



Transition Issues in Early Childhood Settings in North Dakota

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sean E. Brotherson, Ph.D. | Professor and Extension Family Science Specialist, NDSU

Divya Saxena, M.S. | Extension Associate, NDSU

Shea Lammers, M.S. | Extension Associate, NDSU

Kimberly Bushaw, M.S. | Extension Family Science Specialist, NDSU

Department of Human Development and Family Science
College of Human Sciences and Education
North Dakota State University

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Purpose

The goal of this project, which was undertaken to fulfill objectives associated with the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG B-5) federal grant, was to expand understanding of issues related to transitions in early childhood settings in North Dakota. In 2019-20, multiple focus groups consisting of early childhood professionals and parents were conducted to gain a better understanding of contemporary transition concerns and resources in early childhood settings in North Dakota. Participants were a mix of parents and early childhood professionals and included 23 females and one male from Dickinson (five), Grand Forks (10) and Valley City (nine). Further, a parent feedback survey was employed to gather additional information on transition issues, with 175 parents of children ages 0-5 and early childhood professionals completing the survey.

The period of development from a child's birth through age 5 is a time of critical learning and experience that shapes a child's future. In particular, we must consider how early childhood education programs and resources can assist young children and their families in navigating the challenging transitions that occur during a child's early years.

Acknowledgments

Collaboration among the state of North Dakota, NDSU Extension and the North Dakota Parent Education Network made this project and study possible. We would like to thank the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (DPI) for allowing us the opportunity to aid in conducting research on this pertinent topic.

Work on this project was conducted in association with North Dakota DPI Contract #3485, a subcontract extended to NDSU Extension as part of a competitive federal grant received by North Dakota in 2019 to focus on improvements to the state's existing early childhood infrastructure and resources. Additionally, we extend our thanks to the early childhood professionals and parents who participated in this study. Their insight and perspective on the topic of transition issues in early childhood settings and related concerns provided valuable contributions regarding this topic in North Dakota. With this study and report, we aspire to enhance the lives of families with young children in North Dakota.

Summary of Key Findings

- Participants had wide-ranging awareness of critical transition experiences for young children from birth to 5 years of age.
- A variety of strategies for navigating transitions across the landscape of early childhood contexts were discussed, but participants indicated that teachers and family members were their preferred sources of support.
- Other major topics explored were challenges in coordinating services among agencies, limitations in the current child-care system and awareness of available transition resources in North Dakota.

Listed below are the key points that were identified through thematic analysis of the focus group discussions, as well as data analysis from the parent feedback survey on transition issues and resources:

1. **Children and families experience several critical transition experiences between birth and 5 years of age.** Critical transition experiences that participants discussed were the transition from hospital to home and NICU issues, involvement in a range of early intervention experiences, entry to child care and transitions between child-care settings, and entry into preschool or kindergarten.
2. **Multiple strategies are important for effectively navigating transitions across the landscape of early childhood contexts.** Key strategies explored by participants for effectively navigating transitions were continuity of care across transitions and settings, communication among those involved across settings, the value of child trauma training in supporting children, and usage of systematic processes for helping all involved with transitions.
3. **Particular challenges exist in the coordination of services among agency and community programs as children experience transitions.** Such challenges include limitations in the availability of child-care options, other child-care concerns such as staff turnover or access issues, concerns about early intervention and health-care resource coordination, and a variety of other fundamental concerns.
4. **Limitations in the existing child-care system and the effect on healthy transitions was another common theme discussed.** Particular limitations



identified were the difficulties in bridging particular services with child-care or school settings, teachers overwhelmed by limited resources, stigma issues that limit usage of support for transitions and budget shortages in the child-care system.

5. **Awareness of existing transition resources among participants varied widely.** Topics of importance were overcoming lack of awareness about transition resources, strategies for increasing awareness and methods for promoting transition resources.
6. **The most highly preferred sources for supporting transitions were teachers and family members.** Additional preferred sources were friends and child-care providers, while several minor sources were online sources, health-care professionals and community events or classes.
7. **The most difficult transitions noted were bringing a child home from the NICU or hospital and transitions in child care.**

“Children experience many transitions, including from home to early care and education settings, between age groups or program settings, and from preschool to kindergarten. Supporting these transitions for children, families, and staff is critically important because even positive change can be challenging. How the foundation for positive transitions is laid across all levels of the system to support children, families, and staff through transitions can have far-reaching effects on children’s well-being and academic success.”
– Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC)

Section One

Transition Issues in Early Childhood Settings – A Summary of Focus Group Themes

The themes here emerged from an analysis of the feedback provided by participants in focus groups on the topic of transition issues in early childhood settings in North Dakota.



Topic One Awareness of Critical Transition Experiences From Birth to Age 5

Key Finding: Participants indicated that among the most challenging transition experiences for families with children ages birth to 5 were: (1) the transition from hospital to home and NICU issues, (2) entry to an early intervention experience, (3) coordinating access to early learning supports across different settings, (4) entry to child care and transitions between child-care settings and (5) entry into preschool or kindergarten. Further exploration of feedback on these transition experiences is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Feedback on Critical Transition Experiences for Children Ages 0 to 5.

| Hospital to Home | Entry to Early Intervention Services | Other Early Learning Supports | Entry to Child Care and Transitions Between Rooms | Entry to Preschool or Kindergarten |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| Families struggle with the transition from hospital to home for multiple reasons and encourage new efforts to allow for better use of transition resources. | Early intervention staff provide a key link in helping children transition between settings; specialized providers and support groups are key resources. | Young children in need of early learning supports benefit when such services are more accessible to their families, but coordinating access can be a struggle. | Parents struggle to find consistent child care; some may need to split children between settings due to scarcity. Frequent staff turnover makes transitions more difficult. | Early childhood professionals and groups benefit as they plan and use supportive strategies in assisting families with transition to a school setting. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve communication gaps among providers • Increase awareness of available resources • Expand support for NICU parents as child transitions • Share supportive information during the prenatal period • Promote other supports, such as public health nurse home visits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivate parent awareness of key services • Support transition meetings between families and service providers • Highlight existing transition support services, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Right Track - Hospital information - Early Intervention (IDEA, Part C) - Special education services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to support services may be limited by availability (rural) or distance • Concerns shared whether services and IEPs transfer into the private school setting • Need better communication between private and public schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited availability in child-care settings is an issue • Lack of an orientation process limits effective transitions • Encourage sufficient overlap time to ease transitions between rooms for children • Employers struggle to hire and maintain consistent employees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use best practices to manage transition to school • Increase options for affordable child care and preschool • Focus on developmentally appropriate programming • Teachers deal with differing ability levels, behavioral issues |

Topic Two Successful Strategies for Navigating Transitions Across the ECE Landscape

Key Finding: Four key strategies that were identified as critical to supporting healthy transitions for young children were: (1) continuity of care across settings, (2) communication across early childhood settings, (3) child trauma training for ECE professionals and (4) the use of a systematic and/or structured transition process. Feedback related to incorporation of these strategies is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Applicable Strategies for Easing the Transition Experience for Young Children.

| | |
|---|---|
| Continuity of Care Across Settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily/weekly check-ins at the beginning of a transition experience; monthly/as needed when the child becomes accustomed to the new environment • Maintain connection with previous environment while transitioning to new environment • Encourage care provider (such as neonatologist) to be present for transition to new provider (pediatrician) • Practice continuity of care with different children in the same household so parents can connect with the care provider (such as same preschool teacher, etc.) |
| Communication Across Early Childhood Settings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ a tracking system for children who transition out of Early Intervention services at age 3, as well as for children who do not qualify for IEPs currently (but could in the future) • Facilitate parent-to-parent connections for sharing information, resources • Increase communication about transitions between private schools, child care, preschool or other settings |
| Child Trauma Training for Providers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECE professionals with child trauma training can identify and aid children and families going through a variety of circumstances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mental health issues of the parents - Trauma → parent or child (incarcerated parents; exposure to domestic violence; accidents) - Child health issues (particular health condition) - Chemical dependency of parent or child (newborn infant, etc.) - Abuse/neglect issues, potentially involving the child welfare system - Early parenthood (teen parents, etc.) and/or limited resources |
| Utilization of a Systematic Transition Process | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of a systematic and/or structured process as children experience transitions is helpful so staff, parents and children are in sync. Examples of such approaches might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kindergarten orientation experience - Gearing Up for Kindergarten program - Open house experience held by the school or child-care center - Back-to-school night - Small connections with parents (greetings, small updates, etc.) |

Topic Three

Challenges in Coordinating Transitions and Services Among Agencies and Community Programs

Key Finding: Supporting children and families in transitions is complicated by challenges including child-care shortages and other ECE limitations, lack of information exchange or coordination between varied providers, and distance between families and available transition supports. Specific examples regarding such issues are elaborated on in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges Related to Transitions and Supportive Services in North Dakota.

| | |
|---|---|
| Child Care Shortages and Other ECE Limitations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only a limited range of options for affordable child care, as well as limited options for free or low-cost preschool experiences, exist in North Dakota. • Challenges with staff resources in child care, such as staff turnover or available time, decreases reliability of care and supportive transitions for young children. • Some policies exist in child-care or other early childhood settings that may exacerbate transition challenges for families (for example, removing children for behavior concerns, IEP children and confidentiality needs, caps on support groups, limited family engagement opportunities, income qualifications). |
| Early Intervention Supports and Health-care Resource Limitations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shortage of specialized private therapy providers in some regions of the state can limit supportive options for some children with particular needs. • Requirements for staff to specialize in services (speech-language assistance, etc.) may need to be modified to make recruiting or training qualified staff for ECE service needs easier to do. • Low wages to service providers may not be substantial enough to keep them in a region. • Parents are not required to follow through with ensuring that their children receive the services for which they have qualified (for example, Early Intervention, IEP). • Limited interpreters or English-as-a-second-language (ESL) support resources are available to assist families with transition issues. |
| Location and Access Matters | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance between care settings in the community and programs serving children is an obstacle to giving families access to needed services or coordination of support across settings. • Some families must travel a significant distance to reach a particular specialist or recommended services to support a child with particular needs. • In many rural areas, families are isolated and simply unaware of transition-easing resources or too far away to access them easily. • North Dakota has a shortage of hospital and resource options to support coordination of services (especially in western North Dakota). • Economic/resource barriers or external barriers in the environment can limit access or participation in transition-easing opportunities for families and children (transportation, weather, financial challenges). |

Topic Four

Concerns in the Current Early Childhood System and Transitions

Key Finding: With regard to key concerns in the current early childhood system and supporting transitions, parents and early childhood professionals indicated four topics: (1) a “broken bridge” often exists between settings, (2) teachers are overwhelmed with challenges and children with increased needs, (3) stigma related to service usage by families and (4) budget shortages in early childhood settings that lead to inadequate transition experiences. Table 4 briefly summarizes these points and shares one sample recommendation for each topic (more available in full report).

Table 4: Specific Concerns Related to Transition Opportunities in North Dakota.

| The Broken Bridge Between Settings | Teachers Overwhelmed With Challenges | Stigma Related to Service Usage | Budget Shortages in ECE Settings |
|--|--|--|--|
| Too often, not enough of a “bridge process” exists between services/programs and/or child care or school settings (for example, from Head Start to Early Childhood Special Education, etc.). | In a preschool or other ECE setting, especially with children ages birth to 5, teachers often are overwhelmed due to large class sizes and the increasing needs of children who require special services, which makes providing support during transitions more difficult. | Stigma exists for some family members around accessing or using programs or services that could assist a child with transitions. | Although suitable transition-easing programs that provide valuable information to families are available in North Dakota, budget reductions have decreased their impact on families and communities. |
| Sample Recommendation If a child is transitioning to a new setting or working with a new teacher or provider, communicate and hold a meeting weeks ahead with previous staff, new staff and parents to support the child’s needs and transition. | Sample Recommendation Use simple communication tools to facilitate regular (weekly, etc.) information sharing with parents during the initial transition period as a child becomes familiar with a new environment. | Sample Recommendation Making a personal connection with parent and/or child, thereby increasing the person’s comfort level and familiarity, may counteract attitudinal barriers when offering or inviting transition-easing opportunities or supports. | Sample Recommendation Support fully funded preschools to help alleviate the education gap between lower SES families and higher SES families because this essentially would provide the same public school education for all children. |

Topic Five

Awareness of Current Transition Resources

Key Finding: Participants indicated that they had very limited knowledge of current transition resources from the state, suggested a substantial need for improved awareness and/or marketing of key transition resources, and shared a variety of ideas to promote transition resources. See Table 5 for further details.

Table 5: Awareness of Transition Resources and Supports.

| | |
|---|--|
| Lack of Awareness Regarding Current Transition Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited awareness of transition resources is common, including certain populations that may need targeted information: parents who recently relocated to an area; those not eligible for a program; tribal communities; areas with sparse services; dual-language groups. Effective strategies to increase awareness might include providing information to teachers, child-care centers or other information sources. Specific and visible reminders of transition supports or resources can be helpful. Parents have limited awareness of online resource websites connecting them to local resources. Some community professionals would benefit from enhanced awareness of available community resources supporting transitions. State agency-level websites and resources need more familiarity and usage. |
| Increasing Awareness of Available Transition Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A substantial need exists for improved awareness and marketing of key transition resources and supports. Increase specific reminders about transition activities by using a “digital reminder” via email or text, as well as other options. Provide a calendar with transition-related activities. Link online resource websites to local community resources or opportunities and share via social media. Increase communication about resources among ECE professionals and pediatric medical professionals. Encourage health-care professionals in disseminating local resources during wellness checkups. Use online and digital technologies to contact families, share resources and encourage awareness. |
| Promotion of Available Transition Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents and ECE professionals shared a variety of brief ideas to promote transition resources, including usage of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social media Ads Apps NDSU Extension The broad ECE community Family events |

Section Two

Parent Feedback Survey on Transitions in Early Childhood

The purpose of this parent feedback survey on transitions in early childhood was to focus on increased understanding of transition experiences, resources and supports in early childhood settings in North Dakota. Study participants were parents or caregivers of children between the ages of birth and 5 years of age in North Dakota, as well as early childhood professionals in the state. In North Dakota, a total of 175 participants completed the survey via Qualtrics in early 2020. Two key questions were asked of participants that elicited information on their views related to transition experiences in early childhood settings.

Ease of Transitions

A variety of transition experiences occur for young children. Participants were asked to rate their response on the ease of particular transition experiences. They were instructed to only rate the transitions that they have experienced on a scale of 1 to 3, ranging from “not difficult” (1) to “very difficult” (3). For transitions they did not experience, they were to indicate that it was “not applicable.” The percentages for the participants ratings are shown in the Table 6 below.

Table 6. Ease of Transition Experiences for 0-5 Years Children (N = 175)

| Response Options | Not Difficult | Somewhat Difficult | Very Difficult | Not Applicable |
|--|---------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Bringing your child home from the NICU or hospital | 34.3% | 26.3% | 9.7% | 31.4% |
| Transitions in child care | 28.6% | 36.6% | 10.9% | 19.4% |
| Preschool | 42.3% | 21.1% | 6.3% | 26.3% |
| Early Head Start/ Head Start | 14.3% | 8% | 2.9% | 61.7% |
| Early Intervention | 26.9% | 13.7% | 4% | 45.7% |
| Preschool Special Education | 12.6% | 6.9% | 5.1% | 61.7% |
| Kindergarten | 24% | 10.3% | 6.3% | 45.7% |



The participant responses show that for families who experience a particular type of transition, parents most commonly indicated that the transition for their child was “not difficult.” The two transition experiences with a quite substantial percentage of parents indicating the experience was “somewhat difficult” or “very difficult” were “bringing your child home from the NICU or hospital” (36%) and “transitions in child care” (47.5%).

More than one-third of participants indicated that bringing a child home from the NICU or hospital was difficult, while nearly one of two participants noted that transitions in child care were difficult. Therefore, these two transition types likely deserve some focused attention in regard to finding ways to improve those transitions.

With regard to preschool, 42.3% of parents noted the transition was “not difficult,” but 27.4% suggested that it was “somewhat” to “very difficult.” The two categories that were “not applicable” to the most participants were Early Head Start/Head Start and preschool special education (both 61.7%), and also were listed as “not difficult” by about one in 10 respondents. Finally, nearly one in five participants suggested that the transitions associated with early intervention (17.7%) or kindergarten (16.6%) were “somewhat” to “very difficult.”

Transition Support Sources

Participants were asked to indicate those individuals, information sources or resources that helped them as they transitioned their child(ren) into a new setting. This question offered participants an open-ended response option. Participants listed options they have found helpful. A qualitative analysis of the responses revealed the major, moderate and minor themes from the participant comments in the table below. The percentages were calculated from the 144 responses that were coded from the short answer responses (N = 144).

Table 7. Transition Support Sources for Parents of 0-5 Years Children (N = 144)

| Identified Themes | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| Teachers | 28.47% |
| Family members | 20.83% |
| Friends | 14.58% |
| Child-care providers | 13.89% |
| Online sources | 8.33% |
| Health-care professionals | 6.94% |
| Community events, classes | 6.94% |

These results indicate that among a variety of potential transition support sources, parents of children during the period of 0 to 5 years of age show clear preferences for two particular sources: teachers and family members. The most preferred option listed by participants was “teachers” (28.47%), which included examples of teachers in settings such as Early Head Start or Head Start, Early Intervention home visiting or school systems.

Next, participants listed “family members” as the most preferred option for transition support (20.83%). At a moderate level, the transition support sources that were listed as helpful were “friends” (14.58%) and child-care providers (13.89%) (for example, providers at YMCA or other child-care professionals).

Finally, those sources listed least often but which were still of importance were “online sources” (8.33%), health-care professionals such as doctors or occupational therapists (6.94%) and community events or classes including NDSU Extension, library events or similar sources (6.94%). Specific examples of sources in these particular categories are listed below:

- Major Transition Support Sources – Teachers (Early Head Start/Head Start, Early Intervention home visiting, school systems); family members
- Moderate Transition Support Sources – Friends; child-care providers (day care, YMCA, child-care professionals)
- Minor Transition Support Sources – Health-care professionals (doctors; occupational therapists); community events or classes (NDSU Extension; play groups; library events; parenting classes)

Conclusion

The information included in this executive summary provides a useful variety of feedback from parents and early childhood professionals regarding the topic of transition issues and resources in North Dakota. We are grateful to those who participated in providing this information and also to those who reviewed it. Our hope is that parents, early childhood professionals and other stakeholders will find useful information for consideration in exploring issues and needs related to the topic of transitions in early childhood settings in North Dakota.