

Transitions

Serves: 1 whole classroom in motion | Prep time: ongoing, all year | Best made calmly

INGREDIENTS

- A predictable transition routine or signal (song, chime, visual timer); Visual supports & AAC devices
- Advance warnings, not surprises
- A simple job or role for the child during the shift
- Calm, sequencing language
- Adults having flexibility in the pacing because it will never be perfect

PREP (BEFORE IT HAPPENS)

- Post and use a consistent visual schedule
- Preview any change to the usual routine ahead of time
- Identify which specific transitions are hardest for which children; what visuals/tools are needed
- Build in buffer time so transitions aren't rushed
- Keep the sequence of steps the same every day where possible

DIRECTIONS (IN THE MOMENT)

- 1. Give an advance warning** — Use a 5-minute and a 2-minute heads-up before the shift: "Five more minutes, then clean-up time." Deliver this to entire group but then follow-up directly with those who struggle (i.e., make sure an adult gets to eye-level and concretely secures the attention).
Why this works: Shifting attention from one activity to another relies on cognitive flexibility, a skill barely emerging in preschoolers. A warning lets the brain start preparing instead of being caught off guard.
- 2. Use the same signal every time** — Pair the transition with a consistent cue — a song, a chime, a visual timer — every single time. You can even have a “transition captain” as a student job where kids take turns learning how to deliver the transition cue to the rest of the class. Kids at this age love playing “teacher”!
Why this works: Predictable sensory cues reduce uncertainty, and uncertainty itself is a major driver of the stress response system for humans. A familiar signal tells the nervous system “this is safe and expected.”
- 3. Give the child a job** — "Can you carry the basket to the shelf?" or "You lead the line to the door."
Why this works: Purposeful engagement redirects focus toward an achievable task and taps the child's need for agency, which reduces the passive resistance that comes with simply being told to stop and go. This also engages the child's thinking brain (i.e., frontal lobe) which is responsible for self-control, and you increase the chance of easier cooperation, while also buffering the potential for another meltdown.
- 4. Narrate the sequence calmly** — "First we clean up, then it's snack time" — state the order simply as you move through it. Having warm and happy facial expressions and using a sing-songy tone helps.
Why this works: Sequencing language directly supports the developing executive function skill of holding and following a short series of steps in order. Narrating with calm, happy nonverbal adult cues also signals to the child's nervous system that this is “safe life” and prevents misperception of threat cues.
- 5. Allow a little individual pacing** — Where safety allows, give a beat of extra time for a child who needs it rather than forcing an abrupt stop. Adults need to show flexibility because these skills are barely emerging.
Why this works: Nervous systems shift states at different speeds. A forced, abrupt transition for a slower-to-shift child can trigger a stress response that a few extra seconds would have prevented.
- 6. Mark the completed transition** — A brief, genuine "You made it to the rug — nice job!" as the group settles into the next activity. “We transitioned, friends! Give yourselves Hi-5s!”
Why this works: Closing the loop with positive acknowledgment builds a good association with transitions over time, which reduces resistance to the next one.

THE SCIENCE IN BRIEF

- Moving between activities requires cognitive flexibility — an executive function skill that is still developing throughout early childhood.
- Sudden, unpredictable changes activate the brain's stress response simply because they're unexpected, regardless of what the new activity is.
- Predictable routines and rituals lower physiological stress markers in young children and build a felt sense of safety around the school day.
- Children vary significantly in how quickly their nervous systems can shift states — this is temperament and development, not compliance.

CHEF'S NOTES

- Avoid: surprise changes to the routine, rushing, comparing one child's pace to another's, or punishing a slow transition
- Consistency in sequence and signal matters more than speed
- Track which transitions are consistently hardest — that's your data for what to prep differently
- If a child is regularly dysregulated by transitions well beyond peers, loop in your team to consider individual supports

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	TRY SAYING...
<i>"Hurry up, we don't have time for this."</i>	"We have five more minutes — let's finish strong."
<i>"Stop playing and line up now!"</i>	"Time to save your work for next time — line up when you're ready."
<i>"I said it's time to go!"</i>	"First we clean up, then it's time to go."
<i>"Why are you still not ready?"</i>	"Show me you're ready by standing tall by the door."
<i>"We're going to be late because of you."</i>	"Let's beat the clock together — can you help me hurry?"
<i>"Stop arguing and just come on."</i>	"I know it's hard to stop. Take one more look, then let's go."
<i>"You're the last one again."</i>	"You're almost there — two more steps and you're done."
<i>"Quit complaining and move."</i>	"It's okay to feel upset about stopping. Let's walk and talk about it."

