

Smooth Transitions at School

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Like all students who attend school, children with special needs go through major transitions. Knowing what the issues are as you face each of these transitions with your child help you become a strong advocate. Remember that most teachers and therapists have never worked with a child who has CdLS. As your child's advocate, you must teach others about the syndrome and about your child's needs.

Education planning for children with CdLS requires a great deal of thought, planning, evaluating, researching, meeting, discussing—and sometimes arguing—with the school district's planning teams to ensure your child has a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). FAPE is mandated by federal law.

Age three is an important milestone. With that birthday comes a transition from Early Intervention (EI) to attending a local school. At least three months before your child's third birthday, contact the school's special education department. Your child will go through an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education preschool. The evaluation should be fun for your child; the results may be traumatic for you. It is not easy to hear about deficits your child may have and therapies he or she needs.

When your child turns five, it is time to transition to kindergarten. This may mean going from a partial day to a full day, and/or changing schools, therapists and teachers. You will be part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team. An IEP is a plan created especially for your child and includes what therapies and accommodations will be made for him or her. The team decides if the child is ready for kindergarten, which class is appropriate and why. This is a big, important transition, but don't feel bad if the team recommends delaying kindergarten for a year.

You can ask to see the different classrooms, meet teachers and think about whether your child would fit into the environment. If out-of-district placement is offered, or if you would like to investigate other programs, visit those classrooms as well.



During the elementary school years, make sure that the elements of the IEP have been established to meet all of your child's needs. This includes continued growth each year with new goals and objectives; a communication system that your child and the team use consistently; adequate busing needs; a consistent Extended School Year (ESY); a trained one- to-one paraprofessional (if needed); and a behavior plan. You can visit the Wrights Law Web site (www.wrightslaw.com) to learn more about what should be in your child's IEP.

Transitioning to the higher grades can be challenging. The child's peers are getting bigger and more independent. Even the buildings are larger. With the move to eighth grade comes notable changes in students' roles and interpersonal relationships. Adults should help students with special needs feel included in class and all extracurricular activities that are of interest to the student.

Again, as your child's best advocate you must be his or her voice. Keep clothing, haircuts and leisure time activities age-appropriate. Bibs and Big Bird should not travel to ninth grade in a backpack. Ask yourself, "What are his peers doing?" The answer, most likely, is listening to music and spending time with friends. You have to create those opportunities for your child. Successful transitions are marked by students who feel like they belong and that people care about them and know their names.

The final transition from school to adulthood takes many years to work on with a transition specialist at the high school or your state's Developmental Disabilities Agency. Ideally, the foundation for that journey is built throughout your child's high school years. It is never too early to begin planning and dreaming about your child as an adult.

