

**TAKE A  
BATH**

**BRUSH  
TEETH**

# **SMOOTHING OFF THE ROUGH EDGES OF TRANSITIONS**

Does your child tantrum every time he transitions from one activity to the next? Does he struggle any time you pull him away from an activity to get in the car? Is getting your child to the dinner table an ordeal?

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**USE THE  
POTTY**

**PUT ON  
PAJAMAS**

**READ  
A BOOK**

When children are made aware not only that they must stop doing something they like, but also that the next activity can be just as fun, they are less likely to melt down.

## Provide Transition Cues

Why are transitions so difficult for children who have autism and sensory challenges? Many children do not understand the concept of time or do not comprehend to what or to where they are being transitioned. A child with sensory issues whose life is planned in advance is much more likely to respond well to transitions of all sorts. Providing a two-minute warning might be helpful—but only if your child understands the meaning. Another trick is dimming the lights to get the child's attention or using a visual schedule, which provides instructions in pictures for what is about to happen. You can have your child mark off each step of the schedule so he knows what will happen next. This gives him the feeling of participation in the process. Take a photo of your child doing what is fun for him: eating an ice cream cone, playing at the park, reading a book on your lap, or playing with the dog in the backyard. Then print the photos and laminate them. Store this stack of photos related to what your child likes in a special place.

First → then visual illustrations representing situations can be helpful. For example:

- First clean up your toys → then we eat dinner.
- First get your backpack → then we walk to the car.
- First take a bath → then we read a book.

Children (and adults!) generally do better when they know what to expect! When children are made aware not only that they must stop doing something they like, but also that the next activity can be just as fun, they are less likely to melt down.

## Transitioning to Less Preferred Activities

Even more difficult is getting a child away from his favorite activity to do something that is not as fun. How can

you motivate your child to make this transition without melting down?

A child may not like school: It's overwhelming, he does not have many friends, and a variety of sensory challenges exist. When you say it's time to get ready for school, your child may have a tantrum or refuse to get dressed. To achieve the desired result, increase the child's internal motivation with an incentive (e.g., a sticker chart, reward system, time with you). For example, if the child gets dressed before the timer runs out, then he can play a game with mom before going to school.

The reward must be exciting for the child to want to participate. Most often we find that special time alone with mom or dad is the best reward for young children. An older child might work toward earning pennies in a jar or stars on his reward chart. Very young children need an immediate reward and cannot grasp the concept of waiting three days to go get ice cream with daddy if they get dressed right now.

## Transitioning to Sleep

Many parents are worried about their child's sleep habits. Getting ready for bed and sleeping is a major transition. Many aspects of your child's sleep routine are so important—your child needs the right kind and amount of sleep, and so do you! Children with sensory challenges often need more sleep than other children because their brains and bodies are working hard; they may need 10 to 12 hours a night. So make sure to plan your evening around a calm extended time for preparing for and then getting your child to bed. It's worth the time to plan a standard routine. Then in a repetitive manner, execute the same plan every night. The old adage "plan the work and work the plan" is worth remembering.

Use a 5-step plan for bedtime that is the same *every* night. Follow a visual schedule if possible. (Take photos or draw each step so the child knows what to expect.) Be consistent with the sequence of activities.

## Helpful Hints for Sleep Success

- Plan for 30 uninterrupted minutes, focusing only on the bedtime routine. (You and your partner may take turns, so you can focus on each of your children separately.)
- Make sure *you* are calm before starting the bedtime process. Try to get some minutes alone to take a few breaths and regulate yourself.
- Avoid putting on pajamas too early in the evening; children should be cued by pajamas to think of "sleep clothes," not play clothes.
- Try to have your child sleep in his own bed so he gets the full amount of rest and you do as well. It is essential that parents who are dealing with many stressors get adequate rest to tackle each day!

For example,

Step 1: Take a bath.

Step 2: Brush teeth.

Step 3: Use the potty.

Step 4: Put on pajamas.

Step 5: Read a book (sing a song, tell a story).

Provide calming sensory activities as part of the bedtime routine, focusing on the child's basic sensory systems. For example,

**Taste:** Provide a warm cup of milk.

**Touch:** Take a really warm bath with a nice towel rubdown afterward. Massage your child with mild or unscented lotion using deep pressure.

**Sight:** Dim the lights in the room.

**Sound:** Turn on white noise or soothing music.

It has been such a pleasure communicating with you about sensory solutions for your children over the last two years. Of all the messages and advice we have to offer to conclude our column, we hope you will remember one above all else: Be good to yourself! You are your child's most important gift! ■

Warm regards, Lucy and Britt