

# Moving Right Along . . .

## Planning Transitions to Prevent Challenging Behavior

Mary Louise Hemmeter, Michaelene M. Ostrosky, Kathleen M. Artman, and Kiersten A. Kinder

Over the past decade, there has been a significant rise in the number of children in group care settings, including child care, Head Start, and public and private preschool (U.S. Department of Education 2007). Along with this trend, programs face increased pressure to document children's academic and social outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). As teachers work toward these outcomes, they have become more concerned about children with challenging behaviors and the effects of those behaviors on others in the classroom.

Within most preschool settings, there are likely to be only a few children with persistent challenging behavior. On any given day, however, there may be a number of children who engage in some form of challenging behavior. These behaviors are often related to issues such as being in a group care setting for the first time, not knowing the expectations for a setting, not having the social skills to engage in more appropriate behaviors, being bored, and not knowing how to communicate emotions in appropriate ways. Transitions from one activity to another are times when children are more likely to engage in challenging behavior.

There is guidance in the field for teachers about planning and implementing transitions. NAEYC emphasizes the importance of predictable, structured daily routines in which children feel secure and teachers seek opportunities to expand on children's ideas and interests (Bredekamp & Copple 1997). The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children emphasizes that transitions should be structured to promote interaction, communication, and learning (Sandall et al. 2005). Here we offer a discussion of why challenging behavior occurs during transitions, strategies for planning and implementing more effective transitions, ideas for using transitions to teach social skills and emotional competencies, and a planning process for working with children who continue to have difficulty during transitions.



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### Transitions: What are they and why does challenging behavior occur?

Within early childhood contexts, transitions are the times in the day when children move or change from one activity to another. Typically, these include arriving in the classroom, moving from morning meeting to centers, cleaning up after center time to get ready for outdoor play, snack or nap times, and preparing to go home. Children's challenging behavior during transitions may be related to how program staff structure, schedule, and implement transitions. Challenging behavior is more likely to occur when there are too many transitions, when all the children transition at the same time in the same way, when transitions are too long and children spend too much time waiting with nothing to do, and when there are not clear instructions.

Children may engage in challenging behavior when they do not understand the expectations for the transition. Perhaps it is a child's first experience in a group setting

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or the classroom rules and routines are different than at home. Additionally, the program may be only one of several places where the child spends time each day (for example, Head Start, child care, relative care), and there may be different expectations in each setting. It is possible that at one site children must remain seated during snack until all children are finished eating and at another site individual children may leave the table and look at a book while other children finish. Children also may not understand what to do when program staff implement routines differently on different days (for example, on some days children wash their hands, then get their placemats for snack; and on other days they get their placemats first and then wash).

Some children may have a difficult time with transitions due to disabilities (difficulty with change is a characteristic of autism, for example) or limited communication, social-emotional, or cognitive skills. For example, some children may take longer to process directions. If adults give too many directions at once or give oral directions without cues, such as holding up a backpack to signal that it is time to go home, these children may not know what to do. In these situations, teachers may view the child as engaging in challenging behavior rather than recognizing that the child needs to learn a skill or receive additional cues to understand the direction.

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Finally, some children may engage in challenging behavior during transitions because they do not want to stop what they are doing, they do not want or need to go to the next activity, or the transition occurs without warning. Consider a child who is making a block structure when the teacher says it is time to line up and go to the bathroom or children who are looking at books when the teacher announces it is snack time. These situations often result in challenging behavior because the children are not motivated for, in need of, or interested in the next activity.

Sometimes teachers may not realize why children are having challenging behavior and may assume that a child is having a bad day, is ignoring the teacher, or is stubborn, when in fact the child may not know what to do. It is important to consider all the possible reasons a child is having a difficult time and then identify strategies to support the child during transitions. In the next section, we provide ideas and strategies for planning, designing, and implementing transitions to support all children and to decrease the likelihood that challenging behavior will occur.

### Plan for success

Designing a schedule that minimizes transitions and maximizes the time children spend engaged in developmentally appropriate activities is the first step in decreasing challenging behavior. Schedules in which children engage in planned activities or projects for significant periods of



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Original Schedule	Revised Schedule
8:15–8:25 Arrival/hand washing	8:15–8:45 Arrival/hand washing/table toys—Children have a choice of table activities, such as playdough, cutting scraps, or manipulatives, allowing easy entry after finishing arrival routine.
8:15–8:45 Free play	
8:45–9:15 Calendar, weather, and lesson	8:45–9:00 Large group—A few routine activities, plus review of the day's schedule and center time plans.
9:15–10:00 Centers/small groups—Children rotate every 15 minutes between three small group activities or play in a designated center.	9:00–10:20 Center time/hand washing/snack —Teachers support play and teach skills in small groups or with individual children. —Snack is a center choice, allowing varied lengths of time to eat.
10:00–10:15 Hand washing/snack	
10:15–10:30 Music	10:20–10:40 Book time and music —Children finish cleaning up, then choose a book to read. —A few children at a time are dismissed to get coats while the other children continue singing.
10:30–10:40 Book time—Everyone is dismissed from circle at the same time to put on coats.	
10:40–11:00 Outdoor time	10:40–11:00 Outdoor time
11:00 Dismissal—Children wait for families or bus to pick them up.	11:00 Dismissal—Class sings good-bye song and plays waiting games until arrival of families or bus.

time, spend little time in transitions, or seldom spend time waiting with nothing to do decrease the likelihood of challenging behavior. The schedule above was modified to limit the number of transitions. The revised schedule has several advantages, including (a) fewer times when all children have to transition at the same time; (b) less time in large groups and more time in child-directed activities; (c) longer center time so adults have more time to work with small groups or individual children; and (d) inclusion of snack as a part of center time so children can eat when they are hungry. Implementing the revised schedule increases the likelihood that children will be engaged and decreases the likelihood that challenging behavior will occur.

The following questions and strategies can guide teachers in planning and implementing more successful transitions (Ostrosky, Jung, & Hemmeter 2002).

**What is happening during transitions?** Many classrooms post a schedule that includes times and activities, but what really happens day to day in the classroom may be very different. Because transition times can be busy, it is easy for teachers to miss events or interactions that can

cause challenging behavior. To better understand potential triggers for challenging behavior, classroom staff can observe and take notes for several days on when each transition starts and stops, what adults and children are actually doing during transitions, and the number and types of challenging behaviors that occur. The team can then look critically at the information and design a transition plan that includes (1) assigned roles and responsibilities before transitions (for example, designating one teacher to prepare the materials for center time); (2) strategic placement of adults during transitions (for example, having one teacher stand at the door to engage children in an activity as they line up); and (3) identification of children who need individual supports, such as an individualized reminder before the transition or the use of a visual schedule.

**Can any transitions be eliminated?** Teachers can plan ways to minimize daily transitions, especially those that require all children to move at the same time. By reviewing the schedule, teachers can omit unnecessary transitions. For example, teachers might schedule longer center times during which they can focus on goals with small groups of children. This change gives children more time to be engaged with materials and the teacher more time to work with individual children as well as more flexibility to bring small groups together based on their interests or needs.

It is important to note that a longer center time can also lead to challenging behavior if the teacher does not plan engaging activities, support children's engagement in those activities, individualize that support, and ensure that activities are individualized to reflect a range of difficulty and interests.

**Designing a schedule that minimizes transitions and maximizes the time children spend engaged in developmentally appropriate activities is the first step in decreasing challenging behavior.**

**Do children have something to do while waiting for the next activity?** After observing and recording what happens during transitions, teachers can modify them so children move in small groups or design activities for children to do while they wait. While one teacher calls a few children at a time to wash their hands, another teacher could lead an activity that allows for children to flow in and out easily, like singing songs or reading familiar books. Such transitions also encourage social interactions (“When you are finished washing your hands, tap a friend to take your place”).

Interactive songs and games can help make transitions engaging, teach children what to do, and introduce new skills. For example, the cleanup song “Clean up, clean up everybody everywhere . . .” serves as a cue that one activity is ending and another is about to begin. Children can

sing while they transition. When waiting for other children during a transition, children can play simple games such as “Guess What Is in My Bag,” in which a teacher or child puts something in a bag and children take turns asking questions and guessing what it is. The goal is to keep children engaged, thus preventing challenging behavior (see “Daily Transition Tips” for additional ideas).

### **Teach children the expectations for transitions**

Often children do not know what to do during transitions. Consider a transition that happens every day, washing hands. Some children may be learning the hand-washing process and how to do it in a new setting. There are usually

## **Daily Transition Tips**

Arrival/hand washing/  
table toys

- Have children move their picture or name from “home” to “school” on an Arrival Chart.
- Make a feelings poster with pictures of faces showing different emotions (happy, shy, sleepy, excited, frustrated, sad, and so on). When they arrive, children place clothespins labeled with their names on the “feeling faces” that best represent their emotional state at that time.

Large group

- Ask children to come to circle as if they were moving through peanut butter, wiggling through Jello, in a marching band, a plane flying to the airport, a car driving on a road, a bird flying to its nest, and so on.

Center time/hand  
washing/snack

- Hang a chart on the wall. Children write their name under “Yes, I ate snack today” or “No, thank you, I’m not eating snack today.”
- Make a snack menu providing visual directions of what to eat (“Take two apple slices and three pieces of cheese, please”).
- Have one child wear a hard hat and inspect each center during cleanup to see if it is picked up. If it is, the child makes an X over a picture list of all the centers. If not, he recruits some helpers!

Book time and music

- Sing the expectations of the transition: “If you’re finished cleaning up, please choose a book” (tune: “If You’re Happy and You Know It”).
- Create a basket of easily accessible (class-made, repetitive text) favorite books that work well for independent reading.

Gross motor

- Draw pairs of different colored shapes on the end of wooden craft sticks. Give each child a stick and then call a shape. Matching pairs line up together. Collect the sticks as a ticket to the next activity.
- Tape cardboard cutouts of feet (or other shapes) on the floor to indicate where children will line up. Change these to introduce new vocabulary (ladybug, butterfly, cricket) or work on concepts (patterns, emotion faces, colors, shapes, letters).
- Use a fun, simple song to remind children about the expectations for walking in the hallway: “We’re walking in a line, . . . one in front and one behind, we’re walking in a line” (tune: “Farmer in the Dell”).

Dismissal

- Take turns creating body patterns (for example, clap, touch head, clap, touch head).
- Hide an item in a bag and give clues to help children identify it.

procedures to follow, such as how much soap to use, what to do when it is not your turn, and how many paper towels are needed. When a child does not follow the steps for hand washing (or any other transition), teachers should determine if the child understands the expectations and steps.

For children to learn the expectations associated with any transition, teachers need to explain or model expectations multiple times in multiple ways (Sandall & Schwartz 2002). One way to accomplish this is to describe the steps using pictures and then role-play each step during group time. After a few days, mix up the photos showing the steps and recruit children to rearrange them. Place the pictures near the area where the transition is going to occur and model the expectations while referring to the pictures. This shows the children how to use the visual supports on their own.

Children also can be models for their peers. One child can demonstrate while the teacher narrates. For example, Ms. Lin might say, “Let’s watch Noel at the sink. First, she turns the handles a bit. What does she need next? That’s right, soap! She pumps once because that is all she needs! Now she is rinsing off the bubbles and is ready for her paper towel. How many pulls does she need? Let’s say it together—1, 2, that will do!” (Such rhymes are a fun and easy way to help children remember transition expectations. Another example is to have children chant, “1, 2, 3, save some for me!” to keep the line moving when getting water.)

Visual cues or representations (for example, photographs, clip art) assist children in understanding expectations, anticipating the transition, and knowing what to do. Post a visual schedule with removable pieces that each represent activities. As the class completes activities, children remove the corresponding pieces from the schedule. This

will help children learn the order of activities across the day, prepare for what is going to happen next, and anticipate transitions between activities. Teachers can place visual reminders strategically throughout the classroom. For example, laminated pictures on the floor cue children about where to line up; a paper strip with photos of the cleanup routine can remind children what to do after snack; and a stop sign on the daily calendar can cue children that something different is happening that day.

## Use transition times to teach social skills and foster emotional development

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Transitions provide opportunities for supporting social skills and emotional competencies. Teachers can encourage children to work together and can provide descriptive feedback when they do so (“Look at all of you cleaning up!” “Wow, you have your coat on already? That was fast! Can you help Michael get his coat on?”). Promoting friendship skills can make transitions easier for children: have children find a buddy to sit with, walk down the hall in pairs, work with a friend to clean up, choose a friend to play with, and so on.

Acknowledging a child’s feelings validates emotions, teaches emotion words, and helps children learn to handle their feelings appropriately. When a child shows frustration, anger, or sadness at the end of an activity, the teacher can use this as a teachable moment. Acknowledge the emotion (“Caleb, it’s hard to clean up. I can tell you’re worried about leaving your castle”); engage the child in problem solving (“What can we do? Would you like to take a picture? Save it on my desk?”); and help the child follow through

on a solution (“Let’s save it on a shelf for tomorrow and go over to snack”). By labeling emotions and finding a solution, teachers help children transition while simultaneously teaching appropriate ways to respond to difficult situations.

## When some children still have difficulty: Individualizing transition strategies

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Even when teachers plan transitions, use visual schedules, and create interactive activities, some children may have a difficult time. Teachers can give 5- or 10-minute warnings prior to transitions, use visual cues, and provide prompts to help all children; but when some



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children continue to have challenging behavior during transitions, an individualized problem-solving process may be needed. Teachers should address four questions in creating individual plans: Why is the behavior occurring? How can it be prevented? How can I respond if the behavior occurs? and What new skills should I teach the child? (Lentini, Vaughn, & Fox 2004).

Consider the case of 3-year-old David, who has trouble responding to classwide transition strategies. David enters the classroom crying and clinging to his mom. He resists washing his hands, putting toys away, and joining group activities. When the rest of the class begins transitioning to large group, David throws himself on the floor and screams. When adults attempt to redirect him, he hits, kicks, and

screams. During centers, David wanders around the room without engaging in an activity. At afternoon pickup, he refuses to put on his backpack and cries.

Ms. Maggie already uses a classwide visual schedule, structures the day so children have choices, and implements strategies to engage children during transitions. Although a few children occasionally have difficulties, most of the children transition easily. However, David's challenging behavior continues to escalate. Ms. Maggie asks herself a series of questions about David's behavior and collects data on David's behavior during transitions. Based on her observations, she comes up with some solutions and puts individualized supports in place for David (see "Individualized Transition Strategies for David").

## Individualized Transition Strategies for David

Targeted transition	Why does the behavior occur?	How can I prevent the problem?	How can I respond to the problem?	What skill(s) should I teach David?
Cleanup (moving from centers to large group)	D does not want to leave the activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give D a signal before the transition ("Two more minutes" or "Three more blocks")</li> <li>• After the class cue, go over to D and cue him</li> <li>• Model and take turns cleaning up ("First I put a block away. Then you put a block away.")</li> <li>• Use a photo board to show the "First, Then" actions modeled above</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignore inappropriate behavior</li> <li>• Immediately praise D for cleaning up</li> <li>• Use "First, Then" statements</li> <li>• Redirect and model turn taking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to clean up using turn taking</li> </ul>
Arrival and dismissal	D does not want to leave his mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a story about what happens at school</li> <li>• Allow D to carry his blanket in the morning</li> <li>• Provide a fun job for D at arrival</li> <li>• Have a peer buddy greet D and invite him to play</li> <li>• Use a visual schedule with a photo of D's mother</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help D wave and say good-bye to his mother</li> <li>• Read a comforting story about school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to ask for a hug or comfort item</li> <li>• How to use a visual schedule</li> <li>• How to say good-bye</li> </ul>
Going to centers	D does not know what to do next	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare the next activity before signaling for transition</li> <li>• Give D an individualized choice card</li> <li>• Allow D to play with a small item while waiting</li> <li>• Cue D to look at a visual schedule</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use visual cues to redirect D to the next activity</li> <li>• Model the expectations</li> <li>• Point out peer models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to use the visual schedule</li> <li>• How to imitate peers</li> <li>• How to choose a transition activity (books, puzzles) during wait time</li> </ul>

Based on Lentini, Vaughn, & Fox (2004).

## Conclusion

Some children find it difficult to cope with transitions, and this can lead to challenging behavior. When several children have difficulty with transitions, there may be issues with the way the program plans or implements transitions. In such cases, teachers can evaluate the schedule in terms of the number and length of transitions and what children are expected to do during transitions. This information can be used to modify transitions in order to better support children, likely leading to fewer challenging behaviors. If an individual child continues to have ongoing challenging behavior, it may be necessary to develop an individualized plan for that child.

When teachers have evaluated transitions, put strategies in place to help children transition more easily, and implemented individualized plans for those who need them, transitions can be fun and successful times for children and teachers alike.

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