




Building Bridges Toward Success

Strategies for Seamless Kindergarten Transitions

Lori L. Blake, Jennie Morrell, and Leslie Barone



It's the beginning of the school year, and Ms. Barone and Mrs. Morrell take the preschoolers and kindergartners in their respective classes to the school garden. Once there, experienced gardeners (kindergartners) eagerly find new gardeners (preschoolers) to share and explore the plants. Because the kindergartners have a year of school gardening under their belts, they're able to guide the preschoolers using the knowledge and experiences they've gained.

The kindergartners in Mrs. Morrell's class love to return to school each fall to see how the seeds they planted as preschoolers have grown into flowers and

vegetables. Both teachers help them remember what they did the prior year, then describe the garden to incoming preschoolers. They engage all of the children in discussions to find out what they know about gardening, what they're excited to do, and what they think will happen to the garden during the upcoming seasons.

Throughout the year, kindergartners and preschoolers will work on gardening tasks in small, cross-age groups. They'll remove old plants in the fall, weed the garden in the early spring, plant seeds later in spring, and watch the new plants grow until school ends for the summer.



Early childhood educators set a foundation for learning that can stay with children throughout their school years (and beyond). The transition from preschool to kindergarten is an important part of this foundation: Research has shown that it can have lasting effects on a child's well-being, including both short- and long-term academic impacts.

However, children often struggle with the shift to kindergarten. Not only are they adjusting to new people, they're also encountering more academic and behavioral expectations. Many of these are related to on-task persistence, cooperation with peers, problem solving, and independently choosing and engaging in their work. While navigating this transition has traditionally been thought of as a kindergarten teacher's responsibility, it ideally involves both preschool and kindergarten educators working together to bridge the two years and build upon children's assets and growth.

Andover Elementary School in Andover, Connecticut, is a public school that serves children from prekindergarten to sixth grade. It has earned NAEYC accreditation for its four pre-K and two kindergarten classes. Jennie Morrell (the second author) and Leslie Barone (the third author) teach kindergarten and pre-K, respectively. The two met when Leslie was a preservice teacher and did her field work in Jennie's kindergarten class. After Leslie graduated and joined Andover as a pre-K teacher, the educators began to look at ways they could support and scaffold preschoolers' transitions to kindergarten. As a former parent in the school and current professor and researcher at Central Connecticut State University, Lori L. Blake (the first author) examined the thinking and intentionality behind this collaboration.

In this article, we (the authors) describe how kindergarten and preschool educators can work together—with administrators' support—to create and implement strategies to ease children's move to kindergarten. We highlight the ways Jennie and Leslie collaborate and the activities they introduce to support children's growth through this transition. While the two educators work in the same building, their approach can be adopted by other programs looking to bridge the gap between preschool and kindergarten (see "Strategies to Support Smooth Transitions" at the end of this article).

Building a Cohesive Transition to Kindergarten

Strong preschool-to-kindergarten transitions begin with strong relationships among preschool and kindergarten educators. A relationship based on respect and openness will set the foundation for the important work ahead. Teachers must develop a shared understanding of each other's curriculum and learning goals so that they know where children are coming from and where they're heading. Building this kind of collaborative relationship takes time and consistency. It also requires patience and persistence.

Through the partnership they have built, Jennie and Leslie intentionally plan and implement joint, age-appropriate learning experiences (like the school garden) throughout the year. This is part of developmentally appropriate practice and its emphasis on planning challenging curricular experiences that engage children in meaningful ways and invite their exploration and active involvement in learning.

While Jennie and Leslie plan mostly for their own classes, their regular partnering has created consistent, cross-grade content that benefits all children. Following are a few of the strategies they use that contribute to a smoother preschool-to-kindergarten transition.

Establish Professional Relationships

Setting aside time to connect with other teachers about their practices helps to build a shared understanding of each other's work. Administrators at Andover Elementary help facilitate this kind of collaboration by providing coverage for small groups of teachers to spend 15 minutes observing colleagues' classrooms. Through their observations, Jennie and Leslie have become familiar with each other's curricula, teaching strategies, and expectations. In addition to the time allotted by administrators, the two often work together during scheduled planning sessions and after school as they prepare for the next day.

Relationships are also strengthened when educators jointly participate in professional development. During the NAEYC accreditation process for Andover's pre-K and kindergarten classes, Jennie and Leslie joined local accreditation support groups and began participating in coaching sessions together. This allowed them to set common and individual goals and to share ideas on how to connect their work to quality practices.

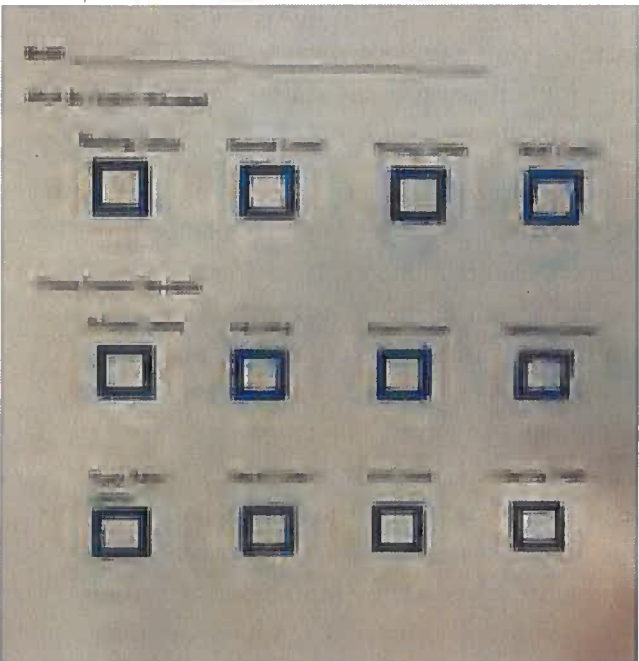
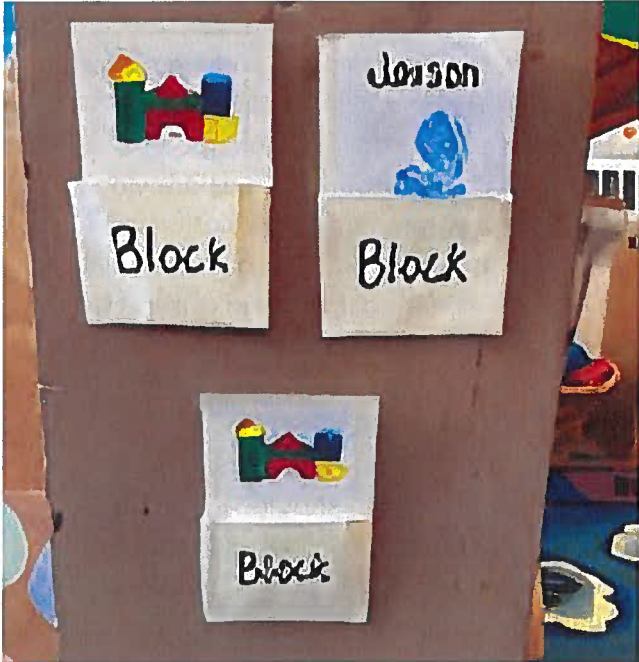
Strengthen Children's Peer Relationships

Establishing relationships among pre-K and kindergarten children is critical to successful transitions: Kindergartners become leaders; preschoolers build a sense of excitement and security as they begin to understand what's to come.

As illustrated in the opening vignette, the kindergartners in Jennie's class were eager to show preschoolers how to use gardening tools and how to plant seeds, tapping their communication and recall skills. The preschoolers, in turn, began to develop a relationship with Jennie. Because all of the children worked in small groups, they were able to practice taking turns, listening to multiple perspectives, and exploring different ideas.

Jennie and Leslie introduce cross-classroom activities and challenges throughout the year. One of these is creating a class "book worm": Each time a child reads a book or has a book read to them, they write the title on a construction paper circle. These are posted on a wall inside each classroom, becoming the body of a book worm. The challenge is to see whose worm makes its way around their classroom first. As children check each class's progress, they get to see and talk about what each class is reading.





The educators also welcome children's visits to their classrooms. From time to time, Leslie takes preschoolers to Jennie's kindergarten class to share skills they're working on (like estimated spelling) and to observe kindergartners' work. This helps Jennie get to know the preschoolers and think about how she might individualize lessons in the coming year for them. Likewise, kindergartners often visit the preschool classroom. During one visit, students in Jennie's class performed a play. Each child wore a sign that identified their role. Soon after, Leslie observed her preschoolers making their own role-playing signs.

Align Classroom Procedures

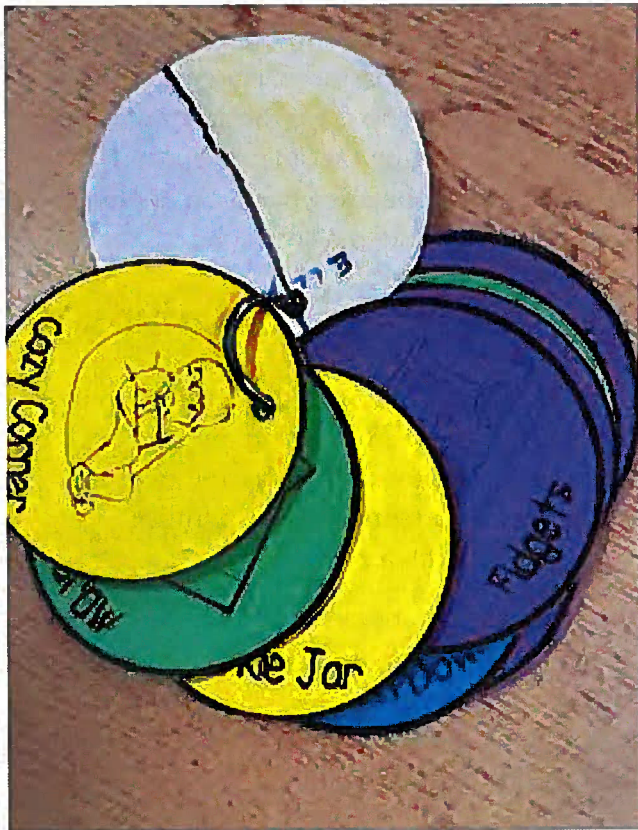
Educators can ease the transition for incoming kindergartners by incorporating familiar classroom procedures. Kindergarten teachers can change and adapt these elements as children grow and learn over time.

For example, at the beginning of the school year, children in Leslie and Jennie's classes use the same system to engage in activity centers. The teachers post signs to help children choose which center to visit.

However, as the year progresses, Jennie introduces tasks at the beginning of each week or unit of study that children need to complete. Kindergartners learn to use a checklist to keep track of what they've accomplished and what they still need to do. This progression is gradual, scaffolding children as they learn and become familiar with working more independently.

Similar techniques can be used when setting up the physical environment. For example, Leslie posts signs to remind preschoolers about classroom expectations, problem-solving steps, and ways to express emotions. In the kindergarten classroom, Jennie works toward greater independence: While she starts

the year using the same posted signs, she later asks the children to create small flip-books that illustrate the strategies on the walls. She encourages children to use their flip-books when needed and evaluates posted signs to see if she can take any down.



Coordinate Curricular Content

Besides aligning procedures, educators can design similar learning experiences. For example, Leslie and Jennie build classroom libraries that have some of the same books. This way, incoming kindergartners immediately find books that are familiar to them.

The teachers also plan similar learning opportunities, saving photos from preschool activities to deepen children's engagement the next year. For example, each fall, preschoolers read *Pumpkin Jack*, by Will Hubbell. They then

carve a pumpkin and watch it decompose. They discuss what's happening and sometimes draw representations of the decomposition. In kindergarten, children read *Pumpkin Jack* again. They're reminded of what they did in preschool, but this time they carve a pumpkin and take it outside to observe what occurs. They each have an observation journal and develop a timeline of events, which taps their developing writing and science skills.

Connecticut has created a crosswalk of standards between preschool and kindergarten learning. The *Pumpkin Jack* activities work toward state standards for language and literacy for this age group, such as drawing and writing to communicate thoughts and ideas. They also address a standard for science learning—investigating and using observed evidence to discuss relationships and events.

Share Information

Kindergarten educators shouldn't have to wait for the beginning of a new school year to become familiar with incoming students. Consistently sharing information about children and where they are developmentally will create a smoother transition for kindergarten teachers, incoming preschoolers, and their families. Leslie and Jennie meet regularly after school to share about children's strengths, needs, and progress.

It's also helpful to discuss lessons and learning objectives during this time. This allows pre-K teachers to introduce skills to children before they enter kindergarten, giving them more time to become familiar with the material they'll encounter there. For example, knowing that Jennie will use words like *characters*, *setting*, and *sequence of events* during read alouds, Leslie can begin using this vocabulary with her preschoolers. The teachers incorporate these same words when they read books for their

class book worms. They also offer materials at the same time of year; for example, reading books about how animals adapt to survive New England winters.

A Model of Cooperation

Through their well-developed professional relationship, Leslie and Jennie are able to plan ahead, anticipate children's needs, connect to children's assets, and individualize their teaching to support each child across the preschool and kindergarten years. This has led to a smoother preschool-to-kindergarten

transition, with children who are more comfortable, regulated, and engaged in learning. It has also enriched the educators' teaching practices: By having someone to discuss ideas and plan with, the two have essentially developed a teaching team that spans their two grade levels. Additionally, their partnership has bridged a deeper connection with families. Jennie and Leslie have planned multi-age family and learning events, which have fostered longer term relationships with families. Their collaboration offers a powerful model of cooperation for other pre-K and kindergarten educators and administrators.



Strategies to Support Smooth Transitions

Jennie Morrell and Leslie Barone work in a school that houses both pre-K and kindergarten classes. Yet educators who work at different sites and in different types of programs (public schools, private schools, independent community preschools) can still work together to ease the preschool-to-kindergarten transition. Following are some ways to build cooperation among those who work at different sites. These ideas come from the educators and from the NAEYC book *Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable and Joyful Learning in Kindergarten*, by Eva C. Phillips and Amy Scrinzi.

- › **Consider the kindergarten school's transition team.** Ideally, schools will have in place an organized community transition team consisting of preschool and kindergarten teachers, community child care representatives, pediatricians, special education personnel, administrators, and families to develop a community-wide strategic plan for transitions for children and families. If such a team is not in place, discuss with your school administrator or program director how to connect with children's families and teachers before the start of school.
- › **Commit to meeting and sharing information.** Administrators can offer pre-K and kindergarten teachers "colleagues and conversations" events, where they meet before the school year begins to discuss and review children's work samples, assessment data, information about each child's interests and learning levels, and strategies that have been effective with individual children. As the year progresses, regular meetings between pre-K and kindergarten educators will allow discussions to continue and support educators to provide children with what they need to learn, grow, and flourish.
- › **Coordinate professional development.** Consider offering district- or community-wide professional development opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers. These sessions could cover important early childhood topics, such as state standards, social and emotional learning, and play-based learning. Such training will provide children with consistency as they move from pre-K to kindergarten, and it will give teachers a larger pool of professionals to work with.
- › **Set up visits.** Elementary school principals can invite preschool educators and children to visit their schools to see a kindergarten classroom and to meet the teachers. Likewise, preschool administrators can schedule a time for kindergarten educators to visit pre-K classrooms to see what children are experiencing.
- › **Aim for environmental consistency.** Look for ways to use comparable signage and wall postings. When pre-K and kindergarten educators use similar materials, they create consistency for children who are transitioning to a new grade. This helps children acclimate more efficiently to their new environments. Educators can begin these conversations during district- or community-wide professional learning sessions before the school year begins. They can share environmental ideas and questions throughout the year during virtual monthly or bimonthly support meetings.

- › **Consider ways to collaborate on projects.** These might include shared reading or author studies, where preschoolers and kindergartners read books by the same author; creating class stories to share with one another; or asking children in different grade levels to write letters to each other. Also consider coordinating field trips and using technology for classes to meet each other.

- › **Welcome incoming families.** Send a personal letter, postcard, or ecard in each family's home language to incoming kindergartners, and invite families to attend orientation activities and special events. Consider families' work schedules and modes of transportation when determining the time of day and location for these activities.

Reflection Questions

For Educators

- › How can you introduce yourself to other preschool and kindergarten teachers in your district, school, or community? Are there any early childhood-focused groups for educators that you could join?
- › What do you need to do your job well (more curricular ideas or assessment strategies)? Advocate for what you know is important, and share this with your team and administrators.
- › How can you enhance instruction and activities within your own class and the collaborative pre-K/kindergarten group?
- › How can you include administrators in building a shared understanding of the purposes of pre-K and kindergarten?

For Administrators

- › Does the professional development in your school address the unique needs of early childhood educators, or is it one-size-fits-all?
- › Are there local groups you can connect with to offer tailored professional learning and coaching?
- › Do you understand the supports necessary for developmentally appropriate pre-K and kindergarten classrooms? Do you regularly talk with educators about their needs?
- › Do you involve pre-K and kindergarten educators in schoolwide discussions?

About the Authors

Lori L. Blake, EdD, is an assistant professor of early childhood at Central Connecticut State University. Her research focuses on self-regulation, early childhood leadership, and play-based practices.

Jennie Morrell is an early childhood specialist/interventionist at Andover Elementary School who works with grades PK-2 on reading, math, and social and emotional skills. She has worked in the profession for 29 years and formerly taught prekindergarten and kindergarten at the school.

Leslie Barone is a prekindergarten teacher at Andover Elementary School. She has taught preschool, including special education, for more than 20 years.

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