



## SUMMARY REPORT

### The Third Annual National Autism Policy Forum: Transitioning – Early Years to School Age

Videoconference and webcast

March 10, 2010, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Quebec

#### Overview

The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) and the Centre of Excellence for Children and Adolescents with Special Needs (CECASN) hosted a videoconferencing and webcast policy forum on autism, on March 10, 2010. This year, this format was chosen to make the forum more accessible to a greater number of people. There were 30 participants in 9 locations from 7 provinces.

The objective of the Forum on Autism is to provide an opportunity for policy makers and advisors from across Canada to share thoughts on the challenges and obstacles faced during the transition from early years to school age years for autistic children and their families, and to share best practices to facilitate transitioning.

The forum was moderated by Gabrielle Collu, Ph.D., APR, presentations were given by Karen D. Bopp, Ph.D., S-LP(C), Senior Behaviour Consultant, British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), and Joel Godecki, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board ASD Project Lead. The opening remarks were made by Claire Gascon Giard, General coordinator of the CEECD and of the Strategic Knowledge Cluster on ECD (SKC-ECD), and the closing remarks by Margaret Boone, CEO, CECASN, Professor Emerita in Nursing and Associate Researcher at Lakehead University.

*Summary of presentation by Karen D. Bopp, Ph.D., S-LP(C), Senior Behaviour Consultant, British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD)*

#### **Challenges & Opportunities in Transitioning from Early Years to School Age for Children with ASD in Canada**

Successful transitioning requires developing positive relationships between parents and the school system. It can result in positive effects on both academic and social skills of the child. But families do not know what to expect, where to go for help, or how to navigate through the system, so planning for transition is crucial.

Stoner et al (2007) identified six themes:

- Effective transitions were child-centred.
- Communication between school and home was a vital link to success.
- Successful transitions were based on an understanding of the child.
- Parents identified barriers.
- Parents focused on horizontal transitions.



- Parents identified effective strategies.

In transitioning from EI programs to the school system, control shifts from parents to the expertise of a school-based team with a general view. Parents are new to the system and may enter prepared to fight. A school's attitude may be that "they know best," so getting off to a good start is crucial. More specific ASD training and awareness is needed for all education professionals. Many families wish to continue ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis) intervention in schools, but capacity and union issues as well as service delivery silos often present barriers. Transparency is needed in the allocation of resources to support students with ASD, and the roles of teacher, aide, school based teams and community agencies/supports need to be clearly defined.

### **Opportunities**

- Develop protocols and handbooks for parents of children with special needs that provide access to information in provinces where they do not already exist.
- Foster collaboration between ministries (exists in British Columbia).
- Develop terms of reference between schools and outsider service providers.
- Increase access to ABA-based training and instruction in schools.
- Start the transition process early.
- Overlap EI (early intervention) programs with entrance to school.
- Implement ongoing structures to follow the child (e.g. Child Profile Form – CPF).
- Address issue of accountability in educational professionals.
- Connect families of children with ASD (e.g. mentor program).

### **Essentials to successful transitions**

Ongoing communication between families, outside agencies, teachers, aides, resource teachers, administrators, etc. Transition must be child-focused and collaborative, with interactive relationships being developed from the start. Visual strategies for vertical and horizontal transitions are useful. Trust must be built through the acknowledgement of parental expertise of their children.

### ***Issues identified, clarifications requested by other participants:***

- Interest expressed in the CPF and the overlapping of pre-school agencies and schools.
- How is a transition coordinator identified? In BC, no specific transition coordinator is assigned; there is generally one person in the schools families rely on (e.g. principal, resource coordinator). This person may change from year to year, so there is no stability.
- A protocol for when and how the transition process should begin is needed.

***Summary of presentation by Joel Godecki, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board ASD Project Lead***

**Connections for Students program, supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services**



Many of the same issues exist in Ontario. In 2007, the two ministries worked together for the first time to create a report entitled *Making a Difference*. Subsequently, a regional leadership team was formed to focus on supporting ASD students transitioning from IBI (Intensive Behavioural Intervention) into an ABA setting. The vastness of the territory presents challenges with respect to regional service delivery. Sixteen school boards in Ontario are working on the *Connections* program to develop a framework to support seamless transitions from Autism Intervention Program (AIP) providers to schools throughout the province. It will roll out in September 2010. Compared to past transitioning, *Connections* will provide greater collaboration between both ministries, a longer transition model, regular multi-disciplinary team meetings, sharing of resources and information, transitioning from IBI to ABA, long-term planning, and ABA expertise in each board.

Ontario's AIP has met with much success. The province is now funding ABA expertise in each school board. A *Connections* information package, including a binder and a 'roles and responsibilities' poster chart, will be sent to school boards.

***Issues identified, clarifications requested by other participants:***

- Ontario's AIP program serves children across the ASD spectrum.
- ABA in the school system refers to using the best ABA strategies in the schools.
- The role of the senior instructional therapist in a preschool IBI group is to transition a child from clinical objectives into individualized education over a period of three months. In the third month, instruction is reduced, and the support role is handed over to the teacher. Regular meetings follow thereafter.
- Ontario issued a policy directive (PPM 140) to school boards to support their use of ABA as an effective instructional approach.

***Challenges faced in each region - participants' comments***

*Thunder Bay, Ont. (TB, ON):* Training of staff; remote locations of schools; long waiting lists; delays in students going into intensive programs.

*Prince Edward Island (PE):* Children in Preschool Autism Program (PAP) are eligible for 20 hours of one-on-one IBI support and consultation with a Preschool Autism Specialist. This program continues until the September of the year they are eligible for school. Once in school, the child is followed by a School Board Autism Consultant, but caseloads are heavy, so the child does not receive as intensive IBI programming. This year, kindergarten is part of the public school system for the first time. A model is thus being developed for the preschool specialist to follow the child throughout the year, in addition to standard 6 months before and 3 months after, in consultation with the school board autism consultant. Communication hurdles and other issues will need to be ironed out. An Early Intervention Strategy that spans across all types of special needs, not just autism, needs to be developed.

*British Columbia (BC):* At present, transition depends on individuals who may have been in place a long time. Need to move to systematic transition rather than transition based on individuals.

*Saskatchewan (SK):* They face similar challenges.



*Quebec City, Quebec (QC, QC):* A strategy is needed for all children with special needs, not just autism. They have been mandated by the Québec Ombudsman (*Protecteur du citoyen*) to focus on transitions for all children with disabilities. The major challenge will be to link all the different ministries involved.

*New Brunswick (NB):* The existing pre-school programs have early intervention criteria. A good framework is in place. The challenge lies in the difficulties facing parents in transitioning from an IBI to a school setting where the focus is on education, not developmental needs. In many cases, parents are afraid of schools. However, the province has some excellent resources.

### ***Solutions and opportunities in place, and questions raised by participants***

*TB, ON: Connections* is just starting the process. Linking with and getting to know ministries has a huge impact. Parents' input is greatly valued. PPM 140 states that transitioning is a priority. Because of remote locations, getting ministries to work together is difficult. How to better do this is a key challenge to explore.

*PE:* (Response) Integrating pre-school programs has helped bridge the gap between ministries in this province.

*BC:* We need to find examples where the processes are working effectively and share them. Ministries work well together, but local people working together is the solution. The CYSN children with special needs framework ([http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/spec\\_needs/pdf/CYSN\\_FrameWorkForAction\\_Combo\\_LR.pdf](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/spec_needs/pdf/CYSN_FrameWorkForAction_Combo_LR.pdf)) is a top-down model that is starting to work well. Six ministries and crown agencies are collaborating on developing a protocol governing various stages of youth transitioning. In its early days, this protocol is a step in right direction.

*NB:* Merging solutions in existing child welfare systems structure should help us in the future.

*SK:* Focus should be on breaking barriers of transition planning and addressing negative aspects of delivery.

*Montreal, Quebec (M, QC):* Mentioned a protocol in Manitoba that was helpful in shaping relationships between ministries. Although each jurisdiction is unique, is there a way to share protocols between regions currently working on similar protocols, because information would assist others trying to build a similar tool?

*PE:* Concerns about bridging the gap and incorporating other ministries.

*TB, ON:* Joel Godecki is working on seven essential themes to share among school boards and interventionists, and he will share these with the group. To facilitate the sharing of information between people from various disciplines and communities, they assembled 27 key local people (from boards, community service providers, etc.). Because they are isolated from rest of province, they realize therefore that they must work together. The recommendation is for communities to draw on local resources.

*Participants:* Were all willing to share their information and will forward links.

*BC:* Addressed the need for a clearing house, possibly collaboration between provinces and ministries, to sift through the abundance of material available.



*M, QC:* Were there useful websites that participants refer to or refer others to?

*Various participants:* Because sites are specific to each province, and due to abundance and issue of reliability, none was specifically offered.

### ***Research questions about transitioning that should be addressed***

*PE:* They have been looking at individualizing strategies to differentiate children on either end of the ASD spectrum, focusing on the best ways to look at the differences in children, and how to make strategies child focused. Research from the U.S. does not necessarily work for Canada. Stoner et al cites some examples, but other key components to successful strategies need to be explored. Dawson and Osterling (1997) was cited.

*TB, ON:* They are exploring parent engagement. *Connections* is the first step. Looking at parent surveys and seeing how well they think their children are doing in schools, etc.

*NB:* Following the parent surveys, ongoing follow-up is needed to ensure children are not regressing. The key is to be able to maintain the support that was offered at the start.

*BC:* Alberta recently began studying the training needs for providers. Another aspect to address is training needs for education professionals. Suggests Ontario has started this protocol by training school board professionals.

*TB, ON:* Suggests that surveys be sent to all educational interventionists to ensure the appropriate training exists and is being provided.

*BC:* In addition to training professionals, knowledge transfer for families is needed.

It was suggested that research questions raised be forwarded to various groups and funding agencies, including via the upcoming conference in Banff and participants' network of researchers.

### ***Recommendations for future activities and final comments from participants***

National forums provide good opportunities to share information and provide support for submissions to policy makers. Potential topics and areas to explore in the future:

- Follow up and feedback on research being done and questions that have been raised.
- Wait lists, funding options, information sharing, and other early years' challenges and opportunities facing provinces.
- Parent involvement in intervention programs.
- Programs for older children.

A collaboration site where people could share information would be useful. More work on early intervention is needed. Updates on previous forum topics, and programs across the country would be useful. Interprovincial dialogue is needed.

*M, QC:* With respect to future activities, federal funding for both CEECD and CECASN concludes on March 31, 2010, so future activities may be under the auspices of another group. Participants will be informed.

All agreed to sharing contact information, forum report and suggested links and resources. Forum organizers will follow up with the group.