

# Ask A School Psychologist: How Can I Help My Child Prepare For Transitions?

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The key to successful transitions is planning and preparation

It's that time of the year again when we need to start thinking about what's coming next for our children in school. Some children will be starting Kindergarten, starting Junior High or High School, or moving to a new school or class. These changes can lead to a mix of excitement and worry about what will happen in the future. For most students, these feelings are expected and manageable with some thought. For others, these feelings can be debilitating in the present and jeopardize the ease of the new beginning.

Parents, in collaboration with teachers, can help students make smoother transitions. The key to successful transitions is planning and preparation.

## Know your child

As a parent, you know your child best and will be able to recognize signs that indicate how your child will react to a transition. Providing the appropriate level of support when signs are present that your child may have more significant trouble in adapting to a transition will help to ensure a positive outcome. You can get clues if a big transition will be more or less difficult for your child by the way they handle transitions on a day-to-day basis. Some children will show a mix of expected emotions; some will show more significant emotions.

## Transition strategies: A response to intervention framework

In the previous two issues, we have presented the Response To Intervention (RTI) framework regarding academic achievement and intervention. This framework can also be applied to identifying the appropriate level of intervention to prepare a student for transitions.

## Universal strategies

All students will benefit from initial planning and preparation. Your child will be curious about the upcoming change.

In preparation for a transition, all students will benefit from these universal strategies:

- Read or view information about the new program.
- Attend information sessions at the new program.
- Ask your child if they have any particular questions or concerns and try to answer them.
- Ask your child how they feel about the upcoming transition.

- Encourage your child to let others know about the upcoming change (e.g. talking to grandparents, sharing with friends, talking with teachers).

### Targeted strategies

Some students will show more worry and a moderate level of concern about the upcoming transition. Rather than dismiss these concerns, it is important to make a bit more effort and time to help your child make a smooth transition.

Here are some targeted strategies that may help ease the transition in addition to the universal strategies:

- Visit the new setting.
- Meet some of the instructors or students that will be at the new setting.
- Ask your child what they are most worried about and try to allay that fear:
- If your child is worried about riding the bus to a new location, take some practice rides together.
- If your child is concerned they won't know anybody, try to set up an opportunity to meet with other students.
- If your child is concerned about making friends, take them to other sports or arts groups in the community to practice those skills.
- Ask your child to write down questions they want answered to help them feel better about the transition.

### Specialized strategies

Even after providing universal and targeted strategies, a small number of children will have significant problems with transitions. These children will tend to have difficulty adapting to changes in their daily lives and will have a 'Fight, Flight or Freeze' response in the face of a significant change, and fears that are out of proportion to the upcoming change.

In addition to the universal and targeted strategies, for these students, it will be important to create an individualized transition plan:

- Make a transition plan with the teachers at the current setting.
- Talk with the new teachers about your child's specific needs.
- The transition may need to be broken down into steps:
- Start with a number of visits to the new setting with a familiar adult.
- Leave the child alone at the new setting for a short amount of time.
- Increase the amount of time the child is on their own in the new setting.

- Help your child feel some control over the situation by allowing them to make choices when possible (e.g. what courses to choose, what day they will start, what they will wear, a small comfort object they can bring along).
- Role-play meeting the new teacher or students.
- Develop a visual narrative (Social Story™) that introduces key people and provides information on their new experience.
- Counseling may help a highly anxious student to learn strategies to deal with transition fears more proactively.

No matter what, planning and preparation will help your child feel more prepared to make any transition. This can make the difference for a successful beginning to a new chapter in your child's life, limit the time to settle in to a new routine and start to realize the benefits that a new setting may bring.

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