



Transitions

When we talk about “transitions”, we mean when a child or a group of children is/are expected to shift from one activity to another. Some examples would be: finishing playtime to come to the dinner table, cleaning up a craft activity to get ready to go outside or for a car ride

Why are transitions so hard for toddlers and preschool aged children?

Young children do not have fully developed executive functioning skills. This means that their brains do not yet have the capacity for judgement, flexible thinking, planning, organization, or self-control. They see the world through their own lens and it’s difficult for them to understand the perspective of others. Basically, they are very much living in the moment! When they are engrossed in an activity, they can become oblivious to the world around them so that their little brains can really focus on what they are trying to learn.

They have a natural instinct to oppose coercion. This is why we often hear a resounding “NO!” from the young people in our lives so often. This instinct is in all humans, no matter what age. As adults we can feel this when someone tells us what to do, think, or feel. This actually serves an important function – to protect ourselves when facing separation. But if children are designed to be directed by people they are attached to, then why don’t they listen to their parents? The answer is often because our “have to’s” have become greater than our child’s “want to’s”. This can also be a result of their immaturity (which is normal!), or their attachment to their parents.

What can we do to make transitions easier?

1. **When possible, give children the opportunity to mentally prepare for a transition** by giving them a warning. Often young children do not understand the concept of time, so using a tangible measure such as “Five more swings”, “finish building two more towers”, is usually better understood than a 5-minute warning. You could also try audible timers or visual timers.
2. **Use “first, then” statements** for the most difficult transitions – this can motivate the child to first finish a less-preferred activity, knowing that a more preferred activity will follow. (Eg: “first boots, then outside”). Ask Sundrops staff for a “First, Then” package for more information and visuals
3. **Come Alongside your child** – before directing your child to move on, try gently entering into their space. Comment on the castle they are building, ask a few questions about it, and then let them know it will soon be time to finish up their play.
4. **Use visuals** – draw pictures of your schedule for the day on a white board, a piece of paper, or ask Sundrops staff if they have a visual calendar for you to try. We all like to know what is coming up next in our day.

References

MacNamara, D. & Neufeld, G (2016). Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one). Vancouver: Aona Books.