

## **Tips on Transitioning from EI to the Special Education System**

By Erin Ward

Since my three-year-old son just experienced the transition from Early Intervention to the Special Education system, I thought I would take some time to reflect on the process as a parent and offer helpful hints that aided our transition. My son William, besides being a happy, handsome three-year old, is a child who has complex medical and overall developmental needs. He received the array of therapies and services that the Early Intervention system has to offer with much success and the initial idea of having to leave the EI system we came to love was daunting. Yet time moves on, change is inevitable, and it is through this process that we have learned to embrace change and seek out the new educational opportunities that await our son. The following tips helped us create a smooth transition.

### **Parent-Centered Tips for Transition**

Attend a "Turning Three" Workshop: This workshop sponsored by the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) is a great starting point to learn the basics about the transition of services from Early Intervention to the special education system or other community resources based on your child's needs.

Start Early & Make a Personal First Impression: By the time your child is 2½, and it is anticipated that he or she will qualify for special education services, your EI service coordinator will make a referral to your local school district's Special Education Department. We asked to be directly involved by including a personalized introduction letter. We felt that from the start this helped make the school district aware that we would be active participants in our child's educational planning.

Request a Pre-Evaluation Meeting: A pre-evaluation meeting is a great opportunity to meet members of the school community that will be working to determine eligibility and develop your child's IEP. It is an initial meeting where anticipated concerns and priorities can be discussed.

Stay Organized: Keep track of all paperwork in one place and stay on top of deadline dates. We created an educational binder and put pictures on the front to help put a face to the name.

Be Prepared for the Eligibility/IEP/Placement Meetings: You know your child best and are a valuable resource in this process. Take some time to put your vision, hopes, and goals for your child in writing before the school meeting. Gather any helpful paperwork to support your educational and healthcare vision; past evaluations, medical records, letter from physician, etc. The "Basic Rights" and "IEP" workshops sponsored by the FCSN can educate you about your child's educational rights.

Visit Possible Placement Options: Just as this is a time for the school to evaluate and get to know your child, this is also a time for you to evaluate and get to know the school system. Visit the classrooms, ask questions, and go with your gut instincts as a parent.

Be Resourceful: Ask for assistance through this process. Your EI therapists and service coordinators are great supports. Ask if there are parents within your local school district who have already gone through transition with whom you can talk. When needed, seek out an educational advocate who is experienced with this process.

Healthcare Advocates: For children with complex medical needs, it is important to consult with professionals who are experienced with integrating health care needs into the school system. Request that your child's physician write a letter that includes the child's needs and physician recommendations. Contact MASSSTART. (See Page 2) Our regional coordinator from MASSSTART was instrumental in communicating our son's healthcare needs to the school system and ensuring implementation of a comprehensive healthcare plan.

Be Open to the Process: This transition can be very intense and stressful because as a parent you want to ensure the very best for your child. Be open to the process. Developing a positive working relationship with the school will foster open communication. Be open to the idea of disagreement, but be committed to work as part of a team towards resolution.

### **Child-centered Tips for Transition**

Expose your child to group experiences: Our son had the opportunity to participate in a playgroup experience through the EI program at the Professional Center for Child Development. It was a great opportunity for him to be introduced to peer play, learn class routines, de-sensitize to group sounds, and experience detachment from parents for short periods of time. It was also a wonderful way for us as parents to evaluate and explore his potential and possible educational needs and goals.

Visit the new classroom and teacher: Arrange to visit the new classroom and spend some time with the teacher before the start date.

Talk about Pre-School: Children, even at three, notice change. Talk with them about their new experiences to come and even look for books about starting "school" to share with them.

Introduce your child to the class: We wanted to help introduce Will to his new class by creating a book about him to be shared his first day at school. We included pictures and personal information about typical things he likes to do, as well as medical equipment with which other children may be unfamiliar.

Celebrate your child's EI experience: As you look forward to new experiences, take some time to find special ways of saying thanks to your EI therapists & service coordinators.

This helps to bring a sense of closure. Celebrate the success and experiences EI has brought your child.

Remember that as a parent you can be the number one advocate for your child. The more you learn about the transition process the better equipped you will be to anticipate the upcoming changes and to be an active participant in the planning. Turning three is the beginning of your family's experience with the special education system. Resolve to yourself that it will be an ever-changing and evolving process throughout your child's educational career. Through it all, by keeping your child at the center of all decisions, the outcome will be a success.

William received EI services at the Professional Center for Child Development in Andover, where Erin served as Parent Contact for two years.