

Transitions in Children

Transitions in children can be changing diapers, getting dressed, going home after a fun day out, starting a new school, nursery school, relocating to a new home, being asked to go to bed, turning off the TV and brushing your child's teeth in the morning or at night

Tips to help high spirited and strong willed children deal with their temperament during their transition phase

Demanding babies/toddlers are born being more sensitive, more intense and more persistent, and all of these traits can lead to issues with transitioning from one activity or environment to another. Transitions can involve crying, fussing, whining, hitting, kicking, biting, screaming...or any combination of these!

Transition signs in babies

- Getting a diaper changed or undressed
- Stopping or starting a feed
- Getting into the car seat
- Being put to bed, or waking up from sleep (many high need babies wake up crying)

As toddlers and preschoolers, common transitions can include:

- Getting dressed or undressed
- Going to bed for naps or nighttime sleep
- Getting into the car seat
- Turning off the TV
- Stopping a favorite game or putting away toys
- Going to the table or highchair for mealtime
- Getting ready for bed, or getting ready in the morning
- Going to or leaving from nursery/school
- Going into or out of a shopping cart or stroller

How to Help a High Need Baby with Transitions

- When they're babies, there's not a lot we can do to *change how our baby feels about transitions*. However, we can help them by adjusting our own expectations and figuring out ways to minimize their discomfort or frustration. Some ways to do this include:
- **Troubles with getting dressed or undressed or getting a diaper changed:** Offer a favorite toy to hold during this time and talk to your child.
- **Troubles with the car seat**
Minimize the number of errands or stops you need to make or run errands when your partner can stay at home with your baby.
- **Troubles with having a toy taken away or stopping an activity:**
Offer an appealing substitute as a distraction. Hand them a toy and use an animated voice to extol the virtues of the new toy or activity.
- **Troubles with going to bedtime/sleep time:**
Start creating a predictable routine you can follow before each nap and bedtime. Don't choose activity you think you should choose, choose ones you and your baby *actually* enjoy. It's also important to start having a regular bedtime and nap times after about 3-4 months of age.
- **Troubles with transitions in general:**
The one way you can help your high need baby cope with transitions is to establish a routine, both day and night. As already noted, this is important for sleep. However, it's also important to start having regular times when you play, go outside, eat meals, etc. During the day, expose him/her to lots of natural light, and at night make the bedroom as dark as possible. This will help not only with sleep, but with understanding the regularity and order of daytime activities as well.

How to Help a Spirited Toddler or Preschooler with Transitions

As high need babies get a little older, many continue to struggle with transitions. As children start to live out in the world more e.g. going to daycare, preschool, to friends' houses, etc. – we can avoid or minimize transitions as much as we could when they are babies. However, whenever possible, we can use the following strategies to help ease the pain of transitions. We can also encourage family members who are with our child regularly to use these strategies as well.

1. **Reward charts.** These can be a great tool for all sorts of transitions: for sitting down at the table to eat, to going to bed without a fuss, to turning off the TV when asked.
2. **Wheel of choice.** These are handy little tools for helping our children feel a sense of power and control over their day to day tasks. We can create spinnable wheels to decide on the order of certain tasks (e.g., brush teeth, put on trouser, vest, toilet training, etc.).
Checklists. Create checklists for various transitions, especially for your morning and bedtime routines.
3. **Give advanced warning.** For younger children, we can simply let them know a minute or so before we're going to change an activity (e.g., "OK, we're almost done with the play dough. Next we're going to go to the park"). For slightly older kids, we can start using a timer to let them know when the next activity will take place.
4. **A list of family rules.** For older spirited kids, having your non-negotiable family rules in a place where everyone can see them can really help with transitions. For instance, "If you go over your allotted TV time, that amount will be deducted from tomorrow TV time" (this is the rule in our house!). This may help ease the transition from one activity to another, as your child is very clear on the consequences of his or her actions.
5. **Chore charts.** I love the Melissa and Doug wooden chore charts.

What to do When a Transition-Related Meltdown Happens

Despite all our planning and best intentions, there will be many times when a transition HAS to happen, and we have to deal with the fallout. For instance, going into the car seat is a safety issue, so it's non-negotiable. Or sometimes, you'll need to leave a place or activity and there isn't any room or time to be flexible or give warning. In these situations, your child may have a meltdown and this is understandable and okay.

Let your child know you understand that they're upset and give them a word for their feelings ("I know you're SO disappointed we need to leave Grandma's!"). *Sometimes this little bit of empathy can help them start to calm down.* If this doesn't happen move their attention off the situation by distracting them and physically moving to another area/location in the environment.

Above all, remember to keep your cool and remind yourself, "He/she is not giving me a hard time, he/she is having a hard time". He/she is looking to *you* to see how you're handling the situation, and will take his/her cues from you so staying calm and in control will go a long way towards keeping him/her calm and better able to navigate transitions in the future.



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Transition in the Montessori Nursery School

"Getting up in the morning, eating breakfast, doing the day's work, preparing dinner, going to bed—all are occasions for adults to step back and see the home through the child's eyes."

—Patricia Oriti, *At Home with Montessori*

The family home, like the Montessori classroom, is a social environment. Children learn to function in the world according to what they experience on a daily basis at home and school. As parents we often forget that the patterns we establish are the foundation for our children's ability to adapt. That's why our routines are so important. And, no matter how much our homes are "child-centered," we, the parents, set the tone.

Consistency is one of the features of a Montessori classroom, and children benefit from consistency at home, as well. Consistency is particularly helpful around transition times - transitions from sleeping to waking, from home to school, from play time to bedtime. Due to busy schedules and competing interests, families often adapt to the pace and needs of adults rather than to those of children. With a predictable schedule and patterns of behavior, we can smooth the way for ourselves and for our children.

Though young children often seem very wise, they are not little adults. They have their own internal sense of order and usually give us signals when something is askew. It's important for us to try to understand our children's actions, especially when they do not have the words to explain their behavior. When our children show signs of distress, it's a good time to review our routines at home, making sure they meet the needs of our children for secure, reliable transitions.

From Sleeping to Waking

The morning sets the tone for the day, and no one thrives when rushed and stressed. To experience a calm morning, you might consider:

- Preparing the night before: Pack the lunches, help your children pack their backpacks and lay out their clothes; talk about the next day's events.
- Waking up: Warm and positive morning greetings and responses help start the day. Rituals such as snuggling together or reading might work in a family where children wake early. Awaken late sleepers gently, allowing plenty of time for them to get ready.
- Getting dressed: Adults model by getting themselves dressed, helping children only when needed. Allow ample time for children to be independent.
- Breakfast: Plan enough time for a somewhat leisurely breakfast, so it doesn't have to be eaten in the car.

Getting Out the Door

When things don't seem to be working smoothly, it often helps to step back and look at the situation through your child's eyes. Adjust the schedule if more time is needed. If there is a certain task your child is having difficulty with, such as zipping a jacket, practice when you're not about to fly out the door. Offer help with calmness and respect. Consider the following tips:

- Some children respond well to the use of a timer to let them know they have five minutes left before departure. For others, a verbal alert is all they need.
- Have children be responsible for putting on coats and gathering their own belongings. Help the youngest children, if necessary.
- Give children information about any change in the usual daily plan.
- Say your formal goodbyes to one another and to other family members.

The Evening Routine

An organized home simplifies daily routines. If there is a place where children can easily hang up their coats and store their belongings, less time will be spent looking for "lost" items. It also will become automatic after a while (even though children may need reminders from time to time). Your evening might include the following:

- Consider using the first 30 minutes home as "downtime," giving everyone time to decompress.
- Have children help with dinner preparations or other tasks, according to their ability. Even a two-year-old can help set the table, one utensil at a time. A three- or four-year-old can help chop vegetables, or feed the dog.
- Dinnertime is a perfect time to practice manners and converse about the day. Children learn by example and will soon catch on by asking for food to be passed, or maybe they'll even remind you not to talk with your mouth full!
- Time after dinner can include more active play. Everyone can help clean up and then have time together to play a game or take a walk.
- Transition to quieter activities as bedtime gets closer. (Screen time is very stimulating for children as well as adults, so save computers and television for other times.)

Bedtime

School-aged children need 10 to 12 hours of sleep per day. Toddlers need more. Even though working parents want to extend the time they have with their children, a reasonable bedtime is crucial. This is another way to respect your child's needs. Some other suggestions:

- Your presence and attention as children get ready for bed is comforting.
- Be committed to maintaining the routine. (Of course there will be occasional exceptions.)
- Baths before bed can help quiet the active child.

- Help your children participate in the routine by letting them brush their own teeth, choose a book to read or music to listen to, turn down the lights, and arrange their bed.
- Children need to learn how to soothe themselves to sleep. If you create a warm, loving routine, it's likely the transition to sleep will be smooth.

Making Life Easier

Being able to internalize even a few regular routines will help children learn, listen, and adapt when new circumstances arise. Once the schedule is learned, there is more room to be flexible and adjust to something unexpected without upset.

"Children thrive when given clear, solid structure, respectful communication and emotional warmth. They fare best when parents set firm guidelines within which their children are allowed freedom."

—Angeline Stoll Lillard, *Montessori, The Science Behind the Genius*

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Defiance in Children from Birth to Preschooler

Defiance in toddlers and preschoolers may be normal, but that doesn't make it fun or easy! And when you have a spirited or strong-willed child, the defiance may be *more frequent* and *more intense* than you thought possible!

Do any of the following scenarios sound familiar?

1 .Your 2 year old throws a toy truck which ends up hitting the wall. You get down on his level, tell him, "No, we don't throw toys. They can break things!". He nods his head and you go back to what you were doing. 10 seconds later, you hear a "bang" and see he's done it again all the while watching you while he does it.

2 . It's time to get ready for preschool, and you ask your 4-year-old daughter to go and get her coat on. She's busy playing on the iPad, and doesn't respond to your question. You go up really close and say it again: "Please go and get your coat on, it's time to leave for school". She looks up at you and without skipping a beat says, "No, I'm not going to school today. I'm staying at home to play on my iPad". Besides dragging her kicking and screaming to the car, you're not sure what else to do.

3 . Finally you went to tuck your 3 year old in at bedtime, and after reading her a story, said good night. She followed you out of the room right on your tail. You put her back in her bed, telling her, "You cannot come out again. its bedtime, and you need to stay in your bed". Not only did she follow you out of the room again, but she did it again and again several times. Your child is telling you, "I know what you want me to do, but I could care less and think it's funny that you're getting mad at her and taking her to her room many times over". All of the above are calcified as defiance.

What's the definition of defiance?

This is when your child refuses to do what you explicitly ask him to do, or doing the exact opposite of what you've asked for.

Often they do this while laughing, giggling, smirking, or while watching you the ENTIRE TIME you expect a reaction or action to your request/instructions. I think this is what makes it so

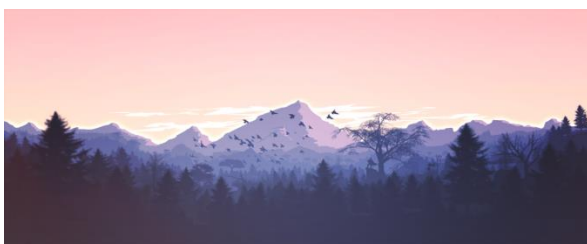
incredibly frustrating! It's pretty hard to have empathy for your child when you feel like they have a personal vendetta against you.

It can definitely FEEL like your child is trying to get his or her way, or is being manipulative, or even like he's doing this specifically to make you mad. But in order to really understand what defiance is at this age, it's important to look briefly at what's actually happening to our children at this age, developmentally, temperamentally, and from a relationship point of view (meaning, his or her relationship with you).

Defiance, why it happens developmentally?

During the growth and development of a child, we know that defiance is perfectly normal in young children, and this tends to start anywhere from about **ages 1 to 2 years**. To delve into developmental theories a bit, Piaget's idea of "**pre-operational thought**" or "**pre-logical stage**", toddlers and preschoolers do *not* appear to be logical most of the time! Children at this stage tend to have quite **rigid** or **black and white** thinking, and aren't able to see things from someone else's point of view (least of all, ours). In other words, our children at this stage are inherently egocentric – meaning, in their mind, they are the center of everything. There's nothing wrong with this, and in fact, it would be strange for a kids NOT to go through this stage.

Piaget did an experiment that showed JUST how egocentric young kids – ages 2-7 years – can actually be.



Young children, ages 4 to 7, were seated at a table with models of three mountains. Each mountain was a little bit different.

A doll was then placed at the base of one of the mountains. The children were then asked to think about what the doll might be seeing or looking at. They were shown 10 pictures of mountains, and the kids were asked to choose which one would most closely represent

what the doll was seeing. The 4-year olds chose their own vantage point, even though the doll was sitting somewhere else. In other words, *they couldn't yet understand that the doll might be seeing something else*. However, as children got closer to 7 years old, they began to identify the correct picture...because they could actually put themselves in the shoes of the doll. This indicated to Piaget that very young children were inherently egocentric – meaning, they could not yet see beyond their own needs, wants and impulses.

We also know that toddlers and preschoolers don't develop impulse control until around 4 years of age and for some children, this can happen even later. This means that if they REALLY want to do something, they'll do it; because their desire to please you or to do the "right thing" outweighed their own desire to do it! This is what's extremely frustrating and confusing to parents because you know that your child KNOWS what we want her to do, and often can even TELL us what she's supposed to do...but then does the exact opposite. And this isn't because she's "bad" or trying to make you mad...rather, she's simply driven primarily by her impulses and trying to get her wants and needs met – in whatever way she can. This is also the prime age for children to show their desire in becoming **more independent** and to **assert their own control**. And one way they do this is by doing the opposite of what you've asked/told them to do.

Can parent set limits? (Or that you cannot expect your child to meet your limits, simply because of where they're developmentally?) The answer is No.

Defiance is a way for your child to **test the limits you've set**, and not in a manipulative way, but just testing the boundaries. He wants to see how far he can go and still get his wants or needs met. He may seem like he wants to be in control, but really, spirited children do best when they have a gentle, firm, consistent and confident leader or guide. So, we're going to keep that in mind when we talk about how to handle the defiance child.

Defiance: How temperament factors in

While all young children will have moments of defiance, we're dealing with with spirited children, who are just naturally **more intense and more persistent**.

This means they tend to react more strongly to their plans being thwarted, to being told "no" or "stop", or to us enforcing a limit that's in direct opposition to what they want to do.

And as a spirited child, he/she will REALLY want to do it; meaning some basic distraction often won't be enough to move his/her focus off that thing he/she *really* wants. This can mean far more defiance than we might see in a more easygoing child and more intense, dig-their-heels-in defiance when it does happen!

Defiance: From a relationship perspective

Parents have **relationship** their children. When figuring out why children are being defiant – especially if he or she is defiant a lot – it's important to FIRST look at **the limits you've set** and **how you've set them**.

Here's why: If we had *no* limits or rules, our child wouldn't be defiant, because there would be nothing to be defiant about! By this logic, if we have too MANY limits or rules, we'll likely experience more limit-testing and defiance. So, ask yourself:

1. ***Do I have too many limits? Am I choosing my battles or am I setting limits around every little thing?***
2. ***How am I setting limits? Am I doing it in an angry or frustrated way? Or in a positive upbeat way? If we do the latter, there will be less defiance and less limit testing.***

What can you do when your child is being defiant? How do we set a limit in a way that respects our child's developmental stage and temperament?

Below are 3 hands-on ways to deal with defiance, and also many other challenging behaviors!

1 .Confidentially helps him meet the limit you've set.

Remember before how we talked about how our kids do best when they have a gentle, firm, consistent and confident leader or guide?

Here's what this would look like in this situation: If there's something you need your child to do (or not do), and he/she's refusing or is being defiant, simply help him do it. I'm not talking about negotiating with him/her over it, or asking him/her to do it, or even giving him/her options, but rather actually *physically helping him/her meet your expectation*. Below is an example:

An adult helping a mother who was struggling with an 18 month old who refused to get her trouser on. The kid was crying and falling all around and you could tell the mother was getting stressed and impatient. This other adult swooped in and took over. “Aww, Sweetie, I know you don’t want to put these on right now, so I’m going to help you!” She quickly and efficiently put the trouser on the kid before the child even knew what she was doing and that stopped the crying child from screaming and the mother stood in shock as the whole episode started and ended within 3 minutes with the other adult. The child was *calm, cool and energetic* as the other adult did it, which was key.

Parenting expert Janet Lansbury calls this “confident momentum” with an attitude of, “Start as you mean to go”. Move in, being confident and upbeat, and acknowledge your child’s feelings as she helped him/her meet the limit.

Don’t acknowledge the defiance and don’t let yourself get sucked up into it! Simply help the child meet the limit in a calm, upbeat way.

2 .Suggest a do-over.

It is believed according to research that children learn **MUCH** more by doing something rather than simply having us tell them how to do it. This is why lecturing and nagging tends not to work. Here’s an example. Your 3 year old is pulling on the dog’s ears. Fortunately, your dog actually lets your child get away with it. You warn your child not to do that again, and yet he/she does it again all the while looking at you for your response. Instead of simply sending him/her to time-out (where he’s unlikely to learn anything), try this: Go to him/her and say, “It seems like maybe you’re bored, but you can’t play with the dog’s ears like that. Let’s try being really gentle with him/her”, then show him/her what you’d like him/her to do. Or let’s say your preschooler screams at you and tries to hit you when you take the phone away from him/her. Say something like, “Hey Jonny, I know you want the phone, but you can’t hit me. Try again but be gentle this time.” While you won’t always see this strategy work in the short term, over time, it will definitely help your child practice and learn better responses to their frustration.

3 .Role play as ways to do it differently next time.

“In play, a child always behaves beyond his age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a ‘head taller’ than himself” – Lev Vygotsky

Once you're out of the heat of the moment, help your child practice solving problems. Role playing is one of the favourite ways to do this, and research tells us that it's also a great way to help our children learn to self-regulate, emotionally and enhance their cognitive skills. You might briefly mention what happened earlier, saying something like: "Remember earlier when you really didn't want to get dressed? Let's pretend your doll doesn't want to get dressed, and see what he/she does!" This is a great, non-threatening way to get them to practice managing their emotions in a more adaptive way, and also of helping them learn the important skills of problem-solving...a skill many spirited kids struggle with.

Final thoughts

The single most important thing to remember when your most demanded and spirited toddler or preschooler is being defiant is that they're not doing this TO HURT YOU. It can certainly feel like it, but try not to take it personally! Remind yourself that your child is still figuring things out, is testing how far he can go, and needs you to be his calm, confident and consistent leader and guide!

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