



## PRESCHOOL TO PUBLIC SCHOOL: Preparing for the Transition

As the parent of a preschooler who has a disability, you may feel anxious about the move to kindergarten. This transition from home or preschool to public school is a big step, so it understandably causes you and your child some fear, as well as excitement. The best thing you can do to help your child make the change is to get yourself prepared. Then you can relax and concentrate on easing the way for your child.

Early childhood educators and experienced parents suggest beginning preparations when your child is three-and-a-half to four years old. You want to plan well enough in advance that you won't feel rushed.

### Getting Information

Some of these suggestions will take time-learning the laws, for instance. And you may find that you want to do other steps more than once, like talking with school personnel. Keep track of your meetings and correspondence; a written record of your activities may be helpful later.

1. Find out about laws and regulations that affect children with disabilities. Call the Division of Special Services at (207)624-6650, and ask for a copy of the Maine Special Education Regulations, Chapter 101 or Maine Parent Federation at 1-800-870-7746.
2. Contact the special education director and other school personnel. Ask to meet them, one at a time, to talk about available services and placements.
3. To get specific ideas about the kindergarten program, ask for a copy of the curriculum and look for areas that match your child's strengths and those that may need special attention. Visit kindergarten classes to see the routines and activities. Some things to look for are:
  - how long the children stay in one group, how much independence they show, how often they talk out or move about;
  - the physical arrangement of the room;
  - the work they're doing; and
  - where the program may need to be modified for your child's participation.

It's a good idea to observe in the fall so you can see **new** kindergartners.

#### 4. Get ideas from other people:

- Meet with your child's preschool team to discuss concerns they have.
- Talk to other parents who have been through the transition.
- Attend meetings for all parents of children entering kindergarten.
- Ask the kindergarten teacher for suggestions.

### **Sharing Information**

The school personnel need to hear from you about your child-his or her past experiences, special relationships, and strengths and needs, if they are going to provide an appropriate education for him or her. You can make sure that when you and the rest of the team are planning your child's education, the members are aware of your child as an individual, whole person.

1. Think about your hopes for your child, for kindergarten and well into the future. Make a list of long-term goals you would like to see your child achieve; then write the skills he or she will need to learn in order to reach them. This exercise can help prepare you for the first Individualized Education Program (IEP) you'll participate in writing.
2. Invite the special education director and other school personnel to get to know your child. Ask them to observe in the preschool or to visit your home. Talk with them about your child's likes and dislikes and your family's values and goals. You may also want to share your fears and dreams for your child. Encourage them to ask you questions and share their concerns.
3. If they do not already exist, you might suggest that the school offer certain activities and set specific policies to ease the transition for all children entering kindergarten:
  - Have a "Move-up Day" in the Spring for incoming kindergarteners to visit.
  - Develop written, systemwide guidelines for the transition.
  - Make a handbook for all parents of children with special needs.
  - Hold Pupil Evaluation Team meetings in the spring before kindergarten.
  - Offer informal meetings with all parents to share concrete information and to answer questions about programs and practices.
  - Create a team that meets throughout the year to monitor the success of a child's special education program.

## Preparing for the Pupil Evaluation Team

In the spring before your child is entering kindergarten, congratulate yourself for getting some of the hardest work out of the way early. The purpose of the first **Pupil Evaluation Team (PET)** meeting is either to determine if your child needs special education or other accommodations to write an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**, which becomes part of his or her curriculum in kindergarten. It will be much easier for you if you are not meeting all the professionals and learning about the special education process for the very first time.

1. **Collect** all the information you want to share at the meeting. It's best to write down what you want to say, because it's easy to forget when you're in a group.
2. **Call** the special education director and ask who will be at the meeting and if you can get an agenda ahead of time. Let him or her know who will attend with you, and that you will want time to contribute, too.
3. **Ask** the preschool team again for their input.
4. **Take good care** of yourself. Eat well; get enough exercise and rest. Play with your family and friends. Remember, all the work you've done will pay off for your child.

## Working on the Team

You are an equal member of this team. Although your role and the professionals' roles are different, they are equally important. They have experience and knowledge of special education programs; you have experience and knowledge of your child. The relationship should be a give-and-take of information. You tell them what you know, and they share information with you.

1. **Bring** someone with you take notes or ask the school if they mind you tape-recording the meeting.
2. **Ask** to be introduced to everyone; introduce those who are with you.
3. **Listen** to what the school staff suggests for programs and/or placements for your child, then share the goals and objectives you brought with you. The IEP can be written and agreed upon based on the two sets of information.
4. **Bring** your special education regulations with you and ask for reasons and support in the regulations, if you have any concerns.
5. **Ask** that another meeting be scheduled if time runs out and the team still has work to do.

6. **Ask** for a written summary of the meeting, if there is one, if one isn't offered to you before you leave. **Compare** your notes with the summary to see that all major points are included. **Discuss** with the group any questions you may have regarding the written notes. When you receive your copy of the minutes of the meeting, let the special education director know right away if they are incomplete or incorrect.

### **Keeping in Touch**

The relationship between school and home is a long-term one, so you want to maintain good communication. As in other relationships, this takes time, effort, and good intent. Problems make occur, but solutions can be found if everyone works at it.

1. Show the school that you want to be involved in your child's education:  
Be positive. Be visible. Be available.
2. Join the school's parent group (PTA, PTO, or PTG).
3. Make a plan with the teacher on how you will keep in touch and how often.
4. Use phone calls and notes to share information informally. Pass on good news, too. If you have important questions or concerns, write letters.

### **Helping Your Child Prepare**

During the summer, involve your child in activities and conversations that will encourage a positive feeling about the new school. Sometimes you may do this directly, by answering questions or reading a particular book; at other times by fostering confidence and independence in everyday practices.

1. **Help your child feel good about going to kindergarten:**
  - Discuss school in positive terms. Be consistent in your expectations.
  - Keep regular routines going, i.e., meals and bedtime.
  - Tell your child that you love him or her. Express your approval.
2. **Encourage independence in your child:**
  - Assign responsibilities, like getting dressed and making the bed.
  - Encourage your child to work out small disagreements independently.
  - Arrange playtimes at other children's homes.
3. **Provide your child with opportunities to examine behaviors:**
  - Teach what you expect for acceptable behaviors.
  - Patiently explain why certain behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate.
  - Be consistent with rules and clear with consequences.
  - Give praise often. Guide your child toward self-discipline.
  - Expect and model good examples of reasonableness.

## Differences between Preschool and Kindergarten

The change from home or preschool to public school will mean a child and family have to make adjustments, and this may cause uncertainty. It is true that change may not always be pleasant, but it isn't necessarily bad, either. Parents and professionals will sometimes disagree or fail to understand one another, and this can jeopardize a good working relationship. Knowing ahead of time what some of the differences and their causes are may help you to prepare for them.

<b>Program</b>	<u><b>Preschool</b></u>	<u><b>Public School</b></u>
	- early intervention	- special education
<b>Focus</b>	- on family's strengths - on social/life skills	- on child's strengths and needs - on academic skills
<b>Services</b>	- at home, school, or therapists - usually one child at a time	- at school, in or out of classroom - maybe in a group
<b>Team</b>	Early Childhood Team(ECT)	Pupil Evaluation Team(PET)
<b>Purpose</b>	to lessen effects of a disability or prevent results of a delay	to individualize education for child with a disability in order to "confer benefit"
<b>Plan</b>	Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)	Individualized Education Program (IEP)

### Focus

The family is the focus of early intervention programs; parents' strengths and needs are considered along with the child's. Their importance as teachers is recognized, and they take part both in writing and carrying out the IFSP. Education is offered to the family in areas they identify as needs.

Special education programs in public schools focus on individual children. The Individualized Education Programs are developed for the student, and although the parents are on the teams, the school staff implements the IEPs.

The difference in focus between the programs is in their purposes and intents. If you are concerned that the amount and types of involvement you have with the personnel and programs at public school will be more formal or less frequent than those with the preschool, there are things you can do. At the beginning of the year, discuss with the teachers, principal, and special education director how often and in what manner you want to keep in touch. Keeping regular lines of communication open may be more up to you than previously.

### **The Program and the Plan**

In the spring before your child enters kindergarten, the Early Childhood Team will begin making preparations for the transfer of information from preschool to public school. Your final ECT meeting will be for the purpose of devising a transition plan for your child. Public school personnel will be invited to sit in on this meeting in order to hear from you and the professionals on the team. This meeting is an excellent opportunity to share information about your child's strengths and needs, as well as your own questions and concerns regarding the differences between the programs.

According to the Maine Special Education Regulations, the special education program is responsible for seeing that a student with a disability between 5 and 20 receives "equal educational opportunities/free appropriate public education in the least restrictive educational alternative...." The special education process looks, briefly, like this:

1. A child is referred to a Pupil Evaluation Team-made up of the parents, a regular classroom teacher, a special education teacher, and a school administrator- which decides if an evaluation is needed.
2. The child's needs are evaluated.
3. The PET considers the results of the evaluations and other information to decide whether the student needs special education and, if so, what the plan of services will be (the Individualized Education Plan).

This overview is generally correct but varies for each child. If your child received early intervention services, the transition to kindergarten will still require a PET meeting to determine the need for special education services and/or to develop an IEP. Holding this first meeting in the Spring before kindergarten should help ensure that your child's transition is smooth, because the program will be in place before school starts. A smooth transition from early intervention to special education - one without interruption of services - is indicated by best practices and the intent of the law. And, a smooth transition should ease fears or concerns, making the experience more positive and successful for you and your child.

For more information on this or other topics related to the needs of children with disabilities, call or write Maine Parent Federation, P.O. Box 2067, Augusta, Maine 04338, 1-800-870-7746 (In-State Only) 207-623-2144 or email MPF at [parentconnect@mpf.org](mailto:parentconnect@mpf.org).

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