

big LITTLE LEAP

THE ROLE OF TRANSITION DIFFICULTIES
IN CHILDREN'S SKILL DEVELOPMENT
DURING KINDERGARTEN

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Transition difficulties are common among kindergarteners

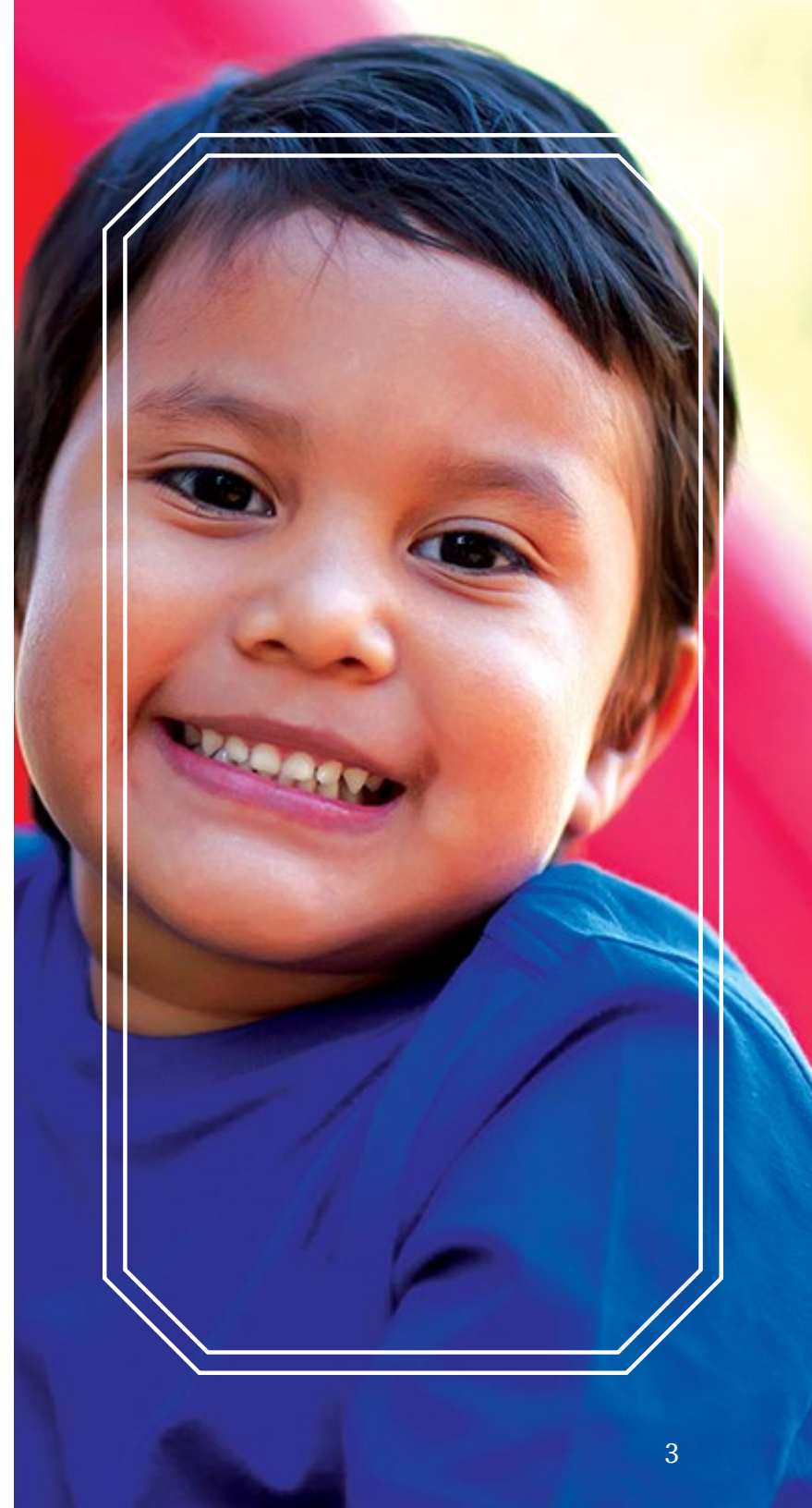
In the United States, kindergarten represents the official start of formal education for many children (Zill & West, 2001) and sets the stage for their long-term success in academics (Duncan et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2013) and social skills (Caprara et al., 2000; Justice et al., under review). The transition into kindergarten poses a number of unique challenges for young children, including adjusting to a new environment and its rules and routines, making sense of interactions with unfamiliar teachers and peers, and grappling with heightened academic tasks (Ladd & Price, 1987; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2002). Regardless of whether children have attended preschool before kindergarten, 70% of kindergartners struggle with some kind of difficulty during this transition (Jiang et al., 2021).

Observing and measuring transition difficulties

To examine transition difficulties and their association with children's academic and social skills at the end of the kindergarten year, we collected data from a sample of 801 Ohio kindergarteners during the 2017 school year. Using teacher-rated observations on children's overall reactions to experienced difficulties at the beginning months of kindergarten, our measure of transition difficulties covered five areas: (a) adjusting to academic demands, (b) making friends and interacting with classmates, (c) working within groups in the classroom, (d) being organized, and (e) following schedules and routines (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Importantly, we measured kindergarten transition separately from typical "kindergarten readiness", measured by math, reading and social-behavioral assessments at kindergarten entry (Rimm-Kaufman, 2004; Williams et al., 2019).

Is there a relationship between transition difficulties and kindergarten readiness?

Children's observed transition difficulties were *negatively associated* with kindergarten readiness. In other words, children who displayed *less* optimal kindergarten readiness experienced *more* transition difficulties at school. Essentially, children with lower academic skills





may experience difficulties adjusting to kindergarten classrooms given the increased emphasis on academic content (e.g., Bassok et al., 2016; Justice et al., 2020). Similarly, children with lower levels of social skills, a key component of kindergarten readiness, may encounter more challenges when establishing new friendships in the kindergarten classroom (Justice et al., under review).

Kindergarten transition difficulties assessed at the beginning of the kindergarten year were *negatively associated* with kindergarteners' development in math, reading, and social-behavioral skills at the end of kindergarten year, regardless of the children's prior skills. The negative associations we observed did not vary by children's kindergarten-entry skills, which accounted for child and family characteristics including child sex, age, race, preschool attendance, home language, and mother education level. In other words, kindergarten transition difficulties that children experienced functioned independently and impacted their achievements regardless of prior academic and social-behavioral competencies brought into kindergarten. This finding highlights that kindergarten transition difficulties are distinct from children's kindergarten-entry skills and have a unique association with key academic and social-behavioral markers that forecast long-term development.

Recommendations for practitioners and policy makers

This study highlighted the concept of *transition difficulties*, a proxy of young children's first experience with formal schooling. Our findings suggest that creating smooth school transitions is critical in helping foster positive developmental trajectories for all children, regardless of their initial skill level. Based on this study, we discuss two primary recommendations – one broad and the other more targeted.

First, early childhood administrators, teachers, parents, and K-12 school systems alike should work to reduce transition difficulties and improve kindergarten experiences for all children. One approach is to align early educational and care experiences with features of kindergarten to ease the transition to the kindergarten classroom context. For example, most kindergarten classrooms have interest areas or centers directly linked to whole-class or direct instructions of literacy and math, while preschoolers spend more time in free play (Bassok et al., 2016; Justice et al., 2020). Although it's still debatable whether exposure to academic load in kindergarten is developmentally appropriate (Miller & Almon, 2009), more consistent use of interest areas/centers in preschool classrooms with kindergarten classrooms would nonetheless enhance children's key skills beneficial to kindergarten adjustment, such as self-regulation, organization skills, task orientation and the ability to follow instructions (Ladd & Price, 1987).





Another approach is to bring preschool and kindergarten teachers/administrators together and inform kindergarten teachers of children's strengths and challenges, as well as provide opportunities to increase alignment of classroom experiences (Ehrlich et al., 2021; Purtell et al., 2020). The separate governance of and funding for early childhood systems and K-12 school systems make this alignment and coordination difficult. Policy makers can play a role in helping facilitate alignment by creating incentives for it, such as pilot programs for strengthening partnerships across early care and school sectors, or incentive bonuses for early childhood professionals who opt to coordinate with and share insights with partnering kindergarten teachers. Similarly, school districts could hire kindergarten transition coordinators to serve as liaisons and build bridges with early childhood providers and parents. However, ideas such as these rely on dedicated funding and a recognition that teachers of young children are already often working long hours.

The third approach to reducing transition difficulties is to build connections between schools, teachers, and parents for a successful kindergarten transition (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). For instance, constructive and mutually supportive communications between kindergarten teachers and parents on children's behaviors and experiences could enhance children's physical, psychological, and intellectual transition between home and school.

Second, practitioners would do well to design interventions targeted for children specifically with difficulties transitioning to kindergarten. Helping children with transition difficulties may also prevent potential disruption of classroom learning which may compromise the growth of all students (Howes, 2000). Identifying what resources and interventions are most effective for helping children with transition difficulties is a key direction for future research and practice. For instance, the Kindergarten Transition Practices (KTP) project carried out by the Crane Center has half of the participating preschool children receiving specially designed transition activities provided by transition coordinators, such as home visits focused on kindergarten preparation, newsletters, and storybooks related to the kindergarten transition, and opportunities to visit kindergarten classrooms and meet kindergarten children. Some participating preschool teachers are randomly assigned to implement specific transition-related practices, to assess their effects on children's school readiness and kindergarten transition. By following children from the start of preschool to the end of first grade, the interventional study KTP will identify specific practices that are the most influential for easing children's transition into kindergarten and for enhancing academic and social-emotional development over a three-year period.





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