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The kindergarten to first grade (K–1) transition is an important developmental period for children. Their adjustment during this time can have long-lasting effects on their success in school (Entwisle & Alexander 1998). Although many factors contribute to a child’s experience in this shift, kindergarten teachers play an invaluable role in fostering smooth transitions. Consider the following:

June: Mary attends full-day kindergarten at the same elementary school where she will attend first grade. Her kindergarten teacher, Ms. Jones, speaks with her parents each month about what Mary is learning in the classroom and what they can do at home to extend this learning. Mary experiences a kindergarten curriculum that is well matched with the first grade curriculum; in fact, Ms. Jones regularly talks with other kindergarten and first grade teachers about integration of her classroom curriculum with the first grade curriculum. Mary’s school district generates class lists in May, so she already knows which of the other kindergartners in her class will accompany her to first grade. Ms. Jones and a first grade teacher arranged joint field trips throughout the year and provided regular opportunities for Mary and her peers to visit first grade classrooms.

August: Mary’s parents attend a K–1 transition night where they meet her new first grade teacher, socialize with other parents of first-graders, and obtain information about supporting Mary as she transitions to first grade.

September: Mary shows up for her first day of first grade and knows exactly where to go. Her new teacher greets her by name at the door, and inside she sees many familiar faces in her peer group. Mary settles into the routine of the first grade classroom quickly, because last year Ms. Jones made explicit efforts to introduce selected first grade routines such as attendance taking into the kindergarten experience.

October: Mary’s father picks her up at school each day. He feels welcome and comfortable in the school building because he has spoken with Mary’s first grade teacher and other school personnel on several occasions—including the summer K–1 transition night, a first grade family potluck, and a recent Back-to-School Night.

Mary made a successful K–1 transition, thanks to a thoughtful plan implemented by her teachers and the school system. She had the opportunity to develop relationships with first grade teachers during her kindergarten year, enter the first grade classroom surrounded by familiar peers, and witness the connection between her parents and teachers. Mary’s parents formed a proactive, collaborative partnership with her kindergarten teacher, which provided them with information about what Mary needed to learn in
preparation for first grade. The established relationship between her family and school made it more likely that her parents’ involvement would continue throughout her school years.

Unfortunately, not all children experience as smooth a K–1 transition as Mary. Findings from surveying prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade teachers suggest that the typical transition for a child in the United States consists of contact with new classrooms that is too little, too late, and too impersonal. Families feel disconnected from schools and lack useful information to help them plan for their child’s transition (Epstein 2001; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre 2003). Relationships and information sharing among families, peers, schools, and teachers during the transition period (beginning early in the kindergarten year and lasting throughout first grade) tend to be missing for many young children today.

A useful way to conceptualize the K–1 transition is as an organized system of interactions and transactions among people (families, teachers, children), settings (home, school), and institutions (community, governments) occurring over time—that is, as a transition ecology (Pianta & Walsh 1996). Just as a child’s first blanket comforts and supports him during his early years, positive relationships between people in his life—such as his kindergarten and first grade teachers—and between places—such as home and school—knit together to serve a supportive role during his transition. As social connections are strengthened and more information is shared between people and settings, the yarns of this K–1 blanket become more finely intertwined.

This approach to easing the K–1 transition—the developmental/ecological perspective—is described in detail in this chapter. We believe this approach should guide thinking toward choosing and implementing effective transition practices.

### Two approaches to K–1 transition

Teachers and school systems use a variety of approaches or conceptual models in addressing children’s K–1 transition. Each model has different implications for the transition practices of teachers and schools (see Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta 2000 for a full discussion of various models). Two widely used models are the skills-only approach and the developmental/ecological approach. Here is a brief comparison of each:

The skills-only model reduces the transition period to a focus on abilities and skills the child displays at a given time, such as the number of letters she can write at the end of kindergarten. This approach is the most commonly used, but also the most limited.

The developmental/ecological model describes a web of child, family, school, peer, and community factors that are interconnected and interdependent on one another throughout the transition period.

Under the skills-only model, a young child’s adjustment during the transition period is understood in terms of the child’s characteristics, such as readiness skills, chronological age, or level of maturation. The model does not look at ecological features (such as the quality of classroom instruction) or even at developmental features. In other words, the skills-only model imagines that when children go to school, they simply get on a bus and carry certain skills with them—ready or not.

In contrast, the developmental/ecological model acknowledges evidence that children’s social and academic skills are remarkably unstable during the early school years (La Paro & Pianta 2001)—that is, what a young child knows and can do today may not be the same tomorrow, and may not be the same at home versus in the classroom. The developmental/ecological model takes into account the stability of relationships among the child, school, family, and community as the child moves from kindergarten into first grade. Perhaps most important, it considers information sharing and connections among children, parents, and schools to be critical supports for children.
The kindergarten teacher in this vignette uses the developmental/ecological approach:

Mrs. Jenkins knows that her student Michael has difficulty following multi-step instructions and needs visual cues to focus his attention. She shares this information with Michael’s future first grade teacher, so when he moves to the first grade room, he can continue to receive the support he needs to learn.

Mrs. Jenkins pays attention to Michael’s individual needs, and communicates this information to his next teacher to help ensure that his transition will be smooth. She views Michael’s readiness for first grade as more than just his age and ability to follow instructions. Her actions help to form a fabric of relationships that will support him as he moves to first grade.

At a national level, some teachers and school systems have recognized the developmental/ecological approach as superior in promoting successful K–1 transitions. Initiatives at the prekindergarten and kindergarten levels inspired by the national “Ready Schools” movement focus on school policies and practices that relate to transition, including relationships between families and schools. The Ready Schools idea was drawn from the work of the National Education Goals Panel, which called attention to the importance of quality experiences for children in K–1 settings (Pianta & Walsh 1996; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta 2000).

But it is the skills-only model that predominately influences transition policy and practice today (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 2000). Its prevalence is perhaps best illustrated by the recent adoption of child outcome accountability assessments in the federal government’s Head Start initiative and by the use of standardized assessments and “benchmarks” for child performance in early elementary school. States and school systems operating under the skills-only model typically use testing or other forms of “readiness assessment” and then make decisions about young children’s suitability for educational programs based on those assessments.

In focusing on academic standards and children’s skills, the skills-only model gives scant attention to program quality, educational practices, or teacher-child relationships. The school district in the following example uses the skills-only approach:

Kindergartner Jill’s school district considers only measurable skills when promoting students. Jill is automatically promoted to first grade because she meets reading achievement standards, though just barely. The school fails to take into account Jill’s close relationship with her kindergarten teacher—who worked tirelessly to help her meet the reading standards—and it makes no special plan to help Jill with her transition.

While Jill’s adjustment to first grade certainly will depend in part on her reading skills, an equally important piece will be her acclimation to a new teacher and the extent of the support that Jill receives from this teacher. The skills-only model does not address all aspects of a successful K–1 transition as defined by the developmental/ecological model.

Factors that influence a child’s K–1 transition

A variety of factors can help or hinder a child’s transition from kindergarten to first grade and subsequent success in school. Structural factors include class size, teacher credentials, and length of school day. Quality of instruction and practice are also significant factors. How teachers and school systems address these factors and their consistency between kindergarten and first grade are critical.

Teachers, families, and communities need to understand how young children’s competencies (their listening skills, for example) collide with how school and communities choose to structure the resources they provide kindergartners in transitioning to first grade. The very nature of this period as a transition is due to this meshing of individual differences in children (and their families) with variations in the structures and relationships of their schools (and communities). Dealing
with that discontinuity puts a stress on children’s self-regulation and social skills, which can interfere with their capacity to learn.

**Variation in K–1 structures**

Class size and teacher credentials are structural factors that policy makers decide upon and regulate. These features can differ drastically among various kindergarten programs and from kindergarten to first grade, resulting in a discontinuity that challenges children making a K–1 transition. Other kindergarten policies such as mandatory attendance, compulsory age, and length of day are also inconsistent across the country. (For more on this inconsistency and other such policy matters, see the box in the Graue chapter and the Kagan/Kauerz chapter in this volume.) Kindergarten attendance is mandatory in some states and optional in others (ECS 2005). In some states, the kindergarten day lasts only 2½ hours, versus a full 6 or 7 hours (Vecchiotti 2003).

When children move from kindergarten to first grade, new structures provide new challenges. For example, a family whose child attended voluntary kindergarten may not understand that sending their child to first grade every day is mandatory. Longer school days, too, can make for difficult adjustments, because they put increased demands on children to focus their attention and sit still. Teachers and school systems can help prepare children for these changes by sharing information and maintaining strong relationships with families, strengthening the fabric of support that eases children’s K–1 transition.

**Variation in instructional quality and practices**

State policies typically require educational programs for young children to be of high quality and to use appropriate practices (for examples, see Clifford et al. 2003; NCES 2003; National Education Goals Panel 1995; Ripple et al. 1999). However, instructional quality and practices inside, as well as between, kindergarten and first grade classrooms vary widely. Again, these differences provide for challenging K–1 transitions.

Several large-scale observational studies provide information about the types and quality of experiences children have today in K–1 classrooms. First, on average, the typical early school setting is not doing a good job at supplying the kind of interactions and stimulation children need for development (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman 2004; NICHD ECCRN 2002). Second, the type of learning activities provided for children differ considerably from classroom to classroom (NICHD ECCRN 2002; Pianta et al. 2002; Stipek 2004). These studies show, for example, that the typical child in an early elementary classroom overwhelmingly receives instruction in a large group, rather than in a small group or individually. In some classrooms, however, children are never taught in a large group. And while literacy instruction is the most common activity offered to children in kindergarten and first grade, a substantial number of classrooms provide no literacy activities at all. Even with this exceptional variability across settings, these K–1 classrooms can still be characterized overall as socially positive but instructionally passive.

When these studies looked at the same children’s experiences over time, variation in classroom quality remains the rule. For example, a child who had a “sensitive” teacher one year could not count on having a similar experience the following year (NICHD ECCRN 2004, 2005). Even in the same schools using the same curriculum, a child was unlikely to experience similar levels of instructional activities in reading or math from year to year (NICHD ECCRN 2005).

In sum, the average child is likely to experience a substantial change in instructional practices and support during the K–1 transition. Using the developmental/ecological approach, more information sharing and stronger connections among schools, teachers, and parents are necessary to provide the strong fabric of support children need during this period of change and stress.
How teachers and schools can help smooth the K–1 transition

Typical transition practices used by teachers and schools across the country provide little consistency in children’s instruction and relationships between kindergarten and first grade. This section identifies the shortcomings of some typical transition practices, and outlines how to choose effective practices that are in step with a developmental/ecological approach. These practices will align a child’s social and instructional experiences over time (throughout the transition period) and between settings (home-school and classroom-classroom).

The current state of K–1 transition

One of the first national surveys of public and private school teachers’ K–1 transition practices indicates that strategies used by teachers and schools across the country are missing the relationships and information exchanges children need to make a smooth transition (La Paro, Pianta, & Cox 2000).

The good news is that more than half of teachers surveyed indicated using some form of transition practice, with more extensive use found in private schools. Overwhelmingly, teachers in this study reported using transition practices that focus on teacher or group child activities rather than on activities that involve families and are sensitive to the needs of individual children. The two most frequently reported K–1 transition practices are teacher-to-teacher discussions of curriculum and group visits by kindergartners to first grade classrooms. These are good practices, but they are insufficient when no other strategies are used.

Effective transition strategies in action

The developmental/ecological approach embraces the idea that school transition is an ongoing, relationship-building process at multiple levels: families with teachers and other school staff, children with peers and teachers, and kindergarten teachers with their first grade counterparts. Active collaboration among the key players in the transition process—teachers, directors and principals, and families—is fundamental in ensuring a successful transition for kindergartners. The following classroom examples illustrate several specific transition strategies in action (an extended list of strategies is offered in the box beginning on the next page). Consider the types of linkages that occur in each vignette and the players involved in building connections:

As one component of a comprehensive transition program, kindergarten and first grade teachers at Washington Elementary School collaborate to host a K–1 family transition night. Families receive information about similarities and differences between kindergarten and first grade, and kindergarten and first grade teachers are available to answer their questions.

In April, veteran kindergarten teacher Mrs. Winters takes her students on a tour of first grade classrooms and introduces them to first grade teachers. In May, she invites first grade students to share a picnic with her class. Mrs. Winters encourages her kindergartners to ask the first grade students any questions they may have about first grade.

Each spring, Ms. Bailey begins incorporating first grade routines into her kindergarten classroom. With her students, Ms. Bailey practices a reading ritual once a week that is practiced daily in first grade classrooms. Because first grade students must leave the classroom to use the bathroom located at the end of the hallway, she asks her students to practice walking down the hallway in a “first grade line.”

Mr. Hinton makes an effort to introduce his kindergarteners to children from other kindergarten classrooms as frequently as possible, because he is aware that their peer groups will change with the transition to first grade. He assigns each child a “reading buddy” from another classroom; each pair gets together on Tuesday afternoons to share books. Mr. Hinton invites another kindergarten classroom to a class puppet show in May. He initiates a pen pal program with first graders at the local elementary school (which is located in a different building); each week, Mr. Hinton and his aide help the kindergartners write letters.

(continued on p. 158)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>When</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family-school connections</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact families during the first few days of kindergarten and first grade</td>
<td>Telephone calls, visits</td>
<td>First week of kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain periodic contact with the family</td>
<td>Telephone calls, notes, newsletters, visits</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage family participation in home learning activities</td>
<td>Materials and/or instructions sent home</td>
<td>Ongoing, particularly during the summer between grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage family participation in the classroom and at school events</td>
<td>Telephone calls, notes, newsletters, visits</td>
<td>Ongoing, particularly at the start of the school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct regular family meetings at school</td>
<td>Lunches, family nights</td>
<td>Ongoing and at regular intervals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct family meetings about transition issues</td>
<td>Family nights, workshops</td>
<td>During kindergarten spring, summer, and first grade fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinate information sharing about individual children between the families and teachers</td>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>During kindergarten spring or summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create newsletters and resource materials</td>
<td>Transition packets, tips, handouts</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct parent orientation after the beginning of kindergarten and first grade</td>
<td>Back-to-school nights</td>
<td>First two weeks of kindergarten and first grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child-school connections</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish a connection between the kindergarten child and the first grade teacher</td>
<td>Visits to the first grade classroom by the child or visits by first grade teacher to the kindergarten classroom</td>
<td>During kindergarten spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a connection between the child and the first grade using special school functions</td>
<td>School fairs, assemblies, playground parties</td>
<td>During kindergarten spring and summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Time of Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have children practice first grade rituals in kindergarten</td>
<td>Practice behaviors, sing songs, read stories</td>
<td>During kindergarten spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate kindergarten activities into the first grade year</td>
<td>Read a favorite book, introduce similar activities</td>
<td>During first grade fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage kindergarten teachers to stay in contact with former students</td>
<td>Letters, school visits</td>
<td>During first grade fall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Peer connections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Time of Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish peer connections within the kindergarten class</td>
<td>Purposeful classroom assignments</td>
<td>During the summers before kindergarten and first grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish peer connections outside of school</td>
<td>Play dates</td>
<td>Ongoing, particularly during the summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish connections with peers who will be in first grade</td>
<td>Activities with other kindergartens</td>
<td>Ongoing, particularly during kindergarten spring and summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish kindergarten peer connections with first grade peers</td>
<td>School visits, summer school</td>
<td>During kindergarten spring and summer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Classroom-classroom connections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Time of Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share curriculum activities and classroom routines between kindergarten and first grade</td>
<td>Teachers observe each others’ classrooms and hold regular meetings</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree on a common assessment tool to describe individual children and their families</td>
<td>Meet to decide what information will be helpful to both teachers</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** This table is intended to serve as a flexible menu from which teachers can pick and choose transition activities that fit their situation. In fact, teachers are encouraged to be creative and add their own ideas to this list as they build a developmentally and ecologically responsive transition plan.
Family-school connections. Healthy family-school relationships are critical in helping a child adjust to a new classroom and teacher during the transition period. A major objective of creating positive family-school connections is to increase each family’s collaboration and involvement with the school so that information about their child’s experiences at home and school can be shared within a trusting relationship. A family benefits from understanding what is expected of their child in the classroom, knowing about the types of learning experiences available at school, and hearing how their child is adjusting to the new setting once the child goes on to first grade.

Child-school connections. The K–1 transition will be smooth when children are involved in comfortable, supportive relationships with their kindergarten and first grade teachers. When kindergarten teachers provide opportunities for children to interact directly with the teachers they will have in first grade—during tours of their soon-to-be first grade classrooms and visits from the first grade teachers to the kindergarten classroom—the children will be more comfortable with the transition. A positive teacher-child connection can begin to form. In some school systems, kindergarten and first grade classrooms are located in different schools, making the logistics of a visit more difficult. Nevertheless, it is just as important, if not more so, for kindergartners to have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with their new school setting (in a class trip, for example).

Peer connections. Strong peer relationships also provide children with support throughout the transition. When children move from kindergarten into first grade with their friends, those connections can make them feel more comfortable with their new environment and provide social experiences that will feel predictable. Such peer connections are promoted inside and outside of the classroom when, with help from kindergarten teachers, families whose children will share a first grade teacher connect, and when sets of kindergartner peers visit their future first grade classroom together.

Classroom-classroom connections. Information sharing between kindergarten and first grade teachers is an essential part of establishing continuity for children during the K–1 transition and beyond. As highlighted earlier, instructional practice and classroom quality vary strikingly across kindergarten classrooms and between kindergarten and first grade. In order to create a more consistent educational experience for children during their K–1 transition, it is critical that teachers...

Smoothing the PreK to K Transition, Too

The discontinuity between preschool and kindergarten can often be more pronounced than the K–1 transition:

- Almost half (48%) of parents surveyed in the 2000 U.S. Census reported that their 3- and 4-year-olds were not “in school”—that is, kindergarten will represent their first formal schooling experience.
- A preschool day can be as short as 2½ and as long as 10 hours, while kindergarten days are as variable.
- A child’s kindergarten classroom is likely to be housed in a location different from the preschool classroom.
- PreK teachers typically have less education and training than elementary school teachers do.
- Substantial variability exists within and across preK–K classroom quality and practices.
- Parent-teacher contact is emphasized less and often decreases in frequency from preschool to kindergarten.

The developmental/ecological principles discussed in this chapter also apply to this preK–K transition. That is, kindergarten teachers are encouraged to form collaborative relationships with preschool teachers and parents to enhance preK–K continuity. For specific suggestions, see Pianta & Kraft-Sayre 2003.
communicate with one another. Schools or individual teachers can initiate such information sharing.

**Redefining “success” in transition outcomes**

The K–1 transition is best understood as a web of relationships among children, families, teachers, classrooms, schools, and communities that can enhance or deter young children’s development and subsequent school success. Frequently, however, the definitions of “success” in K–1 transition only include the transmission of skills from kindergarten to first grade. These definitions favor a skills-only model of transition, rather than a developmental/ecological approach.

From a skills-only perspective, a child’s successful transition from kindergarten is measured solely by her social and academic competence in a first grade classroom. But this competence may not be the only, or best, outcome measure of a successful transition from kindergarten. Factors such as continuity of instructional practices and family-school relationships are instrumental aspects of a coherent transition process and should be considered worthy outcomes in their own right. Current definitions of successful K–1 transition should be revised to include elements of the fabric of support described by the developmental/ecological approach.

Teachers and early childhood educators who take the responsibility to think about transition from a developmental/ecological perspective and make smooth transitions a priority will greatly benefit their students. These teacher efforts can also help create school cultures that focus on strengthening relationships and information sharing to serve as resources for children and families. Future K–1 transition efforts embedded in a developmental/ecological model hold promise for realizing a system of early schooling in which children’s educational experiences are coherent, systematic, and effective.

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**References**


