

Getting Ready for Preschool

A Parent Guide to Transition



- Clare Taylor Friedman
- Deborah Chen
- Gail Calvello



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PAIVI

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Dedication

This guide is dedicated to the families who participated in the original Parents and Visually Impaired Infants (PAVII) Project. We thank them for welcoming us into their homes and for teaching us how parents and young children live and learn together. We also acknowledge the many contributions of children, families, friends, and colleagues involved in the original PAVII Project and of those involved in this second edition, PAIVI: Parents and Their Infants With Visual Impairments.

A Message to Families

This booklet is written specifically for and to parents and families to address concerns about the transition from early intervention to preschool services. This is an emotional and challenging period for families as they encounter changes in service agencies, changes in the ways services are provided, and learn about the new system. These changes require careful preparation on the parts of both service providers and parents.

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Getting Ready for Preschool



Parents of infants and preschoolers with visual impairments share a set of unexpected roles and challenges. These include increased medical intervention, new terminology, helping your child learn during home and family activities, selecting programs that meet your child's learning needs, and advocating for your child. This booklet provides tips to prepare for the transition from early intervention to preschool services and guidelines for evaluation and selection of a preschool for your child. As a parent, you will find yourself embarking on a series of program planning decisions for your child. You will have the benefit of input from family, friends, and professionals, but the final decisions are up to you.

Considerations About the Transition to Preschool

As a parent, you will approach your child's transition to preschool with your heart (emotional level) as well as your head (cognitive/logistical level). In your decisionmaking process, you must clarify priorities and evaluate options. There are no "right" answers.

Cognitive/Logistical Concerns

- What kind of program do you want?
- What are your priorities?
- Is the program appropriate?
- Is the child eligible?
- Does the child have the necessary prerequisite skills?

Emotional Concerns

- Is 3 years old too young for school?
- If the school is not in our neighborhood, will my child be safe on a school bus?
- Can I trust the classroom staff?
- What will I do while my child is at school?

Your cognitive and logistical concerns are your information needs. The emotional level is much more basic and more complex. In many ways, your heart will control how you use information and how and when you choose to get your child ready for school. You need to be able to trust program personnel and to feel "ready" to allow them to share in teaching and caring for the child. Program transitions can be exciting and difficult times for parents.

Choosing a learning environment for any preschool child requires careful consideration. When the child is visually impaired, it is particularly challenging. There are few children with visual impairments and far fewer children who are totally blind; you may have never met anyone with a child "like" yours. Your family's values, your child's personality and needs, as well as the resources and characteristics of the local community, must be taken into account.

Preschool Programs are Different From Early Intervention Programs

Your child may have been in an infant/toddler or early intervention program. If so, you will find that the nature of your child's program and your role will be somewhat different when your child enters preschool. Often, parents have become very attached to early intervention service providers and involved in the program itself. Transition to a preschool program means leaving the security and relationships established with the early intervention program and service providers.

Develop a list of questions to ask your service provider about your child's transition process from early intervention services to a preschool program.

Types of Questions to Ask Your Early Intervention Service Providers

1. When must we leave our early intervention program?
2. How old must my child be to enroll in a preschool class?
3. What preschool classes are available that will address my child's learning needs?
4. Will I be able to visit them? If so, when can I do so?
5. What types of assessments will my child receive to determine eligibility for special education services in preschool?
6. What types of services will my child need and how do I obtain them?
7. What should we do to prepare my child for the new preschool class?
8. What should we do to help the new preschool teacher and staff understand my child's learning needs?

Differences in Preschool Programs Compared to Early Intervention Services

Child-centered focus: In early intervention, the program emphasis is family-centered. The preschool program emphasis shifts from a family-centered focus to a more child-centered focus that reflects your child's changing educational needs. This shift is evident in the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) when your

child enters preschool compared to the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) that was developed and used during early intervention.

Parent participation: Your time commitments to the preschool program will usually be less than in the early intervention program. Many preschools welcome parents to participate in the classroom, but you may find that you enjoy having time for yourself.

Separation from the child: You may not have spent much time away from your child before he or she begins preschool. In the beginning, this separation may be difficult for both of you.

Communication: Because you may not receive home visits or frequent contacts with service providers, communication and contact with teachers and other service providers through notes, e-mails, text messages, and phone calls will become more important.

Special Education: Whether or not your child has been in an early intervention program, entering a preschool with special education services is an acknowledgement of your child's learning needs and may be a challenging time.

Preparation

Prepare a file of your child's records. Include medical reports, immunizations, progress reports, summaries from service providers, assessment reports, Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP), and so forth. Request copies of any reports that you need, and ask questions about anything that needs clarification.

Learn about your legal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 related to your child's education. This is discussed more under "Your Child's Educational Rights" on page 9. In addition, you have a right to participate on the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, to access your child's records, to consent or not consent to services, and to request a due process hearing for disagreements. Websites provide up-to-date information, for example, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) (www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep) and Wrightslaw (www.wrightslaw.com).

Find out about your school district's policies and procedures related to the IEP process and timelines. This is usually available on the Internet.

Develop a short description of your child (strengths, interests, motivators, learning needs, and your concerns and goals for him or her).

Make Use of Expert Input

You may have “expert” input from professionals (e.g., teachers with certification in visual impairment and your child’s learning needs) available to you. This will be most useful if you remember that you are the expert on your child, you know the child best, and you will make the final decisions regarding him or her. You are an equal member of the team of experts in developing your child’s educational program, and your child will not be assessed for or receive special educational services without your consent.

Input from service providers and other professionals during the transition process is most helpful if it is based on knowledge of

- your child,
- the classrooms under consideration, and
- the teaching styles of the individual teachers.

You should weigh this input against your own observations and family values.

Other parents can provide “expert” input based on their own experiences. It can be helpful to talk to parents whose children have similar needs and who have been through the transition process. Parents of other children may be able to respond to your questions or concerns about programs. However, each child and family is unique.

Gather as much information as you can from all sources. This will enable you to make better decisions about your child’s unique educational needs and program options.

Educational Options

There are different options for your child to receive special education services depending on where you live:

- Full inclusion classes (e.g., Head Start, and state funded and private preschools) that promote education for children with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) within the general education classroom

- Specialized instruction for children with visual impairments that is provided in separate classes

Many programs may reflect a combined or blended approach. You must decide which approach is more compatible with your values and beliefs as well as the “least restrictive environment” based on your child’s learning needs.

Timelines

Contact your local school district for information on their programs and referral to private programs. Many school districts serve preschool-aged children (3–5 years old). It is important to refer your child to the local school district four to six months before his or her third birthday in order to guarantee sufficient time for planning and placement. You can call or write to refer your child; the district will then send you information about the evaluation procedures to identify your child’s specific educational needs and the form requesting your consent to evaluate the child. Once you have signed and returned the parent consent form, the school district has a limited time in which to complete your child’s assessment. Federal IDEA regulations provide a 60-day period, but your state may have a different timeline. After the assessment, the school district sends an invitation letter to schedule an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. Within 30 days after the child has been found eligible for services, the IEP is developed at a meeting with you. During this meeting, the child’s goals for the year are developed. The child’s preschool placement will be determined by the IEP, and services should begin as soon as possible.

In order to be an informed consumer, you may want to visit programs in other communities that serve children with similar needs, as well as local programs that are potential schools for your child.

Learning Environment

You know your child’s characteristics, areas of strength, and areas of need. You will evaluate all classrooms within this context. Although children’s needs vary widely, there are some basic elements you might consider. The following are key indicators of quality programs for young children with visual impairments:

- Carefully-planned individual and small group instruction
- Hands-on, age-appropriate learning experiences involving real objects
- Explanations of environmental sounds
- Lighting that makes use of a child's residual vision (if any)
- Structured teaching that respects the child's needs and abilities
- Language that gives information, promotes communication, and provides a model for the child's own language development
- Special instruction in moving around safely (also known as "orientation and mobility")
- Consistency between home and school teaching methods and classroom expectations

Family Factors

An important part of selecting a preschool for your child is to outline family and cultural values. Begin by asking yourself these questions:

1. Do I want my child to attend a specific preschool or one with a particular approach? (If so, you need to determine how your child's special needs could be met in that setting).
2. What level of parent participation do I want? How involved do I want to be in my child's school program?
3. What specific skills or concepts do I want my child to learn in preschool?
4. How will my child travel to school and home?
5. Do I want my child to receive specialized services that address visual impairments?
6. Do I want my child to attend school with a particular peer group (e.g., neighbors, Spanish speaking, non-disabled, visually impaired)?

Child Factors

You must also consider the characteristics and needs of your child. Some factors are related directly to the child's visual impairment, and some are part of any child's individuality.

1. What is the nature and degree of your child's functional vision?
2. Does your child have additional impairments?
3. Is your child developmentally delayed compared to peers with visual impairments?
Compared to sighted peers?
4. What are your child's areas of strength?
5. What are your child's learning needs? Consider these developmental areas:
concept development, social skills, communication, and physical abilities.
6. What are your child's needs related to orientation and mobility?
7. What sort of learning environment will benefit your child? (highly structured and predictable, loosely structured and flexible)?
8. What is your child's primary mode of learning (hearing, sight, touch)?

School District Factors

The availability of specialized services varies according to (a) the population of the area, (b) the Special Education philosophy, and (c) the district personnel with expertise in working with preschoolers who are visually impaired.

1. Ask your local school district for a statement of philosophy regarding service delivery to preschoolers with special needs. This philosophy should be reflected in the classroom practices and activities.
2. Find out if your child will have a peer group with similar educational needs.
3. Ask what personnel with specialized expertise are available in the district (both classroom teachers and support personnel).
4. Visit preschool classrooms in the district. Evaluate the specific preschools for both

- positive aspects and weaknesses. Consider visiting the resource or itinerant teacher of the older children to identify prerequisite skills needed in that setting.
5. Ask if your child will be evaluated using tests developed specifically for children with visual impairments. Find out whether the school district personnel have experience in assessing children with visual impairments.

Your Child's Educational Rights

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law passed in 1975 that guarantees a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). P.L. 108–446, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, is currently the most recent reauthorization of the law.

Assessment (Evaluation)

1. You must be notified in writing that your child will be tested. This notification should include the reason for the evaluation, the tests to be used, and the date and time when your child will be evaluated.
2. You must give your permission in writing for the evaluation to take place.
3. More than one test should be used.
4. Tests that are valid for your child (that is, ones developed for use with children similar to yours) must be used.
5. The individual who administers the tests must be qualified to administer the tests and experienced in working with children with visual impairments as well as children of preschool age.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

1. The meeting to develop the IEP should be scheduled at a time you can attend.
2. The IEP must contain the following components:
 - A statement of your child's eligibility for special education and related

services.

- Your child's present level of performance: What your child can do, his or her strengths, and learning style. For preschoolers, as appropriate, how the disability affects the child's participation in preschool activities and curriculum.
- Measurable annual goals: What the team expects your child to achieve during the year. The team should describe what the child will do and meet the child's learning needs that result from his or her disability, enabling the child to be involved in the general education curriculum.
- How the child's progress toward annual goals will be measured and when reports on the child's progress will be provided.
- Description of special education and related services and supplementary aids: These include supplementary classroom instruction (e.g., physical therapy, speech, orientation and mobility) and program supports that your child will receive.
- Projected dates for beginning services and modifications, anticipated frequency, location, and duration of services: Frequency and amount of time that your child will receive services (e.g., orientation and mobility once a week for 30 minutes).
- Educational placement: The most appropriate setting in the least restrictive environment (that is, as much as possible in general education classes) for your child must be determined based on your child's goals and objectives. The IEP must explain the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with children without disabilities in general education classes and activities.

3. Special factors that must be considered:

- Positive behavior supports to address behaviors that impede learning
- Accommodations for the child's limited English proficiency, including alternative language services and/or instruction in a language other than English
- Instruction in braille and the use of braille in reading and writing if the child is visually impaired

Language and special communication considerations

- Assistive technology devices and services

4. Your signature on the IEP indicates that you participated in the process. You may specify your disagreement with any part of the IEP.

Legislation and Research

Parents have certain legal rights related to their child's special education services as you have discovered during your participation in your child's early intervention services. In 2004, P.L. 108–446, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) reauthorized early intervention services with the following improvements: (a) there is a focus on evidence-based intervention practices derived from "scientifically based research," (b) states are permitted to extend early intervention services from 36 months until a child enters kindergarten, and (c) supports are required for a child's transition from early intervention (Part C) to preschool services so that parents may request that the Part C coordinator or others be invited to the initial IEP meeting.

A national study¹ on the transition process from early intervention to preschool and from preschool to kindergarten has identified practices that programs can implement to support families and children as they change programs. These include the following:

1. Family participation in meetings [e.g., Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meetings, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and transition conferences]
2. Sharing information with families by introducing staff of the receiving school at IEP meeting
3. Offering workshops designed to familiarize families with the IEP and relevant terminology (e.g., PLAAFP stands for "present level of academic achievement and functional performance")
4. Allowing family and child visits to programs, staff visits between sending and receiving programs, and home visits by the receiving program
5. Providing an orientation meeting for families before beginning the new program
6. Providing families with transition packets or handbooks; community resources and

support groups regarding transitions

7. Creating specific strategies for the child, such as visiting the new classroom, or looking at pictures of the school bus

As a parent, you may request invitations for specific people to attend the initial IEP meeting for your child, and ask about meetings and visits that will help you and your child transition from one program to another.

Sending and receiving programs can facilitate the transition by building a strong family-professional partnership, planning carefully, and sharing information. In this way, changes are easier for families to understand and more comfortable for the child to experience.

¹Rous, B., Myers, C. T., & Stricklin, S. B. (2007). Strategies for supporting transitions of young children with special needs and their families. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 30, 1-18.

Suggested Resources

A Parents' Guide to Special Education for Children With Visual Impairments by Susan LaVenture, Editor. (2007). New York: AFB Press.

Designing and Implementing Effective Early Childhood Transition Processes developed by the National Early Childhood Transition Initiative. (2008). Available from www.nectac.org/~pdfs/topics/transition/ECTransitionPaper.pdf

Reach for the Stars...Planning for the Future: A Process for Planning Positive Transitions for Young Children With Disabilities by Diane Haynes & Jennifer Grisham-Brown. (2012). Louisville, KY: American Printing House for the Blind.

Selecting a Program: A Guide for Parents of Infants and Preschoolers With Visual Impairments by Deborah Chen & Mary Ellen McCann. (1993). Los Angeles: Blind Childrens Center.

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep/index.html
U.S. Department of Education website on special education legislation and requirements.

Wrightslaw www.wrightslaw.com

Resource on special education law and advocacy.



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