

How can I help my child with transitions?

Transitions can be challenging for many children. People are creatures of habit and having to go outside of our comfort zone or make changes to what we are doing can be difficult for anyone. Moving from familiar experiences towards uncertainty can leave us feeling vulnerable or anxious. For a child, especially one with emotional sensitivities, having to stop one thing and move onto another can be a significant trigger. Here are a few strategies that might help your child to get through transitions more smoothly:

Connect with your child before communicating. It is very important to ensure that your child is paying attention and able to hear you when you talk to them about upcoming changes. If they missed the cue or failed to understand the directions, they are likely to become even more challenged by the transition when the time comes. Some ways of ensuring this connection is in place can include getting down on their level to speak, making eye contact with your child and asking them to repeat back what you've said.

Give your child advanced notice of changes. Let your child know what to expect from their day, as much as possible. Support them in creating lists or schedules if this allows them to feel more organized. Help them out by doing a countdown before certain activities. For example, before switching to a new activity, let them know that you will be moving on in 30, then 15, then 5 minutes, especially if what they are currently engaged in is something more enjoyable. Set timers for certain activities if it is helpful for your child to see how many minutes are left.

Simplify language. Keep directions short and to-the-point, especially if your child tends to feel anxiety about accomplishing tasks. Try using "first/then" or "when/then" statements (for e.g. "When you have brushed your teeth, then we can read together.")



Give your child some sense of agency where possible. Transitions can be made easier when we feel that we have some sense of choice in the matter. If you need your child to move on from playing video games, for example, you should start with empathy and understanding about how hard it is to end this activity. Then, if there is some flexibility with the next activity, you can ask "What would you prefer to start on first, homework or doing the dishes?"

Chunk things down. To help children feel less overwhelmed by transitions, break activities down into small, more manageable chunks. Instead of saying "OK, you've had your snack – time to get started on all that homework!" try saying "Snack time is done – how about you spend 10 minutes trying the first three questions of your math homework?" Allow for plenty of short breaks in between difficult tasks.

Keep schedules simple. Wherever possible, try to limit task lists to ten items or fewer. For a very young child, only three or four tasks might be plenty. Having too much on a schedule can be overwhelming and can leave children feeling less motivated to tackle their "to-do" lists.

Be playful in your approach. Use songs to help with clean up or turn tidying into a contest. Dance with your child as they put on their clothes or time them to see how quickly they can tie their shoes.

Rewards and consequences. Positive reinforcement is almost always preferable to punishment. Try to find ways to use things like stickers or points that children can earn towards larger rewards. If consequences need to be applied, try to ensure that they are logical and connected to the behaviour.

Make schedules accessible. Place lists in highly-visited areas such as a on a bedroom door or on the fridge to help cue your child about the tasks they are expected to complete.

Visual cues. Use charts or images to show your child in a visual way what is expected of them. For example, you could create a poster or checklist for your child's room including images of eating breakfast, getting dressed, brushing their teeth, and packing their bag. Instead of continuing to ask them verbally of their responsibilities, you might be able to point to the visual cue as a reminder.

Focus on positive communication. Use active listening that demonstrates you are tuned into your child's needs. Validate their feelings, even when you don't agree with how they are behaving. Acknowledge their efforts and show them that you see they are doing the best with the skills they have.

Parents and caregivers play an integral role in coaching their children through transitions. It is through the support of their caregivers that children learn that change does not need to be overwhelming or negative. As much as possible, caregivers need to learn how to manage their own anxious feelings about transitions in order to help their children regulate their emotions during these experiences. Try to be flexible and willing to allow your children to learn from their mistakes. Be patient and open to negotiation, as collaborative forms of problem-solving generally work best. Remember: Children continue to develop their skills in areas such as organization, planning and time management well into their 20s,so we can't expect children to have transitions all figured out just yet!



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