

Does your child struggle to move from one activity to the next?

Getting out the door with a child or several children is a struggle for almost every family. It happens daily...you are trying to get yourself ready, think about the day ahead, and all the while, desperately change diapers, dress children, prepare meals, and more. And in the midst of this hustle and bustle, very young children may have toileting accidents, want you to play with them, or simply get lost in a moment instead of getting ready. Older children may even resist the transition and refuse to stop what they are doing in order to move to the next activity.



Developmentally Speaking

All young children struggle with transitions and here are a few of the reasons why:

- 1) Children don't have a clear concept of time
- 2) Children can be easily distracted
- 3) Children require more processing time
- 4) Children are learning how to follow routines
- 5) Children require support during transitions

When a child is struggling with transitions or “acting out” during something like a morning routine, they are sending a message. For example, they may be telling you that they are excited or confused, that they need to move, or maybe, that they just want your attention.

In more challenging situations, when a child **resists** your requests to “move along”...it is a strong signal that their body is experiencing stress. It is in these moments of stress (for you and them), that they need love and attention more than ever. They need you to help them reduce the stress and regain balance.

When a child is struggling

they need you to slow down, connect, and help guide them.

The following tips are designed to aid your investigation into why your child may struggle with transitions and how to help them become more successful. You can also use the image at the end of this document as a reminder of the essential things needed for successful transitions.

Things To Alleviate Transition Resistance

Determine if there is a medical or psychological reason for the resistance.

For example, is your child having a hard time sleeping so much so that waking is next to impossible? You may want to consult with a health care provider to determine why your child may not be sleeping and ensure to limit screen time right before bedtime. Or is your child experiencing discomfort or feelings of failure at school or with the activity you are trying to transition to? You may need to talk to your child's teacher or activity guide to find out more and alleviate potential stress or anxiety.

Observe your child during the transition. When a child struggles more than expected, or their resistance is causing difficulties for the family, it becomes our job to determine why. Thus, your aim is to uncover why your child is struggling to transition to/from or between activities. You may need to ask someone to transition your child for you so you can watch OR have someone videotape the transition.

Ask yourself, does your child have difficulty shifting their attention from one activity to another? Does your child seem to misunderstand where they are transitioning to? Does your child eventually make the move, but it takes forever? Does your child want more independence or to have a say in some part of the transition?

Preview steps and expectations. Help your child understand what you do want from a given transition and calmly share your belief that transitions can be easier and smoother.

For example, at bedtime, share with your child that you wish to have a smooth, calm morning together, and how that can happen. Use photos or even a video of successful transitions. It's also helpful to share and show the steps of the morning routine (e.g., get out of bed, come to the kitchen, get something to eat, get dressed, brush teeth and hair, get backpack, get shoes). Consider reading a book about smooth transitions. Ask your librarian for some book recommendations. You can also brainstorm with your child how to make transitions more successful.

Prepare yourself first to ensure you are ready to support your child, particularly during difficult situations.

For example, wake earlier than your child and have your cup of tea/coffee to calm your own mind before waking your child. If this isn't possible, consider making time for a calm quiet activity for the two of you to do to ensure what is called "co-regulation," which will set both of you up for more success by working together. Co-regulation is a back and forth situations that is quiet, mostly nonverbal, and enjoyable. This can be playing a game, reading a book, or even emptying the dishwasher together silently. Strive to model and create a calm environment for your child.

Modify how you initiate the transition or how many transitions you require the child to make. Give simple and clear information and allow for sufficient processing time. Allowing a child a few minutes BEFORE you actually expect them to stop one thing and transition to another is more supportive, respectful, and will make the transition smoother.

For example, use preparation statements like "in 5 minutes, time to get dressed." Sometimes simply using a "1st we will do this, then we will do that," language can demonstrate your respectful yet clear direction. And if your child is having to manage multiple transitions, it may be most respectful to their learning and processing to simply modify your schedule to decrease the sheer number of transitions.

Provide sufficient processing time. Often when children struggle to transition from one thing to another they are communicating the need for more processing time.

When your child does not respond or responds negatively to an invitation to transition, take the moment to breathe and regroup yourself first. Simply going silent and waiting a moment can sometimes give children just the time they need to then transition successfully. Aim to not talk or to repeat your original request.

Facilitate independence. We all like to have independence and choice over our lives.

For example, if your child has dropped to the floor at your request to get ready to go, avoid rushing the child to get up off the floor. Rather, aim to create time and space for them to calm down, stand up, and come to you on their own. It's also important that you avoid the habit or impulse to pick them up and carry them away. Aim for only doing 50% of the work rather than 100% and dragging your child through the transition or expecting full independence too soon.

Create opportunities to practice but not "during the storm". Children need multiple and varied opportunities to practice new skills. However, children can't learn or practice new skills if they are in the middle of a meltdown or if they have shut down due to a "flood of emotion." For example, should your child drop or resist mid-transition, it is your job to stop all actions, stop all talking, and use your body language to clearly indicate you are ready to help them transition.

For example, if your child gets out of the bath but then drops to the floor not wanting to go into the bedroom to get dressed, pause, get close and down on their level, restate the simple directive (e.g., "1st get dressed, then eat.") or show a picture of them getting dressed as a reminder of what you want them to be doing. Pause to allow processing time, and resist the urge to pick your child up to move them physically into another room. Allow your child to take some action with yours to get up and walk with you. Take your child's hand gently and firmly and do just 50% of the work to stand up.

If your child pulls away, offer the other hand and be sure your body language is clearly stating that you are ready to transition. For example, if you are sit with your child who has dropped to the floor, this is indication that you are sitting together (not on your way out the door). Rather, you might try positioning yourself as a guide through the door instead (offering your hand as you start the action of walking out the door but allowing your child to join you).

NOTE: For more tips on how to "weather the storm" see our **Teach Before the Peak videos** series (<https://kristiepf.com/teach-before-the-peak-mini-series/>) and **Calming the Chaos: Home Edition** (<https://prektechandplay.com/shop/> filter by training videos). Both resources are designed to strengthen or help you gain the skills needed to address some of the most challenging behaviors we see in early childhood.

Assume positive intent. While your child is posing a challenge to successful transitions, try not to jump to the conclusion that they are being "manipulative," that they are trying to "push your buttons," or that they are "just being stubborn".

Keep in mind, children, particularly those with disabilities or other special needs, may slow down transitions as a means to communicate that they do not understand, are overwhelmed, feel out of control, do not wish to do what you are asking, or need more processing time.

Practice and experiment. You very well may be successful during your first try of transitioning with these tips; however, chances are, you will need some practice and to make adjustments. Allow your child to learn through your trials and experimentations.

Allow your child to witness your calm and patient attitude. Ensure they feel your loving versus demanding support and your confident guidance. In moments of doubt, turn frustration into fascination. Ask yourself what your child is communicating when they are struggling with transitions. And, as your child is learning to be more successful with transitions, be sure to provide positive attention and feedback before, during, and after the transition.



To download the image as a printable handout, go to:

<https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/conferencelinks/Developmental+Pathways/Transition+Essentials.pdf>

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