TRANSITION PORTFOLIOS

A Strategy for Making Easy Transitions

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INTRODUCTION

The Merrion-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (2003) defines a transition as "a passing from one condition, form, stage, activity, place to another." For children with deaf-blindness and other low incidence disabilities, any passage or transition can be a time of excitement, but also a time of apprehension and concern. Parents and teachers may have worked long and hard to make sure that a student's communication system is in place. They may have struggled to design an instructional program that includes the appropriate cues. They may have worked out the ideal support system for the student or chosen a reinforcer that "finally works."

A transition to another school or another classroom can destroy a team's hard work unless there is way to transfer this kind of information to the student's new team. Even though teachers and other team members may use a formal school process to transition a student, it is the little details of a student's program that don't always get into the hands of the receiving team. This booklet has been written to assist teams in providing this kind of information as they plan a student's transition to a new setting.

What is a Transition Portfolio?

A transition portfolio is a strategy that documents important information about an individual. A portfolio can be developed and used by children or adults of any age. A portfolio contains basic information about a person but also includes additional things that are critical for other people like teachers, speech therapists, and paraprofessionals (teaching assistants) to know about the person. A portfolio is not meant to replace other kinds of records but rather to enhance a transition by providing critical information to teachers and other service providers that may not be documented in other places.

The information in a transition portfolio may include a personal section (e.g., a student's likes and dislikes, information gathered during a MAPS session), a medical section (e.g., what to do if the G-tube falls out), an expressive communication section (e.g., how a student who is non-verbal tells someone he is ill), a reinforcement

section (e.g., what kinds of things are reinforcing to an individual). All of the information in a transition portfolio is person-specific and meant to enhance the transition of the individual to a new teacher, classroom, school, or community setting.

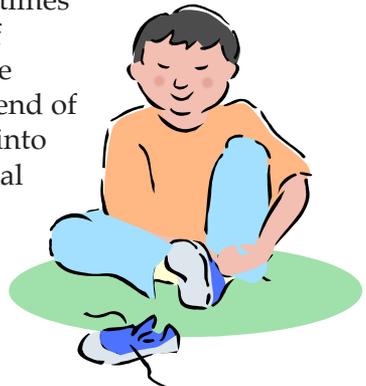## Who Creates a Transition Portfolio?

Ideally, it is a student's team who develops a transition portfolio. Each member of the team should have a working knowledge of a student's strengths and abilities as well as adaptations and successful instructional strategies.

A student's parents may also spearhead the creation of a transition portfolio. Parents are the stable factors in a student's life and experience the educational journey with their son or daughter. A parent will be able to give valuable input into the portfolio process and help prioritize the kind of information that is needed for a new team.

How is a Portfolio Created?

There is no one way to create a portfolio. Teams have used multiple methods to develop and updated information. The first step is to decide the components of the portfolio. Creating a "personal section" is a nice way to introduce a student. Other sections will depend upon the needs of the student.

Once the portfolio sections are agreed upon, then documenting the information can happen in various ways. Some people use note cards to collect information in an informal manner. These notes can be gathered together several times during the year to begin the creation of a portfolio. Other people simply update information on a regular basis. At the end of the year, the information is developed into a more formal portfolio format. The final product is kept at the school and sent to the receiving team. It is also a good idea for the student's parents to have a copy of the portfolio.

Sources of Information

There are a variety of ways to collect information to include in a transition portfolio. Some of the best and most useful means are through observation and personal contact with a student. Other strategies include conducting interviews with family members, service providers, and obtaining formal and informal environmental assessments.

Kinds of Information to Gather

A transition portfolio is student-specific. Although this booklet describes some basic sections that should be included in a portfolio, an individual may require additional sections. For example, if a student is non-verbal it will be important to have a communication section that includes strategies like a communication dictionary. The basic contents of a portfolio include:

✓ *Personal Information:*

The personal information section may include a brief introduction of the student. Some parents/teachers have written this part in the "first person," as if the focus individual was introducing himself (e.g., Hi, my name is Ian. I like to ride horses and go with my parents on trips."). This section might also include information from a MAPS session (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint & Rosenberg, 1997). MAPS is a planning process that brings family members, peers, friends, and professionals together to answer specific questions about an individual. The questions may include:

- History of the child/young adult
- Dreams for the individual
- Fears for the individual
- Strengths, skills, and abilities of the individual
- The individual's likes and dislikes
- The individual's current communication system
- Needs (e.g., a functional communication system, friends)

Once a MAPS has been completed the group creates an "action plan." The action plan identifies different people who will take responsibility for doing something that will meet the dreams/needs of the child or young adult. Oftentimes, the "needs" section of a MAPS session becomes the individual's IEP goals/objectives.

Adults can use a similar process like Person Centered Planning to gather information about such areas as employment, housing, and recreational interests.

✓ *Medical Information*

This section of the portfolio is critical for those students with special health care needs. It should provide basic, user-friendly information about a student's medical status and needs. Although this section is not meant to replace the expertise of medical personnel, it can be used to document relevant information and reactions to emergency situations. Important areas include the following:

If a student takes any kind of medication, at home or at school, <u>all</u> school personnel should be aware of:

- the medication
- the dosage
- when/where medication is given and who should give it
- side effects (e.g., alertness level, vision issues)

If a student has a **seizure disorder,** it is important that all school personnel who interact with a student understand:

- the type of seizure
- what the seizure looks like
- what might trigger a seizure (e.g., flickering lights)
- program restrictions (e.g., climbing on equipment)
- appropriate follow-up procedures (e.g., student needs to rest after a seizure)

This section, in particular, should be updated and monitored on a regular basis. Oftentimes, a student with a seizure disorder

frequently changes medications and can have a reaction that impacts his behavior. School personnel should all be aware of these changes and document their observations and recommendations for instruction.

✓ Communication System

The communication portion of a transition portfolio is important for all students, but particularly critical for those individuals who are nonverbal or have limited communication skills. Understanding how a student receives (receptive) and gives (expressive) information is key in designing educational programs, preventing behavior problems, and creating opportunities for social connections.

Receptive Communication:

For many students with disabilities, including students who are deaf-blind, using spoken language may not be the primary way they receive information from, or give information to, other people. Spoken language may be only used with other cues to enhance the meaning of a message. Receptive communication cues may include:

*Touch cues	Cues that are made on a a student's body	Tapping a student's shoulder to indicate he should stand up
*Object cues	Using objects / textures from daily activities as cues	Using a spoon as a cue for snack time
*Olfactory cues	Certain smells that are cues for activities	Having a student smell the shampoo to indicate hair washing
*Movement cues	Moving a student in a certain way to prepare him for an activity	Moving a student's hands to indicate going on a walk
*Sound cues	Using spoken words and environmental sounds	Using a bell to indicate a transition

Team members need to look for the kinds of receptive cues that the student needs and design a system that will enhance the student's understanding of the school day and familiar routines. This will make transitions easier and more predictable for the student.

Cues should be selected that are <u>easy</u> and relate to the activity. They should be distinctly different from one another so that the student does not get confused (e.g., don't tap one should for one activity and the other shoulder for another activity). Cues should prepare the student for the activity and take into consideration the student's abilities as well as his disabilities. Finally, school personnel and parents should use the chosen cues on a <u>consistent</u> basis so that the student has multiple opportunities to "read the message." The portfolio is a place to document these cues and enhance the student's functional communication system.

Expressive Communication:

Students with disabilities have a variety of messages to communicate. They may protest or reject an object, person or activity. They may request that someone continue an activity or interaction. They may make a choice or greet a friend. They may comment on something or try to get more information.

Students with disabilities also have many ways to communicate their message. They may use pre-symbolic expressions like vocalizations, gestures or even body temperature. They may use sign language, picture cards, object symbols or spoken language. Whatever the means of communication it is important that team members understand the student's receptive and expressive communication system.

A transition portfolio is an ideal place to document a student's communication system. It is a place to give information to a receiving team, not only about how a student communicates, but how the previous team has identified opportunities for the student to communicate throughout the school day. This type of information can be helpful to a new team so that they do not have to waste time assessing the student or misreading the student's

communicative intent. Misinterpreting a student's messages can lead to problem behaviors and cause undue stress for the student and the team. Including a communication section in a portfolio is one way of providing this kind of valuable information to a team.

Communication Dictionary

A communication dictionary is designed to document the student's various forms of communication. It may include a list of spoken words that the student understands or speaks. It may include sign language the student can read or signs that the students uses on a regular basis. The list should include typical or adapted signs. The list may document the gestures the student understands or communicates and any object, line drawing or photos. It may also include voice output devices the student uses together with symbols to be placed on the device and the activities in which the device is used.

The list should also note any behaviors (e.g., crying, self-injury, grabbing, facial expressions) that a students uses with communicative intent. Oftentimes, teachers and other school personnel misread a student's atypical communication methods as being non-compliant when, in fact, the student is trying to give the teacher information.

✓ *Educational Programming*

This section of a portfolio is focused on the student's daily program. It gives teachers, paraprofessionals, and support personnel (e.g., physical therapist, speech language pathologist) information about how the student learns best, how instruction is delivered, and what kinds of supports need to be in place for the student to be successful.

The IEP Summary: Creating an IEP summary sheet can help school personnel understand how a student can participate in a class. The summary is written in a simpler format then the actual IEP. It lists the student's goals/objectives and can be used to brainstorm with a general education teacher on how the student might practice a skill within the context of a class.

"Fine Motor: Henry needs to practice his pincer grasp. One of the ways to do this is to pass out the weekly reader and the daily assignments."

Instructional Matrix: The Instructional Matrix is another planning strategy that is designed to give a broad picture of the student's day. It can help a team decide when and how the student can practice a skill across various activities and environments.

	Greet Peers	Make Choices	Use Switch	Pincer Grasp	Follow Directions	Use Stander
Opening	x	x	x		x	
Reading		x	x	x	x	x
Music	x		x		x	
Science	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lunch	x	x		x	x	

It is important that team members take the time to observe the places (e.g., general education classrooms, recess) where a student may have an opportunity to practice and use his skills. This task can be divided up among personnel so that all appropriate environments have been analyzed.

Classroom Participation Plan: This strategy is a way to help teachers and other team members document how the student will participate in classroom activities. A classroom participation plan (Gee, Alwell, Graham, & Goetz, 1994) describes the activity, the goal for the class, and how the activity is adapted for the focus student. It specifies the materials and support needed, instructional cues and the IEP objectives to be targeted within the activity.

Classroom Participation Plan
Student: Ian F.   **Skills Objectives:**   1. Making choices   2. Vocabulary   **Activity:** Story writing   **What the class does:**   1. Make one new animal out of parts from three other animals   2. Write a story about the new animal   **How Ian participates:**   Ian participates by using his computer to scan the animal choices. He will choose three animals. He will then scan and choose details about each character to complete the story (e.g., boy or girl, big or little).   **Support:** Help from paraprofessional/peer to put name on his paper.   **Materials:** Computer, peers, paper, and pencil

Over the course of a school year, a team can develop a series of participation plans that cover a variety of classes and activities. These plans can be added to or expanded upon in the following year. They may also be reused depending on the activity and a student's level of involvement. Participation plans can help new teachers, paraprofessionals, and peers understand how to actively involve a student in a class and serve as an informational foundation for new team members. This strategy serves as a way to document the creative ideas of team members so they are passed on to new teachers and service providers.

Instructional Scripted Routines: Sometimes it is necessary to give a student instruction in a systematic way that requires teachers and paraprofessionals to use specific strategies (e.g., pausing, verbal instructions, and touch cues). Developing a scripted routine for a student can help school personnel understand the kind of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, that will allow a student to participate in, and respond to, an instructional activity. A scripted routine can be written for any activity and is one more technique that can be used to create consistency for a student. A scripted routine may consist of using a touch cue, in addition to spoken words, pausing for at least 10 seconds after the touch cue and verbal cue, and then note the action that is taken after the

student responds. If the student doesn't respond then the cues are repeated and the instructor pauses for an additional 10 seconds. If he still doesn't respond then assistance is provided to the student and the routine continues. For example, here is part of a scripted routine for swimming:

Touch Cue	Verbal Cue	Pause	Action
How you give Pat nonverbal information	What you say to Pat	Wait for 10 secs. and look for a response	What you do after Pat responds or pause is over
1. Rub seat belt under elbow. Release buckle so sound is made.	"Time to get ready for a swim"	Pause/Observe	Continue to Step 2
2. Rub swimming suit against wrist	"It's time to put your swimsuit on"	Pause/Observe	Continue to Step 3
3. Rub Pat's back	"Time to take your sweater off"	Pause/Observe	Lean his forward
4. Gently tug at the collar of the sweater	"Time to take your sweater over your head"	Pause/Observe	Lift the back of his sweater over his head and bring it down in front of him

(Mirenda & Hunt, 1990)

Many students with disabilities need time to process information. This process time will depend upon the individual student and his experience with the information being given to him. If the student is provided with a daily routine and consistent cues then he will process information in a shorter period of time. He will be able to predict and anticipate what is going to happen next. But, if the student is given different instructions and cues each day, he will take longer to process the information. The educational section of the portfolio is a good place to assure that anyone working with the student can maintain instructional consistency.

✓ *Adaptations, Supports, and Physical Considerations*

A portfolio is a place to document the kinds of adaptations and supports that a student needs to be successful during the school day. Some students may require some kind of personal support from a teacher, paraprofessional, or peer. Other students may require a assistive technology (AT) device to help them complete their school work and/or be included in typical activities. Assistive technology devices are defined within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 as "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of a student with a disabilities." These kinds of devices can range from low technology (e.g., pencil grips, simple switches) to high technology (e.g., laptop computers, communication devices).

A portfolio should also note the kinds of environmental adaptations that a student needs to be successful. For example, Harry has a vision impairment that requires him to sit with his back to the window to minimize the glare. Sara is easily distracted by the other students and needs to sometime use a study carrel to do her independent work. Other kinds of environmental adaptations include space issues, auditory distractions and requirements of the instructor (e.g., auditory trainer worn by teacher).

This section should include the type of personal assistance a student needs throughout the day. New school personnel will appreciate specific information as to what kinds of tasks the student can do independently. It is important to document the level of assistance (e.g., hand over hand, gentle tactile prompt at elbow) that works best for the student during various activities.

A portfolio can be used to give information about the positioning and handling of a student with physical impairments. The student with physical disabilities may use adaptive equipment (e.g., wheelchair, walker, corner chair, sidelyer, stander) that is necessary to maintain the student's muscle tone and inhibit

abnormal patterns of movement. It is important that personnel know, not only when and how equipment is used, but how the equipment can give the student access to peers and ongoing classroom activities.

✓ *Reinforcement Strategies*

This section of the portfolio should include a list of the kinds of reinforcer(s) that a student prefers. A list of reinforcers can be developed by observing a student, conducting interviews with family members, peers, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school personnel. Reinforcement information should be updated on a regular basis, particularly for students with more severe disabilities. A student's likes and dislikes may vary from day to day. It is therefore important for school personnel to understand the characteristics and range of a student's preferences. For example, Lucy likes things that spin or are cool to the touch. Anything metal is of interest to her. She does not like soft things or items with a rough texture. Giving her the same item doesn't always work but giving her something that has her preferred characteristics helps her team come up with reinforcers.

As noted previously, it is not always easy to use typical reinforcers (e.g., verbal praise, free time, toys) for students with more significant disabilities. Part of a good reinforcer assessment is to not always look for particular objects but for the characteristics of items or activities that the student likes. This process requires team members to have good observation skills and place value on a student's preferences.

✓ *Behavior Support*

Not every portfolio will include a behavior support section. Because each portfolio is personally designed, the sections will depend upon the needs of the student. If a student does require behavior support this becomes a critical element of their program.

School personnel should remember that problem behavior serves a purpose and is a student's way of communicating a message. Problem behavior does *not* occur in isolation but is connected to events in the environment. A particular behavior can also serve

multiple purposes for a student. For example, Bobby will pinch when he is frustrated, hungry or during transitions. Pinching is easy for Bobby to do and requires very little energy on his part.

The behavior support section of a portfolio can provide school personnel with valuable information by listing the student's problem behavior(s) and noting the situations in which a behavior occurs and does *not* occur. The information included in a portfolio can be taken from a <u>functional behavior assessment</u> which has been conducted by school personnel. A functional behavior assessment is a process that identifies the problem behavior ("pinches"), defines the behavior in observable and measurable terms ("pinches teachers or peers on the arm or face), and formulates a hypothesis about the purpose of the behavior ("Bobby will pinch when there is a transition from activity to activity.").

The outcome of a functional behavior assessment is to develop a positive behavior support plan. This plan should contain the definition of the behavior, a summary statement about the purpose of the behavior and any "setting event" strategies. Setting events are those events that are more distant than things that occur immediately before a behavior happens. These things might include a lack of sleep, hunger due to missing a meal, illness or, in some cases, abuse. A student may come to school set up for a problem and an event or direction at school will trigger the behavior. Teachers and other school personnel need to understand and note this kind of information in a portfolio. Sleep and eating patterns, reaction to medication and other setting events can be gathered through interviews with family members and other people who know the student well.

A support plan should also include replacement behaviors that match the purpose of the problem behavior ("Instruct Bobby to look at his picture schedule to help him transition to the next activity.") Additional information should include consequence strategies, crisis management strategies, generalization information and ways to maintain improvements over time. Finally, a plan should always include evaluation methods to document progress.

A student's portfolio might be organized to include a formal behavior support plan or it might summarize this kind of information. As with all portions of the portfolio, the decision about the contents should be relevant to the student and user-friendly for the receiving team.

✓ *Team Problem Solving and Meeting Notes*

Meetings, meetings, meetings! It seems like teachers and other school personnel are always involved in meetings. Teaming around students and young adults with disabilities is important and therefore requires teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and support personnel to get together to talk about a student's program. This section of the portfolio is meant to assist a team as they do their planning.

Brainstorming and problem solving are important elements of the teaming process. There are oftentimes wonderful ideas that are implemented and work for a student but never written down or continued the following year. The rationale for such decisions is also something that may not be tracked and therefore a new teacher or team member might come up with an idea that has already been tried and either worked for the student or was unsuccessful. For example, Ian is a second grade student with multiple disabilities. He is a member of Mrs. Brown's second grade class at Hayward Elementary School. Each morning the second grade class says the Pledge of Allegiance. Last year, Ian's first grade team decided that he should participate in the activity by touching a switch that activated a recorded voice of a student saying the Pledge. This year's team, including Ian's parents, decided that it was important for Ian to participate in the activity but they wanted Ian to be building a skill that was more useful and he could practice throughout the day. They decided that instead of having him touch the switch to activate the recording to say the Pledge that the student's voice should say "Ready, begin." This is a nice example of partial participation. The activity cannot begin without Ian. He can also practice hitting the switch throughout the day and during various activities of the week. For example, he can begin the Pledge each morning, start a

music activity, or even begin a test. The rationale for making this decision was noted in this section of Ian's portfolio.

The other portion of this section should include the notes from team meetings. In theory, we all know the elements of an effective team but we don't always abide by collaborative team rules. We might not have a time keeper or a formal agenda. We may be running from one meeting to the next on some days and certainly don't have time to find a "jargon buster." What we do need to try and do is stay on task and take notes regarding our decision and our individual tasks. This information is again important for future teams because it lets them know the thinking and the process of how decisions were made for and with a student.

Final Thoughts….

A transition portfolio can be a useful tool for school teams as they transition a student into a new setting. This kind of information can also be valuable for new paraprofessionals and new service providers even if a student stays in the same setting. Being a good observer and taking the time to document the things that make a program work for a student will benefit the team as well as contribute to positive student outcomes.

(Information in this booklet was adapted from Demchak & Greenfield, 2004).

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