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This Research Brief is the second in a periodic series published by the National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment (NCASE) to build awareness of research and promising practices in the field of school-age child care.

The goal of NCASE is to ensure that school-age children in families of low income have increased access to quality afterschool and summer learning experiences that contribute to their overall development and academic achievement. For more information, contact us at ncase@ecetta.info.



Navigating the Transition to Kindergarten and School-Age Care

The transition to kindergarten is an important milestone in a young child's life. While this transition is often accompanied by much excitement and anticipation, it can also bring uncertainty and anxiety as children face changes on multiple levels, such as new teachers and classmates, a new learning environment, and a new set of expectations around schedule and behavior.¹ The range of reactions felt by children also affects their parents and caregivers, as they think about the changes that lie ahead and work with their children to prepare for the transition.

For families who rely on full-day child care coverage, the transition to kindergarten marks not just the child's entry into the formal K–2 school system, but also to before-school, afterschool, and summer programming. Many parents rely on this wrap-around coverage—child care outside

of school hours—so they can remain in the workforce. In the United States, nearly one in four families has a child enrolled in an afterschool program, and the majority of those parents agree that the availability of afterschool programs helps them keep their jobs.²

- 1 Patton, C., & Wang, J. (2012). Ready for success: Creating collaborative and thoughtful transitions into kindergarten. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project. Retrieved from <https://archive.globalfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/ready-for-success-creating-collaborative-and-thoughtful-transitions-into-kindergarten>; National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2013). *Family engagement in transitions: Transition to kindergarten*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/rtp-transition-to-kindergarten.pdf>
- 2 Afterschool Alliance. (2014). *America after 3 pm: Afterschool programs in demand*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/America-After-3PM-Afterschool-Programs-in-Demand.pdf>

This research brief builds on existing guidance about supporting children and families during the transition to kindergarten by broadening the way parents and stakeholders think about this transition to include the school-age programs many young children attend.

During their child's early years, working parents of low income may have used child care subsidies through the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) to obtain full-day child care, or sent their child to a part-day Head Start program that used CCDF funding to offer extended-day coverage to children from qualifying families. The shift from this type of comprehensive child care coverage to a much-shorter school day schedule means working parents must secure additional child care and prepare their children for the transition to these new care arrangements as well as to kindergarten.

Many resources are available to help parents prepare their children for entry into kindergarten, with tips about reaching out to kindergarten teachers to learn more about routines, planning visits to the new elementary school, and sharing information on kindergarten routines and activities with their child.³ Head Start programs, which send over 300,000 children to kindergarten each year, are governed by program performance standards that include a [transition services](#) requirement to collaborate with families and local elementary schools to support children and families during this transition. Other preschool and pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs may have their own transition-related practices to help prepare children and families. However, existing resources and efforts to support children and families during the transition to kindergarten do not tend to address the broader array of care and learning environment transitions that children of working

parents may soon experience, such as before-school and afterschool care.

Varying Landscape of Early Education Experiences

Children enter kindergarten with a wide variety of prior early care and education experiences. Some children spend their early years at home with a parent or in the care of a relative or other adult. Others spend the years prior to kindergarten in a family child care environment. For children who have not experienced a non-relative early care and education setting, the transition to a formal kindergarten program can represent a major change. And while family child care can offer the feel of a structured learning environment, kindergarten might represent the first time children have experienced regular classroom routines, large- and small-group activities, and teachers who are not familiar caregivers.

Slightly more than half of all three- and four-year old children attend center-based preschool,⁴ and these young children enter kindergarten having already experienced a formal early learning environment. These programs include publicly funded Head Start and public pre-kindergarten, as well as private preschools. Generally, these children have already experienced many of the routines and practices of a typical kindergarten program, such as circle time, large- and small-group activities, and a regular daily schedule. In addition, children who have experienced formal early education environments prior to kindergarten entry may be accustomed to entering environments with children they did not previously know, and receiving care from a variety of teachers and other caregivers.

Of the children who participate in child care and early education programs prior to

3 National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. (n.d.) *Your child is going to kindergarten: Making the move together*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ttk-making-the-move-together.pdf>

4 Chaudry, A., Morrissey, T., Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2017). *Cradle to kindergarten: A new plan to combat inequality*. New York, NY: The Russell Sage Foundation.

kindergarten, some attend part-day, part-year preschool programs (such as Head Start), while others attend full-day, full-year programs that offer the coverage parents need to meet the demands of their work schedules. Parents of low income who use CCDF subsidies to pay for child care often need care beyond the hours provided by part-time programs. This is especially true as parents must be enrolled in education and training activities or, in some states, work a minimum number of hours to qualify for subsidies, and these hours may not align with the hours of part-time programs.⁵ These parents might send their children to a care provider who is open the full amount of time they need or to a part-day program, such as Head Start, that offers extended day services that meet parents' coverage requirements. Still others might rely on a combination of part-time preschool/pre-K programs and more informal kinship care to address the coverage gap left by their child's early education program.

Parents who need full-day, year-round coverage when their children are very young often continue to need this type of coverage when their child enters kindergarten. As a result, many parents will need to obtain before-school and/or afterschool care for their children, as well as coverage during school vacation weeks and the summer months. This adds a layer of complexity to parents' preparation for their child's transition to kindergarten, because they need to consider not just the kindergarten classroom environment, but also the variety of school-age child care options available to them.

Broadening Support for Multiple Transitions

Resources focused on the transition to kindergarten stress the importance of prepar-



ing children and parents for what to expect in the kindergarten environment. Such preparation includes sharing information about kindergarten routines and activities, familiarizing children with the new building and teachers, talking with children about the exciting changes that lie ahead, and addressing any concerns they may have. Many elementary schools work with early childhood programs, such as Head Start, to facilitate visits to the classroom and meetings with the kindergarten teachers to help children and families get acquainted with the classroom and staff.

Children who will be attending before-school and/or afterschool care face additional transitions during the kindergarten year. In addition to new teachers and classmates, a new school building, and new routines in their kindergarten classroom, these children will also encounter new caregivers and program staff, new peers, a new space (if the afterschool program is off-site), new transportation arrangements, and another new set of routines and activities in the afterschool program. Young children are often sensitive to change, and the transition to multiple settings, caregivers, routines, and peers can be overwhelming for some children. Parents and child care providers should be ready to provide additional support and encouragement to children adjusting to multiple transitions.

⁵ Stevens, K., Blatt, L., & Minton, S. (2017). *Child care subsidies under the CCDF program: An overview of policy differences across states and territories as of October 1, 2015* (OPRE Report 2017-46). Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://ccdf.urban.org/sites/default/files/CCDFDatabase2015PolicySummary.pdf>



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Issues to Consider in the Transition to Kindergarten and School-Age Care

What should parents and caregivers consider when preparing for the transition to both kindergarten and school-age care? Consider how the child has reacted to past transitions and change in general. How did the child handle changes in caregivers? How did they handle placement changes (e.g., moving from one program to another, or from one classroom to another, within the same program)? Was the child sensitive to disruptions in continuity of care, or did they adjust well to each new change?

Reflecting on how a child has reacted to previous transitions can help parents anticipate how their child may adjust to new school and care settings, as well as help parents decide what type of before-school or afterschool child care arrangement would best suit their child. In addition, parents of a child with disabilities should consider how afterschool providers will be able to address their child's needs. Does the program have experience working with children with the same or similar disabilities? Are staff open to parents' suggestions about how they can best accommodate the child's needs?

Children who are more sensitive to placement or caregiver disruption might benefit from before-school or afterschool programs located in the same place as their kindergarten program. Children who relish trying new things might welcome the chance to experience a different placement setting and a new group of peers. If a child previously attended a child care center that also served school-age children, continuing with that program could provide both a break from the kindergarten school environment as well as continuity with a previous care setting. Similarly, children who are used to a small family child care program might prefer returning to the familiar comfort of

that setting for their afterschool care, given all the other changes kindergarten brings. However, if parents choose to use family child care for afterschool coverage needs, they should pay close attention to transportation needs, as family child care homes may be less likely than child care centers to offer transportation to and from a child's school.

Parents who use CCDF subsidies to offset the cost of child care will also need to consider program fees when selecting before-school and afterschool child care. Programs located at the child's school may be license-exempt, and parents will need to check whether such programs are eligible to accept subsidies in their state. Community-based child care programs that accept subsidies may be more likely than school-based programs to remain open during school vacation weeks and school holidays, thus helping to meet parents' coverage needs. All of these factors are important for parents to consider when planning for child care coverage needs during the kindergarten year and beyond.

The National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment has created a [tipsheet](#) to help parents think through school-age child care options when preparing their child for the transition to kindergarten.





Recommendations for Supporting Families

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies, early childhood programs such as Head Start, public pre-K, CCDF providers, and elementary school staff all have roles to play in guiding parents of incoming kindergarten students in thinking broadly about transition planning so that it covers the full range of children's and parents' needs. The following recommendations can help stakeholders identify ways to support children and families in the transition to kindergarten and afterschool care.

- » State and territory CCDF Lead Agency staff can leverage their involvement in early childhood advisory councils and other early learning coordinating entities to ensure kindergarten transition issues are framed broadly enough to include before-school and afterschool as well as summer child care. States' early learning standards can also include references to transition planning and children's broader out-of-school time care needs during the kindergarten and early elementary years.
- » CCR&R agencies can talk to families with preschool-age children to guide them in thinking ahead to their child care needs when their child transitions to kindergarten. CCR&R staff can help families understand the types of school-age programs that are eligible to receive subsidies (such as license-exempt providers, which serve large numbers of children through school- and community-based afterschool and summer programs).
- » The [quality standards](#) of the state's QRIS (quality rating and improvement system) program can broaden family engagement criteria to include sharing information about school-age programs available for before-school or afterschool care, as well as summertime child care. Some states' QRIS programs include requirements for child care providers around developing and maintaining active partnerships with schools and community-based agencies, as well as supporting kindergarten transition. These efforts can be broadened to include (1) an explicit focus on partnerships with school-age programs that offer before-school and afterschool care and (2) attention to the transition to this broader array of care environments when addressing the transition to kindergarten.
- » The [Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five \(PDG B-5\)](#) program emphasizes preparing children for the transition to elementary school as well as expanding parental choice and ensuring families are connected to the services they need. States that participate in the PDG B-5 program can create strategies related to transition supports and expanding parental choice that include attention to kindergarteners' before-school and afterschool needs. This helps to broaden the concept of "transition planning" to incorporate the full array of children's child care needs during the transition to kindergarten.
- » Early childhood programs, such as Head Start and pre-K programs, can incorporate information about school-age child care planning into their existing transition practices. Many of these programs already have well-established transition planning activities. Therefore, including information about before-school and afterschool issues can help ensure this transition planning is comprehensive and meets the needs of working parents. CCDF providers who serve school-age children can share information about school-age programming options with parents of rising kindergarteners, including details on available transportation between the program and the child's school.

» Elementary schools can send parents information about kindergarten registration and school readiness that includes information about before-school and after-school options in the community. During transition-focused events for incoming

kindergarten children and their families at the school or at community organizations, staff can also confirm that families have the information they need to address the full range of child care coverage their children will require.

Conclusion

Stakeholders at all levels of the early education and care system have roles to play in broadening the concept of transition to kindergarten to encompass issues related to children's transitions to before-school and afterschool care. As with the transition to kindergarten itself, changes in these other care arrangements can bring excitement and new opportunities for learning and growth. These changes can also

create anxiety and uncertainty as working parents try to knit together wraparound care that supports their workforce participation. A more comprehensive approach to addressing the transition to kindergarten can ensure that children and families are supported throughout the full range of learning and care changes that come with this pivotal transition time.

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