

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors by Helping Children Make Transitions

What are transitions?

Classroom transitions occur when children move from one activity to another during the day. Transitions happen throughout the day and children are expected to move to the next activity smoothly without complaint or confusion. During transitions, children often use challenging behaviors. Stressful transitions may include before or after mealtime, moving between indoor and outdoor activities, moving between individual and group activities and getting ready for nap time. When moving from one activity to another, children can become confused or frustrated and challenging behaviors may occur.

Why is it important to address transitions between activities?

Transitions take a great deal of time each day, but many teachers do not plan for transition times. During transitions, children often spend too much time waiting to move to or begin the next activity. For example, children might be required to wait until everyone has finished snack before moving to the next activity or children might be expected to wait quietly and patiently at the table for activities to be set up. In these situations, even the most easy-going preschooler may become fidgety. Children's ability to independently make transitions between activities is one of the essential skills needed in kindergarten, so teaching the skills needed for smooth transitions is a school-readiness skill! As children become more independent and more focused on what they 'should be doing,' they are less likely to create problems.

What can you do in your classroom?

Some basic guidelines for successful transitions are:

- Prepare children to move from one activity or setting to another by providing warnings or cues, such as saying '5 minutes until snack,' ringing a bell, dimming the lights, or using a five-minute glove.
- Plan your daily schedule to include transition times and make a plan for each transition, such as singing songs, leading finger plays, playing guessing games or moving to the next activity in a specific way (e.g., 'Let's float like bubbles').
- Individualize transition strategies as needed, such as using photos to help a child anticipate what the next activity will be, giving directions in a child's home language, or providing an individual warning to a child who needs more time to prepare for a smooth transition.
- Help children become more independent as they make transitions, for example as children finish snack, they are encouraged to go to the carpet and choose a book. Not all transitions have to be whole-group transitions!
- Teach children to help others; they can move as partners to the next activity or you can ask a child to help another gather his/her backpack.
- Provide positive attention to the children following the transitions that go smoothly, for example comment on the times that children pick up the toys without much prompting.
- Give very specific positive feedback after transitions, for example 'Nicholas and Jorge did a great job cleaning up the block area and moving to the carpet.'

Research on this topic:

Evidence-based practices are those strategies, documented by research, that have been shown to 'work' with young children. Researchers have shown that planning for and supporting transitions between activities is a strategy that is beneficial to young children. Care must be taken to adapt transition strategies to meet the individual needs of young children with an awareness of the diversity (cultural and language) of the families served.

Food for thought:

If we fail to plan, we are planning to fail! You can reduce challenging behaviors in your classroom by planning for transitions and intentionally teaching children what's expected of them during transition times. Having a plan for each transition during your day will ensure that you are planning for the children (and you) to succeed.

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