



# Birth to Three Transition:

## One Family's Story

**C**hange is stressful, but it's a normal, even healthy, part of life. Many of the biggest changes in my life—the birth of each of my daughters, my first day at work in a new career as a family facilitator in early intervention—were stressful. But they were changes for the better. However, nobody could have told me four years ago that change is good when it was time to transition out of our Early Intervention Program, known in Wisconsin as “Birth to 3.” At that point, enough changes and stress had already built up in my life. After many doctors’ visits and rounds of tests, our second daughter, Cara, was diagnosed with low muscle tone and oral-motor problems that affected control of her mouth. We had found Birth to 3 when she was eight months old. I liked Birth to 3, their providers liked Cara, and I thought we could easily just stay where we were in the comfort of our own living room until Cara was old enough to start high school.

I don't always see eye-to-eye with federal legislators, but this time there was no choice. The law says that children leave Early

Intervention at the child's third birthday. When Cara was two and a half, it was officially “transition time.” In Wisconsin, that not only means changing our team of providers, but also leaving one agency for another. Our Birth to 3 program is run through the Department of Health and Family Services, while the Department of Public Instruction oversees our Early Childhood Program serving children ages three to five.

Our family's service coordinator had been prepping me for several months about the imminent changes. She talked about the upcoming evaluation for the transition. She encouraged me to apply for our state's Medicaid waiver program to help increase the chances that Cara would receive additional, one-on-one speech services for a very severe motor speech impairment. She made sure I was signed up for our county's Respite and Family Support Programs.

It just wasn't sinking in, though. “But,” I asked, “Who will be my service coordinator? Who

will tell me about what's available out there? Who will bring toys to our house, entertaining both my daughters and delighting in them like part of the family?”

Well, the ability to fit in as part of the family isn't really a mandate of Early Intervention. But in all seriousness, having people around us who focused on Cara's strengths and included our whole family in the process were very high family priorities.

During the transition process, I felt our Birth to 3 service coordinator worked with the incoming Early Childhood staff to do several things that, in retrospect, were extremely comforting and fit well with what we as a family thought was important. These included:

- Families were introduced ahead of time, during the transition process, to the incoming Early Childhood teachers. Our Birth to 3 Program hosted a spring parent meeting focusing on transition, inviting the Early Childhood teachers from public school

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to talk about what to expect during the upcoming school year, including the dreaded bus ride. As it turns out, many parents are very concerned about putting a three-year-old child, especially a child with limited verbal abilities, on a school bus. The Early Childhood team took this concern seriously and talked about the bus company's safety record, how they hire drivers, etc.

- *Families could talk with other families who had been involved with the Early Childhood Program.* At this meeting, two families talked about their Early Childhood experiences, bringing pictures of class activities and answering questions.
- *Parents were invited to visit the Early Childhood Program before sending their child, giving them time to look around, ask questions, and learn about the curriculum and activities.* For many families, a fear of the unknown is part of what makes change so intimidating. Knowing what to expect and being able to talk with staff ahead of time helped allay fears and forge the beginnings of a family-provider relationship.
- *Evaluation by the incoming Early Childhood team occurred in our home, giving me an opportunity to meet individual teachers and therapists personally, and providing them a relaxed setting in which to get to know Cara.* Because we had always received home-based Birth to 3 services, this seemed



the most natural setting for our family to be introduced to Early Childhood professionals. In the years since, changes in the federal law (IDEA) allow current Birth to 3 assessments to be used in the IEP team process, eliminating the need for duplicate testing by the school district.

- *Members of my Birth to 3 team offered to go with me to the transition and IEP meetings.* I wasn't savvy enough at the time to really understand the law, or to have asked for an advocate or support person to attend meetings with me. Likewise, I would not have known that this was an appropriate request. I was tremendously relieved to receive the offer, and later appreciated all the insights they provided to the incoming team that I would have forgotten to mention on my own.

- *Both Birth to 3 and Early Childhood teams remained professional in their interactions with each other, avoiding the need for me to "take sides" or get caught in the middle of any professional power struggles.* I mention this because I later learned that this is not always the case. In fact, there were differences in work styles among members that could have resulted in noticeable tension. In subsequent years, I have been caught in the middle of power struggles between service professionals, and felt that our family was the ultimate loser in such situations. I appreciated both teams' professionalism, so we could all concentrate on Cara's best interests.

Overall, I think our transition went smoothly, considering that I really wasn't ready for any type of change. However, I also believe that there were elements about our transition that could have been changed to result in even better outcomes for Cara and for our family. These include:

- *Families had limited program choices after Birth to 3.* Basically, our family had two options: enroll Cara in a self-contained Early Childhood classroom that met two mornings per week, or choose not to participate in public school programming. We would have preferred more options, such as itinerant services, integrated settings, or even a choice between mornings or afternoons. Cara was a slow riser

and didn't really become fully alert until after 9:00 AM. Yet, Early Childhood classes met at 8:00 AM, and the bus was to arrive at 7:30 each morning. It was just expected that parents alter family schedules to accommodate school hours.

- *Programmatic decisions were based primarily on Cara's chronological age, rather than her developmental level.* Most children do not experience major changes at their third birthday. We would have preferred following the same preschool schedule for Cara that her older sister, Amelia, had had. Amelia did not immediately begin preschool or ride a school bus when she turned three. Instead, we enrolled her in a preschool close to our home shortly before her fourth birthday. Yet, if a child has a disability or delay, the entire system typically must change as the third birthday approaches.
- *The Early Childhood team shifted from "family-centered" practices toward "child-centered" outcomes.* During Birth to 3, our entire family felt supported. We received information about upcoming conferences and community opportunities. We talked about ways our family could maximize Cara's potential through ideas for play, positioning, and outdoor activities. We talked about outcomes that were especially important to our family, such as learning



how to swim, skate, and climb stairs. During the transition, it became clear that there would be a shift from what our family felt was best to what the school team knew was most important to Cara. We felt that potty training was more important than balancing on a triangle swing in the therapy room, but the school staff disagreed. While "parent involvement" has become a popular phrase during the past few years, there actually were few opportunities for us to provide input as Cara began school in the Early Childhood setting.

In retrospect, I realize that some of my concerns about changing systems at the time of our transition are tremendously difficult challenges to overcome. To make this change seamless and less noticeable to families requires two separate systems with different organizational structures and priorities to work together. Often, different individual approaches, priorities, or communication styles

can lead to conflict among team members or between the provider team and the family. However, in the years since that transition, our family has experienced other transitions that did not leave us feeling left out or without choices. While it is true that the tenets of the Birth to 3 philosophy are rooted in families at the center of service delivery, I have worked with public school teams that have been just as committed to including and involving our family in every aspect of service delivery.

The difference between a smooth, successful transition and a challenging ordeal lies not with the program, but with individual providers and their teammates. The final reward of a positive transition is success for the child and a sense of support for his or her family. Ultimately, that's what all of us—families, Birth to 3 providers, Early Childhood educators and therapists—want for all children.

**Note**

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