

HOW TO SUPPORT CHILDREN DURING TRANSITIONS



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Transitions, the process or experience of changing from one state, stage, place, or condition to another, can be tough for all of us. A lot changes during these moments, and supporting children during transitions means paying attention to both the environmental shifts they're experiencing and helping them process their internal shifts. We are creatures of habit, and even when change is desired, it still takes energy. Getting started with change and staying emotionally steady through it can be hard, especially when children are still learning to handle stress and body dysregulation. This struggle may be expressed as resistance or avoidance, or through coping tactics like distraction, negotiation, or shutting down when they feel overwhelmed. By understanding why transitions are tricky and building in helpful tools and routines, we can guide kids through these moments and give them strategies for life's one constant: change.

WHAT MAKES TRANSITIONS TOUGH?

- Transitions place demands on our prefrontal cortex, or air traffic control system, and require skills that may be especially hard for those with young brains, cognitive differences, or those under stress.
- Some transitions mean stopping something that we find rewarding to shift to something we find less rewarding (or not at all).
- The nervous system requires time to adjust to new input. Transitions may involve going to new spaces with very different sensory input (lighting, sounds, smells, etc.)
- Kids thrive on routine, and often transitions feel unpredictable and come with new expectations.
- Some may develop intense focus on inertia during an activity or task and may find it hard to put the brakes on it without completion or a natural stopping point.
- Many children do not have a lot of say or control during periods of transitions, reducing their sense of choice. Being told to stop what they are doing can trigger resistance and a desire to regain autonomy.

CREATE PREDICTABILITY

- Describe what can be expected in advance once an activity or event is over.
- During periods of low stress and stimulation, provide information through pictures, videos, walk throughs, or rehearsals.

KEEP THINGS SIMPLE

- When possible, allow autonomy for opting out of activities or events or provide choices for how they may choose to engage.
- Be mindful for how many transitions are happening at a time, in a day, or in a week. Limit unnecessary transitions during times of stress or high change periods.

PROVIDE TOOLS

- Create a calendar for transitions like going out of school to summer break, going on vacation, or an event. Use visuals like stickers, drawings, and pictures to symbolize events.
- Use timers or visual timers.
- Establish clear routines and pair with rituals like games, songs, and preferred sensory input during routines.

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MAY

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
17	18 	19	20 	21	22 	23
24 	25 MEMORIAL DAY	26	27	28 PAJAMA DAY	29 LAST DAY!	

Make a 2 week calendar as a fun activity with your child using drawings, stickers, or pictures to represent events and changes that are coming up. Review the calendar together to help them prepare for the next day.

EXAMPLES OF TRANSITIONS

- Moving from a preferred task to a non-preferred. (Legos or video games, to bath, getting dressed, etc.)
- Going to the bathroom
- Getting in and out of bed
- Getting in and out of the shower or bath
- Morning and nighttime routines
- Coming inside from outside
- Going into an overwhelming environment re: high acoustical ceilings, crowded places, school (This is helpful to be curious about, as these may have sensory-related challenges)
- Starting the new school year
- Ending the school year or graduating
- Beginning vacation and ending vacation
- A new sibling on the way
- Getting in and out of the car
- Going through puberty
- Changing schools
- Moving homes
- Starting a new medication
- Having visitors over

STRATEGIES

- When possible, structure transitions from highly preferred activities to slightly lower preferred activities instead of directly to non-preferred activities
- Pair non-preferred activities with positive things like songs, games, or sensory tools
- Over time, teach the child to use tools like visuals or a timer with gradual independence.
- To increase the child's sense of control, offer choices such as, "Would you like to set the timer for 4 minutes or 5 minutes?" "Would you like to sit here or there?"
- When using a timer, create a plan together for what will happen. Check for understanding by asking, "What will we do when the timer goes off? (When they respond, indicating they understood) Yes! That is right!"
- Be Curious. If your child continues to struggle during transitions, look for patterns (time of day, your phrasing, sensory triggers etc). This can help develop more strategies.