



Four Important Things to Know About the Transition to School

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The transition to school is a rite of passage in the lives of children and their families. For children, it means meeting new teachers and friends, adapting to a different and often larger hustling and bustling environment, and adjusting to new rules and expectations. For families, the transition to school can bring about feelings of happiness, sadness, and worry.¹

We, at Harvard Family Research Project, define transition as a process—not just a one-time event—that begins during children’s preschool years and continues into and through 3rd grade. Keep in mind that transition is also a time when children begin to take part in an increasing number of learning settings, both in and out of school. Below we highlight four important things research tells us about the transition to school.

1 Transition is a Matter of Equity

Transition is an equity issue. Studies have shown that upon kindergarten entry, children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds begin school with higher average achievement scores in comparison with children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.² These preparation gaps can be explained, in part, by families from low-income households having less access to high-quality preschool opportunities, fewer resources, less social support, and higher family stress than families from high-income households.

One of the most exciting research findings is that transition activities can shield children from these risk factors. Put differently, children and families with increased social and economic risk benefit *the most* from transition activities.³ In this way, kindergarten transition might be a very important tool in reducing preparation gaps across income groups. Unfortunately, there are inequities in transition practices. Low-income families, who are the most in need of transition services, are the least likely to receive them.⁴

In this issue of the [FINE Newsletter](#), we highlight three programs in high-risk school districts that are working to address these inequalities. [Comienza en Casa](#), a program in Maine that works with migrant families, supports families in engaging in their children’s learning through innovative uses of technology. [Bridges to Success](#), an initiative in California, brings together families, schools, and communities throughout one county to share responsibility for the transition to school in a variety of ways. And [Iridescent](#), a national science education nonprofit, engages underserved

KINDERGARTNERS BY THE NUMBERS

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in the 2010-11 school year, approximately 4 million students were in kindergarten in the United States. Here’s what we know:

Children entering kindergarten come from diverse demographic backgrounds⁵

- 53% White
- 24% Hispanic
- 13% Black
- 4% Asian
- 6% Other

Many incoming families are impacted by poverty⁶

- 26% of kindergartners lived in households that were below the federal poverty threshold

Children vary in their prekindergarten experiences. In 2012⁷

- 48% of kindergartners were not enrolled in any preschool program
- 27% of kindergartners were enrolled in part-day programs
- 26% of kindergartners had attended full-time prekindergarten and preschool programs

children and families in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) project-based learning into and throughout the early elementary school years.

2 A Smooth Transition to School Makes a Difference for Children’s Outcomes

A smooth transition to school—one in which children come to make new friends and understand and follow the rules and academic expectations of the classroom—can increase the likelihood of children’s positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes in years to come. While for many children the transition to school is a smooth process, for others it is a difficult and stressful period.⁸ When children are part of a quality transition process, they have an easier time and enjoy:

- Improved academic achievement⁹
- More positive social and emotional competencies and fewer problem behaviors¹⁰
- Rapidly developing skills¹¹

Quality transitions are those in which families, schools, and communities have opportunities to work together as a team, to share information, and to create continuity in curriculum, assessments, and relationship quality across learning settings.¹²



3 Families Play an Important Role in the Transition to School

During the transition to school, children take part in an increasing number of settings. For example, children might leave a preschool, family child care provider, or the home to participate in a kindergarten classroom, and maybe an afterschool program or new community classes, too. The one constant across the transition is the family, and for this reason, families have an important responsibility in providing children with stability, comfort, and a sense of what to expect. Research suggests families can do this in a variety of ways:

- Engage in activities such as telling stories; doing puzzles and playing math, and science games; and singing songs.¹³ These activities prepare children for the demands of kindergarten.
- Impart the value of a “growth mindset” that emphasizes practice and persistence in order to perform well in school. Kindergarten offers new challenges, and children are better prepared when they understand that effort matters.¹⁴
- Foster relationships with children and convey acceptance of anxious feelings they may have about the transition.¹⁵



- Align daily family routines and sleep schedules with kindergarten expectations for continuity between home and school.¹⁶
- Involve kindergarten children in structured activities outside of school, such as participation in clubs and music, which are shown to improve academic outcomes.¹⁷

The transition to kindergarten can also be a stressful time for parents, who might worry about a variety of topics—from how their child will do in the new school setting to logistics of transportation and afterschool care.¹⁸ It is thus imperative that early childhood programs, schools, and community organizations provide information and guidance early on.

4 It's all About Relationships – Among Families, Early Childhood Programs, Schools, and Communities

During transitions, partnerships among families, schools, and communities come to be even more essential than they might be during other stages of children's development.¹⁹ In elementary schools, contact with families typically becomes less individual, more regulated, and increasingly driven by the school. Because of this, families' connections to the school often undergo a shift, and family engagement can begin to fade.²⁰ To avoid this dwindling of family involvement and to promote continuous family engagement, schools and their community partners can address parents' informational needs. Parents of incoming kindergarteners report needing guidance about:

- Kindergarten expectations and curriculum,
- Their child's academic status at school entry,
- School's efforts to prepare for transition, and
- What parents themselves can do to get children better prepared.²¹



By sharing with families the information they seek, and engaging families in varied ways, early childhood programs, schools and communities can make certain that families are better able to do their part in ensuring their children's smooth transition, and school achievement.²² Schools and community-based organizations can also take the initiative to promote children's learning outside the classroom and facilitate family access to afterschool offerings, museums, libraries, and sports and arts programs.

CONCLUSION

Strong family–school–community relationships across the transition are important for children's success. They are also important for maintaining and bolstering families' continuous engagement, which is linked to improved student outcomes.²³ It is not a given that family engagement needs to fall off during the

transition to school; in fact, evidence shows that many parents increase their level of school involvement during this time.²⁴

We invite you to read more about how programs are putting innovative transition practices into place in our current [FINE Newsletter](#). And be on the lookout over the following months as we further explore how policy and teacher preparation can support the transition to kindergarten.

ABOUT HFRP

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a leading national organization whose purpose is to shape 21st-century education by connecting the critical areas of student learning. Our focus is on anywhere, anytime learning approaches that extend from early childhood through college and connect families, schools, out-of-school time programs, and digital media. We build strategic partnerships with policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders to generate new thinking, stimulate innovation, and promote continuous improvement in education policy, practice, and evaluation. Our research and tools provide timely, relevant, and practical information for decision making. Addressing issues of access and equity in children's learning and identifying meaningful, effective family engagement practices that reinforce success for all children are central to our work.

A number of research articles, many using data from the U.S. Department of Education's [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study](#), Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K), have informed our thinking about the transition to school. Access the [references](#) in this article in alphabetical order.

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