

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A PILOT STUDY



Debra Hughes, Patricia Carter, Cindy Walsh, Magdalena Janus
Offord Centre for Child Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton



Introduction

- Children with special needs may have mental, behavioural, cognitive or physical disabilities.
- In Canada, 1.6% of preschool children (ages 0-4) and 4 % of school-aged children (ages 5-14) are reported to have disabilities.
- Developmental delay and chronic health conditions are the most common types of disabilities (68% and 65% respectively).
- Over 40% of children with special needs have disabilities in the severe to very severe range.
- These statistics indicate that some disabilities may not be apparent until the school years, and that multiple disabilities are more common than single conditions.
- In Ontario, services for the special needs of preschool children are provided through the Ministries of Health, Children and Youth Services, and Community and Social Services. When these children enter school, the Board of Education assumes responsibility to provide or requisition services.
- In 2005, there were 92 children entering the Hamilton School Boards with identified special needs

Study Goals

- Preschool children with special needs face a complex transition to school.
- Our first goal - to examine differences between the families of preschool and kindergarten children with special needs (henceforth categorized as "pre-transition" and "post-transition" groups respectively). To achieve this, we compared the groups on child functioning, parent characteristics, family resources and perception of services received.
- Our second goal - to determine which of these variables played a significant role in the transition to school. Therefore, post-transition family measures were correlated with teacher ratings of children's school adjustment.

Sample

	Pre-transition	Post-Transition
Sex: Male	7	15
Female	2	3
Average Age	4.4	5.2
School:		
Daycare only	9	-
JK only	-	5
JK + daycare	-	2
SK only	-	7
SK + daycare	-	4
Mother's Education:		
Less than grade 12	2	3
Secondary School	3	4
Community College	1	6
University	2	5
Post-Graduate	1	0
Father's Education:		
Less than grade 12	1	2
Secondary School	4	6
Community College	2	3
University	1	3
Post-Graduate	0	1
Not Reported	1	3
Median Household Income	\$50,000 – 60,000	\$45,000 – 55,000
Family Situation:		
Single-parent family	2	3
Two-parent family	7	15

Eligibility:

- Born in 2000 - 2002
- entered school in 2005-2006 or will be entering kindergarten in 2006-2007.
- "Special needs" = disorder which affects the child's behavioural, communication, developmental, intellectual, or physical abilities.
- Resident of Hamilton area

Methodology

1. Family measures:

• Assessment of child:

- direct psychometric assessment (Mullen)
- indirect assessment (report by parents)
- Vineland II
- Strengths & Difficulties questionnaire (SDQ)

• Parent characteristics:

- Symptom Checklist (SCL90)
- Parent Stress Index (PSI)
- Parent Locus of Control scale (PLOC)

• Parent interview:

- qualitative approach involving collection of demographic information, history of identification and diagnosis of child's special needs, services received to date, and, for the kindergarten families, the process of transition into the school setting.

2. Teacher assessments (for the post-transition group only):

- Early Development Instrument (EDI)
- Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA)

3. Analysis - participants were divided into pre- and post-transition groups.

Study goal 1:

Statistical analysis included t-tests on all quantitative family measures between these groups; Qualitative analysis included distillation of common themes from the interviews.

Study goal 2:

Statistical analysis using Pearson correlations between family and teacher measures for the post-transition group.

Results

Quantitative Measures

- No significant differences between the groups on the child assessments, parent characteristics or family resources.
- Scores on the MPOC and CSQ were significantly lower in the post-transition group. (Table 2)

• Teacher reports of student adaptation and functioning correlated highly with the parent evaluation of the care received. Better perceived care correlated strongly with the child's social, emotional and cognitive development. Furthermore, better care was correlated with the child's liking for school and, correspondingly, was inversely related to school avoidance. (Table 3)

• Children with higher functioning (as measured by the Mullen and the Vineland assessments) had better overall functioning in school and they appeared to like school more. (Table 3)

Scale	Pre-Transition Mean ± SD	Post-Transition Mean ± SD	p	Effect Size
MPOC				
Enabling & Partnership	5.52 ± 1.1	4.02 ± 1.8	.019	-1.36
Providing General Information	4.75 ± 1.9	3.62 ± 2.2	n.s.	-0.59
Providing Specific Information	6.15 ± 1.0	5.03 ± 1.6	.071	-1.12
Coordination & Comprehensive Care	5.83 ± 1.1	4.22 ± 2.1	.022	-1.46
Respectful & Supportive Care	6.04 ± 1.2	4.53 ± 1.9	.021	-1.26
CSQ	28.44 ± 4.1	23.17 ± 8.3	.036	-1.29

* Significant at .05 level (2-tailed)

Table 3: Teacher and Family correlations for post-transition group

	Teacher EDI			Teacher TRSSA	
	Social competence	Emotional Maturity	Language & Cognitive Development	School Liking	School Avoidance
Enabling & Partnership	.72	.56	.52	.65	-.83
Providing General Information	.42	.24	.42	.51	-.45
Providing Specific Information	.38	.36	.10	.51	-.23
Coordination & Comprehensive Care	.73	.58	.45	.79	-.67
Respectful & Supportive Care	.67	.62	.34	.66	-.70
CSQ	.63	.65	.30	.67	-.69
Mullen – early learning composite	.75	.58	.88	.54	-.19
Vineland II – composite score	.51	.52	.70	.52	.31

Qualitative Measures

Parents of preschool children display a range of responses to the upcoming transition. Many anticipate that the present services will be transferred in somewhat seamless fashion into the school system. Others are prepared to take a more proactive stance, while a few have encountered obstacles and remained in the preschool setting for another year.

"Right now, not being in school, he is getting a lot of support [in the daycare]. But hopefully, that's good enough and hopefully when he goes to school it won't be such a shock for him and that the transition for him will be good."

"There are all these things that I am aware he is going to need and insisting on him getting. So I am being pushy and I am starting early. And apparently that's a good thing."

"We did go through the entry process, we had our school meeting, we found that there wasn't going to be a whole lot of support for him, he wasn't considered I guess to be a safety danger to others. And, basically they said probably you're on your own, we can try to apply, but didn't hold out much hope... We opted to keep him where he was with the RT [in daycare]."

15 of 18 of the post transition group attended daycare. Of these 15 families, 8 mentioned the important role which the daycare Resource Teacher played in the transition process. 3 others mentioned a healthcare professional who served as a liaison.

"The lady [Resource Teacher] that actually saw Sam at the preschool recommended to me that we should do a special intake kind of thing for Sam. And I said, "Yes. I agree. "Cuz he may need further services." She set that up. They sent me a time. I filled out some paperwork. She sent it into them and they contacted me with an appointment."

For 10 families, the transition was experienced negatively. Frustration was due to the following issues:

- differing perspectives on the child's service needs
- services promised but not received
- marked delays in initiating the process of assessments and therapies
- poor ongoing communication

He doesn't have one [Educational Assistant] for his big-boy's school. They were supposed to have one and they don't. So the teacher, the poor teacher – she's got him, who's a very rambunctious little wild child at times, with 16 other children and two different levels [JK & SK]... We weren't lucky enough to get an EA. They're still trying, but they haven't got one for him yet. We're hoping.

Conclusions

- The transition to kindergarten of children with special needs appears frustrating to families.
- A main source of support is the daycare Resource Teacher.
- MPOC and CSQ scores indicate less favourable perceptions of therapeutic interventions in the post-transition group. The perceived characteristics of care seem to be related to a child's adjustment to school.
- Further longitudinal study is needed to pinpoint the nature of this relationship.