

Transition Strategies
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Is the result of asking your child to “switch gears” and move onto the next activity as predictable as mud being part of mud season?

Fill in the blanks . . . Your child bounds into the house after getting off the bus. A trail of objects – backpack, boots, gloves, papers are deposited in a trail which rivals the likes of Hansel and Gretel. The playroom is entered and, “VOILA!” your child is absorbed in Legos, phone calls, computer games or reading. Your son or daughter is captivated by their activity. Then, the moment you dread – as predictable as mud getting tracked into the mudroom – time to call your child to dinner. The struggle begins.

You call once, no reply. You call again only to be greeted with “In a minute, Mom!” and then, “Just a sec” or worse, an exasperated, “OK – I’m coming!” and no hungry child appearing at the table. As the food grows cold, your internal temperature rises until you swear you could reheat the soup just by sticking your finger in it – and still no hungry child at the table.

Transitioning from one activity to another is often a difficult time for children. These are the times when you are trying to help your child finish an activity or daily routine and move on to another one. Children can become very engaged in their chosen activity and find it difficult to abruptly stop what they are doing. This holds true for any favorite activity, whether it is playing the piano, talking on the phone with friends or listening to the new Green Day CD.

But there is no reason to surrender and admit defeat. Transitions can be transformed into positive experiences by a solid upfront plan. Just like you put out extra mats for the boots covered in mud, preparation is your best friend in engaging your child in transition activities. Transitional activities can be positive and playful ways of moving children from one activity to another. They can make finishing one activity and moving on to another activity a learning experience.

In the imagined dinner example, a simple technique to smooth your child’s transition from playtime to dinner time can be implemented. Provide a warning that playtime will soon be over. Instead of calling out “Five more minutes!,” ensure your child has heard you by going directly to him or her and saying, “You have time for two more pages in your book. Dinner is in five minutes.”

This warning serves two purposes: (1.) It clearly sets a plan for your child to follow and (2.) It shifts your child’s focus from the current activity to the new one.

If your child is unable to switch gears quickly, it is helpful to give this type of child ten-minute, five-minute and one-minute warnings before a change. This allows them to gradually prepare for the shift.

Transition times and activities differ from child to child and even activity to activity. You may find that your child transitions quickly from playtime to a pizza dinner but drags their feet when transitioning from TV time to bedtime. Knowledge from your child's past transitions and understanding your child and their feelings is the foundation on which to build your transition strategy.

Responses to transitions are generally related to:

1. How is my child behaving/feeling?

Angry: Leaving an enjoyable activity for a less enjoyable activity often results in anger in the child. Setting a time to resume the enjoyable activity or devising creative transition activities (a song or role playing) can help diffuse the child's tension.

Anxious: For some children, change (even simple change) is often difficult. Ease the child's anxiety, make predictions, give anticipatory guidance and resistance to change diminishes significantly.

When parents are attuned and understand their child's temperament, it's easier to anticipate and ease the transition process.

2. How are my child's feelings/behaviors addressed?

Observation: Mindful watching of your child's positive and negative transitions can offer important clues to plan for future smooth transitions.

Constancy: Establish a sense of routine and security for your child. This creates opportunities for more timely and calming transitions.

Model healthy patterns of transition: Children emulate the people they love. Sometimes teaching your child healthy transitions is as simple as modeling them yourself.

3. How do you react to successful transitions?

Offer Praise: Build upon your child's strengths and create opportunities for successful transition that merits praise and give lots of it.

Provide Support: Recognize your child's needs and construct your strategies to offer the best possible outcome.

Always try to think about your transition plan before you need it. Just as we know mud season will come, we know it will give way to another predictable transition. Depending on your point of view, that could be the prospect of black flies or daffodils.