

TRANSITIONS

Transitions happen when children move between activities and events throughout the day. Some transitions are obvious, like leaving the house to go out. Others are more subtle, like changing from one activity to another or having to change clothing. Both obvious and subtle transitions are common times for dysregulation, especially for neurodivergent children or those with traumatic pasts. What may feel like a small shift for an adult can be a big shift for a child. Transitions can be challenging for children because they often involve shifting attention, expectations, or environments. This can feel like an interruption and be unpredictable, overwhelming, or hard to process.

Note: Being patient, thoughtful, and connected during these moments helps children feel safe and supported.

Understanding Transition Challenges

Children experience many transitions throughout their day and week. Some children have a limit to the number of transitions they can tolerate before becoming dysregulated. To better understand a child's needs, try:

- Counting transitions. Track both obvious and subtle transitions daily or weekly.
- Observing behaviour. Note mood, energy, and behaviour on days with more versus fewer transitions.
- Rethinking schedules. Transitions may feel easier when moving with a natural rhythm instead of following a strict clock-based schedule.

Supporting Children with Transitions

Prepare Ahead of Time

- **Warnings.** Offer verbal or visual warnings ahead of a transition (e.g., "5 more minutes", "After this episode").
- **Front-loading.** Give the child enough time to process what is coming by telling them plans. Consider using "First/Then" language for more immediate transitions (e.g., "First snack, then shoes").
- **Visual supports.** Use photos, drawings, a visual schedule, or a visual timer to show what's coming next. Keep photos of places or people you visit on your phone or print them out for easy access.
- **Environmental cues.** Small shifts in the environment or the adult's actions can cue the children to know a transition is coming (e.g., closing the curtains when rest time is approaching, setting the table, beginning to clean up or sweeping when playtime is almost over).

Familiarity and Connection

- **Security items.** Let the child bring a comforting item during transitions (e.g., a toy, a blanket).
- **"Out-of-the-house" kit.** Pack snacks, water, small toys, sensory items, or headphones with calming music or audiobooks to use during waiting times or transitions.
- **Bathroom familiarity.** Let the child know where to go or reassure them that you'll help if needed.



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Supporting Children with Transitions Continued

Make It Joyful

- Humour and games. Make a game during the transition time, walk like animals, carry the child upside down, play "I Spy", ask the child to sing you a song or tell you a story.
- Music. Sing warning songs, clean-up songs, or made-up songs about what's happening. Calm, familiar music may also be supportive.

Rethink Your Schedule

- Reduce the number of transitions. If possible, focus on the ones that need to happen and limit other transitions.
- Timing matters. Plan activities around the child's best times of day (e.g., when they're well-rested and fed).
- Follow their rhythm. Try following the child's rhythm rather than following a strict time-based schedule. Move more slowly and change activities when the child shows they are ready.

Transitioning Away from Parent or Caregiver

- Front-load. Talk through the drop-off or saying goodbye routine prior to it happening.
- Keep goodbyes predictable. Establish a consistent goodbye routine, like reading a book and giving a hug, and follow through.
- Plan a special activity for reconnection. Let the child know what you'll do together later.
- Create a label for your time together. Use names like "Mama and Jonny Time" or "Daddy Date." Having a label will help the child remember, make it special, and make it easy to reference.
- Use familiar markers instead of time. Say "After lunch" or "When you come inside from the playground" rather than a specific hour.
- Establish a connection with home. Provide the child with a special item to help them feel connected to you (e.g., a photo of you, a stuffie, or another meaningful item).
- Use eye contact. Be present and attuned when saying goodbye.
- Validate emotions. It's okay for children to be sad. Your calm, predictable response helps them build emotional resilience. See the Calming Sensory Strategies resource guide for more information.
- Give time for physical touch. When you hug the child, let them hold on until they decide to pull away. Physical affection, when respectful and child-led, supports a sense of safety and connection.
- Ease separation anxiety with connection tools. Use symbols of connection, like imagining an invisible string between you or giving them a photo of you to keep close.

Some children may resist transitions, even those that are familiar and expected. This is developmentally appropriate and does not mean you are doing anything wrong. These children may simply need extra time, support, and co-regulation before, during, and after transitions.

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Need More Support?

Local Resources:

- Family Physicians, Pediatricians, or Nurse Practitioners
- Public Health Nurse
- Child Development Therapy Supports
- Counsellors (e.g., Child & Youth Mental Health)
- Art Therapists

Podcasts:

[Janet Lansbury – Choose Not to Battle with Your Child \(Here's How\)](#)

Children's Books Available at the WKCCRR Library:

- The Invisible String by Patrice Karst
- The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn, Ruth Harper, & Nancy Leak
- Transitions Books to Support Children Book Pack
- Chester the Raccoon Book Pack

Online Resources:

- [OT Toolbox – Transitions for Children](#)
- [The Inspired Treehouse – 10 Calming Techniques and Transition Strategies for Kids](#)
- [Janet Lansbury: The Secret to Getting Out the Door with a Resistant Child](#)