

What Parents Need to Know When Preschoolers Move On

The bureaucracy calls it Transition from Childcare to School Setting. But parents lie awake nights when we are about to send our beautiful little ones off into the world. This rite of passage can be a celebration - aren't parents supposed to feel relief when "the birdies leave the nest"? But it can be so frightening, especially when we know some children are not able to "fly" on their own. Some may always be that vulnerable, but that means they need ongoing support to experience the joys of "flight".

Most of us haven't been in a school for a long time, when we first contemplate how school will treat our children. But if we understand how our child was supported in an inclusive pre-school, we already know what will work in kindergarten. Success does not mean documenting, treating or overcoming the child's challenges, but calls upon the acceptance and creativity of adults. How do I know? I made some serious mistakes for my son, 20 years ago; have learned from him, his brother and sister and many friends; and have been working with the Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education to make a difference for all children. So talk to other parents; don't go alone to meetings; ask for help from your child's resource teacher or support worker; visit schools.

Here are some things I have learned about positive planning between families and their schools:

- We hear so much about trouble in schools, teachers burning out, pressures on principals, etc. But expect the very best from educators and administrators; keep expecting them to care about *all* kids. Make them accountable; every child is part of the future we share. Be "real" together; if their comments hurt you, tell them. Invite educators and administrators to take off those hats. Maybe they are parents too – how would they feel? But celebrate good teamwork too.
- Inclusive education means all students receive support to learn as members of a regular classroom, participating in and contributing to their own neighbourhood school – the one their brothers and sisters and neighbours attend. No child is "too disabled", but no child should have to sit still at a desk all day! Teaching methods are adapted in ways that can enrich education for all students, and that do not necessarily cost more money. Find out all about effective, individualized education.
- Be careful how you introduce your child. Special education has made such mistakes, traditionally thinking of disability labels. To say "Hello. This is Johnny. These are his 3 biggest problems" can be a recipe for disaster. How would you want to be described if you were starting a new job? Get help from friends and allies so you can take a sentence listing your child's 3 main strengths – as a powerful mantra – to meetings!
- All we hear these days is that there is not enough money for schools. That doesn't mean your child comes last in line, after everyone else. Beware that educators these days are pressured to create the world's worst ways of describing students – to get provincial money called Intensive Support Funding – but ISA should not mean "I'll Say Anything"! Schools cannot do psychological assessments or access medical information without parents' consent. Find out about the uses and abuses of such testing. Tell educators it's not your job to worry about the money, but that your job is to make sure your child gets the best possible education.
- So watch out for harmful pre-judgments. What does the teacher really need to know? You know your child best; the teacher knows all about kindergarten. Curriculum builds upon what kids CAN do, not what they cannot; so planning doesn't mean just anticipating problems. While your child's challenges may be different, they are not likely the greatest that teachers ever face. Imagine Monday morning in Kindergarten; what will it take to include your child – even 15 minutes at a time? Kids thrive in families, and we didn't get advance instructions! Don't accept excuses; find solutions.
- Every child's strongest right is to just show up at the neighbourhood school. It cannot turn any student away, unless parents give up, or exhaust considerable rights of appeal. It hurts parents so much when principals reject our children – but maybe they are just trying to make their own lives easier. School boards want us to believe that it's only those "special" places that have the expertise, have the resources that even want kids with disabilities. But we have a long shameful history of sending people with disabilities away from society. Many never come back. Even now, students who go to segregated classes and schools live separate lives, and can become strangers. Segregation costs taxpayers much more – and there's never enough education funding.
- Find out all you can about inclusive education; so you will be convinced that what you want is right and worth the struggle. You may have a miserable summer, worrying that support will not be available in September. But once you make it clear that you and your child are not leaving the

neighbourhood school, the principal and the teacher will have to become advocates too. Then, getting the help your child needs makes their jobs easier too.

- Students cannot be formally identified as exceptional or placed in special education – at meetings called IPRCs – until after they actually start school. IPRCs often describe students negatively, and pressure to segregate, even though the law (Regulation 181) now says they must consider regular class placement and support for every exceptional student, every year. No one can be segregated without justification. Both students' needs and parental preferences must be considered.
- You don't need to have had an IPRC to get extra support; indeed IPRCs cannot guarantee your child will get help, such as from an educational assistant. It is only good school teamwork that determines what students really need and brings help quickly to their teachers too. "Special Education Program" is defined in the Education Act as the way to plan for and provide an education for one student at a time. So remind the school that "program" is not a place, and does not involve clustering students. It really means providing required accommodations – often by means of an Individual Education Plan (IEP).
- You are part of a struggle for social justice – for better education and full citizenship. Emily Eaton's family went all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada to defend her right to an inclusive education. (And although the judgment didn't help her, she is thriving now in high school.) Her legal precedent established that considerable extra support must be provided in a regular classroom before any school board can ever justify segregation.
- Change can be difficult, but the good news is that inclusive education is better for everyone. Just ask the kids!

So your little one is starting school; of course you want the very best! We can work together with the goal of true inclusion. The Ontario Coalition for Inclusive Education knows many students who have showed such courage to "leave the nest" and always just want to be one of the kids. There is no need for them to define themselves in terms of their disabilities; so why should we? As a parent, when I became frustrated at school personnel who put more obstacles in his path, I would say to myself: "Why am I paying you?" After all, these educators are only around for a little while, and they need to be directed by parents, and students. The Ontario Coalition for inclusive Education is inspired by People First members who have first-hand experience, often having been labeled disabled, and segregated in school. Their advice to us is to see our children's strengths and to aim higher for the future.

If you are steadfast and work with allies, you will be successful. Tell us all about it!