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Navigating tough transitions

Kim Waldie

When we think about the word transition, many descriptors come to mind. Rocky transition. Transition time. Transition process.

Even the descriptors sound unpleasant!

In the article "Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI): A Systemic Approach to Complex Developmental Trauma," Drs. Karyn Purvis and David Cross write about three types of transitions that are especially difficult for children from hard places:

- **Daily transitions.** These are common, daily transitions such as getting a child into bed or putting down a video game.
- **Major life transitions.** These transitions include starting in a new school or moving to a new house.
- **Developmental transitions.** These are the transitions that come to all kids developmentally like changing from infant to toddler or child to teenager.

What's the problem?

For kids, daily transition can mean having to cope with unexpected interruptions to otherwise enjoyable activities or even activities they're simply more comfortable doing. Few of us naturally like changing to things that make us uncomfortable (Martinelli, 2019). Drs. Purvis and Cross, in their book "The Connected Child," speak of the challenge of moving a child from a comfortable, rewarding activity: "Her brain is awash in excitatory neurotransmitters, and she can't easily put the brakes on." The unexpected, abrupt start and stop of activity can cause a child to lose their ability to self-

regulate, and once they lose it, it can be difficult to regain.

Transitions can also be life transitions. When you have a history of losing things or people you love, this is where fear creeps in. Bryan Post, in his book "The Great Behavior Breakdown," writes, "Transition is one of the most difficult areas that children struggle with, and they immediately revert to their fear barrier." When big transitions happen, children can unconsciously be returned to that place (or just that feeling) from the past. For parents, it's imperative to remember perception is reality for our children. Many kids revert to a younger, emotional age during times of transitions.

Developmental transitions are inevitable, so each stage of development means a reprocessing of the past, present, and future. It doesn't mean our past attempts to help our kids heal were a failure. It just means this new season requires deeper understanding and new tools to help them.

What can I do?

- **Prepare.** This is simple, but I can't tell you how many times I've forgotten to do this! Abruptly interrupting them and expecting instant obedience is a recipe for disaster. For the very transition-resistant child, Dr. Ross Greene, in his book "The Explosive Child," suggests increasing the transitional reminders and the time it takes for transition to happen. If we forget to give our kids time for their brains to catch up with what we're asking, things can easily fall apart. Here are some practical ways to do this:
 - Post visual reminders of new schedules and weekly calendars.
 - Make sure you have eye contact and connection before

"The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old but on building the new"

— Socrates

giving instructions (Martinelli, 2019).

- Charts, timers, or songs can be useful tools to help make the transition less threatening.
- Make the most of technology to help create colorful lists or schedules (e.g., Visual Schedule Planner app).
- **Practice.** I once heard a trainer say, "The brain remembers best what it does." Children need to practice healthy transitions when they're regulated. If we haven't practiced this skill or invested in trust-building connections, their brains won't have what they need to push through when fear sets in. Practice transitions as fun family exercises with as much humor and excitement as possible. Reward their positive transitions during this practice time in creative ways. For kids with sensory processing disorder, consider slowing down the transitions and breaking them down into manageable pieces.
- **Plan.** As parents, we have the unique task of coaching our kids in how to regulate their emotions and fears. To do that, they need a workable plan. Talk with your child about what tools they need to be successful. And when they're struggling, coach them in how to use those tools to deal with disappointment, fear, or discomfort.
- **Predict.** In the scary face of transition or change, hold on to whatever family routines you can to keep your child feeling safe. With the busy schedule of activities that school brings, it's easy to overlook normal family rituals that are important to a child already struggling with safety. If your family needs an evening of ice cream together once a week to stay healthy, stock up on lots of ice cream! If your child needs an extra hug each morning before they leave the house, make a point not to miss this opportunity. Create rituals within your transitions.

Whatever you do, ride the wave of transition knowing this transition time, like everything else, won't last forever.

Green, R. (2014) *The Explosive Child*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Martinelli, K. (2019, June) *How Can We Help Kids with Transitions?* Retrieved from <http://childmind.org/article/how-can-we-help-kids-with-transitions>.

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Traverse City, MI 49686
231-995-0870

bethany.org/traversecity

parctc@bethany.org

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Bethany Christian Services
175 W Apple Ave
Muskegon, MI 49440
231-924-3390

bethany.org/muskegon

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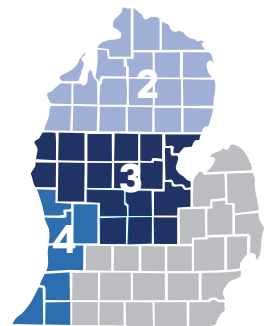
Bethany Christian Services
901 Eastern Ave NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
616-224-7565

bethany.org/grandrapids

parcgr@bethany.org

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