

Helping Your Child Handle Transitions and Sudden Change



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Does your kid have trouble making transitions at school, for instance when it's time to come in from recess or to switch subjects? Does he or she melt down at home when you announce a sudden change in plans? If so, your youngster may feel too precariously balanced to handle confidently the minor disruptions and challenges of a normal day. You can tackle this problem and solve it.

To understand the problem, think about your own routine. How do you react when you get into your car, ready to head off to work, and find the battery dead? Or when a traffic jam on the highway makes you late for an important meeting? Suppose life sends you a curve ball in some other department and you are aware that, at least for the moment, you have lost control?

If you're like me, you feel irritated and slightly off kilter, eager to right the balance and shake off any lingering feeling of unease. Long experience has left you and me able to cope with minor anxiety and right ourselves on automatic pilot at least some of the time. Generally we find new ways of asserting control or reassure ourselves that the problem is no big deal (or we use a combination of the two techniques).

Young children, who have yet to learn basic coping skills in this area, usually feel more secure when there is lots of structure in their daily lives. By "structure," school staff and mental health professionals mean a fairly stable and predictable routine, so that the child knows what's about to happen most of the time.

If your child's pediatrician or the school social worker has suggested that your child needs more structure, you may be quaking in your running shoes. You shudder at the thought of punching a clock from daybreak to curtain time, delivering meals on an inflexible schedule and programming your family as

rigidly as if daily life were a conveyor belt. But structure does not have to make you a mechanical mom or dad. Here's how it can work.

You can help your child anticipate what lies ahead in the next few hours, days, and weeks using a few visual aids: a big wall calendar that shows a month at a time, a portable planner with a page for each day and perhaps also one for the week, and a white board with an erasable marker. Visual aids are preferable to talk because people remember things they have seen better than things they have only heard.

Carry the planner with you in your daily travels. Use it to note appointments, remind yourself (and your child) of things to do, and record last-minute developments that will need to be transcribed later onto the white board or the wall calendar.

The white board will become your child's daily agenda. On it you can note homework, laundry folding, and room cleaning, to take just a few examples, and you can invite your child to add to the list anything he or she would like to accomplish. The erasable marker should stay handy so that you or your child can cross things off the list as they are done. The two of you will want to review the list at least twice a day, once in the morning, to see what tasks need to happen, and once in the evening, to take stock of progress made.

The agenda allows your child to keep track of chores and projects. It also provides an organizing tool that will last a lifetime. Perhaps best of all, as kids learn how to pace themselves, the agenda offers a ready-made opportunity to take pride in work done. Good mental health demands that all of us stop from time to time so that we can reflect on our efforts and celebrate our accomplishments.

The wall calendar can record all of the events affecting your child on a month-by-month basis. Here you can see at a glance doctors' appointments, school events, karate and piano lessons, visits with relatives, holidays, deadlines for longer-term school projects, Scout meetings, the start of camp, and so forth. The calendar is probably most useful when you consult it daily, but it is essential for you to review it with your child at the start and end of each week.

As the two of you look at the calendar together, for instance, you might remind your child that this week there will be a visit to the dentist, a trip to the amusement park, and early dismissal on Thursday because the teachers are having a work day. You can also use the calendar to review and discuss the week just past—the science report that got turned in on time, the noise and mess of roof repairs now behind you, or the awful weekend with Aunt Nell, who insists on having breakfast in bed.

Each day on the monthly calendar can become the starting point for the daily agenda, which will draw on information in your portable planner. By using all three tools, you will be able to help your child prepare mentally for today, tomorrow, and the month ahead. You can also note on the calendar incidents—migraines, tantrums, or just when the lawn got mowed—that you’d like to track for further discussion.

Some of the same sorts of tactics can help you prepare your child for transitions from one hour to the next. So for instance you might pass your child engrossed in fighting the war of the worlds on a PlayStation 2, and you would say, “Looks like you are having a great game! I just need to remind you that you have an hour left before we go to the grocery store.” At the half-hour mark you might say, “Good work with that puzzle. We will be going to the grocery store in half an hour.” Closer to departure time, you could say, “It’s time now for you to put on your shoes and go to the bathroom, because we’re leaving for the grocery store in ten minutes.”

Some children have powers of concentration so intense that they experience discomfort when they must break away from a favorite activity. If your child is one of these, you may need to do some advance contracting. You might say, “I’d be happy to turn on the computer for you but only on one condition. You can play with it for an hour, but you need to be willing to shut it off the moment I say it’s time. Do we have a deal?” You can also explain, of course, that there will be no computer time tomorrow if your child doesn’t honor the agreement today.

You can share these techniques with staff at school and in after-school programs. Team up with the teachers to understand your child’s unique learning style and coping patterns. Doing so will help you add to your child’s successes and promote confidence and mastery.

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