

Child Care plus*

+ Planning Smooth Transitions

Transitions in early childhood programs happen whenever children switch caregivers, move from place to place, or change from one activity to another. For example, children start the day by switching from parent to caregiver, moving from car/bus to inside, and changing from fairly passive sitting to engagement in arrival activities.



As necessary and frequent daily experiences, transitions require attention and planning.

When transitions are planned as a meaningful part of the curriculum, they promote children's learning, set a positive tone, and help everyone move seamlessly through the day. When transitions are ignored, the results can be unpleasant—children who engage in rowdy or inappropriate behavior and teachers who dread transitions. Transitions that are not carefully and thoughtfully planned compromise children's ability to benefit from other learning opportunities. What to do? Here are four general principles you can use to plan effective transitions:

□ Minimize the number of transitions as much as possible. While transitions must occur, young children benefit from a schedule that limits the need to switch too frequently. Too many transitions results in stress for both children and adults. Even when children seem to have had plenty of time to play, it can be difficult for them to leave an activity that has captured their attention and move on simply because "it is time."

□ Plan ahead. Long before children arrive, think about major transitions determined by your schedule and make plans. During the planning, look first at the environment to make sure it supports what is expected during the transition. Determine creative ways to use staff (if you have them) to build flexibility into transitions. Be fully prepared and set up for the day so you can focus on encouraging children during transitions. Don't forget that an element of fun can help keep a transition from falling

apart.

□ Teach children what is expected so they learn self-regulation skills. During well-planned transitions, children anticipate and take the lead in doing what is needed to move to the next activity. You support self-management by actively teaching the sequence of activities—what comes first, second, etc. Effective teaching allows you to engage children, move beyond giving orders or need-

ing to constantly tell children what to do next, and enables you to individually support children who may need it.

□ Constantly evaluate the effectiveness of transition plans and make adjustments. Be prepared to be flexible and try different and new ways of doing things as you study each transition. Whenever a transition is necessary, it should allow enough time for children to participate at their own pace. If a transition is too long, change it! If children seem uncooperative or you begin to feel frustrated, use the principles previously described to alter your approach.

There are many strategies for planning transitions that give children tools to understand the routine and make them partners in the process of caring for themselves and their learning community. When transitions work, children move through them without seeming to need the guidance of adults at all! + SHW/SLM

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+ IN FOCUS

For some children, a difficult transition may have nothing to do with routines and activities. Children form strong attachments with adults in the program, and for some children, staff transitions can create stress and anxiety.

Joseph had a difficult time when Ariel, the morning assistant, left and Juanita, the afternoon assistant, arrived. Although he seemed to enjoy being with both of these adults, Joseph frequently cried and screamed over and over, "don't go"! The head teacher used the following strategies to make this necessary transition smoother.

First, she gave Joseph advance notice that Ariel would be leaving when lunch was over. Ariel began helping the children clean up their dishes each day—creating a consistent "last thing" she would do before leaving. She reminded Joseph that Ariel would be leaving after the cleanup and that Juanita would be arriving soon.

She posted pictures of all the staff at child height and talked about Juanita during the morning (what she would be wearing, the book she read yesterday). Over time, Joseph became familiar with these routines and his tantrums diminished.

This teacher was committed to making the transition easier for Joseph. By putting her energy into planning a smooth transition, she found she did not need to spend as much time calming an anxious child. + CC+

+ TRY IT OUT

Choose a typical day in your program and create a detailed schedule of activities. Remember that a transition occurs whenever children shift from one activity or routine to another. When children move from outdoor play to handwashing to snack time and then from snack time to circle time, they have experienced three transitions.

Schedule of Activities for _____	
Morning	Afternoon

* Count the number of transitions that occur using this schedule. Consider which ones are effective and which ones are not working as well as you would like.

* Choose a transition you would like to eliminate; a) think about what you do now and b) plan one change you could make in your schedule to eliminate the transition.

* Choose a transition you would like to change; a) think about what it looks like now and b) make a plan to change it to make it work more effectively. + CC+



+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

A major transition in early childhood programs occurs at drop-off or arrival time. Since this transition often involves families, it is important to establish routines that work easily and yet are flexible. During this transition, emotions may be strong for both children and their parent(s). You become the person who facilitates this transition so both the child and the parent feel positive about what happens next.

A teacher/caregiver who is prepared for the day and ready to greet children and their parents can make a big difference. Predictable routines like taking off wraps and putting them in a personal cubby help children feel comfortable. Parents feel more comfortable when they know what is expected of them during the drop-off process, too. Is there a bench or chair for parents to sit at child level to help the child take off a coat, tie a shoe, or give a parting hug? Do they need to sign the child in and briefly describe any "stuff the teacher needs to know about today"? Is there enough time to talk with you about a celebration or concern? Do they join you for a minute as you help the child enter the play?

If you take a second look at the principles that make good transitions for young children, you will see that many apply to making the transition of dropping off their child a positive experience for parents and families as well. + SLM

+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Transitions are challenging for most young children—and can be a source of frustration for teachers as well! When you take time to *plan ahead* and *teach what is expected*, you can make transitions a positive and learning experience for everyone in your program.

X PLAN AHEAD

- Prepare the environment. Create clear paths with minimal distractions so it is easy for children to move from one activity to the next. Make sure that the materials and equipment you and the children need for the next activity are available and ready for use. See to it that you have enough materials to support the transition. A simple transition can become challenging when too many children are waiting to use the same soap dispenser.
- Establish a predictable routine or schedule so children know what will happen next. For example, children will begin to naturally move to put on coats after lunch if outdoor play routinely follows lunch. Children are not motivated by the clock—maintain flexibility and play outside longer when their interest is high. What is important to children is having a sense of what's coming next.
- Eliminate waiting. Rotate children through situations that typically require waiting (toileting, washing hands) in easy-to-manage numbers. Begin with a small group of two or three, and send them to the bathroom while others are still playing. Other children can then follow as the first group returns to the room and begins to help clean up.
- Make transitions meaningful and fun. By singing a song during clean up, or hopping on one foot to come in from outside, you can make transitions entertaining as well as productive. Many teachers find it helpful to be prepared with a *list* of appropriate songs/fingerplays and pictures of animals to imitate ("let's walk tall like the giraffe"). Even seasoned teachers/caregivers sometimes find themselves unable to spontaneously come up with an idea during a busy transition!
- Promote self-direction and self-control throughout the day. Create a climate where mutual acceptance and responsibility for group living is clearly a value.

Positive child guidance techniques used throughout the program support children during transitions.

- Address the strengths, interests, and needs of each child. Plan ahead to support children who may need help with transition cues. Often, parents or other members of a child's team can help you identify specific strategies that will support a child in your program. Strategies might include providing advance notice when activities are about to change or using a transition item (such as a paint brush or snack plate) to help a child anticipate the next activity.

X TEACH CHILDREN WHAT IS EXPECTED

- Start by posting a "picture schedule" where children can see it. You might use actual photographs of your play yard, lunch table, and play centers in sequential order or draw pictures to represent different parts of your day.
- Model what you are teaching the children. Keep a calm voice and manner. Speak softly and move in an unhurried way to communicate that this is an orderly process.
- Prepare the children for a transition. Walk quietly through the room, and speaking softly, help children anticipate a change in activity. "When we finish playing, we will clean up so we can have snack." "We will look at books, then the bus will come to take us home." "We will play outside for a little bit longer—then it will be time for our story." Your soothing comments should let children know what is happening now and what will happen next.
- Whenever possible, give children plenty of advance notice when the schedule is going to change. You can also move the "picture schedule" to represent the change. "Today, we are doing something different. When you finish in the bathroom, come back out on the patio for a special music activity."
- Provide extra support for children who need it. Watch for children who seem uneasy or anxious during transitions. Involve them early in a task; ask them to be your assistant, giving concrete directions. "Noah, it's nearly time for snack. Help me carry these cups to the table." + CC+

+ QUESTION

QUESTION: *My challenge has been keeping children focused so clean up doesn't take forever; some children need repeated reminders to get things put away.*

ANSWER: It's easy to think that the children are the reason a transition is not going well when, in fact, they may really be telling you that your strategies need a makeover! When children know what to do and the environment supports it, they are more likely to follow through. Teach children to take good care of their "school" and why it's important. When things are clean and put away, children can find the materials they need and nothing important gets stepped on, lost, or broken.

X Teach clean-up expectations. Children need to know exactly what is expected during clean-up time. Group meetings can help clarify expectations and problem-solve when it is not working. Use step-by-step directions and model what you want to see children doing.

X Provide environmental cues. Help children easily know where things belong. Label shelves/bins with pictures to help guide putting things away. Draw outlines of tools, musical instruments, or cooking utensils on peg board to help children hang those materials and stay organized.

X Make it fun and playful. Engage children in a variety of clean-up games. One favorite is having children pick up toys by color. Some programs use a special song.

X Make clean-up a group responsibility. Rather than asking children to clean up what they have used, clean-up should be a community event that is part of "taking care of our school." When children finish cleaning up an area, their job is to look around to see what else needs to be done. Touring clean-up areas with "inspection signs" (signs

that say "clean" on one side and "messy" on the other) engages children in deciding which areas of the room have been well-cared for. And children eagerly jump in to make corrections when they define an area as "messy!"

X Change the pace. Start children cleaning up at different times and in small groups. If the block area has more to pick up, start them early. This makes it likely that most children will complete clean-up around the same time and be ready to move to the next activity.

These suggestions should help you see how to apply a few of the principles for effective transitions to clean-up time. You may get even more ideas as you review other strategies discussed in this newsletter. + SHW

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

The Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning has published 21 briefs summarizing effective practices for supporting children's social-emotional development and preventing challenging behaviors. Brief 4 is about *Helping Children Make Transitions between Activities*. To download, visit www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/whatworks.html, and click on "What Works Briefs."

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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