



Transition Time: Helping Individuals on the Autism Spectrum Move Successfully from One Activity to Another

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All individuals must change from one activity to another and from one setting to another throughout the day. Whether at home, school, or in the workplace, transitions naturally occur frequently and require individuals to stop an activity, move from one location to another, and begin something new. Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) may have greater difficulty in shifting attention from one task to another or in changes of routine. This may be due to a greater need for predictability (Flannery & Horner, 1994), challenges in understanding what activity will be coming next (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2005), or difficulty when a pattern of behavior is disrupted. A number of supports to assist individuals with ASD during transitions have been designed both to prepare individuals before the transition will occur and to support the individual during the transition. When transition strategies are used, individuals with ASD:

- Reduce the amount of transition time;
- Increase appropriate behavior during transitions;
- Rely less on adult prompting; and
- Participate more successfully in school and community outings.

What are transition strategies?

Transition strategies are techniques used to support individuals with ASD during changes in or disruptions to activities, settings, or routines. The techniques can be used before a transition occurs, during a transition, and/or after a transition, and can be presented verbally, auditorily, or visually. The strategies attempt to increase predictability for individuals on the autism spectrum and to create positive routines around transitions. They are utilized across settings to support individuals with ASD.

Why do we use transition strategies?

Transitions are a large part of any school or work day, as we move to different activities or locations. Studies have indicated that up to 25% of a school day may be spent engaged in transition activities, such as moving from classroom to classroom, coming in from the playground, going to the cafeteria, putting personal items in designated locations like lockers or cubbies, and gathering needed materials to start working (Sainato, Strain, Lefebvre, & Rapp, 1987). Similar requirements for transitions are found in the employment and home setting as well, as individuals move from one task to another, attend functions, and join others for meals and activities.

Some individuals with ASD may have difficulties associated with changes in routine or changes in environments, and may have a need for "sameness" and predictability (Mesibov et al., 2005). These difficulties may eventually hamper one's independence and limit an individual's ability to succeed in community settings. A variety of factors related to ASD may contribute to these difficulties during transitions.

These may include problems in understanding the verbal directives or explanations that a teacher, parent, or employer are providing. When a teacher announces that an activity is finished and provides multi-step directions related to upcoming activities, students with ASD may not comprehend all of the verbal information. Difficulty sequencing information and recognizing relationships between steps of an activity can impact one's ability to transition as well. Individuals also may not recognize the subtle cues leading up to a transition (i.e. students packing up their materials, teachers wrapping up their lecture, co-workers getting their lunches out of the refrigerator) and may not be prepared when it is time to move. Additionally, individuals with ASD are more likely to have restrictive patterns of behaviors (per the diagnostic criteria) that are hard to disrupt, thus creating difficulty at times of transitions. Finally, individuals with ASD may have greater anxiety levels which can impact behavior during times of unpredictability, as some transitions are.

Other factors, not unique to individuals with ASD, may impact transition behavior also. The ongoing activity may be more reinforcing to the individual than the activity he/she is moving to, or a second activity may be more demanding or unattractive to the individual (Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007). The individual may not want to start one activity or may not want to end another. In addition, the attention an individual receives during the transition process may be reinforcing or maintaining the difficult behavior.

Preparation Strategies

Cueing individuals with ASD before a transition is going to take place is also a beneficial strategy. In many settings a simple verbal cue is used to signal an upcoming transition (i.e. "Time for a bath now", "Put your math away", or "Come to the break room for birthday cake"). This may not be the most effective way to signal a transition to individuals with ASD, as verbal information may not be quickly processed or understood. In addition, providing the cue just before the transition is to occur may not be enough time for an individual with ASD to shift attention from one task to the next. Allowing time for the individual with ASD to prepare for the transitions, and providing more salient cues that individuals can refer to as they are getting ready to transition may be more effective. Several visual strategies used to support individuals with ASD in preparation for a transition have been researched and will be discussed.

Visual Timer

It may be helpful for individuals with ASD to "see" how much time remains in an activity before they will be expected to transition to a new location or event. Concepts related to time are fairly abstract (i.e. "You have a few minutes"), often cannot be interpreted literally (i.e. "Just a second" or "We need to go in a minute"), and may be confusing for individuals on the spectrum, especially if time-telling is not a mastered skill. Presenting information related to time visually can assist in making the concepts more meaningful. Research indicated that the use of a visual timer (such as the Time Timer pictured below and available at timetimer.com) helped a student with autism transition successfully from computer time to work time at several points throughout the day (Dettmer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2000). This timer displays a section of red indicating an allotted time. The red section disappears as the allotted time runs out.



Time Timer

Visual Countdown

Another visual transition strategy to use prior to a transition is a visual countdown system. Like the visual timer, a visual countdown allows an individual to “see” how much time is remaining in an activity. The countdown differs, however, because there is no specific time increment used. This tool is beneficial if the timing of the transition needs to be flexible. Team members deciding to use this strategy need to make a countdown tool. This can be numbered or colored squares, as used in the photos below, or any shape or style that is meaningful to the individual. As the transition nears, a team member will take off the top item (i.e. the number 5) so the individual is able to see that only 4 items remain. The team member decides how quickly or slowly to remove the remaining items depending on when the transition will occur. Two minutes may elapse between the removal of number 3 and number 2, while a longer amount of time may elapse before the final number is removed. Once the final item is removed, the individual is taught that it is time to transition.



Visual Countdown

Elements of Visual Schedules

The consistent use of visual schedules with individuals with ASD can assist in successful transitions. Visual schedules can allow individuals to view an upcoming activity, have a better understanding of the sequence of activities that will occur, and increase overall predictability. A number of studies have indicated that visual schedules used in classrooms and home settings can assist in decreasing transition time and challenging behaviors during transitions, as well as increase student independence during transitions (Dettmer et al., 2000).

Use of Objects, Photos, Icons, or Words

Research has indicated that using a visual cue during a transition can decrease challenging behavior and increase following transition demands (Schmit, Alper, Raschke, & Ryndak, 2000). In one study, photo cues were used with a young boy with autism during transitions from one classroom activity to another, from the playground to inside the classroom, and from one room within the school to another (Schmit et al., 2000). At transition times, the staff presented the student with a photo of the location where he would be going. This allowed him to see where he was

expected to go and provided additional predictability in his day. Other formats of information, such as objects, black-line drawings, or written words could be used to provide similar information to individuals. It is helpful for the individual to carry the information with him/her to the assigned location. This allows the individual to continually reference the information about where he/she is headed as the transition occurs. Once arriving at the destination, consider creating a designated "spot" for the individual to place the information, such as an envelope or small box. This indicates to the individual that he/she has arrived at the correct place.

For example, if an individual is a concrete learner handing him an object that represents the area that he will be transitioning to may be most meaningful. If this student is to transition to work with a teacher, staff may hand him a task that will be used during the work time indicating it is time to transition to that location. Another student may be given a photo of the work with teacher area, while a third student may be given a written card that says "teacher". When the student arrives at the teacher area, he may use the task in the activity or place the photo or word card in a designated spot. These cues provide advance notice to an individual and may assist with receptive language (understanding what is being said). Examples of a transition object (a book representing the reading center), a transition photo (picture of the teacher work area and the matching photo located at the teacher table), and a written card (the word "teacher" is given to the student and matched to a corresponding written cue at the teacher area) are below.



Transition Object



Written Word



Transition Photo

Showing a student one piece of visual information at a time during transitions may be helpful for many individuals with ASD. Other individuals may benefit, however, from seeing a sequence of two activities so they can better

predict what will take place during the day. It is important for the team working with the individual to assess how much information is helpful at transition times. A "First/Then" sequence of information may be useful—as individuals can see what activity they are completing currently and what activity will occur next. This may help an individual transition to a location that is not preferred if he/she is able to see that a preferred activity is coming next. A "First/Then" should be portable and move with the individual as he/she transitions.



First/Then

Use of Transition Cards

Other individuals with ASD may find that longer sequences of visual information are more effective in alleviating transition difficulties. These individuals might benefit from the use of a visual schedule that is located in a central transition area in the home, classroom, or employment setting. Instead of the information coming to the individual as discussed previously, now individuals have to travel to the schedule to get the object, photo, icon, or words that describe the next activity or location. If the schedule is centrally located, individuals need a cue to know when and how to transition to their schedules to get information. Using a consistent visual cue to indicate when it is time to transition is beneficial, as concrete cues can reduce confusion and help in developing productive transition routines. When it is time for an individual to access his visual schedule, present him/her with a visual cue that means "go check your schedule". This cue can be the individual's name, a photo of the individual, a picture of something that is meaningful to the individual, or any visual symbol the team selects. The individual is taught to carry the visual cue to his/her schedule, match the cue in a designated location and refer to the schedule for the next activity. Using the visual cue regularly helps individuals predict the transition routine. The visual cue may be more salient and meaningful to the individual than repeated verbal cues. Examples of transition cues, including visuals that read "Check Schedule" and match to a corresponding pocket above daily schedules, and a picture of Barney that serves as a transition cue for a young girl (who also matches it to a corresponding pocket near her daily schedule) are below.

Transition Cards



"Finished" Box

Another visual transition strategy that can be used before and during a transition is a "finished" box. This is a designated location where individuals place items that they are finished with when it is time to transition. When it is time to transition it is often helpful for individuals to have an assigned location to put materials prior to moving on to the next activity. The box may be located in the individual's work area as well as in any center of the classroom or room in the home, and can be labeled with the word or a visual cue to indicate its purpose. Research indicated that the finished box, in combination with several other discussed visual strategies, was helpful during transitions from work time to free time for a young student with ASD (Dettmer et al., 2000). When work time or free time was finished (as indicated by the Time Timer) the student was instructed to put his items in the finished box before transitioning. This assisted in creating a clear and predictable transition routine which decreased transition time and increased positive behavior. Similarly, team members may decide that a "To Finish Later" box may be appropriate for an individual with ASD. This may be used during transitions when an individual has not had time to complete an assigned activity. Often, individuals with ASD may prefer to complete an activity before moving on, and this may not be possible due to time constraints (i.e. family member has an appointment to attend, it is time to go to the cafeteria, the work shift is over). In these cases, establishing a location where the individual knows he/she can find the materials to finish up at a later time or date may be helpful.



Finished Box

Other Considerations When Planning for Transitions

Along with developing predictable and consistent transition routines, team members may also need to consider adjusting the activities that individuals are transitioning to and from if transition difficulty continues. Factors such as the length of an activity, the difficulty level, and the interest level of an individual all may contribute to transition issues. Similarly, if an area is too crowded, loud, over stimulating or aversive for some reason, individuals may resist transitioning to that location. A review of environmental factors that could contribute to transition difficulties is also recommended. In addition, the sequence of activities may need to be reviewed. Team members may benefit from reviewing the activities required of the individual throughout the day and categorizing them as preferred, non-preferred, or neutral. If the individual has difficulty transitioning it may be wise, when possible, to strategically sequence certain activities so individuals are moving from non-preferred activities to preferred activities and from preferred activities to neutral activities. Though this certainly may not be possible for all of an individual's transitions, it may alleviate some transition challenges.

It is important for the team to continually assess how transitions impact individuals with ASD. Depending on the activity, environment, and the specific needs and strengths of the individual, a variety of transition strategies may be appropriate. Through the use of these strategies, research shows that individuals with ASD can more easily

move from one activity or location to another, increase their independence, and more successfully participate in activities at home, school, and the workplace.

References

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This article is an excerpt from a longer manuscript that can be found on the Autism Internet Modules, website: <http://www.ocali.org/aim/>.

Hume. (2008). Transition Time: Helping Individuals on the Autism Spectrum Move Successfully from One Activity to Another. *The Reporter* 13(2), 6-10.