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Supporting Transitions for School-Aged Children

There are a variety of transitions that young people experience on a daily basis, such as entry into school, recess, lunch, leaving after school, dinner, and bedtime. Other larger, more impactful transitions are weekends to weekdays and weekdays to weekends, school year start-up, Winter Break, Spring Break, the end of the school year, and a change to a new school, like from elementary to secondary school.

What all of these various types and degrees of transitions have in common is that they all can be anxiety-inducing, and some to a very significant degree. Transitions—however big or small—cause some degree of anxiety for almost everyone. This is true for both adults and children. After all, psychologists say that one of the biggest stressors in life is **change**.

As a result, it is vital to ensure smooth transitions for children as this can be a key ingredient to supporting any individual's successful day at home or school. This article briefly unpacks the experience of transitions for young people and how we can mitigate their effects.

Most people thrive in structured and predictable environments and situations because this makes us feel safe. In contrast, transitions disrupt our equilibrium—decreasing our perception of safety and, at the same time, increasing our sense of danger. This disruption can occur with even the smallest transition or most (seemingly) insignificant change in routine. Moreover, a sense of danger can be amplified if a setting event has taken place.

The key to success, therefore, is to embed structure and predictability within the transitions themselves. Here is how:

1. Avoid unnecessary or arbitrary transitions; schedule as few transitions as possible into a young person's day.
2. Be mindful of and careful around transitions from a preferred activity to a non-preferred activity. Try to replicate elements of the preferred activity within the non-preferred activity. Reduce expectations around the non-preferred activity.
3. Watch for signs of escalation—verbal and nonverbal. Respond accordingly by disengaging, if necessary. A transition may not be absolutely necessary right at this particular time.
4. Prepare the child by frontloading as thoroughly as possible, for example, by using a countdown strip, timer, visual schedule, pictures, etc. Be very consistent with their use. High fidelity to what works is very important.
5. Teach explicit communication skills around identifying anxiety—individuals benefit from being able to indicate to others when they are feeling anxious so that we can support them through it.
6. Provide a break between activities, like a short walk or hand-washing, if needed. Explicit transition bridging activities, such as a song or a rhyme said aloud while tidying up at the end of an activity, can turn a transition (scary) into a routine (safe)!
7. Invite the child to hold a preferred object, such as a favourite stuffy or glitter wand, through the transition. This will help to ground and comfort the student.
8. Time does not matter. It is ok for an individual to navigate the transition at a slow pace.
9. Praise for all successful transitions. Celebrate all gains.

Stress-reduction should be the foremost consideration when planning transitions. In addition to preparing an explicit sequence of events around transitions, being mindful of the child's perspective and feelings of uncertainty and insecurity through a transition can help to increase the likelihood of a successful and smooth day for all involved. Happy planning!

The Inclusive Education Committee consists of parents, self-advocates, Richmond School District educators and Aspire staff. Our responsibilities include promoting opportunities and materials for inclusive educational practices benefiting families, educators and students as well as making recommendations to the Aspire Board for advocacy related to public education issues and changes that affect students with developmental disabilities.