

# Teacher Toolbox



## Teacher Toolbox – October 2024

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### **Transition Tips:** *Strategic Supports for Smoother Switching*



Let's be honest... transitions are TOUGH! From the moment we wake up until we lay down our heads at night, we all are faced with countless transitions. Some transitions require switching thoughts between tasks, while others involve switching the place or even the people within the environment. One may wonder, how many transitions do students encounter in their average day... 10? 20? 50? More likely, the frequency numbers in the hundreds. In the school setting, students transition from the school bus to the playground – to lining up with their class – to entering the school hallway – to their classroom to put their backpack away – to sitting in a chair and starting on their morning assignment – all within the span of 30 minutes and each of those contexts involving a completely different set of expectations. The length of time transitioning in school also contributes to the transition challenges. Differentiatedteaching.com reports that, "This means that from the moment students enter the middle or high school classroom until they leave, at least a third of their instructional time is spent on moving from place to place within the classroom or between rooms. This means that out of an hour-long class period only 40 minutes are left for learning activities."

Transitions disrupt all staff and students so often that it has become an expected part of classroom culture. However, some of our students with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or specific learning disabilities often experience extreme reactions to moments of transition that others accept as a typical part of their day. Their "Fight-Flight-Freeze" center frequently becomes activated when faced with a transition that they perceive as unexpected or challenging, triggering the dreaded escalation through the crisis cycle resulting in derailing moments, hours, or at times, even the entire day. One autistic individual explains, "*Switching between tasks requires a change in thinking; a change in established routine and the risk of a new uncertain activity, especially when a change is imposed upon me.*"

Strategic steps to smoother switching between tasks, environments, and people all begin with the same foundations and involve creating your own unique classroom culture, such as:

1. **Referring to the posted classroom schedule:** The implementation and consistent use of a variety of schedules are a crucial part of managing transitions throughout the school day. Starting the day by reviewing the whole class schedule of what is expected to happen throughout the day is a worthwhile investment in preparing students. Individual student-specific schedules are an evidence-based practice for autistic students and frequently can

prevent anxiety and unexpected behavior. Students with various needs benefit from schedules that incorporate more specific information than what is usually included in a whole class schedule. See below for information regarding the **NEW Autism Toolbox Series** live-virtual complimentary TAP professional development workshop entitled "**Visual Schedules – DEMYSTIFIED: Dependable Directions Create Calmer Classrooms!**" for a full-day of learning to create and implement a wide variety of visual schedules in all classroom contexts for all ages and developmental levels!

- 2. Gaining students' attention:** The purpose of this step is to get students to stop what they are doing and attend to the person about to give them directions. Educators may consider sounding a gentle chime, a hand gesture such as raising one hand above your head, and/or using a call and response, like "Class-Yes" used in Whole Brain Teaching. The key is teaching the meaning behind the attention signal and what response you are expecting from the students (e.g., stop what you are doing and look at the speaker to get their next directions).
- 3. Preparing the students for endings and beginnings:** This simple step involves giving students a specific and direct statement about what activity is ending and when, followed by which activity is about to happen next. For example, the "ending statement" could sound like "Math will be ending in five minutes." However, this language is sometimes too abstract for some individuals. Multi-sensory cues are necessary for many of our students, such as pointing to a projected timer for those students who need visual supports. The "starting statement" would then follow, such as "Reading buddies will be next."
- 4. Give the direction using simple and direct language and signal the transition:** After regaining the students' attention as needed, give the next set of instructions, such as "When I say go, I want you to quietly put your math notebooks away, get your reading book, and sit beside your reading buddy. Go." Using the visual timer during this moment of task-switching may again be helpful for those who need visual support to help them maintain attention to this transition. Depending on the complexity of the directions, some students may need staff supervision and/or a peer buddy (i.e., additional verbal and visual prompting) to help them follow the directions. Monitor and redirect students as needed, while encouraging calm behaviors.

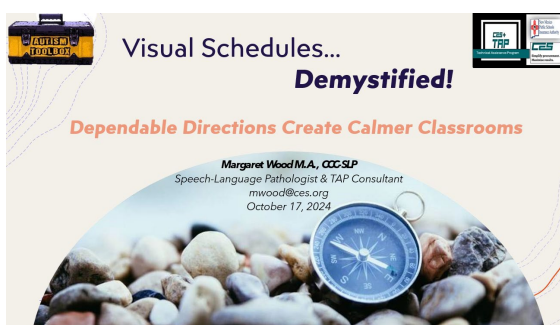
A variety of additional strategies are often necessary for many of our students who process information differently, so consider implementing a few of the following ideas to the above transition routine:

- 1. Visual Timer and Countdowns:** A timer that shows in a different color how much time is left. When the color disappears, the student needs to transition to the next activity. A visual countdown may be used by providing students with a list of tasks that are removed until they are gone, which automatically signals the time to transition. Check out [www.online-stopwatch.com](http://www.online-stopwatch.com) for many useful visual timer and countdown options.
- 5. Student-specific or Task-specific Visual Schedule:** An actual schedule so the student can see the sequence of activities that will occur for a given period (e.g., the morning), enabling them to transition better to the next activity or environmental setting. Here's another

shameless plug for the NEW and COMPLIMENTARY **Autism Toolbox Series** workshop on Thursday October 17<sup>th</sup>! Go to <https://www.ces.org/september-2024-25-technical-assistance-program-updates-and-offerings/> to register for **“Visual Schedules – DEMYSTIFIED: Dependable Directions Create Calmer Classrooms!”** for a full-day of learning to create and implement a wide variety of visual schedules in all classroom contexts for all ages and developmental levels!

2. **Use of Objects, Photos, Icons, or Words:** An actual object or a photo of an image or words the student can hold that explains the transition or provides comfort during anxiety-provoking transitions to a different location. For example, some students experience anxiety as they anticipate the transition to the noisy cafeteria, which can be decreased by providing a small comfort item to hold or keep in their pocket. Other students may choose to use noise cancelling headphones.
3. **Use of Transition Cards:** The card represents what the student will be transitioning to next, with a word spelled out or an image of the transition displayed for the student to refer to. These are very helpful concrete learners.
4. **Finished or “All-done” Container/Box:** It is beneficial to have a container in a certain location where the students can put their finished work and materials before transitioning to the next location or activity. Teaching students to put away materials after completing an activity may also function as a natural queue in which one activity ends and another begins.

As our dear friend, Mr. Rogers once said, *“Transitions are almost always signs of growth, but they can bring feelings of loss. To get somewhere new, we may have to leave somewhere else behind.”* Autistic students have the tendency to become very engaged in the activity that they are doing and feel a sense of loss when they must “leave it behind” before they are finished. It can be hard to “switch gears”, especially when they thrive on consistency and routine. When autistic children are forced to switch gears without support, it can cause extreme stress and anxiety, resulting in loss of control and challenging behaviors. Fostering smoother transitions requires consistent and patient application of strategic supports. This wise investment of your time and energy is sure to produce smoother transitions and a calmer classroom environment for all!



## Resources and References

<https://www.differentiatedteaching.com/>

<https://inclusiveteach.com/2017/07/29/the-ultimate-guide-to-transitions/>

[www.online-stopwatch.com](http://www.online-stopwatch.com)

<https://wholebrainteaching.com/wbt-basics-2/>