

Supporting ELL Transitions in Early Education

By [*Karen N. Nemeth*](#)

A young child's experiences on the first day of school can set the stage for the whole school year and beyond. When that child is new to the language of the school, the adjustments are even more challenging. Careful attention to a young ELL's transition into your classroom, and then from your classroom to the next, can really make a difference for the child, the teacher, and the whole class. Here are some strategies and resources to turn transitions into opportunities for success. Though these suggestions are primarily for students in U.S. schools, most are still excellent suggestions for supporting the transitions of ELs in any academic context.

Get to Know the Child and Family

Head Start preschool programs arrange home visits for every child before they enter the program. This practice helps to build rapport with the whole family and gives the teachers valuable insight into the child's language and cultural background. Many U.S. school districts do some kind of home language survey. The most successful districts provide those surveys in any language needed by the family, then follow up with phone calls or visits to clarify the information on the form. They also take care to make sure each classroom teacher knows as much as possible about each child's language, culture, and prior school experiences as possible so classroom material and lesson plans can be prepared accordingly. If your school district doesn't provide these services, it is worth the extra effort to take these steps on your own.

Partner With Families to Ease Transitions

The more the family knows about what to expect at each transition, the greater help they can be preparing the child to move from one setting to the next with confidence. Parents also need to feel confident, respected, and welcome when they bring their child to your class and when they learn their child is moving to a new class or service. Keeping them informed and giving them opportunities to ask questions and express concerns are important strategies. (See Judie Haynes' August 2014 [blog](#) about creating a welcoming environment; that welcoming environment is a key factor in effective transitions, too.)

Understand Differences in Regulations and Policies Between the Programs

The first step in understanding transitions from preschool to kindergarten for ELLs is recognizing that these programs are likely to operate under entirely different rules, standards, and practices. Even in districts that operate preschool, there is often a serious disconnect between preschool practices and K–12 practices for ELLs. In some cases, a child may have been in full-day preschool but transition to a half-day kindergarten. In other cases, the preschool teacher may have worked tirelessly to build the Spanish-speaking child's English proficiency, only to have the child placed in a bilingual education program for kindergarten that is 90% in Spanish.

Almost no state has explicit regulations for bilingual education in preschool, but most states do have regulations that begin in kindergarten or first grade. [This report](#) (2012) by the Head Start's National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness shows what rules exist in each state.

This creates a great divide, because preschool programs are doing whatever they think is best and what they choose to do is not necessarily connected to whatever will happen in kindergarten.

Collaborate With Any Program That Will Be Sending ELLs to Your School

Elementary schools should get to know who is going to send their ELLs to kindergarten and work with those programs to help them get ELLs ready. This collaboration helps the preschool and helps the primary school. Many schools are not in the habit of meeting with local child care centers, preschools, or family child care homes. This is a missed opportunity, because, whether you work with them or not, they are still going to be sending children to your kindergarten. Working together can only make your job easier in the long run. Castro, Espinosa, and Páez (2011) review the research to describe what makes up a high quality preschool program for young ELLs, and learning about these practices will help you plan for smooth transitions to kindergarten.

Contact your local Head Start preschool programs. They may have already identified children who need English language development support and can support transitions by sharing information about their curriculum and encouraging the families to share information about their child's progress. Because Head Start programs are designed to serve children from low-income families, they have an even greater percentage of ELLs in their programs. Their federally funded resources provide a wealth of information, research, teaching strategies, and professional development resources about working effectively with young ELLs (Head Start uses the term “dual language learners.”) So, as much as you can help Head Start programs prepare their children to transition easily into kindergarten, Head Start can also offer assets that school districts may not have. Check out the [website](#) of the Head Start National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness.

Elementary school teachers and administrators may be unaware of all of the child care and preschool programs in their area. The best place to find potential partners is by contacting the local [Child Care Resource and Referral Agency](#) (CCR&R). Visit the National Child Care Aware [website](#) to find the agency in your area. In New Jersey, for example, there is a CCR&R in each county that receives state funding to keep a detailed database on every licensed child care center or preschool and every approved family child care home.

Work with the CCR&R to put you in contact with every program that may be caring for children before they come to your school. Invite them in to learn about your kindergarten entrance process for ELLs, your kindergarten curriculum, and your standards. Learn more about the curriculum approaches and learning activities that preschool ELLs are exposed to. Collaborate on shared professional development opportunities. Create a system for transferring information about each child, such as a portfolio of their work or the pages of their family story scrapbook. Share resources such as translated materials and interpreters.

Ideally, every school district will invite all of the local child care providers—including Head Start, chains, private programs, faith based programs and family child care home providers—to discuss, collaborate, and plan together. Compromises can be reached. Resources can be shared. Policies can be adjusted. Common goals can be established. Adding families to these partnerships is the best way to ensure each child will be well-served as they move from program to program or class to class. If these partnerships are not happening in your area, you may be able to accomplish some of these goals by participating in local chapters of professional associations. Look for the local

affiliate of the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) or the [National Head Start Association](#) to get to know the early childhood professionals in your community and talk informally about shared issues and interests.

Prepare Children for Each Transition

Every child deserves the respect of being told when change is about to happen, and every child deserves sufficient support to make that change manageable. Let the child visit the new setting and meet the adults and children. Rehearse the transition. Use pictures and videos to let children know what to expect. Be prepared for young children to reveal their discomfort during transitions through their behavior rather than with words. Look for signs of stress and offer support before that stress starts to affect the child's behavior in a negative way. With planning, communication, and collaboration, transitions can become opportunities for learning and growth.

References

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Resources

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