



# Early Intervention to Preschool **TRANSITION**

A Parent Guide

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to your child's first public school experience! I've written this guide to help you understand how school special education systems work so you can have a smooth transition into preschool services for your child.

This introduction gives an overview of the federal rules for special education in public schools. The advice you read in the timeline is my opinion based on my experiences as a speech-language pathologist, elementary principal and special education director.

Early intervention (EI) services are available to all children in U.S. states and territories when they have a developmental delay or are at risk for a delay. These EI programs are available from birth to age three, and sometimes beyond.

Preschool special education programs are run by local school districts in the U.S. to serve children from age three to kindergarten. Don't let the words *special education* confuse you. It's the term used for any specialized instruction or therapy children receive so they can participate successfully in school.

Both programs are funded by a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. The rules for the two programs are quite different. The differences can be a challenge for families to navigate as their child makes the transition between programs at age three.

Fortunately, there are rules in IDEA designed to make the transition easier for parents to understand. Unfortunately, the process doesn't always go as smoothly as the rules intended. Planning ahead can help you understand the program offered by your school and how to get the best plan and services for your child.

### PART C TO B TRANSITION

The activities that prepare for your child's third birthday are often called the Part C to Part B transition. This refers to two parts of IDEA. Part C relates to early intervention, with services described in an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Part B addresses services for children aged 3–21, with services described in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

The **rules** say children in EI will have a “smooth and effective transition to those preschool programs.” Smooth and effective — a lofty goal. Fortunately, many agencies have found ways to do it.

Note that this transition planning is required only for children who may be eligible for school-based services. When it's known that the child does not need to continue services – or parents don't want services – transition planning is **not required**.

Transition activities are supposed to follow a timeline that makes sure the new program plan is in place and ready to go by your child's third birthday. This doesn't mean services must have a firm stop and start date on that magic day. It means the birthday is the **deadline** for having the plan in place.

Some children may continue receiving services on an IFSP until a date decided by the planning team. For example, if your child has a summer birthday the school may decide to have IFSP services continue through the summer. The IEP would be written to begin on the school start date in the fall.

Sometimes IFSP services can continue even longer past the child's third birthday. If this option is considered, you must be given clear explanations of what you are getting and not getting under this plan.

### YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT IS NOTIFIED

Early intervention providers are required to notify the school district of a child in their program at least 90 days before the child's third birthday. This notice includes your child's name, date of birth and your contact information. You will be told that the information will be sent. In some states, parents can opt out of sending a notice to the school.

A copy of the notification to the school district is also sent to a state agency. This is so transition timelines can be monitored to make sure children get their services on time.

There are special rules when children come to early intervention services when they're close to turning three. The EI agency must notify the school district immediately if a toddler is found eligible for EI services between 45–90 days before the child's birthday.

If the EI agency receives a referral less than 45 days before a child's third birthday, they don't have to do an evaluation or IFSP plan. Instead, the EI agency will get signed permission from the parent to send all the referral information to the school district. The school takes over the testing process, because the child will turn three before all the testing is complete.

The following pages are your guide to supporting your child's transition. Tips help you start gathering information a year before your child's third birthday. Details are provided about forms and procedures you'll see as you go through the school's sequence of testing and reporting. The checklist ends with what you can expect during the first year of your child's preschool program.

### THE TIMELINE

#### Now

##### Begin discussing transition early

Your IFSP has a Transition page. Don't save it for the transition conference that's held shortly before your child turns three. Use this page to write down information you want to learn and answers to questions as they are collected.

You're more likely to feel overwhelmed or panicky if all the transition planning is sprung on you with little time to mentally prepare. Gather information over time so you have time to ponder it and make well-informed decisions.

##### Get an overview of options in your community

EI staff should know about the school district in your area. Ask them for general information about the programs offered (such as age three speech therapy or a preschool class for children with IEPs). Ask for school contact information so you can speak or email directly with the correct person at your local school.

If you want to explore private therapy or preschool options, ask about those as well.

# 8–10 months before third birthday

## Know the date child's name will be given to school

Your EI program is required to report your child's name, birthdate and contact information to the local school district and state monitoring agency. The district needs the information so they can plan for the evaluation process. The state agency needs it so they can make sure EI and schools are following the timelines in the law.

EI needs your permission to send this information. Make sure you have your questions answered so you feel comfortable allowing EI to send the information by their deadline date.

## Find out about community preschool options

Schools are supposed to have a range of options available for children. Now's the time to collect more information on what's available in your area.

One common option is a preschool program only for children with IEPs, starting at age 3. The preference, though, is for children to have experiences with their typically developing peers. You might see a preschool program that includes some typical peers, or some districts pay for services to be provided in licensed day care settings.

Schools are supposed to have written agreements with other publicly funded preschool options in the community, such as Early Head Start for 3-year-olds and Head Start for 4-year olds. Head Start is for families with limited income, but the program is required to reserve some slots for children with disabilities regardless of income. Find out the process for getting on that list.



Learn about any community program's location, class size and how special education services are coordinated. What are the differences between the programs? How is transportation coordinated between programs?

### 5–7 months before third birthday

#### Set a target date for the transition conference

The planning conference between EI and school must be held no later than 3 months before your child's third birthday. Get it on everybody's calendar sooner rather than later. Someone from the school district must attend, and it can be a challenge to coordinate schedules.

Set the meeting day well before the 90-day deadline. Your school district has 90 days to complete all their testing and hold the IEP meeting. The transition conference should allow enough time to get all the paperwork squared away before the 90-day countdown begins.

You'll want to have the IEP meeting weeks *before* your child's third birthday to allow time to set up the details, including transportation. The school district has 10 days to send you a copy of the IEP document with a permission form that says you approve. Services can't start until the school receives your signed permission to begin the plan.

IEP services do not have to start on any specific day after the IEP meeting is held. A start date is decided by the team and written into the IEP.

Your EI program is responsible for scheduling the transition conference. Ask your service coordinator to start the scheduling process now. Find out the name of the school district person who will be invited to attend. You can talk to that person directly to get answers to your questions about the school district.



### 4-6 months before 3rd birthday

#### Attend the transition planning conference

Early intervention services focus on family needs. This meeting is a good time to talk about any supports you need so you'll be ready to participate in the IEP evaluation and planning process. Want to visit the available programs? Need more information about the process? Decide at the meeting who will provide your supports and when they will happen.

#### Fill out the school district referral form

The school needs this form to start their process. Your service coordinator may have already prepared the form, or it may be done at the conference.

The referral form describes information about your child and why they may need school services. It's a request for the school to start the evaluation process.

The first step in the school's evaluation process is to send you the evaluation plan. This form lists the sources of information that will be used to decide if your child qualifies for IEP services. Ask about the timeline for sending you the plan. There's no deadline for the school to send it but it should be within the next two weeks.

There's a chance the school won't need to do further testing if they plan to accept the data available from the EI program. You can ask what the school's typical procedure is. Ask the school representative to avoid unnecessary testing by accepting recent test results and current progress reports from IE.

### Sign a release of information form

Your EI program and school must keep your child's information confidential. They are not allowed to talk to each other unless you give them signed permission.

Give permission for either agency to contact the other and share information. Make sure the release allows therapists to talk to each other and/or send copies of their evaluation reports or progress notes. This will allow school staff to follow up for more details if needed.

### Sign a Medicaid information form

Districts often ask every parent to sign this form, because then they avoid the privacy issue of asking if a child is eligible for Medicaid funding. This form gives the school permission to submit your child's name to the state Medicaid agency to find out if reimbursement is available for any medically related services like therapy, nursing or physical care.

Some parents are concerned that signing this form could cut into the funds available for outside therapy or medical services. Sometimes private therapists have this misunderstanding as well. States actually receive federal Medicaid funds from two different funding streams. One stream is specifically for school-based services and does not affect the funds available to a child who uses non-school services.

Note: Private and school-based therapists are supposed to coordinate their plans of care. Be sure to give them written permission to share information with each other.

Some people wonder why schools should be able to use Medicaid funds at all. The costs of providing special education are far from covered by federal and state funds. Your school district has to make up for the shortfall by using money from their general fund. States have convinced the federal government that it's reasonable to use medically related federal funds for those services provided in a school setting. This helps to save local taxpayer dollars to use for other costs.

### Receive a copy of the Parent and Child Rights

This lengthy document has a title like Parent and Child Rights In Special Education, or Due Process Procedures. We'll just call it the Rights.

You'll receive the Rights at least once per year. The packet reminds you of your options if you disagree with the IEP or if the plan is not being carried out as written. It's a lot of information and is usually more than you need to know. Usually everything goes fine and parents are satisfied with their child's program.

Many schools send this information as part of the paperwork for starting the evaluation process. It's okay to get it then if the school person doesn't bring a copy to the transition conference. However, it can be handy to talk about the Rights at the conference because the school person has a chance to explain the information to you in layperson terms. In theory, the document is written in a reader-friendly format, but it's just too long. The school person can give you an overview of the highlights.

Even though most parents never need to use this information, it's good to show you're interested in understanding how to protect your due process rights.

### 3–4 months before 3rd birthday

#### Receive a Prior Written Notice

This step is not likely, but it can happen. The district has to send you a form called Prior Written Notice (PWN) any time they propose to start or change an IEP. They also send one if you request an action (like evaluation) that they reject.

A district can use referral information to decide not to do an evaluation if it's clear the child will not be eligible for services. If they decide not to do testing, they send the PWN to explain their decision. You can appeal the decision.

Districts rarely decline to do an evaluation with a child from EI. That's because a transition conference is only scheduled if the program coordinator and parent feel the child needs continued services. Usually the school assumes the evaluation should be done. Just be aware that the school district has to give you a written notice if they decide not to go ahead with the evaluation.

#### Receive a Notice of Evaluation

This form restates why your child was referred. It lists what testing will be done by the school, who will do the testing and what information will be used from other sources. Check to see if they will use data supplied by EI.

#### Contact the person listed on the Notice of Evaluation

This notice includes the name of someone to contact if you have a question. Contacting them is not required, but if you haven't met this person it's a good way to break the ice. Ask any questions you may have about the testing plan.

I suggest you ask the contact person if you'd be able to have a meeting with one team member when the testing reports are finished but before the IEP meeting. Often a district will mail paperwork ahead of time so parents have time to look it over before the meeting. It's much better if you can have the evaluation results explained to you instead. Understanding this information in advance helps you focus on the program plan when you're at the IEP meeting.

### Sign and return the Permission to Evaluate

Return this form as soon as possible. The 90-day timeline to complete the IEP does not start until the school receives your signed permission to evaluate.

## 1–3 months before third birthday

### Sign and return the Invitation to IEP Meeting

The district needs to make several attempts to obtain your attendance at the meeting. Ideally, someone from the district will contact you before the meeting time is set, to find a time that works for you.

The school will send you a written notice to make the invitation official. Be aware that IEP meetings are not scheduled outside of school hours. If needed, you may arrange to attend by telephone or videoconference.

Confirm your attendance so everyone can get the meeting on their calendar. If you need to cancel your attendance, give as much advance notice as possible. If a last-minute conflict comes up, call the contact person to reschedule.

### Get the evaluation report before the IEP meeting

When you received the notice of evaluation, I recommended that you call the contact person to let them know you'd like to discuss the evaluation results with one person before the IEP meeting. If they can't arrange that, at least get a copy of the evaluation report before the meeting. It will give you a chance to digest the information and think of questions to ask at the meeting. Write a note on the bottom of your signed invitation asking them to send a copy of the evaluation report before the meeting date.

Sometimes team members take a long time talking through evaluation results at the meeting. In my opinion, everyone knows your child has needs, so why not get to the discussion of how those needs will be addressed? You can let team members know at the beginning of the meeting that you had a chance to review the report and have a few questions (if you do).

### Be prepared for professional jargon

Early intervention usually does a good job of making their documents reader friendly. Information is written in terms parents can understand and goals are focused on family priorities. In contrast, schools tend to have longer reports and lots of unfamiliar terms. The school regulations are more detailed than for EI, which adds more jargon to the paperwork. Don't hesitate to ask about unfamiliar terms.

### Invite someone to come along with you, if desired

You may always invite others to an IEP meeting. Sometimes it helps to have someone who can take notes or be there for moral support. When you respond to the IEP meeting invitation, list anyone who you will bring with you.

You may request to have an EI staff person attend. Talk it over with your service coordinator or therapist and see if you think that would be needed.

### Attend the IEP meeting

Every IEP meeting must include at least these members: parent, special education teacher, general education teacher and representative of the school district. Sometimes a staff person will play more than one of these roles.

There may be more than the minimum team members. Usually these are people who did testing or will be providing IEP services. Someone from EI or a private therapist may be an invited member, if you request the school to invite them.

### Review evaluation results

Typically, evaluation results are reviewed at the same meeting that IEP planning takes place. Sometimes the district will determine that a child does not meet the eligibility criteria for school-based services. In that case, the meeting will end and you will receive a Prior Written Notice (PWN) that the district proposes to not provide IEP services to your child.

It's unusual for this result to occur for a child transitioning from an EI program. If a question comes up, make the following points. (1) The child has already been identified as a child with a developmental delay, using the same criteria that's available for school-based services. (2) If the EI staff did not see a need for continuing services, they would not have made the referral to the school. (3) Team members have the ability to use clinical judgment in these decisions, and not be ruled strictly by a test score.

You can appeal a PWN that says your child is not eligible. Follow the procedures in the Parent and Child Rights document.



### Ask about Extended School Year services

EI services are year-round, but that's not true for school IEPs. Some children with IEPs need to have Extended School Year (ESY) services, which usually means over the summer break. ESY services don't match all the services received during the school year. They only need to address any goal that would show a significant regression during a break *and* would take a long time to recover.

Now is the time to find out about how the school handles ESY decisions. Planning for ESY takes many months. If a child needs ESY services, those services must be described in the IEP.

The ESY decision needs to be backed up with data that shows documented regression during breaks (e.g., the winter holidays). If you think your child may need ESY, you need to start the discussion now. This will make clear to staff that they need to have a plan for collecting the required data. If EI can provide data that's great; however, the district will probably want to see some more recent data as well.

In most cases, ESY will not be written into this first IEP. That means another meeting will need to be held to discuss, decide and make an ESY plan. Get that meeting on people's calendars now, if possible, or find out the district's deadline for having this IEP change in place.

### Decide on your child's IEP start date

No gap should occur between the time your child ends EI services and begins school services. A common issue is that school is not in session when a child has a summer birthday. Programs are required to have a written agreement that states how these potential gaps are handled.

Make sure the start date is clearly stated during the IEP team meeting. If a gap is suggested, make it clear this is not acceptable. You can ask to put the meeting on hold until “higher ups” can be contacted to work out how services can be provided during the gap period.

### Sign and return permission for IEP services

The IEP is supposed to be developed by the whole team (including you) at the meeting. That means the final document isn't ready for your review and approval on the day of the meeting. The district has ten days to send you the final version of the IEP, the PWN offering placement and the parent permission form.

**IMPORTANT:** The school not allowed to provide any IEP services until they receive your signed permission. Sign and return the permission form as soon as possible, to make sure the process keeps moving.

## 3-4 months after IEP services start

### Receive first progress report

Your child's IEP states how often you'll receive a report on your child's IEP goal progress. Reports must be sent at least as often as general education progress reports are sent (usually the report card dates or parent-teacher conferences).

Look for a measurement of progress on the goal. A general statement of “doing well” or “making progress” is not enough. There needs to be data that can be compared to the level of performance where your child started (called the baseline). You can find baseline data written in the IEP as part of the goal or included in the Present Levels section.

Each IEP goal lists objectives or benchmarks. These serve as a guide or steps on the way to the goal. Progress reports are not required to state a measure for each objective or benchmark, but you might see them mentioned in the progress report.

### Stay in touch with the teacher or therapist

Ask questions whenever you have them. This can relieve any worry or frustration that might arise during the year. It also helps you know how to support your child's learning at home.

Find out how your child's teacher or therapist communicates with parents about school activities. Keep the communication two-way. Let school staff know about issues that may affect your child's ability to participate in school.

If your schedule permits, ask about a volunteer opportunity in the classroom or school. Being comfortable with the people and routines of school helps you keep the lines of communication open.

## 6 months after IEP services start

### Attend six-month review conference

For preschoolers, some states hold a six-month review conference to discuss progress on the IEP and decide if any changes are needed. This is a nice feature, especially for parents who are used to that from their experience with EI.

If your school doesn't use this system, be aware that you can request a meeting with any of your child's teachers or therapists whenever needed. You can schedule a 1:1 conference with a staff member any time. This is like a parent-teacher conference and it's not considered an IEP meeting.

If you want to talk about issues with or changes to the IEP, that needs to be done in an official IEP team meeting. Ask your child's case manager to set up the meeting. You'll know it's official when you receive the written invitation form. Let the team know what you want to discuss so they can prepare.

## 10–11 months after IEP services start

### Respond to Invitation to Annual IEP Meeting

An IEP must be reviewed at a meeting at least once per year. The new IEP must be ready to go before the old one expires. Your meeting must be scheduled for a time that works for you, within regular school hours. If you can't attend in person, arrangements can be made for you to be there by phone or video conference.

Even if someone talks to you to find a time that works for you, you'll get a form to make the invitation official. Sign and return the form to confirm your attendance.

### Attend annual IEP meeting

At the meeting, you will provide updates and/or concerns for your child's development. Team members will give you an update on your child's progress on previous goals. The whole team will then set new goals for the year.

As was done with your child's first IEP, you'll get the final copy along with a PWN to tell you this is the new service offer. You are asked to sign and return the permission form.

Here's an important difference in the process. Now that your child has been receiving IEP services, there's an assumption that you want services to continue. If you don't return the signed permission within 10 days, the district is allowed to begin the new IEP on the start date listed. Refusing to sign does *not* stop the new IEP.

### Follow up with concerns

You've kept the lines of communication open and you have a good relationship with the people supporting your child's education. There are times when the usual process fails, though. That's why the school is required to give you a copy of your Rights at least once per year—just in case you need it.

You must speak up immediately if you disagree with the new IEP. Ask to have another IEP meeting as soon as possible to discuss the area of disagreement, and request attendance by the special education director or other administrator. To make sure the IEP changes do not begin, you must make a written request. Get out your latest copy of the Rights document to find out what information to include and where to submit your written objection.

If you can't work out a satisfactory agreement at the second IEP meeting, you may request mediation or a due process hearing. Either request starts the "Stay Put" rule. That means the old IEP services continue until your issue is resolved.

A mediation meeting is recommended before you file a due process complaint. A trained mediator who knows special education rules leads the discussion between you and the school district representative. You may bring any support person (friend, advocate, attorney) with you to the meeting.

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The mediator helps to define the issues and explore possible solutions. In most cases, this informal process can help keep both sides focused on solving the problem and they're able to work out an agreement.

A due process hearing is a more formal process that involves a hearing examiner, sworn witnesses and state-level documentation. You should have legal representation for this process. It's more expensive and takes longer than mediation.

It's human nature for a written complaint to cause some discomfort among staff that work with your child. They are advised to not discuss the issues with you outside of an IEP meeting, because then you could get confusing or conflicting information. Try not to take it personally if a staff member seems uncomfortable about how to talk with you about the issue. It's best to keep communication between you and staff focused on your child's daily activities. Remember, you'll still be working with them after the dispute is resolved.

You can find information about mediation and due process complaints on the website for your state's department of education. Search for the terms "special education mediation" or "special education complaint."

## CONCLUSION

Preschool is the first of several transitions in your child's school career. It may be the most challenging one because everything is so new. The checklist on the following pages lists the steps in this timeline. Use it for planing your activities: cross out items you don't plan to do and fill in dates for completed tasks.

Enjoy your school years!

## CHECKLIST FOR TRANSITION

### Now

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Begin discussing transition early

Get an overview of options in your community

### 8–10 months before third birthday

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Know the date child's name will be given to school

Find out about community preschool options

### 5–7 months before third birthday

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Set a target date for the transition conference

### 4–6 months before third birthday

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Attend the transition planning conference

Fill out the school district referral form

Sign a release of information form

Sign a Medicaid information form

Receive a copy of the Parent and Child Rights

### 3–4 months before third birthday

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Receive a Prior Written Notice

Receive a Notice of Evaluation

Contact the person listed on the Notice of Evaluation

Sign and return the Permission to Evaluate



## CHECKLIST FOR TRANSITION, continued

### 1–3 months before third birthday

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  | Sign and return the Invitation to IEP Meeting     |
|  | Get the evaluation report before the IEP meeting  |
|  | Be prepared for professional jargon               |
|  | Invite someone to come along with you, if desired |
|  | Attend the IEP meeting                            |
|  | Review evaluation results                         |
|  | Ask about Extended School Year services           |
|  | Decide on your child's IEP start date             |
|  | Sign and return permission for IEP services       |

### 3–4 months after IEP services start

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|--|---|
|  | Receive first progress report               |
|  | Stay in touch with the teacher or therapist |

### 6 months after IEP services start

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|  | Attend six-month review conference |
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### 10-11 months after IEP services start

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|--|---|
|  | Respond to Invitation to Annual IEP Meeting |
|  | Attend annual IEP meeting                   |
|  | Follow up with concerns                     |



# Joyce Olson

## EdS, CCC-SLP

Joyce Olson, founder of The Interaction Coach, has over 40 years of experience as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. She also served in public school administration as an elementary principal and a director of special education for a five-county cooperative of school districts.

Joyce took a break from schools for several years to work at Thinking Publications. As Senior Editor of the speech-language publishing company, she wrote and administered federal grants, wrote books and therapy materials, and edited texts by national experts.

Joyce has taught courses and given presentations to state and national organizations on topics including early childhood special education, language and literacy development, social skills instruction, and improving special education programs for students and their parents.

The Interaction Coach is a collection of resources developed by Joyce to support families of children who have communication challenges. Listen to the [podcast](#) and read the [blog](#) at [www.TheInteractionCoach.com](http://www.TheInteractionCoach.com).