three assumptions: 1) there are specific *inter-related* outcomes that can be measured; 2) the measures are able to indicate the *degree of success* of the transition process for families; and 3) these important outcomes are influenced by the window of time needed by families to effectively prepare for, and adjust to, the new program. Based upon the literature, the authors have identified four inter-related *proximal* family outcomes of the transition process and experience, which include: knowledge, skills to support their child's development, adaptation to the new culture and program, and self-efficacy. The ultimate or *distal* outcome is the family's engagement and involvement in their child's program, as well as the other programs and activities their child participates in outside of the educational system (Figure 4). Within the **Transition Conceptual Framework**, both the system and the family play a role, and have responsibilities for achieving these outcomes. The role and responsibility of the system is to develop policies, use practices, and provide the supports needed by families to facilitate achievement of positive family outcomes. Families have the responsibility to do their best to try to be prepared for, and adjust to, their child's new situation. Each family transition outcome is briefly described below.

**Knowledge.** One of the first tenants or pillars of the *Family Empowerment Approach* is the need for families to be informed (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Knowledgeable families are more competent and confident (Bailey, Blasco, & Simmeonson, 1992; Dunst et al., 1994; McWilliam, Snyder, Harbin, Porter, & Munn, 2000).



**Figure 4**  
**Family Proximal and Distal**  
**Outcomes for Transition**



Families need to process sufficient information about their *child's* condition, characteristics, and developmental needs, as well as how their child responds to interventions and settings. Due to the multiple changes that take place when a child transitions from one setting or program to another, knowledge of what to expect is crucial (Hanson et al., 2000; Rous, Hemmeter, & Schuster, 1994; Sainato & Morrison, 2001). Knowledge of resources that can support their journey during transition (e.g., Parent-to-Parent programs, Coach) is also beneficial to families. Families who have sufficient knowledge about the transition processes and procedures, what is expected of their child, potential service options, and their legal rights are more prepared, and experience more successful transitions (Hamblin-Wilson & Thurman, 1990). Families from diverse cultural and linguistic groups often experience additional challenges in obtaining sufficient knowledge to facilitate a smooth transition for their child (Harry, 2002; Rous, Schroeder et al., 2007). Successful transitions for both the child with disabilities and his or her family require that families be *informed consumers* (McWilliam et al., 2000). Without sufficient information, it is more difficult for families to make good or informed decisions.

**Facilitating Child's Development.** Family competence is another important ingredient of the family empowerment model. Families need to have an array of skills to adequately facilitate their child's development before, during and after transitions (McConnell et al., 1998). For transitions to be successful, families must put their knowledge into action. Families need skills in order to help their child develop the competencies and behaviors needed in the new environment. In daily routines and outings, the family can help the child develop important skills such as following directions, taking turns, listening while others speak, sitting quietly in a group, and using toys appropriately. In addition, families need to have a variety of *parenting skills* in order to help their child with routine activities, prevent or successfully address challenging behaviors, and promote adequate rest and nutrition (Blanchard, Gurka, & Blackman, 2006). Other important parenting skills relate to: (a) the ability to meet their child's basic needs; (b) reading their child's cues and knowing what to do; (c) playing with their child; and (d) assessing their child's progress and response to interventions, activities and situations. Families want to be able to teach and play with their child in ways that help their child learn, as well as feel safe, secure, competent, and loved (Bailey et al., 1992; McConnell et al., 1998).

**Adaptation and Meaningful Participation.** Using knowledge in order to be actively and meaningfully involved in decisions related to services is another pillar of the empowerment approach. Parent involvement has been cited as an important factor in the successful transitions of young children in general (Pianta & Cox, 1999), children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005), children living in poverty (Schulting et al., 2005), and children with disabilities (Fowler et al., 1988; Hanson, 2005; Hanson et al., 2000; Rosenkoetter et al., 1994). Children are posited to be more successful when families participate as active *partners* in transition planning, are meaningfully involved in exploring options related to their child's program, truly assist in the selection of placement settings and services for their child, advocate for their child's needs, and are able to communicate with professionals regarding the amount and type of help they desire for their family and their child with disabilities (Able-Boone, Sandall, Loughry, & Frederick, 1990; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997).

Just like their child, families go through a transition as well. When transition occurs, families also are required to *adapt to* the structure and culture of the new setting, program, or organization. Historically, this change in "the way things are done" has been a stumbling block for many families. Difficulty in appropriately and adequately adapting to the structure and culture of the new program can present challenges to the effective participation in service delivery, planning and decision-making described above (Rosenkoetter et al., 1994; Rous & Hallam, 2006). However, adaptation becomes easier when families are armed with appropriate knowledge and understanding, not only about the structure and requirements of their child's program, but also about how this new

service delivery, planning, and decision-making described above (Rosenkoetter et al., 1994; Rous & Hallam, 2006). However, adaptation becomes easier when families are armed with appropriate knowledge and understanding, not only about the structure and requirements of their child's program, but also about how this new program will support their child's development and meet his or her needs. Adaptation is facilitated by the ability of the family to use effective communication skills and a productive approach to cooperative problem-solving with professionals in the new setting or program. In order for this to occur, families must have an understanding of the new program's culture.

**Self-Efficacy.** Believing in their own capabilities is the final pillar of the family empowerment model. Belief in one's own abilities "to get something done" affects one's motivation, resilience in the face of adversity, vulnerability to stress, quality of functioning, and life choices (Bandura, 1994). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is the "conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce a (desired) outcome" (p.193). With regard to transitions, this means that families with high self-efficacy possess a belief in their capabilities to procure: (a) needed information, (b) skills for themselves, and (c) services for their child (Dunst, 1999; Dunst et al., 1994). Key constructs comprising self-efficacy include: self-confidence, self-esteem, mastery, locus of control, and resilience (Bandura, 1994, 1995, 1997; Rutter, 2000). Self-efficacy goes beyond feeling good about one's self. It is the *sense of being in control* and able to take effective action (Bandura, 1995, 1997). In addition, the self-efficacious person *persists* in a given task until he or she *succeeds* (Bandura, 1989; Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; Des Jardin, Eisenberg, & Hodapp, 2006). There is evidence that during the transition process, families possessing higher self-efficacy became less, instead of more, needy as the transition process unfolded, because they had been adequately prepared (Dunst, Trivette, & Cornwell, 1989). Service providers of the more self-efficacious families used family-centered practices, in addition to providing social supports before and during transitions.

**Importance of Preparation Time.** Essential to the concept of successful transition outcomes for families (and in turn for their children) is that families have sufficient time to *prepare* themselves and their child for this critical experience. It takes time for families to gain the sufficient knowledge, skills, and belief in their own abilities, to support their child and make informed decisions before, during, and after transition. Originally, federal regulations required beginning the transition process at least 90 days prior to the child's exit from the program. However, based upon the results of federal monitoring initiatives, as well as the recommendations of families and professionals, the new proposed regulations encourage programs to begin as early as nine months prior to the "age 3" transition. Having increased preparation time is posited to more adequately empower and build the capacity of families to successfully navigate both the functional and emotional challenges of transitioning from one program to another for both themselves and their child.

Time continues to be an important element to facilitate the family's adjustment after the child has entered the new program. Just like their children, families need to continue adjusting to the culture, structure, and requirements of the new program. Therefore, it is important for the new or receiving program to recognize that families need time to adequately adjust. It is equally important that families receive the supports they need during this important period in order to ensure that adequate adjustment can occur.

## Using Family Transition Outcomes

The delineation of specific desired family outcomes of transition can aid the field in more systematically increasing the effectiveness of transitions (Harbin et al., 2005; Rous et al., 2006). The identification of desired outcomes helps us to *move beyond* focusing solely on transition activities and paperwork. It assists us to develop, select, and use policies and practices that are directly linked to the desired outcomes. This is at the heart of the

evidence-based approach to accountability (Buysse & Wesley, 2006; Harbin et al., 2005). In this way, we can begin to see how diverse families benefit from (or don't benefit from) the implementation of specific policies and practices in the context of multiple levels and types of influence (Guralnick, 1997; Knapp, 1995; Rous, Harbin, & McCormick, 2006). The proposed Family Outcomes portion of the **Transition Conceptual Framework** can be useful to individuals at all levels of service delivery.

For *policy makers*, the **Transition Conceptual Framework** identifies critical areas to use in defining and measuring success. For example, state policy makers could encourage local programs to align their transition strategies and practices with the four family outcomes identified by this model. As part of their enhanced State Performance Plan (SPP), policy makers could explore the measurement of family experiences with, and outcomes of, transitions. State policy makers could develop policies that require transition planning to begin *no later than 9 months* prior to transition. Federal and/or state policy makers could fund special programs that develop a model in which transition planning begins at program entry and is done collaboratively, over time, by individuals from both the sending and potential receiving agencies. Finally, adequate evaluation of services and outcomes (accountability activities) is costly. Therefore, federal and state policy makers should explore ways to provide financial support to state and local agencies, in order to facilitate these important, yet costly, activities.

Instead of a haphazard approach to selecting transition activities for families and hoping for the best, *providers* can use the Family Outcomes portion of the **Transition Conceptual Framework** to become more systematic and strategic. Focusing on the four outcomes moves providers beyond the mindset of mechanically implementing the legal steps in the transition process. It alerts providers that for families to be successful, families must be empowered. They must possess sufficient knowledge and skills to adequately support their child, adapt appropriately to the new program, and meaningfully participate in decisions. For this to occur, providers would provide sufficient time and provide the necessary formal and informal supports for families to believe in, and act on, their capabilities. Finally, this suggests that to ensure effective transitions in particular, and successful interventions in general, providers would be wise to measure a broader array of family outcomes than those presently required by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), in the US Department of Education (Harbin et al., 2005). The *Family Benefits Inventory* (Harbin & Neal, 2003) is an example of a tool that can be used to measure family outcomes in four areas: knowledge, skills (which includes skills to facilitate their child's development and skills to participate in their child's program), well being (which includes self-efficacy), and community participation.

A critical task required of the *service coordinator* is the facilitation of transition planning. They too should go beyond the legal "mechanics" of the steps in the transition timeline and use practices that are designed to enable families to more competently, confidently, and meaningfully participate in transition planning. Successful transitions require more than "merely going through the steps" in the legally mandated process.

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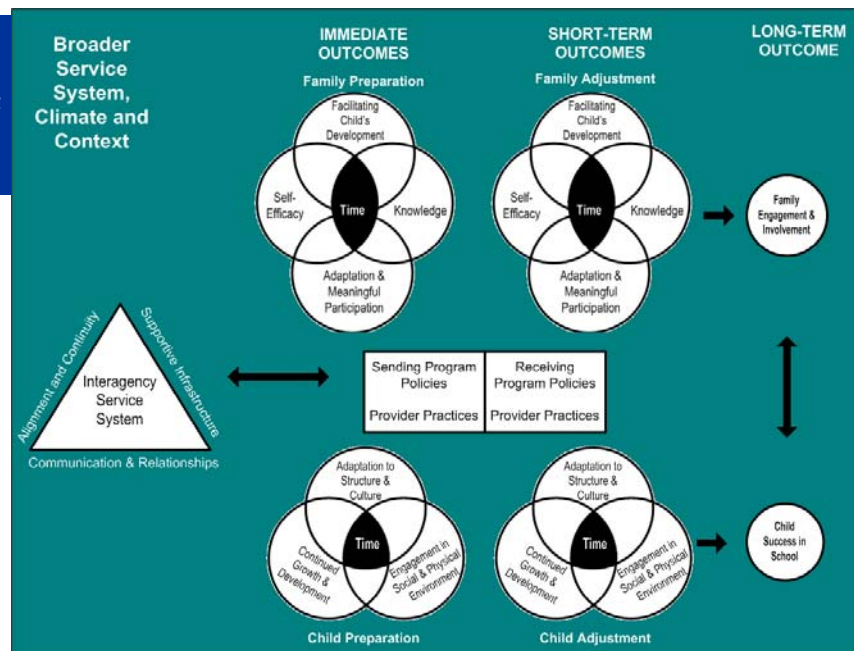
Equally important, the family outcomes model can be helpful to *families* as well. Knowledge of transition outcomes can empower families to understand the process, create expectations, and request the kind of support they need to achieve these outcomes and facilitate their child's transition. Finally, the Family Outcomes portion of the **Transition Conceptual Framework** provides a focus for *researchers*, as they design studies and interpret findings, in order to better understand the complex nature of the transition ecology, including the effects on children and families.

NECTC researchers have been using the **Transition Conceptual Framework** depicted in Figures 1— 4 to study the transition at "age 3" and the transition to "kindergarten" for children with disabilities and their families. As a result, and in collaboration with members of the National Advisory Board, NECTC researchers recognized the need to integrate the separate figures into a single more cohesive figure or picture of the factors influencing the process and outcomes of transition. Consequently, Figure 5 was constructed and includes the key organizational factors or elements in the transition process at the **local level** (i.e., the interagency service system, the policies of the sending and receiving programs, and the practices used by providers of the sending and receiving programs). In addition, Figure 5 indicates that these organizational or system factors influence: 1) the preparation of children and families for smooth transitions (immediate outcomes), 2) the adjustment of children and families to the new environment (short term outcomes), and 3) subsequent engagement and involvement of the family in the child's program and the child's ultimate success in school (long-term outcomes).

This **Transition Conceptual Framework** posits that both the sending and receiving programs have a role to play in facilitating both the preparation and adjustment of children and families. Figure 5 also depicts that the organizational factors as well as the child and family outcomes are embedded in, and influenced by, the broader community service system, climate and context (indicated by the shaded area). The findings from the NECTC studies and current use of the framework (Figure 5) by other researchers will address the validity and utility of not only the broader conceptual framework, but both the child and family outcome models as well. Ultimately, a sound conceptual framework of transition that includes a scholarly, yet

**Figure 5**  
**Transition Conceptual Framework and Child & Family Outcomes**

useful delineation of both child and family outcomes can contribute to improving the many transitions experienced by children and their families, thus enhancing the child's success in school.





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