

Making Transition Times Easier

How many times a day do you ask children to change activities or move from place to place? It probably happens very often. You may notice that it's during these "transition times" that children's behaviour tends to get worse. Many children find it hard to "shift gears," but with a bit of planning, you can help everyone make these changes more smoothly.

Predict the rough spots

The first step is to recognize transitions. That way you can plan for them. You've probably already seen little children's resistance to diaper changes, getting dressed to go outside, having to stop playing and pick up toys, getting into the bath, sitting down at the table... the list could go on and on. Because young ones have less practice with shifting gears, you can expect that even little things will set them off.

Older children have to be able to move from home to the school bus to the school yard to the classroom to recess to the classroom...from active to quiet all day long. It's a recipe for stress, sometimes defined as our reaction when we have to adapt to changes. Under stress, most people, whether children or adults, tend to think less clearly. They generally have trouble controlling their emotions and do not behave their best.

In-born temperament also plays a role in this scenario. Some people are more slow to adjust than others. If you or your children have this temperamental trait, it likely won't change much, but you can all learn strategies to work with it.

Planning is the key

Once you are able to predict times when things are likely to break down, you can plan ways to make them go better.

- Plan ahead to leave **lots of time** for children to move from one activity or one place to another. Feeling rushed increases their stress level and decreases the chances they'll cooperate.
- Keep the **same routine** every day for activities like preparing to leave in the morning, coming home in the afternoon and going to bed at night. Children find it easier to shift gears when they know what will come next because it *always* happens that way.
- **Eliminate** as many changes as possible. For instance, one care provider has children playing outside at the

end of the day so they are already in their snowsuits when parents come to pick them up. If you have several errands to do, try to reduce the number of times you must get the child in and out of the car seat. If you know your child has trouble with transitions, keep after-school activities to a minimum.

- **Keep children informed** of what will happen next. Use **language they will understand**, for instance "after five more times down the slide, we will leave the park to go home for lunch." If children are slow to adjust, they may need you to repeat the information: "now three more times," "now one more time." Older children can understand, "ten more minutes before it's homework time."
- **Don't ask** if the child wants to do something; **tell** them it will soon be time to do it. What you can **negotiate** is something like, "In five minutes we will leave to pick up your sister. Which toy do you want to take with you in the car?"
- Use the bell on a **timer** as a signal. Set it for five minutes. Then when it rings, get the child to set it for two minutes more; the second bell means it's time to change activities. Or **flick the lights** once as a two-minute warning and twice to say, "it's time now."
- **Sing a song** about the activity, for instance "Now it's time to pick up the toys...." Make up several verses to give children time to get used to the idea.
- Put on the same calming **music** every day to let children know nap time or bed time is coming soon. When the music is over, it's time to get their blanket or stuffed toy and lie down.
- Paste **pictures** of routine activities on a poster and point to the picture of what will happen next.
- **Acknowledge children's feelings**. You can say something like, "It's hard to stop the game when you're having so much fun." They may still resist changing, but your understanding will **make their reaction less intense**.
- **Focus on the next activity**. For instance, "When we get home, we'll wash our hands and have a snack. You can help me pass the crackers."
- **Watch your own reaction** to transitions. Do you have trouble adjusting from work to home? If so, give yourself a transition activity. A walk around the block taking deep breaths may help you make the switch. When you can stay calm through the stress of changing gears, it's more likely your children will too.

by Betsy Mann