

# It's a struggle:

## Transitioning children into kindergarten

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transitions are key points in developmental trajectories in which individuals need to adapt to their changing environments (Elder, 1998). One of the earliest transitions that children in the United States experience is the transition to formal schooling, which for many children begins with kindergarten at about 5 years of age. This transition is a big change for young children, and teachers and parents alike commonly discuss how challenging it can be for some children. However, there is little evidence on how common these challenges actually are and which children are most likely to experience them.

To understand the occurrence of these problems, we asked 45 kindergarten teachers in central Ohio to complete a transition difficulty questionnaire on 688 students in the fall of their kindergarten year. Results showed that 72% of children experienced at least one of five difficulties during the transition. The most common difficulties reported were related to meeting the academic demands of kindergarten and staying organized. However, we also found that difficulties co-occurred; children typically either experienced no difficulties or all of the difficulties measured. Finally, we also found that boys and children with individualized education plans (IEPs) were more likely to experience difficulties during the transition.



# Background

Kindergarten represents the first experience with formal schooling for many children in the U.S. Although many children experience some sort of ‘school-like’ setting prior to kindergarten, such as preschool, estimates suggest that only 58% of children experience a center-based care setting as their primary care arrangement in the year before kindergarten (Rathbun & Zhang, 2016). Even children who attend center-based settings prior to kindergarten experience dramatic shifts as they enter kindergarten, in both environmental experiences and expectations. As compared to preschool, kindergarten has less free play, more time on academic content, and more emphasis on individual work, such as worksheets (Justice, Jiang, Purtell, Lin, & Logan, 2020). Children are also held to different expectations, including behavioral expectations, such as staying on task and adhering to stricter routines, and academic expectations, as seen in the larger emphasis on skill development and time spent in learning-focused activities (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Adjusting to these new environments and expectations may be a challenging transition for children. However, we know very little about the frequency with which children experience difficulties during this transition. Prior investigations of kindergarten-transition difficulties found that nearly one in five children (16%) had challenges transitioning into the kindergarten setting (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). However, teachers did not report on individual students in this study (just classroom averages) and these data were collected over 20 years ago. Given the increased academic focus in kindergarten that has occurred in recent years (Bassok et al., 2016), the nature and occurrence of children’s transition problems may have also changed.

Therefore, we sought to examine the frequency with which children experience difficulties in the transition to kindergarten. Understanding who is at risk of experiencing difficulties is also important. In this paper, we examine demographic and socioeconomic predictors of children’s transition difficulties.



## Research Aims

**AIM 1:** To determine how frequently children experience difficulties in their transition to kindergarten.

**AIM 2:** To determine the extent to which kindergarten transition difficulties co-occur.

**AIM 3:** To determine whether certain children are more or less likely to experience difficulties in the transition to kindergarten.





## Method

### PROCEDURES

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger five-year project that aims to investigate children's longitudinal development from preschool or kindergarten to third grade. The current study used data from the second year of the study, when all participating children were in kindergarten and a careful evaluation of children's transition to kindergarten was conducted.

To recruit the sample, the research team held informational sessions at schools located in a geographically and economically diverse school district in Ohio, and teachers voluntarily signed up to participate in the study. Enrolled teachers received financial incentives for completing study activities (e.g., filling out questionnaires), and children from their classrooms were eligible to participate given full caregiver consent. Participating children were followed from preschool (year 1 recruits) or kindergarten (year 2 recruits) to third grade, and the research team collected longitudinal data on children's family characteristics, classroom environment, social interactions, as well as cognitive and socio-behavioral development.

### PARTICIPANTS

The sample of the current study consisted of 688 kindergarteners (51% boys, 49% girls) from 45 classrooms across 15 schools. Sixty-five percent of the children were white and non-Hispanic, whereas 8% were Black and non-Hispanic, 14% were Hispanic, and 13% of children were other races or multiracial. Eight percent of children had an individualized education plan (IEP) in place during the kindergarten year. In terms of mothers' highest degree earned, 45% had a high school diploma or GED, 17% completed a two-year degree, whereas 24% had attained a four-year college degree or



above. The average household made an annual income of \$40,001 to \$50,000, had two adults and two children, and English was the primary home language spoken in 89% of the households.

Out of the 45 participating teachers, the majority were white (95%), non-Hispanic (98%), certified (97%), and had attained a master's degree as their highest credential (73%). The average class size was 25, with 52% of boys, 21% of English-language learners (ELL), and 8% of children with IEPs.

## MEASURES

**Kindergarten transition challenges.** In the fall semester of the kindergarten year, teachers were asked to rate each child's challenges in the transition to kindergarten in five areas: making friends and interacting with classmates, following schedule and routine, adjusting to academic demands, working within groups in the classroom, and being organized. The extent to which a child experienced challenges in each area was rated on a scale of 0 (no difficulty) to 4 (great difficulty). The average rating of transition difficulties was significantly and negatively correlated with scores of concurrent standardized assessments of early literacy skills (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2007) and self-regulation (Ponitz et al., 2008) ( $r = -0.1$  to  $-0.3$ ).

**Child and family characteristics.** Caregivers completed a short initial questionnaire and a family background questionnaire, providing information on demographics, household characteristics, and the home environment. In both questionnaires, caregivers were asked whether their child attended preschool during the year prior to kindergarten (defined as public school pre-kindergarten, Head Start, or private preschool). Children's disability status as indicated by the presence of an IEP was obtained from a teacher report.

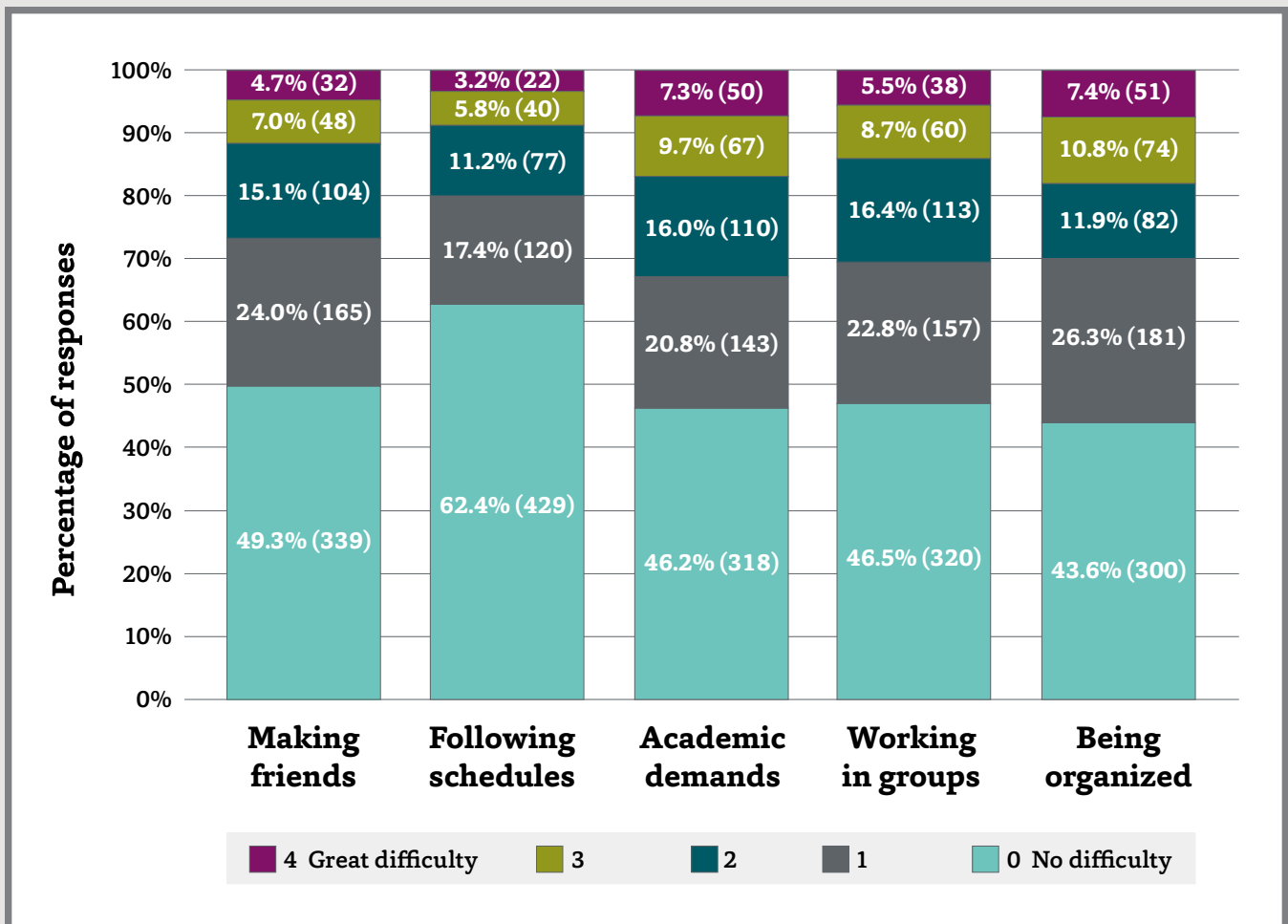
# Results

**AIM 1:** To determine how frequently children experience difficulties in their transition to kindergarten.

Out of 688 children, 72% experienced at least one of five difficulties during the transition. As shown in Figure 1, more than one-half of children had at least some difficulties in being organized (56%), meeting academic demands (54%), working in groups (53%), and making friends (50%), whereas 37% had challenges following schedules.

For those who had transition difficulties, the average levels of challenges were 2.1 for meeting academic demands, 2.0 for being organized, 1.9 for following schedules and working in groups, and 1.8 for making friends. Correlation among the five areas of transitional difficulties ranged from 0.59 to 0.76 as measured by Spearman’s rho coefficients.

**Figure 1:** Teacher-reported challenges in transitioning to kindergarten: Percentage (counts)

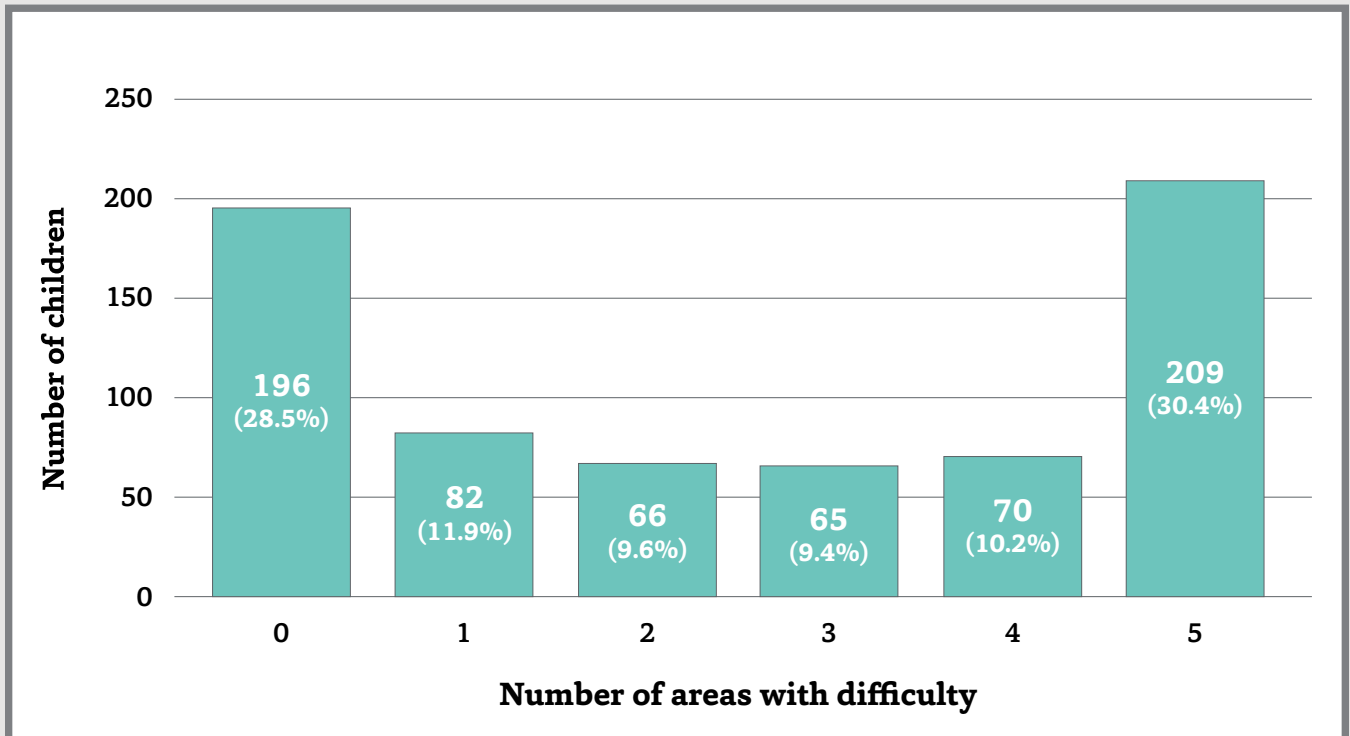




**AIM 2:** To determine the extent to which kindergarten transition difficulties co-occur.

Transition difficulties tended to co-occur. As shown in Figure 2, 60% percent of children were reported to have difficulties in more than one area, with more than 30% of children having challenges in all five areas. The average number of transition difficulties was 2.5 out of five.

▼ **Figure 2:** Percentage of children experiencing 1 to 5 areas of difficulty





**AIM 3: To determine whether certain children are more or less likely to experience difficulties in the transition to kindergarten.**

We examined nine variables that potentially correlated with children's transition difficulties, including child demographics, family characteristics, and preschool attendance status. Two child characteristics were significantly related to both the number of areas in which children displayed transition difficulty as well as the level of difficulty: child gender and IEP status ( $p < .001$ ). Specifically, boys had more difficulty (2.9 areas, mean level = 1.2) than girls (2.2 areas, mean level = 0.8), and children with IEPs struggled more (3.5 areas, mean level = 1.6) than those without IEPs (2.4 areas, mean level = 0.9).

Household characteristics including family income ( $p = .027$ ), number of children in the household ( $p = .023$ ), and home language ( $p = .010$ ) were linked to the level of difficulty. Children from poorer families, single-child households, or English-speaking homes tended to have greater difficulty transitioning to kindergarten than their peers from higher-income families, multiple-child households, and non-English-speaking homes.







## Discussion

These findings clearly show that challenges in the transition to kindergarten are common. For example, for most items, at least half of the sample experienced some challenges. One potential cause for this is the lack of alignment between children’s experiences prior to kindergarten and their experiences in the kindergarten classroom. This contrast was likely present even if children had attended preschool as recent research has highlighted the stark differences in classroom expectations and experiences across these two settings (Justice et al., 2020; Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000). Given the importance of kindergarten to children’s long-term success, further attention needs to be paid to the prevalence and consequences of these challenges.

Interestingly, children were likely to either have no difficulties or all five of the difficulties. This suggests that the children who struggle academically in the transition are also the children who struggle socially in the classroom. Our results also showed that boys are at particular risk of experiencing difficulties. This suggests that providing additional supports to boys during the early months of kindergarten may be beneficial. Alternatively, modifying the classroom climate that all children experience may particularly benefit boys, as prior work has shown them to be more sensitive to the classroom environment around them (Ponitz, Rimm-Kauffman, Brock, & Nathanson, 2009). Children with IEPs were also consistently more likely to experience transition difficulties. Although perhaps not surprising, this does suggest that the transition planning in which children with IEPs participate may need to include more supports that help these children adjust to the classroom environment.



# Recommendations

## **POLICY MAKERS**

- Provide opportunities for preschools and elementary schools to collaborate in ways that will ease the transition to kindergarten, such as developing strong transition practices.

## **PRACTITIONERS**

- Engage in practices that help children and families transition to the kindergarten environment, such as staggered starts and parent orientations. Ensure that these practices reach families experiencing low income whose children are at greater risk and who may have more challenges to attending events such as parent orientations.
- Be aware of children who may be struggling and provide opportunities for them to adjust to the new environment. For example, providing more learning through play during the fall may help children who are struggling with academic demands.

## **RESEARCHERS**

- Continue to examine best practices that help children adjust to the kindergarten environment.
- Consider measures of the transition to kindergarten when examining children's long-term development, especially in studies from preschool to elementary school.

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