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TEACHING TIPS

# 6 TRANSITION ACTIVITIES FOR PRESCHOOLERS AND TODDLERS

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If you've been around kids for a while, or have your own, you know that transitioning between activities and locations can be challenging for toddlers and preschool aged children. Think about how many times each day children start an activity, stop an activity, clean up, wash hands, eat, go outside, come inside, and so much more!

Being asked to stop one activity and start another is a common trigger for challenging behavior in all children, especially when they are being asked to transition from a preferred activity (e.g., building with Legos) to something non-preferred (e.g., cleaning up). The good news is that we can help children be more successful during transitions with one or more easy-to-implement activities.

# What are Transition Activities?

Transition activities are strategies and calming techniques used during times of lesson transition to help prevent negative behaviors by promoting self-regulation. Young children have not yet developed the skill to independently cope with frustration and disappointment. They are still learning to control their emotions and manage their behavior. The whining, negotiating, delaying, or full-blown meltdowns and tantrums that are triggered by transitions occur because children feel unable to control their routine and become overwhelmed by their emotions. They quickly learn that these behaviors often work to successfully delay or avoid the transition. With our help, and bit of forethought, children can learn to manage transitions successfully.

## Why are Transition Activities Important for Preschool Students?

Transition activities and strategies promote self-regulation by helping children know what to expect and actively participate in their daily schedule. They also promote an understanding of the sense of time (i.e., past, present, future) and help with the development of social-emotional skills. We can empower children to maintain self-control even when transitioning away from a favorite activity.

Here are a few good opportunities to implement a transition strategy:

- Separating from caregivers upon arrival to school
- Moving from one activity, center, or location to another
- Sitting down at circle time
- Clean-up time
- Lining up
- Coming inside from the playground
- Times of waiting for an activity to start or waiting for a turn

## Preschool Transition Tips for Success

One major key to success when helping children with transitions is developing consistent schedules and routines. Most preschool classrooms already follow a set schedule, but some children continue to struggle. As you develop a daily schedule for your children and students, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Provide visuals.** Include pictures or symbols in your schedule. Being able to point to what is coming next is powerful.
- **Give a preview.** Review the schedule with children each morning. Consider having a helper demonstrate moving from one location to the next to model expectations for upcoming transitions.
- **Establish routines.** Within each part of the schedule, establish a routine. Routines are comforting for children and promote independence. A daily arrival routine might include putting belongings in a cubby, washing hands, and then completing an attendance task like putting a magnet on their name.
- **Create rituals.** Rituals help establish a connection between the child and the preschool. For example, use

certain songs for specific transitions (e.g., hello song, clean up song, hand washing song) or develop a class-specific call and response clap pattern or rhyme for getting everyone's attention, such as this popular one:  
Teacher: "1-2-3, eyes on me" Children: "1-2, eyes on you."

- **Limit transitions.** When possible, limit or combine transitions (e.g., plan the bathroom break on the way to the playground).
- **Make a plan.** Pre-determine what children and adults will be doing during transition times, and allow time in the schedule for the transition activity. Will they sing a song, listen to a story, listen to background music, carry an item?
- **Be realistic.** Many children struggle with transitions that involve stopping an activity before it is finished. Ensure you are providing children with adequate time for them to finish projects and activities, or explain ahead of time the specific time when they will be able to finish their work if they are interrupted.
- **Give advanced warning.** Give a verbal or nonverbal warning to prepare children for an upcoming transition. A verbal warning might be "Five more minutes until we clean-up for snack!" A nonverbal warning could be turning the lights off as the five-minute warning. Because young children do not have a well-developed sense of time, a visual timer is a great way for children to visualize how much time is remaining. You can easily find free visual timer apps in your app store or purchase a physical visual timer such as the one from Time Timer ([www.timetimer.com](http://www.timetimer.com)).
- **Be balanced.** Try to alternate between non-preferred and preferred activities so children can be reminded of fun things to look forward to throughout their day.
- **Keep a few tricks up your sleeve.** Sometimes the day doesn't go as planned or children need to wait for an unexpected amount of time. Keep a few special books on hand or memorize a few fingerplays. These activities can engage children during waiting times.
- **Prepare for children who need more assistance than others.** Some children have more difficulty with transitions than others. For a child who continues to struggle, validate their feelings. Say: "I see you are sad. You love playing with the cars! You want to keep playing, but it is time to clean up and go to lunch. You can play with the cars again after rest time!" Redirect the child's attention to the visual schedule and upcoming fun activities. Offer choices when possible (e.g., "Do you want to put the cars on the shelf or in this basket?"), or give that child a special helper job during the transition such as "line leader."
- **Praise Success!** When you observe children transitioning appropriately, acknowledge their positive behavior with specific feedback. Highlight children who transitioned properly to help all children better understand your expectations (e.g., "Sam and Beth did a great job cleaning up their snack and sitting down on the carpet!").

## Transition Activity Ideas for Preschoolers and Toddlers

The options for transition activity ideas are endless. Be creative! Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

### 1. Use a fun song get children ready to line up.

On the Get Set for School Sing, Sound, and Count with Me album, the [Line Up Time song](#) is a perfect choice to add to your daily lining up transition ritual.

## 2. Use a transition object.

Children sometimes have more success during a transition when they can move an object from place to place with them. If it's a toy (e.g., small animal figure), Just make sure to explain how to "park" the object near them while they complete their work. One larger object can be used to help a whole group transition. For example, a hula hoop can be placed in the room or hallway for all children to jump in and out on their way to the next location. Or they could limbo under a jump rope!

## 3. Make the transition into a game.

When children are having fun during the transition, even those who typically struggle might have better cooperation.

- During clean up time or another challenging transition, bring in a little excitement by asking children to do the task in a new way. Maybe they can pretend they are elephants and pick up toys with their "trunk!"
- When moving from one area to another, incorporate movement! Hop on one foot, walk like a crab, or tip toe.
- Sometimes adding a time challenge is just the motivation children need to initiate the transition. Set a timer and challenge them to clean up or line up before the timer goes off, or play a song and let the end of the song be the target for finishing the transition task.

## 4. Use a fun finger play during waiting time.

The Get Set for School Sing Along album contains two finger plays you can use to engage children anytime you find them having to wait for an activity to start. [Five Fingers Play](#) and [Ten Little Fingers Play](#) are both easy to memorize and fun! (They teach important fine motor and school readiness skills too!)

## 5. Involve the senses.

Consider incorporating olfactory cues into transitions!

- Keep a bottle of air freshener made with child-safe essential oils handy. Teach children that when they smell it, it's time to transition! Using lavender essential oil to signify the transition to rest time might serve a double purpose!
- Increase auditory stimulation with fun sound effects. Download a sound effects app and experiment with using different sounds to signify the end of an activity or the start of a new one. Maybe a gong sound could signify it's time to come to circle time and birds chirping means get your coats on to go outside!

## 6. Add an academic component.

Here's an idea using [1-2-3 Touch & Flip Cards](#) that also challenges children to demonstrate their knowledge of number recognition and ordinal numbers. Randomly pass out the number cards to children at the end of an activity. Ask them to line up at the door in numerical order according to the number on their card, or the number can represent whose turn is first, second, third, etc. in a turn-taking activity. [ABC Touch & Flip Cards](#) can be used similarly with children organizing themselves in alphabetical order.

# Making Positive Transitions with Learning Without Tears

Many preschool teachers consider the ability to transition independently and successfully to be one of the essential skills children need to learn prior to Kindergarten. Using a transition activity can increase success for your children and make the difference between a good day and a bad one. The tips and suggestions above are a great place to start. Experiment and find out what works best to help the children in your life transition successfully at home and school. To learn more about the Learning Without Tears activities mentioned above, visit .

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