

Transitioning Your Child with Autism from Birth to Three to Your School District

(This document was compiled for CT FEAT by parents of children with Autism)

By age 3, your child will transition out of the Connecticut Birth to Three System (B23) and into your local school district for all of their educational/disability requirements. The earlier a referral is made, the better. You should reach out to the school district when your child turns 2-years-old. This gives everyone plenty of time to meet each other and prepare for the transition.

It is important to remember that B23 services will end with your child's third birthday and the goal is to have other services and support programs through the school system already in place. Early planning for this transition is essential to ensure your local district has appropriate services available. If your school district does not have a program in place to meet your child's unique needs, this is the time your school district should begin to build an appropriate program or begin the discussion of other options outside of your district. These guidelines will help you get off to a good start on this part of your journey.

Why does it matter what my child's label is?

- Your child's school services will be based partially on the diagnosis of autism. Autism carries with it a higher number of service hours than other disabilities. You must identify the 'Primary Disability' as 'Autism' on all school-related documents - especially the Individualized Education Program (IEP) document.
- To obtain a recognized diagnosis of 'Autism', you need to have your child evaluated by a psychologist, developmental pediatrician, neuropsychologist, or neurologist that is not affiliated with the school district. These practitioners are called 'independent evaluators'. (CT FEAT has compiled a list of Independent Evaluators, recommended by parents in our community, which can be found in the "Diagnostic, Legal and Advocacy Resources" section of the CT FEAT's web site, www.ctfeat.org.)
- The independent evaluator should recommend the hours of service your child needs. A child under 3-years-old with a diagnosis of autism should be receiving at least 20 hours per week of ABA therapy.

How do I optimize my B23 schedule to ensure the maximum services are offered to my child by the school district?

- 20 hours per week of Birth to Three ABA services is the standard for a child with autism. B23 can provide these hours at your home or at a daycare facility. The school district will base their own number of service hours on the most recent B23 Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The school must start with what you are currently receiving. If you maximize B23 hours at 20 hours per week, that should be the minimum offered by your school district. (There are cases of school districts

offering to start 3-year-olds with 7 hours per week of ABA which is grossly inadequate.)

- Additional services your child receives from B23 or independent providers such as Physical Therapy (PT), Occupational Therapy (OT) and Speech, should also be documented.

When should my child be referred by my B23 program to my school district?

- The transition process should begin when your child is 2-years-old and no later than six months before your child's third birthday.
- Transition requires written assessments/recommendations from B23 and other providers. The school district should have plenty of time to review those records and make programming recommendations of their own. Beginning the process early gives better opportunity for necessary staff adjustments and classroom accommodations.

What happens if my child turns three-years-old over the summer months?

- Regardless if your child has a summer birthday, the transition should occur before your child turns three. During the transition meeting with B23 staff and school district personnel, the Planning and Placement Team (PPT) - which includes you - must decide if your child will require extended school year (ESY) services. (You can learn more about the legal standards governing ESY services in the "Legal Information" section of CT FEAT web site.)

What happens if my child is referred to the school district late?

- If your child is closer to age three and you haven't started the transition, DO NOT PANIC. The school district is still responsible for transitioning your child within 45 school days. Reach out to the school system as soon as possible to begin the process.

How does the transition begin?

- Your child's Service Coordinator from B23 is responsible for starting the transition process. You should also plan to reach out and introduce yourself to the special education department. Ask to have an early transition meeting so the district is familiar with your child's needs. They should be reviewing your child's records, meeting your child and doing their own evaluations PRIOR to transition. At a minimum, three important people need to attend the transition PPT: you, your child's B23 Service Coordinator and a representative from your school district.

Where can I find more information?

- Join CT FEAT's "Parents Only" listserv discussion group. (Information on how to join can be found at the CT FEAT web site.) Reach out to parents within your district to learn what resources your local schools do have - and what they do not. Investigate your district's strengths and weaknesses so that you are well-informed.

- Join your local school district's Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA). It is the easiest way to meet other parents who have already transitioned. Fellow parents who know what you are going through may be able to offer you district-specific recommendations.
- Read the IEP Manual and IEP Guide on the Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education website:
<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Special/IEPManual.pdf>
<http://www.ct.gov/ctcdd/lib/ctcdd/iepguideeng.pdf>
- Review current evidence regarding early intervention for children with autism. CTFEAT.org has an up-to-date list of articles which support intensive ABA treatment for autism.
- Attend a [Wrightslaw](http://www.wrightslaw.com) conference, or read the website (www.wrightslaw.com). This is the best resource to review current law about special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Schools must follow federal law in providing for your child. A good understanding of these laws will help you to protect your child's right to an appropriate education.

How can I make this transition easier for myself and my child?

- Hope for the best but expect the worst.
- School districts really do not always do the right thing for our kids. Never assume that because they are the educators, they know more than you or want what is best for your child. YOU KNOW YOUR CHILD BEST. YOU ARE YOUR CHILD'S MOST IMPORTANT ADVOCATE!
- Keep a record of everything! It is a good idea to keep several notebooks handy - one for PPTs/meetings, one for observations and one for phone conversations. Always note the date and time and who was involved.
- All correspondence with the school district needs to have a written record. Follow up every conversation with an email detailing what was discussed, whether you spoke in person or over the phone. Use a matter-of-fact, polite tone. For example, "Thank you for [X,Y,Z]. I was [glad/sad/surprised] to hear [you/the district] does [or does not] provide this service for children with autism." Use the email as a way to repeat back what you heard and understood. If you were pleased with the content of the discussion, say so. If you were disappointed in the results, an email is a good way to document your disagreement.
- Never delete an email to or from school district personnel. Create a separate email folder to organize and keep them "just in case". If problems arise down the road, the written trail of your efforts to work cooperatively with the school district speaks

volumes! Wrightslaw.com has a very good explanation for how to write an appropriate 'letter to a stranger'.

Are there any professionals that can help me with the transition?

- Yes!

There are special education advocates and attorneys you may consider consulting prior to transition. They are knowledgeable about the process and can recommend how to proceed in the best interest of your child. They can attend your first transition meeting/PPT and ensure that things start out correctly. This is a very emotional time for parents. Having an objective, knowledgeable person sitting at the table with you can be priceless.