

## **Practical Strategies to Help Make Transitions Easier for All**

We all make transitions many times a day. Transitions are when you must change from one activity or setting to another. They require a certain level of understanding of expectations, along with the ability to shift attention from one task or routine to another.

These are skills that many individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) find exceptionally difficult. Transitions can be increasingly challenging when your child has to stop doing something or leave somewhere that they are enjoying, to do something they enjoy less. The child may not want to stop playing in the living room to start his/her bedtime routine in their room, for example.

Here are some practical strategies to help make transitions easier:

### **1. Plan and Discuss Transitions**

Just like us, children do better when they know what to expect. If you know they only have a half-hour to play in the playground, discuss that with them before you get there. Similarly, if you know you will need to go and get groceries after picking them up from school, let them know the plan before dropping them off in the morning. If they know what to expect, they will be less surprised by the transition. For young or non-verbal children, the “plan” can be shared using pictures of what to expect.

### **2. Use Time Warnings**

To help your child know when to expect transitions, provide him/her with warnings ahead of time. The child may need you to say when there is 15, 10, and 5 minutes left to play at the park. When possible, use a clock, timer, or sand timer to teach how to check how much time is left. You can buy these from Amazon. Search time timers and sand timers.

### **3. Use Countdowns**

Like a miniature version of a time warning, countdowns alert your child that the transition is about to happen. So, instead of taking the game controller away and saying their 10-minute warning is up, provide him/her with a last 10-second countdown to help them prepare for it to be taken.

Countdowns are also extremely useful to help children wait. Just like it is easier for adults to push through the last few minutes on the treadmill because we know it is ending soon, children have an easier time allowing their nails to be cut, hair to be washed, or teeth to be brushed if they know it will be ending soon.

#### **4. Offer Choices**

Whenever possible, let your child make choices. This allows him/her to have some control in what happens. When posing the options, provide the child with two choices, both of which you are willing to follow through on. For example, offer your child the choice between going to bed in five minutes or 10 minutes. These five minutes may make no difference to you but can help the child feel that he/she had a say in the matter. A choice can be as simple as asking if he/she would like to walk or hop to the bathroom. You would be surprised what works!

#### **5. Use Natural Breaks**

Pay attention to what your child is doing and initiate transitions during natural breaks. For example, let your child finish the puzzle or game before calling him/her for lunch. This way, the child does not feel interrupted or rushed.

#### **6. Use Likes and Interests**

Use what your child enjoys to ease the transition. For example, play chase or tag while walking to school, play Eye Spy while leaving a mall, and if bath time is a challenge try blowing a string of bubbles down the hall to the bathroom and celebrate with more once the child is in the tub. Be creative!

#### **7. Use Transitions, Objects or Songs**

Having a physical object to hold can help your child understand what transition is happening; for example, he/she can hold an old set of keys to signal getting ready to go to the car. An object like a stress ball can draw their attention away from the undesired change. Songs can also be used in the same way. Try making up your own bedtime song or singing "The Wheels on the Bus" when leaving home for school. Think of your child's likes and interests to find what will be motivating for him/her.

#### **8. Consider Appropriate Use of Rewards**

Many parents and educators use rewards to support children in transitioning successfully because it can be extremely effective. It is important to recognize the difference between a reward and a bribe as bribing is a habit to avoid. A reward is something your child is motivated by and is agreed on *ahead of time* to be provided after he/she completes an activity. A bribe is when a preferred item or behaviour is provided in the moment as an attempt to get him/her to stop undesired behaviour.

It is a bribe if you offer to buy a child a chocolate bar to get him/her to stop kicking and screaming in a grocery store. This same treat would be a reward if you made a deal before entering the store that if he/she stayed close and calm while you shopped, he/she

would earn a chocolate bar. As the transition becomes easier, the rewards can be decreased, or the expectations increased to continue expanding his/her skills.

## **9. Use Deep Breathing**

The most important and foundational skill during difficult transitions is to remember to breathe. When you are in the moment, emotions are high, and these strategies may escape you. The very best thing you can do as a parent is take a few deep breaths. The key is to exaggerate your natural breathing pattern in length and sound. Slowly and loudly breathing in through your nose, pulling the air down to the bottom of your stomach, your belly should be rounded. Pause.

Then slowly release the air out your mouth, gently squeezing the air out of your stomach. Repeat until you feel your jaw and shoulders relax. This creates a buffer between your heightened emotions and your instinctual reactions, which can be less than ideal and counterproductive in the long run. Not only does this help you reregulate and make better decisions on how to proceed, but it also models a core emotional regulation tool that your child can imitate and learn to use independently.

Practice these strategies during transitions that already go well. They will be easier to implement when you are both calm, and your child will be far more likely to respond positively when he/she knows he/she can be successful. Be sure to use time warnings and countdowns before exciting transitions, like going to the park or turning on a favorite television show, as well as for the far less fun transitions like toileting or bedtime.

Remember to offer your child the same respect we as adults expect by making transitions during natural breaks and offering choices whenever possible. Remind yourself that we all need a little extra motivation to get through those routines that we are particularly not so fond of which is why proactively building in rewards during transitions that are likely to be challenging can make such a big difference. Lastly, be creative and have fun. As parents, you know your children best, so use that to your advantage. If all else fails, remember to breathe!

May these strategies help you and your child to transition more smoothly throughout the day!