


# Reducing Challenging Behaviors during Transitions: Strategies for Early Childhood Educators to Share with Parents

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At pickup time, Teresa approaches her daughter's preschool teacher, Ms. Ann. Teresa would like some advice on how she can get her daughter, Lily, to transition more easily between daily activities. The previous evening, Lily had a tantrum at the end of library story time; she wanted to stay at the library longer, looking at picture books, but it was time to go home for dinner. Ms. Ann listens to Teresa and struggles to come up with concrete ideas for making outings such as these smoother for everyone.

Transitions are when children move from one activity to another. Everyday transitions include arriving at an educational setting from home, moving from dinner to playtime, finishing playtime and cleaning up, brushing teeth and then taking a bath, and going from bath time to bedtime. Transitions can be difficult for some parents, particularly when taking their young children out into the community (such as Teresa's struggles with Lily at the library), picking them up from educational settings, or moving between activities and routines at home. For some children, transitions may be frustrating or may provoke anxiety, and they may lead to challenging behaviors. In this article, we adopt the definition of "challenging behavior" provided by the Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (2013):

- Any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults.
- Behaviors that are not responsive to the use of developmentally appropriate guidance procedures.
- Prolonged tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, disruptive vocal and motor behavior (e.g., screaming, stereotypy), property destruction, self-injury, noncompliance, and withdrawal.

When young children engage in persistent challenging behavior, parents might look to their children's teachers for advice. The purpose of this article is to highlight strategies that early childhood educators can share with families in an effort to prevent challenging behavior during routine activities both inside and outside the home. We start with a discussion of why transitions may be difficult and when frustrations are most likely to occur. We then focus on the importance of early childhood professionals being knowledgeable about transition issues and offer suggestions and guidance for family members. Finally, we share strategies parents can use prior to and during transitions to prevent challenging behaviors, as well as skills children can be taught to help make transitions easier.

## Understanding the difficulty of transitions

Difficulty with transitions can occur for a number of reasons, such as when children are tired, hungry, confused, or not ready to end an activity. Difficulty with transitions is also common when children have communication delays, limited social and emotional skills, or intellectual disabilities (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Corso 2012). By considering children's needs and abilities and planning accordingly, parents can avoid problems at transition times. For example, instead of racing from one errand to another on a Saturday morning, parents might plan a 20-minute break to play with their children between stops. Early childhood educators can encourage parents to *put themselves in their children's shoes* and look at the world from their vantage points as they consider how to show their children what to do ("Leo, put the washcloth like this to scrub your legs."); how to keep their children busy ("Alex, while we wait for the server to bring our food, why don't we

look at these books we brought along?”); and how to prepare their children for what comes next (“Jade, after we go to the bank, we will stop by the park for some crackers and juice and play on the slide for a bit.”).

Ideally, educators will customize these strategies as they get to know each family. Many parents struggle with transitions throughout a child’s early years, so sharing strategies that might prevent challenging behaviors during these times is an important task for early childhood educators. While some beginning educators report that they do not view parents as equal partners in family-centered practices and that working with parents can be difficult (Bezdek, Summers, & Turnbull 2010), parents often look to professionals for suggestions about how to address particular issues. Additionally, recommended practices in early childhood special education highlight the important role that parents play as partners in their children’s learning and development (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children 2014).

To be supportive—and to improve transitions at the beginning and end of each school day—early childhood educators should devote time to developing strategies to share with parents on successfully navigating transitions at home and in the community. “Given that challenging behavior has an impact on children as well as families, understanding challenging behavior in the context of families is critical” (Tyrrell, Freeman, & Chambers 2006, 30). For example, educators might collaborate with parents in deciding what strategy to try first to tackle a difficult transition. A teacher might say to a parent, “It seems Jack does better during long periods of waiting when he knows what will happen next and when he has something to play with. You mentioned that he often has a tantrum when you are both waiting at the bus stop for your third grader to come home. How do you think Jack would react if you brought a toy along, played a guessing game with him, or sang some songs?”

*Transform wait time into fun learning time. For example, when standing in line, play I Spy to find objects that are a particular color.*

## Helping with transitions

There are several things that can be done to make potentially difficult transition times easier for parents and children. First, preventative strategies reduce the likelihood that transitions will be difficult or that challenging behaviors will occur. Second, early childhood educators and parents can work together to determine how to teach children

the skills needed to make transition times successful. Finally, there are specific individualized strategies that can be used when a transition becomes difficult or when a child's behavior escalates. These topics are discussed in the following sections.

## Preventative strategies

Early childhood educators may share ideas with parents about how to create smooth transitions at home, thereby decreasing the likelihood of challenging behaviors occurring. While these ideas should be adapted to meet the needs of individual children, general strategies (Artman-Meeker & Kinder 2014) to share with family members include

- **Looking carefully at a family's schedule, routines, and transitions.** Help families think about (1) whether there are transitions or parts of routines that may not be necessary or that could be changed; (2) if their daily schedule could be more consistent, making it easier for children to predict the day; and (3) what strategies they could use to signal to their children that a transition is coming. For example, some families put a child-friendly schedule (with pictures to represent activities) on the refrigerator.
- **Planning ahead.** Have materials and activities on hand to transform wait time into fun learning time. For example, when standing in a long line at a store or when driving in the car, play I Spy to find objects that are a particular color or begin with a specific sound. Have quiet toys to use while waiting, such as word puzzles, books, or crayons and a coloring book.
- **Having materials ready.** Gather all necessary items for the next activity before signaling a transition to your child. For example, have the bath ready, shoes gathered, or apples out for snack time prior to calling a child to the activity.
- **Using music, songs, or predictable noises to signal transitions.** A routine cleanup song can be used when it is time to pick up toys. Set a timer to indicate that playtime is ending and soon it will be time to clean up for dinner.

- **Using visual cues.** Mini-schedules posted near transition locations provide visual prompts for the next transition or schedule change. For instance, picture cues near the front door might contain photos of a coat, hat, and boots to prompt a child to get ready to go outside.
- **Turning transition times into games.** Create a song and dance or engage in pretend play about what a child is going to do next. For example, children can be encouraged to “fly” to the sink like superheroes to brush their teeth.

The main goal of preventative strategies is to help children understand adults’ expectations for transitions so that challenging behavior is less likely to occur (Hemmeter et al. 2008).

## Skills to teach



While preventative strategies are helpful, over time children need to learn to regulate their emotions and behaviors so that transitions are no longer difficult. Educators can provide parents with suggestions for specific skills to teach children. Even if parents have consistent, predictable routines in place and children know what is expected during transitions, challenging behavior may occur when a child does not have the necessary skills to complete the tasks someone is asking of her. It is important to collaborate with parents so that children develop specific skills needed during problematic transitions. Consider the following:

- Ask parents to think about difficult transitions throughout the day, and encourage them to consider if their children have the necessary skills for understanding directions and moving to the next activity when a transition is signaled. For example, a parent may ask, “Does my child know how to brush his teeth independently, or does he need assistance?” “What might I do, or what skills might I teach my child, to assist her in getting dressed? In cleaning up before bedtime?”
- Suggest that parents practice skills with their children, and provide descriptive feedback on how their children use those skills. For example, a child may be able to put his coat on but might not know how to zip or button it. Parents can (1) provide descriptive feedback once the child puts on his coat (“You put your coat on all by yourself!”); (2) show the child how to zip or button the coat and encourage him to help (“I know the zipper can be hard, so how about I hold the bottom of your coat and then help you zip it?” [Meadan et al. 2013]); (3) provide praise or descriptive feedback once essential tasks have been completed and add a cue for the transition to begin (“I like that you put on your hat and gloves all by yourself after we zipped your coat! I can tell you are ready to go to the store now!”); and (4) give feedback once the child makes the transition (“You did a great job getting into your car seat. Now we can go to the pet store.”).
- Encourage parents to teach their children a variety of emotion words so they can express their feelings. Sometimes children have an easier time making difficult transitions when they are able to communicate their desires and emotions. For example, when a child is upset about leaving the park, an adult can label this emotion by saying, “It looks like you are upset about leaving the park. Are you upset? Would you like to tell me why you are upset about leaving?” After pausing to see if the child responds, the parent could continue, “I am upset about leaving the park. I like playing here with you. We need to go now because it’s dinnertime. If the weather is nice tomorrow, we can come back.”

- Brainstorm with parents some strategies for teaching children problem solving skills so they learn to come up with alternative solutions to situations that arise. For example, a parent might ask a child, “What do you want to quietly play with while we take grandpa to the doctor’s office?” Such questions help children consider variables like, “This toy makes music, so I can’t bring it.” Another useful strategy is a four-step problem solving process (CSEFEL 2013), in which parents ask their children to consider the following: (1) What is the problem?; (2) Think, think, think of some solutions; (3) What would happen if we tried the solution? Would it be fair? Would it be safe? How would everyone feel?; and (4) Give the solution a try! Through this process, children learn to problem solve with guidance and support.
- Encourage parents to use “First . . . , then . . .” statements to communicate their expectations and to help children learn to wait patiently for preferred activities. For instance, a parent might say, “First you need to put the books on the shelf, and then you can play outside.”

## Individualized strategies

Even with preventative strategies in place and efforts made to teach new skills, there will still be times when transitions are challenging for some children. By learning about the specific situations that remain difficult, early childhood educators can provide parents with individualized suggestions. For example, if a child regularly has trouble with the transition from school to the car during pickup time, a teacher might give the child clear directions in the presence of the parent, describing to the child exactly what behaviors she expects to see as they walk to the car (“Shannon, I need to see walking feet and gentle hands as we walk to the car with Mom.”). Early childhood educators also might model transition behaviors for the child while the parent is present (“Shannon, watch me walk to the cubbies, take out your backpack, and help you put it on to go home.”).

Preventative strategies and new skills might not work well if parents have a hard time remaining warm and supportive when their children act out. The importance of remaining calm during difficult transitions cannot be overemphasized. Educators can offer suggestions to parents about how to develop their own cooldown strategies during stressful times (such as counting to 10 and visualizing a calming place). Educators can also help parents learn to redirect their children as a way to defuse a difficult transition.

For example, as Cameron begins fussing about not wanting to take off his new snow boots, Ms. Annette might say, “We got some new fish in the fish tank today; we’ll go check them out as soon as your boots are off.”

## Supporting parents

Some parents may seek support from educators or ask questions about a particular incident or transition, while other parents may have difficulty with multiple transitions. It is critical that educators consider which strategies best meet parents’ unique needs. While educators should model for parents when opportunities arise, educators should also plan for less stressful learning opportunities during which they problem solve with parents. Some suggestions for sharing ideas with parents follow.

## Parent workshops

Parent workshops can provide wonderful learning opportunities on creating successful transitions, while also allowing parents to see that they are not alone. During group workshops, early educators can cover topics such as preventative strategies, how to teach children the necessary skills to be successful during transitions, and how to manage challenging behavior during transitions (for example, see CSEFEL Parent Training Modules at [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training\\_modules.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training_modules.html)). During parent workshops, educators can demonstrate strategies for parents, role-play, and share information regarding how school transitions are structured. Videos of difficult transitions could be used as a foundation for collaboratively developing solutions. (For example, a video showing a transition using a timer can be found at [vimeo.com/194715303](https://vimeo.com/194715303), while a video depicting transition cues can be viewed at [vimeo.com/194715224](https://vimeo.com/194715224). For even more video examples, visit <https://bit.ly/2JDYBz2>.)

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## Home communication

Proactively communicating with parents about transitions is another strategy that early childhood educators can use to maintain positive connections between school and home. For example, a monthly newsletter with transition tips can be sent home to parents, or weekly transition ideas can be inserted into a classroom newsletter. Additionally, communication logs can be created for individual children. These logs go between home

and school as a method of sharing information with parents who would like support or suggestions for specific transitions. This provides an opportunity for educators and parents to learn about which strategies are successful at school and home, generate ideas for individual children, and examine challenges that continue to occur.

## Observations and modeling

If children are struggling with transition times, parents can observe educators modeling strategies during classroom transitions. Some parents may benefit from paying attention to the expectations and directions teachers provide and then watching how their children react during the transition. This sort of modeling could be done while a parent is volunteering in the classroom, on a field trip with the class, or attending a parent night. Additionally, some parents might benefit from educators coaching them as they learn new strategies for supporting their children during difficult transitions. This might involve educators sharing detailed information on steps to follow when preparing for a transition, as well as performance-based feedback on what worked well and what a parent might do differently next time.

## Conclusion

When early childhood educators and family members collaborate to support children who struggle with transitions, everyone benefits. Teachers and parents should communicate about their difficulties with transitions to determine possible solutions, like Ms. Ann does with Teresa in this closing vignette.

A few days after Teresa asks Ms. Ann for help making transitions easier for Lily, Ms. Ann shares a few strategies she uses in the classroom when challenging behaviors arise. She suggests three strategies: trying “First ..., then ...” statements to establish expectations, modeling emotion words so Lily can talk about her feelings, and helping Lily think about what might make her feel better.

Teresa thanks Ms. Ann and decides to try these strategies at the library that evening. “First we will go to story time at the library, then we will drive home to eat dinner,” Teresa says to Lily as they get ready to go to the library. After story time, Teresa reminds Lily that it is time to go home for dinner. Lily starts to become upset, and Teresa worries that she’s going to have another tantrum. Remembering Ms. Ann’s advice, she asks, “Are you sad we have to leave the library? Can you tell me why you’re sad?” Lily says she wants more story time. Teresa asks her if she would like to do story time at home. She explains that they can borrow the same book that they just heard during story time and read it over and over at home. Lily nods enthusiastically. Together, they take the book to the library checkout desk, calm and happy.

## Transition Resources

### Routines and schedules

From the TACSEI Backpack Connection Series:

- “How to Help Your Child Have a Successful Morning”  
[http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection\\_routines\\_morning.pdf](http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection_routines_morning.pdf)
- “How to Help Your Child Have a Successful Bedtime”  
[http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection\\_routines\\_bedtime.pdf](http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection_routines_bedtime.pdf)
- “How to Use Visual Schedules to Help Your Child Understand Expectations”  
[http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection\\_routines\\_visual-schedules.pdf](http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection_routines_visual-schedules.pdf)

- “How to Help Your Child Transition Smoothly Between Places and Activities”

[http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection\\_routines\\_transitions.pdf](http://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection_routines_transitions.pdf)

From ZERO TO THREE:

- “Creating Routines for Love and Learning”  
[www.zerotothree.org/resources/223-creating-routines-for-love-and-learning](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/223-creating-routines-for-love-and-learning)

### **Encouragement for successful transitions**

From The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning:

- “Some Starters for Giving Positive Feedback and Encouragement”  
<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules-archive/module1/handouts/3.pdf>

## References

Artman-Meeker, K., & K. Kinder. 2014. “Moving Right Along: Planning Transitions to Prevent Challenging Behavior.” Front Porch Series Broadcast Calls. Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. Video. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/planning-transitions-prevent-challen....>

Bezdek, J., J.A. Summers, & A. Turnbull. 2010. “Professionals’ Attitudes on Partnering with Families of Children and Youth with Disabilities.” *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 45 (3): 356–65.

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. 2013. “Module 3a, Individualized Intensive Interventions: Determining the Meaning of Challenging Behavior.” [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training\\_preschool.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/training_preschool.html).