

SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS BOTH BIG AND SMALL

Infants and toddlers experience transitions every day. Some transitions are small, like going from playtime to lunch or from nap to a diaper change. Other transitions are big, like starting in a new program or welcoming a new sibling. Whatever the size of the transition, young children need caring adults to support them through it. Three keys to successful transitions are: caring relationships, consistent routines, and flexibility that meets the needs of each child.

THE TAKE HOME

1. Children's individual differences affect how they respond to transitions.
2. Families that understand child development can better tailor their support to the child's needs during transitions.
3. Supportive environments with familiar, consistent routines can help infants and toddlers handle transitions.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

- **A child's temperament and developmental level will affect how they respond to transitions.** Some children adjust easily to change. Other children may need more adult support. How young children express their emotions and behaviors will vary based on their stage of development. Adults who understand child development can better adapt their support to the specific needs of the child during transitions.
- **Caring relationships act as a buffer during transitions.** Infants and toddlers who receive responsive caregiving from adults learn to trust them and they gain emotional security. They learn they can count on those adults to support them through transitions big and small. This helps them be more receptive to the transitions.
- **During transitions, it's common for infants and toddlers to act in ways that adults may find challenging. Remember, children's behavior has meaning.** They use their behavior to communicate. But their communication and self-control skills are still developing.



- **It's even harder for infants and toddlers to regulate their emotions when things are changing.** As they develop, children begin to understand and control their emotions and behaviors. But, they still need adult support to learn how to handle transitions. Extra help is also important for children with disabilities or suspected delays, who may have challenges communicating their emotions or processing change due to the nature of their disability or delay.
- **Infants and toddlers do best in predictable environments.** Familiar routines around daily transitions teach children what to expect and boost self-confidence. When children know what to expect, it's easier for them to practice regulating their emotions and behaviors.
- **Even when children know what to expect, transitions can be hard.** Some transitions occur at a time of day when children are hungry or tired. Or, the transition might involve many steps that a child doesn't have the memory skills to carry out. This is why routines and support from caring adults are so important. For big transitions, children and families are better able to adjust to change when supportive practices, like routines, are already in place.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- How infants and toddlers respond to transitions depends on the individual child. Temperament, developmental level, and past experience all play a role. One infant might smile as they transition from one adult to another adult's arms. Another infant might immediately begin to cry. For some children, it can be helpful to rehearse or talk about what a bigger transition might look and feel like. Other children might run (or crawl!) full speed into the change.
- Relationships act as a buffer to stress. Young children need responsive adults to help them regulate their emotions and behaviors. For example, at first, babies are unable to soothe themselves on their own. They need an adult to help. When children are in responsive relationships with caring adults, they learn, "I know that person and they know me. I can count on them to be there even when things change."
- Big transitions are part of all infants' and toddlers' development. Caregivers move away. Families change homes. Children transition into new programs. A family welcomes a new baby. A parent transitions their infant from using a bottle or wearing diapers.
- Big and small transitions affect children in different ways. Keep in mind, transitions — especially big ones — affect families, too, and so the families may need support through these transitions along with the child.
- Many of the daily transitions infants and toddlers experience are predictable and occur in a familiar sequence. An example is putting shoes on before heading outside or changing a diaper after naptime. Other daily transitions are unpredictable, such as an unexpected trip to the doctor or a visit to the home by an unfamiliar person.
- Having consistency in caregiver actions and routines teach children what to expect. Reminders, including visual schedules, can help them prepare for what comes next. Consistency is especially important for children with disabilities or suspected delays and children who are dual language learners, as they may be unable to rely on language cues alone.



TRY THIS!

- Talk with families about their daily routine. Start the day with a preview of what the day will look like for the child. A visual schedule with pictures of the day's activities can help young children and children with disabilities or suspected delays to understand the day's routine. Be sure to talk about anything that will be different from a typical day.
- Be flexible with the daily routines you've created, to take into account the individual needs of the child.
- Encourage families to provide more time or extra reminders to help young children learn new routines and practice transitions.

- Model a first/then strategy for families to let infants and toddlers know when a transition is coming. For example, you might say, “First, we’ll put on your shoes and coat, then we’ll head outside.” For infants, use a soothing voice to talk about what you’re doing and what comes next. For toddlers, a little warning gives them time to mentally prepare.
- Share the [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework \(ELOF\)](#) with families. The ELOF is a wonderful guide for understanding child development that can help families better support their child through transitions and beyond. Use the [ELOF2GO@Home](#) mobile app to access effective teaching practices while on the go for home visits.
- Connect families to program services or resources to help them prepare for and adjust to big transitions.
- Discuss the importance of preparing for smaller transitions, too, such as transitioning from a bottle to soft foods or beginning potty training. To help both children and families adjust, have in place supportive practices that align with a family’s culture and beliefs.
- Help families think in advance about the different ways children may respond to small and big transitions. Together, make a plan for how to respond across different scenarios. Talk about how their child’s reactions and their own responses will change based on their child’s development.
- For children transitioning to a new program, encourage families to visit the space ahead of time if they are able.
- Be a model for families by engaging in warm, supportive interactions with their infants and toddlers. Encourage families to let their child know they are there for them, even when there is change.
- Help families feel supported and ready about upcoming transitions. Young children take cues from their families. If families feel relaxed, young children are more likely to, also.
- Explain the importance of visual cues for upcoming transitions. For example, if nap time comes after reading books, show them their crib. Visual cues can be especially helpful for children with a disability or suspected delay or for children who are dual language learners.
- Encourage families to focus on the positive. Praise children when things go well during transitions. Provide examples of how families can be specific in their praise, such as, “You were patient while I got your bottle ready” or “I like how you cleaned up by putting your toys in the basket.”

LEARN MORE

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework>

Supporting Transitions for Children and Families

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/supporting-transitions-children-families>

Supporting Transitions: Resources for Building Collaboration

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/transitions/article/supporting-transitions-resources-building-collaboration>

Transition Tips for Reopening Infant/Toddler Programs

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/coronavirus/transition-tips-reopening-infanttoddler-programs>



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TALK ABOUT IT

Talk to your child about small and big transitions. This kind of talk can teach children, even infants, what to expect over time. You might provide a verbal warning that a small transition is coming: "We need to clean up in 5 minutes. First, we'll clean up, then we'll wash our hands before lunch." One reminder might be enough, but other children may need additional warnings. For bigger transitions, talk about what will happen and when. Describe what will be the same and what will be different. You'll likely need to talk about the transition on many occasions. How and when you talk about the transition will depend on your child's temperament and developmental level.

USE TRANSITION OBJECTS

A transition object is something that the child can hold and obtain comfort from. You might offer your child a toy to hold in their car seat, during diaper changes, or bath time. Offer a favorite blanket or stuffed animal as you snuggle or read before they head for a nap or bedtime. Let them pick out a special object to use only during the specific transition.

ADD VISUALS

Sometimes talking about a transition isn't enough. Children need to experience or see what will happen. For daily transitions, find pictures or symbols that represent transition activities. You can color them together or print out images you find on the computer. Hang the pictures up to point to each day when preparing for each transition. For bigger transitions like starting in a new program, visit the site with your child if you are able. Before welcoming a new sibling, give your child a baby doll and encourage the child to feed it or be gentle with it. Books also offer visuals that can help with transitions. They can help young children see and learn more about what the transition might look like and how other children or characters have experienced them.

PLAY A SONG

Add music to your routine. Songs can be a great cue to signal that a transition is coming. Select an upbeat song when you want to add some fun to clean up time or a soothing song when you're transitioning to nap time. Or make up your own song! Adapt the words from a familiar tune to match the transition.

