

Voices from the Field: Cori Hill



Q1: What does transition entail?

Transition is a lifelong process. We ALL experience transitions throughout our lives but even throughout our daily routines. Consider the transitions we make when moving from school to college, from college to career, or from career to retirement. All BIG changes.

How about smaller, more routines-based transitions? We transition from home to the events planned for the day. We might move from work, to lunch with a friend, to a work meeting, to the gym, and then home again. Each of those transitions requires us to plan and prepare.

Q2: What aspects are specific to a family transitioning from the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU) home and into early intervention?

The family's first transition was that most parents do not anticipate their newborn needing to spend time in the NICU. The family has to adjust their dreams of bringing their infant home shortly after birth. Now their days revolve around physicians and nurses, health vitals like blood pressure and heart rate, decisions, minimal sleep, fears and worries about their baby's well-being.

The infant's daily routines are surrounded by beeping machines, big people poking and prodding, trying to learn to eat and to wake up to the busy, chaotic world around her. Each of these activities includes transitions as the newborn attempts to regulate. And then, FINALLY, it is time to go home!

Families face the excitement and anxiety of caring for their infant for the first time completely by themselves. Can they do it? Who will help them? They learn about early intervention and a team of providers. They learn a whole new language of eligibility, IFSPs, and supports and services. They learn that things they thought they never could do, now become part of their daily lives.

Q3: What can early interventionists do to support families as they plan and prepare to make this big transition?

Here are some tips and strategies that may help to reduce the stress that families might experience:

First, if the early intervention program receives the referral from the NICU in enough time, a (temporary) service coordinator could visit the family in the hospital. This provides the opportunity to build connection and establish relationship early on with the family, by meeting them face-to-face and sharing initial information about the local early intervention program.

Consider how to support extended family and friends. For example, a family may have a close friend or relative who lives nearby to the family's home and, therefore, would be an integral part of the family's daily routines. The friend or relative may not have been able to travel during the NICU stay and may have been feeling anxious from afar. The infant's mother and early intervention practitioner could take pictures and videos of the various machines that would come home with the baby. The family member or friend would then have the opportunity to see and hear what life would look like and sound like when the infant arrives home.

Don't forget family pets. They, too, will feel the stress and anxiety of the changes in home life. Many animal experts recommend bringing home a blanket or clothing item that the baby has worn so the animal has the opportunity to smell the new scents. Again, if there will be medical equipment, recording the beeping and alarm sounds and playing that around the pet prior to the infant arriving home helps ease that auditory transition.

Finally, use good coaching questions to learn what the family most needs. Questions such as, "What would be most helpful to you as you get settled at home?" or "Since you've been home, what parts of the day have gone smoothly? What parts have been more challenging?" assist in gathering information about the family's needs and priorities. Early interventionists might be surprised to find out that what the mother may most need is time to take a shower. Together the mother and the provider can consider options such as asking a family member or neighbor to come over for thirty minutes to make this daily routine possible.

Without doubt, transition from the NICU to home and into the early intervention system is a big step. With planning, families are better prepared for the journey. They learn that this transition into early intervention will be an initial step toward building their confidence while they learn to support their child's development.