

Supporting Self-Directed Transitions in Young Children

Helping Young Children Make Transitional Choices

Transitions are key moments in a child's day when they move from one activity or routine to another, such as shifting from playtime to clean-up, or from outdoor activities to indoor ones. In many households, parents or caregivers direct these transitions by telling children when it's time to clean up, eat, use the washroom, and so on. While this approach offers structure, it often removes the element of choice for preschoolers, which can make transitions challenging. When children are not given choices, they may experience behavioural issues or meltdowns as their autonomy is taken away.

For some children, compliance at home is easy and they're content to follow adult direction. However, once they enter a preschool environment—especially one that encourages child-led activities and decision-making—they may feel intimidated or overwhelmed by the freedom. These children might freeze and be unable to choose an activity, become anxious because they don't know how to start or stop an activity on their own, or become upset and ask for their parents, wanting to go home.

The Importance of Allowing Children to Choose When to Transition

When children are empowered to make their own choices—such as selecting activities, deciding when to move on, cleaning up independently, expressing their needs for food or the washroom—they build independence, self-confidence, and autonomy. This not only fosters cooperation but also enriches their vocabulary and promotes emotional regulation. Well-managed transitions that include choice, help preschoolers feel secure and confident, reduce stress, minimize confusion, and encourage independent behaviour.

Challenges Preschoolers Face During Self-Directed Transitions

Preschoolers often struggle with transitions because they have a limited sense of time and are used to being directed by adults. They may not know how to identify or choose what they need or want, and they might expect someone else to decide what happens next. These challenges can result in anxiety, resistance, feelings of being overwhelmed, or behavioural issues during transitions.

Common Transitions at Preschool

- Arrival and departure (entering and leaving the classroom)
- Moving between indoor and outdoor activities
- Shifting from playtime to snack or mealtimes
- Transitioning from circle time to individual activities
- Clean-up time

Common Transitions at Home

- Getting cleaned up (bathtime), ready for the day or to go out
- Mealtimes, including knowing when they want a snack or drink
- Using the washroom independently, once toilet training is completed
- Stopping an activity to go to the washroom
- Putting away an activity when finished
- Choosing a new or different activity
- Reaching limits on TV or screen time
- Bedtime

Strategies to Support Self-Directed Transitions

- **Provide Advance Warning:** Give children clear, simple signals before a transition. For example, say, “In five minutes, we will clean up and get ready for supper.”
- **Maintain Consistent Routines:** Predictable routines for meals, baths, and bedtime help children feel safe and know what to expect. Your child can take the lead on activities between these routines and be less directed by adults.
- **Offer Choices:** Allow children some control whenever possible, such as, “Would you like to tidy up the blocks or the puzzles first?” This encourages engagement and cooperation.
- **Engage Children Actively:** Make transitions enjoyable by using games, songs, or movement activities, such as singing a clean-up song or marching like animals to the kitchen.
- **Model and Reinforce Positive Behaviour:** Demonstrate and praise appropriate behaviours, like cleaning up before starting a new activity, responding after being asked once, or helping prepare for bath or bedtime.
- **Support Individual Needs:** Offer encouragement and additional time to children who find transitions difficult or are new to making their own choices. Use gentle reminders or offer to make the choice if they are unable to do so.

Children’s lives are filled with transitions, which are a natural part of daily routines for both children and adults. By understanding the importance of these moments and using supportive strategies, parents and caregivers can allow children to take the lead during some transitions. This approach makes transitions smoother and more positive while building essential skills in choice-making, confidence, independence, and self-regulation—qualities that will benefit children throughout their lives.