Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

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# Helping Children Make Transitions between Activities

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

# Helping Children Make Transitions between Activities

**This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, "how to" information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers support young children's social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.**

*Numerous times a day young children move from one activity to another in their early childhood classrooms. For example, at Glendale Early Childhood Center, children are greeted as they get off the bus. As they emerge from their buses, the children in Ms. Karen's preschool classroom gather around the playground fence and sing songs until all five buses have come and gone. As the 15 preschoolers prepare to walk to their classroom, Ms. Karen reminds the children to use inside voices and to stay along the right side of the hall so other teachers and children can pass by. She also suggests that Cameron and Elizabeth hold hands, knowing from past experience that Cameron will have an easier time moving down the long hall if he has a buddy close by him.*

*After the preschoolers round the corner and see their classroom and cubbies, they get busy hanging up coats and backpacks, handing notes from home to Ms. Karen and Ms. Ellie (the teaching assistant), and selecting books to look at on the carpeted area. One child, Daniel, typically needs a little extra help removing his coat, so a teacher is always nearby to assist Daniel so he won't become frustrated, yet will continue to become more independent. As children begin moving to the large carpeted area with books, Ms. Ellie joins them while Ms. Karen stays with the group needing a little extra time and help at their cubbies. Ms. Ellie has arranged numerous books about fire trucks and fire stations on the rug for the children to make a selection. Ms. Jimenez, Lily's mother, has even lent the class three books about fire trucks, written in Spanish.*

*The preschoolers became very interested in fire trucks a few days before when a small garage nearby caught on fire and three fire engines went racing by the classroom window. Ms. Ellie begins having conversations with the children about the trucks, hoses, fire house dogs, and other things they see in the books. She asks them questions about their experiences with fire trucks and she points to different objects in the books (e.g., fire hydrant) as she says the name so the children hear the words and connect them to the pictures. While the children are looking at books, Omeed, a child with autism, has begun to get restless. Ms. Ellie calmly brings him onto her lap, hands him a plastic fire truck, and begins turning the pages of the fire house book he has selected. Soon Ms. Karen joins the others on the carpet and pulls out the photo schedule to show the children what will happen today. They begin talking about centers that are "open," and the children start making choices and moving to the different play areas.*

## What Are Transitions between Activities?

For some young children, moving from one activity to another (e.g., bus to classroom, cubbies to book reading, art time to lunch) results in confusion, frustration, and challenging behaviors. Caregivers such as Ms. Karen and Ms. Ellie apply a variety of strategies to help children make smooth, independent transitions.

When thinking about transitions, caregivers might ask themselves questions such as:

- How do I prepare children to move from one activity or setting to another?
- Do I plan my daily schedule to include transition times and consider what the children and adults in the setting will do during these times?
- What activities such as singing, playing word or guessing games, reciting rhymes, or doing finger plays can I do with the children in my care so the time passes more quickly as they wait for the bus to come, for other children to finish using the bathroom (e.g., if location requires the entire class to toilet at the same time), etc.?
- How do I meet the individual needs of children who might need more support or different types of support during transitions (e.g., photos to help them anticipate what activity is next, directions given in a child's home language or sign language, an individual warning to a child that soon it will be time to clean up and begin a new activity)?
- Do I have too many transitions between activities?
- Do children become frustrated at not having enough time to finish a project or activity?
- How do I help children become more independent across the year as they make transitions from one activity to another (e.g., gathering backpacks and putting on boots, picking up toys)?
- Do I provide positive attention to the children following the transitions that go smoothly (e.g., the times that children pick up the toys without prompting)?

Strategies that support smooth transitions between activities include verbal cues such as verbal reminders before transitions (e.g., "5 minutes before snack time," "it's almost time to clean up") and positive feedback after transitions (e.g., "Nicholas and Jorge did a great job cleaning up the block area and moving to

the carpet."). Nonverbal cues (e.g., showing pictures of the next activity, ringing a bell) are another frequently used strategy to help young children make smooth transitions. Adults also let children move individually from one area to another area when they are ready to avoid making children wait for the entire group to get ready. For example, as children finish hanging up their backpacks, Ms. Ellie encourages them to go to the carpet and choose a book. Adults also consider activity sequences by

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planning a gradual increase or decrease in the level of activity (e.g., gross motor activities such as gym or outdoor play followed by snack) and a good balance of active and quiet play (e.g., center or large group time followed by story time). In addition, adults teach peers to help children who have a hard time during transitions. For example, children such as Cameron and Elizabeth may move in pairs from one activity to another, or adults may prompt one child to help another child gather his/her backpack. Caregivers also help children self-monitor so they become more independent at moving between activities. For example, children can be asked to reflect on how quietly or quickly they moved from one activity to another (e.g., "Yoshi, what did you do when you heard Ms. Forbes ring the bell?"). When implementing different approaches to facilitate transitions, it is important that adults praise children after transitions are completed to help children learn expectations.

Evidence-based practices are those strategies, documented by research, that have been shown to "work" with young children. It is important that work with young children and their families is based on evidence-based practices. Researchers have shown that planning for and supporting transitions between activities is beneficial to young children. Care must be taken in adapting transition strategies to meet the individual needs of young children and the cultural and linguistic diversity of the families served within the setting.

## Why Is It Important to Address Transitions between Activities?

Research studies have suggested that transitions take a great deal of time but that caregivers tend not to plan for transition time when they plan their schedules. During transition time, children often spend much time waiting to move to or begin the next activity in preschool classrooms, child care settings, and home settings. For example, all children might be required to wait until everyone has finished snack or lunch before moving to the next activity, or children might be expected to wait for buses quietly for time periods that cause even the most compliant preschooler to become fidgety! Some children have stressful and frustrating experiences making smooth and independent transitions between activities. They might be reprimanded multiple times for touching things on the wall, poking their peers, talking, or squirming during transitions between activities.

Many preschool teachers and other caregivers consider children's ability to independently make transitions between activities one of the essential skills needed in group contexts such as kindergarten and preschool. Skills such as putting on and taking off a jacket, cleaning up toys, and lining up reduce transition times and leads to more time for children to become engaged in learning activities. As children become more independent and more focused on what they "should be doing," we are less likely to see problem behaviors.

## Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Transitions?

Like all areas of research, studies on transition strategies have been conducted with a limited group of children in certain settings. Care must be taken to determine if strategies are culturally, linguistically, and individually appropriate for the children in your care. For example, some children may have had limited opportunities to independently choose and look through picture books and might need more adult support and supervision. The importance of adapting strategies to meet the needs of the children and families in your care cannot be overstated.

Many preschool teachers and other caregivers consider children's ability to independently make transitions between activities one of the essential skills needed in group contexts such as kindergarten and preschool.

*As we take a peek into Ms. Karen's classroom three months later, we see that most of her students are independently hanging up their backpacks and getting ready for the day by placing their belongings in their cubbies with little or no assistance. We also note that children move fairly independently when told that it is time to "clean up." For example, they sort and put blocks on the correct shelves, clean up art supplies, and put puzzles together before returning them to the shelves and plastic bins. Additionally, we see children taking Omeed's hand and bringing him to snack and helping him to line up when it is time to go outside. They support Omeed without any cues from the teachers. When we look at Ms. Karen's daily planner, we see that she consistently "plans" for transition times by noting songs to be sung as children wait for others to arrive at the carpeted area from snack, finger plays to do as children wait for the buses to arrive at the end of the day, and word games to play as children move to the gym. Ms. Karen and Ms. Ellie know that these transition strategies help prevent challenging behaviors because young children are actively engaged, they are too busy to look for other things to do! These teachers have seen their students become more independent as the year progresses and they know that careful and thoughtful planning across the day has contributed to this growth.*

***We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.***

## Where do I Find Information on Implementing This Practice?

*(See CSEFEL's Web site at http://csefel.uiuc.edu) for additional resources.)*

Practical strategies on how to implement transition practices can be found in journals such as *Young Children , Teaching Exceptional Children*, and *Education and Treatment of Children.* See the following articles for examples of how to implement transition practices:

Alger, H. A. (1984). Transitions: Alternatives to manipulative management techniques. *Young Children, 39*(6), 16-25.

*Conflict management and young children: Helping children deal with everyday problems* (2000). Head Start Bulletin. Issue 68.

Education Development Center (1997). *Supporting children with challenging behaviors: Relationships are key*. Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community. Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services.

Nixon, P. (2000). *Negotiating with toddlers*. Head Start Bulletin. Issue 68.

Petersen, D. (2000). Using transitions to promote literacy in preschool and primary classrooms. *Young Children, 55*(4), 24-29.

Ratcliff, N. (2001). Use the environment to prevent discipline problems and support learning. *Young Children, 56*(5), 84-87.

Rosenkoetter, S. E., & Fowler, S. A. (1986). Teaching mainstreamed children to manage daily transitions. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *19*(1), 20-23.

Sainato, D. M. (1990). Classroom transitions: Organizing environments to promote independent performance in preschool children with disabilities. *Education and Treatment of Children, 13*(4), 288-297.

## What is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore the topic deeper, the following researchers have documented the effect of transition practices:

Connell, M. C., Carta, J. J., & Baer, D. M. (1993). Programming generalization of in-class transition skills: Teaching preschoolers with developmental delays to self-assess and recruit contingent teacher praise. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 26*(2), 345-352.

Doke, L . A., & Risley, T. R. (1972). The organization of day-care environments: Required vs. optional activities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 5*(4), 405-420.

Krantz, P. J., & Risley, T. (1977). Behavioral ecology in the classroom. In K. D. O'Leary & S. G. O'Leary (Eds.), *Classroom management: The successful use of behavior modification* (2nd ed.), (pp. 349-366). New York: Pergamon Press.

Schmit, J., Alpers, S., Raschke, D., & Ryndak, D. (2000). Effects of using a photographic cueing package during routine school transitions with a child who has autism. *Mental Retardation, 38*(4), 131-137.

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