

Helping Children Understand Routines and Classroom Schedules

HANDOUT

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Schedules and routines are important because:

- ✦ They influence a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development.
- ✦ They help children feel secure and comfortable.
- ✦ They help children understand the expectations of the environment.
- ✦ They help reduce the frequency of behavior problems (e.g., tantrums).
- ✦ They can result in higher rates of child engagement.



Remember:

- ✦ A schedule that is followed consistently helps make settings more predictable for children and adults.
- ✦ When planning activity schedules, caregivers should consider the balance of activities (outside vs. inside, active vs. passive, teacher directed vs. child directed, the pace of activities, and the length of young children's attention span).
- ✦ Longer play periods can result in higher levels of play behaviors.
- ✦ Teachers and caregivers should include blocks of time where children have choices between different activities and materials.
- ✦ At the beginning of the school year, caregivers should discuss the classroom schedule using a picture or object chart to help children understand what will come next.



A routine is an event that is completed on a regular basis, frequently involving a series of responses (such as a bedtime routine involving having a snack, bathing, reading a book, and cuddling).

- ✦ During routines children learn about the sequence of activities, they begin to anticipate what will happen next, and they work on becoming more independent (e.g., learning to dress and undress).
- ✦ Children are less likely to engage in challenging behavior when they are aware of and can anticipate changes in the routine.

Helping Children Make Transitions between Activities

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Prepare children to move from one activity or setting to another.

Provide verbal cues before transitions (e.g., “5 minutes ‘til snack,” “it’s almost clean-up time”).

Use nonverbal cues (e.g., showing pictures of the next activity, ringing a bell).



Plan your daily schedule to include transition times, and consider what the children and adults in the setting will do during these times.

Sing songs, play word or guessing games, recite rhymes, or do finger plays with children so that the time passes more quickly when they have to wait for long periods of time for new activities to begin.

Plan a gradual increase or decrease in the level of activity (e.g., outdoor play followed by snack) and a good balance of active and quiet play (e.g. center time followed by story time).

Limit transitions between activities.

Allow children adequate time to finish projects or activities.



Individualize transition strategies.

Provide support or different types of support to children during transitions (e.g., photos to help anticipate what activity is next, directions given in a child’s home language or sign language, an individual warning to a child that soon it will be time to clean up and begin a new activity).



Help children become more independent across the year as they make transitions from one activity to another.

Allow children to move individually from one area to another area when they complete an activity (e.g., as children finish snack, they are encouraged to go to the carpet and choose a book).

Teach children to help others (e.g., have children move as partners from one activity to another or ask one child to help another child gather his/her back pack).

Help children self-monitor during transitions (e.g., children can be asked to think about how quietly or quickly they moved from one activity to another).



Provide positive attention to the children following the transitions that go smoothly (e.g., the times that children pick up the toys without much prompting).

Give very specific positive feedback after transitions (e.g., “Nicholas and Jorge did a great job cleaning up the block area and moving to the carpet.”).



Schedules and Routines

▶ Create a visual schedule. Use it consistently.

Visuals support children by providing a reminder of the upcoming activities.

▶ Keep your schedule simple.

An effective visual schedule reflects only the major events of the day.

▶ Balance activities throughout the day.

Have a mix of active/quiet activities and teacher-directed/child-initiated activities.

▶ Post your schedule.

Make sure children and adults can see the schedule throughout the day.

▶ Refer to your schedule often.

Children need the predictability of a routine and schedule.

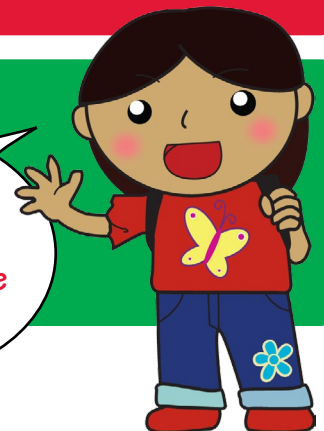
▶ Provide individual schedules or schedules with activities.

Breaking down the steps of a routine—such as hand washing—or the parts of an activity help children know what is expected of them.

▶ Let children know when the schedule changes.

Provide reminders and visual cues when something different than the usual routine occurs.

Encourage children when they follow the schedule!



Trouble-Free Transitions: They're Possible If We Understand Child Development *(Adapted from RAE PICA Keynotes & Consulting)*

If there were a list of things that young children aren't suited (developmentally ready) to do, at the top of that list would be *being still* and *being quiet*. Yet those are the exact two requirements we try to impose on young children during most transitions. We ask them to form an orderly line (something else they're not adept at), to stand still, and to refrain from talking. We then ask them to move from one place to another in that manner, pretending to hold bubbles in their mouths so they'll be silent.

I ask you: Does this demonstrate an understanding of child development? Does this show respect for who and what young children are? Or is this simply a desire for control?

Don't get me wrong; I'm not a fan of chaos. I absolutely want the children to do as I ask! But if I'm asking them to do that for which they're not developmentally ready – and for which they have no intrinsic motivation – resistance and chaos will be the results. Young children *perceive* when we're disrespecting them and they make us pay for that! The end result is frustration on the part of both the children and the teachers. And that frustration isn't pretty. On the teachers' part, during site visits I've witnessed them resorting to yelling at the kids to get them to comply. It's no wonder, then, that transitions come to be dreaded by everyone involved. And it's no wonder that many experts refer to transitions as a waste of learning time. How can learning take place in such an environment?

But it doesn't have to be this way! Instead of fighting to get the kids to move quietly up a flight of stairs, why not challenge them to pretend to be climbing a mountain? Or, if that still results in too much noise (I happen to believe that *sound* is acceptable as long as it isn't interfering with others), the children can be invited to pretend they're weightless astronauts, or cats stalking a bird. Or how about a game of Follow the Leader, with the teacher at the head of the line, tiptoeing in exaggerated fashion up the stairs?

In addition to eliminating chaos (children aren't inclined to wreak havoc when they're engaged!), there are clearly learning opportunities here as well. With just a little imagination, transitions can be linked to themes and lessons being explored in the classroom, adding continuity and the repetition necessary for young children to "cement" the information acquired. Activities like these also offer chances for problem solving, creativity, and self-expression – and we can't ever have too much of those. They're among the skills we can be *certain* kids will need in this rapidly-changing world.

Because transitions usually require moving from one place to another – and music is a common partner of movement, as well as being mood altering – movement and music are the perfect tools for transition times, as well as being two subjects that today's teachers have trouble finding ample time for! Children *love* movement and music, so that alone helps turn transitions into pleasurable experiences – even something to look forward to.

Movement activities, songs, and finger plays provide a focus for the children during transitions, hold the attention of waiting kids, and are easily tied to curriculum content. For example, if you've been studying animals, you can invite the children to move like some of

the quietest ones: foxes, turtles, or rabbits, to name a few. If you've been studying the weather, you can ask them to transition as though they were clouds or a gentle breeze.

Speaking more generally, not only will the children learn to bring satisfactory closure to activities during successful transitioning; also, they will learn to move easily into and out of group situations. These dynamics naturally entail cooperation and consideration, which are important social-emotional skills. *And* the children will learn to follow directions – which is often the argument made for more “stringent” transitions.

If we truly understand child development, we know that young children have no motivation to learn something unless it's fun and engaging (that's where their intrinsic motivation comes from). If we make following directions fun and engaging, they'll learn to follow directions. And if we handle transitions in imaginative and developmentally appropriate ways – and *plan* them, as other parts of the program are planned – transitions will be both trouble-free and filled with important learning experiences.

For lots of transition activities, for all different parts of the day, check out my [YouTube channel](#).

[*http://www.raepica.com/2017/12/understand-child-development-for-trouble-free-transitions/*](http://www.raepica.com/2017/12/understand-child-development-for-trouble-free-transitions/)

Self-Regulation Strategies for Transitions

To help young students learn to manage transitions between activities, consider these simple whole class exercises.

By [Lauren Brukner](#)

In my 15 years as a practicing school-based occupational therapist and evaluator, one of the main areas of concern I've identified within the academic setting centers around transitions, specifically with preschool and elementary school populations. The new school year is a big transition, so it's important to give students supports to help them manage both big and small changes.

Consistently leading all students in the exercises and using the tools I offer below before transitioning out of the classroom or between activities should help to decrease and prevent related difficulties.

For students experiencing high levels of emotionality, transitioning can be a very difficult task. Having to exit a familiar environment, stop a preferred or familiar task, and leave that consistency can feel frightening. Providing the strategies outlined below at all transitions creates a calming routine, which is regulating, while the exercises are designed to keep students out of a fight-or-flight mode.

SMOOTHING TRANSITIONS

Students who seem to be experiencing low energy, high energy, or strong emotions during transitions can benefit from the following suggested strategies:

- Consider creating a visual of the supports outlined below. Visuals can include images of students themselves modeling the strategies.
- The strategies can be completed before transitions and as the class is transitioning in order to keep students regulated throughout the transitioning process.
- Keep a visual of these supports by the wall next to the classroom entrance door, so that students can bring them into the class to remind them of the exercise sequences that they can utilize during the transition process to prevent dysregulation.

- One tip before having your class begin a transition after a class with high levels of physical stimulation would be to have them take a collective [bubble breath or deep breath](#).
- It may be beneficial to engage students in an interactive and motivating game before and during transitions, such as [I Spy or the Name Game](#).
- Consider adding the classroom job of transition leader within your classroom, providing leadership roles to your students relating to regulation. If there's a student who consistently struggles with transitions from a physical or emotional standpoint, think about offering them the task of transition leader, teaching them how to model functional transition skills for their peers (and thus, for themselves as well). If necessary, you can pair them with a classmate to assist them in completing or modeling these strategies for the class.

SMALL MOVEMENT EXERCISE

Stretch and bend: Directions for students: *Begin in a standing position. Straighten your legs all the way up to your hips until they feel nice and tight. Use your right arm to help you bend your left knee toward your shoulder, and hold this position for five seconds. Come back to a standing position. Use your left arm to help you bend your right knee toward your shoulder and hold for five seconds.*

This is a nice activity to do before transitioning, as the balancing component provides vestibular input, decreasing fight-or-flight from an emotional and physical perspective. Focusing on the balancing component can also act as a distraction from the transition itself, thus adding a further emotional component.

BIG BODY BREAK

Walk and squeeze the whole body: This large movement exercise is especially helpful in relation to focus/sustained attention while participating in a motivational game. Students are grounded while keeping hands on their hips as they listen for the direction to freeze, thus addressing attentional skills. Making the body into a tight muscle incorporates proprioception, decreasing fight-or-flight from an emotional or physical perspective, while also waking up the body if there's low energy.

Directions for students: *Start in the [Mountain Pose](#). Move your hands to rest on your hips. When your teacher or movement leader says “Freeze,” freeze your body and make your entire body into a muscle—squeezing all your muscles in your body until you feel them shake. Once you hear your teacher say “Relax,” release the muscles and place your hands back on your hips.*

TOOLS

Sunglasses and/or a hat: Wearing sunglasses indoors can help reduce glare from bright lighting and make classes and spaces that feel overwhelming more manageable. Wearing a hat with a brim, such as a baseball hat, blocks out part of the visuals in the environment and can make students’ space feel calmer. It also can provide deep pressure to the head. Decreasing the more noxious visuals within the environment can decrease the fight-or-flight response from an emotional and physical perspective. If the hat is fitted (but not too fitted), it provides a calming compression around the head, thus also decreasing fight-or-flight reaction from those perspectives.

Directions for students: *Are you bothered by bright lights or by seeing too many people or things nearby? Wearing a hat with a brim (e.g., a baseball hat) can help by blocking what you see. Make sure that it’s fitted (but not too tight). This can also make your body relax when there are too many things to see and hear by telling your body where it is. Wearing sunglasses can make bright lights less bright (think of those fluorescent bulbs), both inside and outside. This can be especially helpful when going from one place to another and there’s a lot of noise around you.*

Being consistent with having students do these exercises and use the above tools before transitioning should help to decrease and even avert related issues.

Helping Children Make Transitions Between Activities

CSEFEL®

Strategies that support smooth transitions between activities:

- **Before the transition-**
 - ✓ Plan your schedule to include a minimum number of transition times.
 - ✓ Consider what the children and adults will do during these times.
 - ✓ Provide verbal and nonverbal cues before transitions.
 - ✓ Teach children the expectations for the routine
 - ✓ Minimize the number of transitions in which all children have to do the same thing at the same time.
- **During the transition-**
 - ✓ Sing songs, play word or guessing games, recite rhymes, or do finger plays with children.
 - ✓ Plan a gradual increase or decrease in the level of activity and a good balance of active and quiet play.
 - ✓ Allow children adequate time to finish activities.
 - ✓ Plan something for those children who finish an activity quickly so they are not waiting without something to do.
- **After the transition-**
 - ✓ Provide positive attention or feedback to children following smooth transitions.
 - ✓ Give very specific positive feedback after transitions.

Adapted from The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL)
<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>