

Supporting Transitions and Changes in Routine

Practical ways to prepare for stopping, starting, switching, waiting and coping when the expected plan changes.

A transition is any movement from one state, activity, place or expectation to another. Some are obvious, such as leaving home for school or moving to a new classroom. Others happen dozens of times a day: putting down a game for dinner, getting out of the bath, starting homework, leaving a friend's house, changing teacher, waiting for an appointment or discovering that a planned activity has been cancelled.

For a child with ADHD, the difficulty may not be the new activity itself. The challenge can be disengaging attention from the current activity, holding the next steps in mind, managing time, tolerating uncertainty, regulating disappointment or generating enough momentum to start again. A transition that looks tiny to an adult can contain several executive-function demands for the child.

Look at what kind of transition is difficult

What you may see	What may be happening	What may help
'No!' when it is time to stop	Difficulty disengaging from a rewarding or absorbing activity; the ending feels abrupt.	Give a visible warning, show what comes next and create a predictable finishing point.
Repeatedly asking what is happening	Uncertainty is taking up mental space; verbal reassurance is not staying available.	Use a simple visual plan that the child can return to independently.
Meltdown after an unexpected change	The child had mentally prepared for one outcome and now has to rapidly rebuild the plan.	Acknowledge the disappointment first, then make the new plan concrete and simple.
Appears fine until the transition happens	The child may understand the change intellectually but still struggle when it becomes real.	Rehearse practical details: where, when, who, what to take and what the first step will be.

Preparation should answer the questions the child is carrying

'We're going somewhere new tomorrow' may leave a child with dozens of unanswered questions. Where exactly? Who will be there? How long will it last? What happens first? Can I take my headphones? Where is the toilet? What happens afterwards? You do not need to predict every detail, but making the knowable parts visible can reduce the amount of uncertainty the child has to hold.

Warnings work best when they mean something

A five-minute warning is only useful if five minutes has meaning for the child. Pair time language with something concrete: a visual timer, one final turn, the end of a programme, a countdown card or a specific finishing action. Too many warnings can become background noise, so choose a small number of predictable cues and use them consistently.

Helping transitions happen with less conflict

The aim is not to remove every protest. Children are allowed to dislike stopping something enjoyable or feel disappointed when plans change. The aim is to reduce unnecessary surprise, make the next step easier to understand and support the child to move through the feeling safely.

Before	Give useful notice, make the next step visible and check whether the child needs equipment, sensory support or extra processing time.
At the transition	Use fewer words. Point to the visual, name the first action and avoid adding unrelated demands while the child is switching.
After	Allow settling time where possible. A child may need movement, quiet, a snack or a familiar activity before another demand.
When plans change	Say clearly what is different and what is staying the same. Replace the old plan with a new concrete plan rather than repeating 'it's fine'.

When the child becomes stuck

If the child cannot move on, adding repeated instructions may increase pressure without solving the difficulty. Shrink the transition. Instead of 'Get ready, we're leaving,' try the first concrete action: shoes on. Then coat. Then bag. If they are deeply engaged, help them create closure: save the game, photograph the construction, mark the page, write down the idea or decide when they can return to it.

Unexpected change and disappointment

A cancelled trip, substitute teacher, changed meal or different route may seem manageable to an adult but can be genuinely destabilising when the child had already built a detailed expectation. Avoid immediately arguing that the alternative is 'just as good'. Acknowledge what has been lost, then show the replacement plan. Emotional validation and practical planning can happen together.

New situations: preview without creating a script that must happen

Photos, maps, a short social description or a visit beforehand can help a child understand a new place. But avoid promising details you cannot control. Separate what you know from what might happen: 'We know where the entrance is and who is meeting us. We don't yet know which room we'll use.' This prepares the child for both predictability and uncertainty.

School transitions

Transitions between lessons, teachers, rooms, break times and home can create cumulative strain. Where difficulties are significant, discuss practical supports with school: advance notice of known changes, visual timetables, transition prompts, a consistent arrival routine, a named adult or a quieter route/time where appropriate to the child's needs.

Create a Transition Plan

Choose one transition that regularly becomes difficult. Build a plan around the actual point where it breaks down rather than trying to change everything at once.

The transition we want to make easier	_____
What is the child moving FROM?	_____
What are they moving TO?	_____
What part is hardest: stopping, waiting, uncertainty, starting or something else?	_____
What warning or visual cue will we use?	_____
What will the first next step be?	_____
What can stay familiar or predictable?	_____
What sensory or practical support may help?	_____
If the plan changes, how will we show the new plan?	_____
What will we review after trying it?	_____

Build flexibility in small, safe doses

Children do need opportunities to experience manageable change, but deliberately creating distress is not the goal. Flexibility can be practised when the child has enough capacity: two acceptable options, a small change with warning, or discussing a backup plan before it is needed. The message is not 'anything can change at any time'; it is 'when something changes, we can work out what happens next.'

A message for parents

Transitions can make family life feel as though every ordinary activity has a difficult doorway attached to it. Try not to judge success only by whether your child moved without protest. Progress may be accepting a warning, using the visual, recovering more quickly, asking what the new plan is, or needing less adult support over time. These are meaningful skills.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare offers further practical ideas around executive-function support. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 8