

Excerpted from Chapter 1 of **Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools**

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## **MODELS OF TRANSITION**

Children's transition into kindergarten can be considered in a variety of ways. To understand the approach to transition described in this volume, it is useful to describe other models of transition. Four ways to think about transition are 1) a *skills only model* that targets children's skills as the key influence on school adjustment, 2) an *environmental input model*, in which children's skills at any given time are influenced by their experiences in key settings, 3) a *linked environments model* that, building on the others, recognizes the importance of connections across settings (e.g., relationships between parents and preschool providers), and 4) a *developmental model* of transition, which incorporates all of the elements of the prior models, emphasizes connections and linkages across settings over time, and also informs our approach. (See Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2001, for a fuller discussion of these models.)

The following presentation of the models of transition is not an academic exercise removed from the reality of practices and experiences—it is a useful tool that reflects them. The description of each model presents quotations from interviews we conducted with parents, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals connected with transition planning. The quotations offer a glimpse into the ways that these different people experience transition and the ideas that guide their work.

### **Skills Only Model**

The *skills only model* is a child-focused perspective that views the transition to kindergarten in terms of the abilities and skills the child brings with him or her on the first day of school (see Figure 1.1). School adjustment is understood in terms of child characteristics, such as readiness and level of maturation.

*"You start seeing behavior problems and adjustment problems in preschool. Sometimes at the start of kindergarten, it can still be just a maturity issue, but if it is a maturity issue, then at the end of kindergarten and the beginning of first grade they get over it."*

Furthermore, in this model, children's problems in school may not be viewed as related to their transition experiences. Transition, in this case, is narrowly defined:

*"This child doesn't have any problems with transition even though she has other issues, academic issues that I see, but not transition issues."*

Although children's skills and abilities do indeed play a role in their adjustment to school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Christian, Morrison, & Bryant, 1998), their skills and abilities do not account for the majority of individual differences in children's school adjustment (LaParo & Pianta, 1998; Pianta & McCoy, 1997). For example, measures of children's academic and cognitive abilities and skills in preschool account for less than 30% of the differences in these skills among children once they enter kindergarten. Measurements of the social skills valued by kindergarten teachers as signs of adjustment correspond even less in preschool and kindergarten. Thus, understanding transition outcomes requires focusing on influences on school outcomes beyond characteristics of the child.

### **Environmental Input Model**

The *environmental input model* describes experiences in a variety of social settings as contributing to children's skills and adjustment at any given time (see Figure 1.2). Input from experiences with family, peers, school, and community settings affect the child's skills. For example, peer relationships and classroom characteristics, such as class size and classroom quality, influence the child's performance (Graue, 1999; Howes, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987). Many people who agree with this model of transition believe that social experiences outside of school (e.g., whether a parent reads to the child, teaches him or her letters, or shows the child how to tie a shoe) can affect how a child adjusts to school.

School adjustment is viewed as a function of the structure and emotional climate of the classroom. Positive teacher qualities, a clear structure, and older peers serving as buddies can help children's transition to the new environment:

*"Having nurturing qualities in teachers is what really helps any kid get used to school as a first-time experience."*

*"Setting limits and having a routine for them are important."*

*"I try to keep my schedule exactly the same, and if I can do that for them, then they're fine."*

What is missing from this model is an emphasis on experiences over time and how different settings are connected to one another. The teachers quoted here do not see transition and school adjustment as interrelated processes. For them, the adjustment to school pertains strictly to what happens in the kindergarten classroom and not to the

child's family relationships or previous experiences. These teachers understand transition as occurring only within this setting, and they do not connect this context with other contexts, such as the home environment or preschool experiences. Nor are contexts viewed as interacting over time. For example, this teacher does not see parental factors as related to children's adjustment:

*"I don't think the parent's expectations really have a lot to do with how well the kids [make the] transition. Those are just parent issues that they have sometimes coming from certain situations, but that doesn't really make a difference to me at least with how the kids do."*

### **Linked Environments Model**

The *linked environments model* includes the ways in which connections between key settings or people in key settings in the child's life (e.g., the parents' comfort and communication with the preschool teacher) can affect the child's adjustment. In the linked environments model, children's skills; experiences with family, peers, schools, and the community; and the connections among people and settings all influence school adjustment at a given time (see Figure 1.3). For example, family involvement indirectly influences children's school success. Strong connections between families and schools are linked with positive child outcomes beyond any direct effect the families or the schools have on children (Epstein, 1996; Reynolds, 1989). Although this model considers the interactions of multiple relationships surrounding the child, it regards these relationships as static rather than as developing over time.

Whereas some kindergarten teachers do not identify previous experiences and family background as contributing to children's school adjustment, others believe that positive family environments, preschool, and other structured experiences contribute to a successful transition. If children lack these experiences or face emotional challenges, teachers often feel that the adjustment to kindergarten may be a problem:

*"Just the fact that they are in a preschool and doing something and not doing whatever they might do at home — at least they're being exposed to books one year earlier."*

*"I find the hardest children to deal with here in the classroom are those who are able to run free at home, who don't have the structure, and whose parents don't have control."*

*"The ones that have the biggest problems are the ones that haven't had a routine, and don't know what that is to have some expectations."*

These teachers mention the importance of parent attitude and involvement in promoting children's adjustment. Parents' comfort level influences the transition for children:

*"Parents' attitude plays a big part. If a parent doesn't want the child to come, it really plays on the child."*

*"The parents' perception of school, if they like school, if they are comfortable here, makes a big difference [to the child's transition]. They are just more at ease, and that goes back to their children and their children are more at ease here."*

*"Having the feeling that they're welcome at school and comfortable in the school and not intimidated and more willing to work together [are important]."*

### **Developmental Model**

The *developmental model* incorporates all of the components of these three perspectives and adds the important dimension of time, a critical aspect of the transition process. This model is described as developmental because it emphasizes change and development over time in the key features and experiences that affect children's adjustment to kindergarten. Child, family, school, peer, and community factors are interconnected and interdependent with one another not only at a given time but throughout the transition process (see Figure 1.4). Based on Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) bioecological model and Pianta and Walsh's (1996) contextual systems model, the developmental model considers the key changes in relationships among the child, school, family, and community as the child moves from prekindergarten experiences to formal schooling. Rather than understanding a child's transition solely in terms of his or her skills or the influences on those skills at any given time, this perspective emphasizes how the connections and relationships that support the child develop over time.

When transition practices and plans foster positive relationships, they support the child's successful school adjustment. This model provides a framework for thinking about these relationships and generating ideas about which relationships to foster and how to develop them. Specifically, relationships between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers, among peers, and between families and schools can serve as a bridge from preschool to kindergarten and foster children's adjustment. The developmental model of transition results in transition plans that help schools reach out to families before school starts, help communities foster links between preschools and kindergartens, and promote personal connections before the first day of school. In these ways, this model is consistent with the National Education Goals Panel's (1998) first goal that children will start school ready to learn and that schools will be ready for children.

The transition process is multifaceted and varies greatly from school to school. It depends on the perceptions of parents and teachers and their beliefs regarding the factors important to helping children adjust to kindergarten. Fundamentally, transition is a *process* that involves four facets: ready schools, community participation and support, family knowledge and involvement, and preschools and child care settings committed to preparing children. The goal of this transition approach is to facilitate an ongoing relationship-building process among all partners. In developing, designing, and implementing transition plans in communities and districts, we use a set of guiding principles to inform our work. These principles are derived from the way we think about transition and the available evidence of what makes a successful transition for children, families, and schools.