Navigating Your Way

Ages 3-6

Being included in all aspects of life is key to your child’s social, psychological and cognitive development. Although educational and other services will be big part of your support system for many years to come, community connections and relationships are vital to your child’s long-term success.

Transitioning from birth-to-three services into the school system comes with a series of changes for you and your child. Be prepared for not one, but several transitions—from early intervention services, to developmental preschool, then on to kindergarten and first grade. With each transition, start planning at least six months ahead. A good thing to remember is that all parents feel concerned about any transition in a child’s life. This is a very normal feeling no matter what the transition.

Once your child turns 3, you no longer have a Family Resources Coordinator to guide you, and the family-centered approach of early intervention will change to a focus on your child as a student.

Before your child transitions, find out the name and contact information for each of the school district professionals involved in your child’s education, whether it’s an Early Childhood Coordinator, Readiness to Learn Coordinator, or school psychologist, the professionals involved in coordinating special educational services will vary.

One way to prepare is to think about how your child communicates, your dreams for your child, and any concerns. You can share information with transition staff with a letter, power point or photos. Personalizing your child will help staff get a fuller picture of their life.

Thanks to the families before you, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act known as IDEA, public schools must provide your child a free appropriate public education known as FAPE from age three to twenty one.

Under IDEA, every child is entitled to have an Individualized Education Program, known as an IEP. It’s specifically tailored to meet your child’s learning strengths and needs. An IEP includes education goals and objectives in addition to related services as needed such as speech, physical, or occupational therapies, assistive technology, counseling, or other aides and services that enable your child to receive a free appropriate public education.

Even with state and federal laws to ensure your child’s right to an education it takes a lot of hard work to see that your child gets the services and education he or she needs. No one knows your child better than you do, so when it comes to making decisions regarding his/her education, it’s important to speak up and ensure that your child’s needs are being met. Organizations such as Parent to Parent (P2P) and Partnerships for Action, Voices for Empowerment (PAVE) will help you learn how to be your child’s best advocate. Visit arcwa.org/getsupport to find a Parent to Parent office near you. For assistance from PAVE, visit wapave.org.

The Office of the Education Ombuds (OEO) resolves complaints, disputes, and problems between families and public schools. The OEO is independent of the public school system and provides an alternative to costly lawsuits and administrative hearings. For more information, call 1-866-297-2597; www.governor.wa.gov/oeo

It’s just as important to build your network of support and connection to your community.

The more your child learns to participate in groups and socialize with other children, the better they will make the transition to school. Look for opportunities to include your child in typical community activities, such as library story time or Parks & Recreation programs.

The Family Community Connections Guidebook, a free publication of The Arc of Washington State, offers valuable tips and worksheets for identifying people, places and ideas to help broaden your family member’s social circle and community connections. Visit informingfamilies.org to download a free copy in English or Spanish.

If you have other children, there’s support for them, too. Sibshops provide peer support from other siblings in a lively, recreational setting. Visit siblingsupport.org to find a Sibshop near you.

As you navigate this transition to early childhood, pay attention to your child’s evolving interests, abilities and strengths. These will form the building blocks for the many types of planning that will take place throughout their life—from educational and service supports to larger life goals.

My Life Plan, a free online planning tool, is a great way to document your child’s interests, strengths, abilities and needs. My Life Plan helps you create goals based on your child’s unique qualities at every stage of life. Share your child’s plan with anyone who plays an important role in their life, such as other family members, doctors, educators, and therapists. Visit mylifeplan.guide to get started.

In addition to special education and community resources, additional publicly funded services and benefits may be available to your child.

If your family is low income and in need of financial assistance, contact the Social Security Administration to find out if you qualify for Supplemental Security Income. Call toll-free 1-800-772-1213 or visit online at www.ssa.gov. SSI is the gateway to Medicaid services, such as Apple Health, so it’s an important first step for families with low income.

WithinReach provides local and state resource information on health care coverage and other services for families of children with special health care needs in Washington State. For answers to your health care questions, call the Family Health Hotline toll-free at 1-800-322-2588 or visit [www.withinreachwa.org](http://www.withinreachwa.org).

If your child is eligible for Apple Health, which is a Medicaid program, an important benefit is called EPSDT, which stands for Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment. With EPSDT, children can get a regular check up and treatment for medical issues found during an exam up to age 21. Call 1-800-562-3022 and ask about EPSDT services for your child.

Many home and community-based services, such as in-home personal care, are administered through the Developmental Disabilities Administration. DDA is the state agency that provides case management and supportive services for children and adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Washington State.

Children enrolled in ESIT early intervention services are eligible for DDA up to age 4, when eligibility must be renewed. You will need to re-apply for DDA services *before* that happens, to avoid gaps in services for your child. DDA will send a notice 6 months prior to your child turning 4. Request a determination of eligibility from your local DDA office or online at dshs.wa.gov/dda. You can also sign up for news updates from DDA from their homepage. Just click the box to the right.

Find links to all of these resources and more at informingfamilies.org, a program of the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Council.