Over the past decade, there has been a significant rise in the number of children in group care settings, including child care, Head Start, and public and private preschool (U.S. Department of Education 2007). Along with this trend, programs face increased pressure to document children’s academic and social outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). As teachers work toward these outcomes, they have become more concerned about children with challenging behaviors and the effects of those behaviors on others in the classroom.

Within most preschool settings, there are likely to be only a few children with persistent challenging behavior. On any given day, however, there may be a number of children who engage in some form of challenging behavior. These behaviors are often related to issues such as being in a group care setting for the first time, not knowing the expectations for a setting, not having the social skills to engage in more appropriate behaviors, being bored, and not knowing how to communicate emotions in appropriate ways. Transitions from one activity to another are times when children are more likely to engage in challenging behavior.

There is guidance in the field for teachers about planning and implementing transitions. NAEYC emphasizes the importance of predictable, structured daily routines in which children feel secure and teachers seek opportunities to expand on children’s ideas and interests (Bredekamp & Copple 1997). The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children emphasizes that transitions should be structured to promote interaction, communication, and learning (Sandall et al. 2005). Here we offer a discussion of why challenging behavior occurs during transitions, strategies for planning and implementing more effective transitions, ideas for using transitions to teach social skills and emotional competencies, and a planning process for working with children who continue to have difficulty during transitions.

**Transitions: What are they and why does challenging behavior occur?**

Within early childhood contexts, transitions are the times in the day when children move or change from one activity to another. Typically, these include arriving in the classroom, moving from morning meeting to centers, cleaning up after center time to get ready for outdoor play, snack or nap times, and preparing to go home. Children’s challenging behavior during transitions may be related to how program staff structure, schedule, and implement transitions. Challenging behavior is more likely to occur when there are too many transitions, when all the children transition at the same time in the same way, when transitions are too long and children spend too much time waiting with nothing to do, and when there are not clear instructions.

Children may engage in challenging behavior when they do not understand the expectations for the transition. Perhaps it is a child’s first experience in a group setting...
or the classroom rules and routines are different than at home. Additionally, the program may be only one of several places where the child spends time each day (for example, Head Start, child care, relative care), and there may be different expectations in each setting. It is possible that at one site children must remain seated during snack until all children are finished eating and at another site individual children may leave the table and look at a book while other children finish. Children also may not understand what to do when program staff implement routines differently on different days (for example, on some days children wash their hands, then get their placemats for snack; and on other days they get their placements first and then wash).

Some children may have a difficult time with transitions due to disabilities (difficulty with change is a characteristic of autism, for example) or limited communication, social-emotional, or cognitive skills. For example, some children may take longer to process directions. If adults give too many directions at once or give oral directions without cues, such as holding up a backpack to signal that it is time to go home, these children may not know what to do. In these situations, teachers may view the child as engaging in challenging behavior rather than recognizing that the child needs to learn a skill or receive additional cues to understand the direction.

Finally, some children may engage in challenging behavior during transitions because they do not want to stop what they are doing, they do not want or need to go to the next activity, or the transition occurs without warning. Consider a child who is making a block structure when the teacher says it is time to line up and go to the bathroom or children who are looking at books when the teacher announces it is snack time. These situations often result in challenging behavior because the children are not motivated for, in need of, or interested in the next activity.

Sometimes teachers may not realize why children are having challenging behavior and may assume that a child is having a bad day, is ignoring the teacher, or is stubborn, when in fact the child may not know what to do. It is important to consider all the possible reasons a child is having a difficult time and then identify strategies to support the child during transitions. In the next section, we provide ideas and strategies for planning, designing, and implementing transitions to support all children and to decrease the likelihood that challenging behavior will occur.

Plan for success

Designing a schedule that minimizes transitions and maximizes the time children spend engaged in developmentally appropriate activities is the first step in decreasing challenging behavior. Schedules in which children engage in planned activities or projects for significant periods of

Mary Louise Hemmeter, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Special Education at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. She is the director of the Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning and faculty on the Technical Assistance Center for Social Emotional Interventions. ml.hemmeter@vanderbilt.edu

Michaelene M. Ostrosky, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is also a faculty member on the Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. ostrosky@uiuc.edu

Kathleen M. Artman, MEd, is a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. She has taught young children with multiple disabilities in inclusive early childhood settings and is working on projects related to professional development around challenging behavior. Kathleen.m.artman@vanderbilt.edu

Kiersten A. Kinder, MEd, is a doctoral student in early childhood special education at Vanderbilt University. She has nine years of teaching experience in inclusive preschool classrooms and is working on developing effective professional development and ongoing support for teachers. kiersten.a.kinder@vanderbilt.edu
time, spend little time in transitions, or seldom spend time waiting with nothing to do decrease the likelihood of challenging behavior. The schedule above was modified to limit the number of transitions. The revised schedule has several advantages, including (a) fewer times when all children have to transition at the same time; (b) less time in large groups and more time in child-directed activities; (c) longer center time so adults have more time to work with small groups or individual children; and (d) inclusion of snack as a part of center time so children can eat when they are hungry. Implementing the revised schedule increases the likelihood that children will be engaged and decreases the likelihood that challenging behavior will occur.

The following questions and strategies can guide teachers in planning and implementing more successful transitions (Ostrosky, Jung, & Hemmeter 2002).

**What is happening during transitions?** Many classrooms post a schedule that includes times and activities, but what really happens day to day in the classroom may be very different. Because transition times can be busy, it is easy for teachers to miss events or interactions that can cause challenging behavior. To better understand potential triggers for challenging behavior, classroom staff can observe and take notes for several days on when each transition starts and stops, what adults and children are actually doing during transitions, and the number and types of challenging behaviors that occur. The team can then look critically at the information and design a transition plan that includes (1) assigned roles and responsibilities before transitions (for example, designating one teacher to prepare the materials for center time); (2) strategic placement of adults during transitions (for example, having one teacher stand at the door to engage children in an activity as they line up); and (3) identification of children who need individual supports, such as an individualized reminder before the transition or the use of a visual schedule.

**Can any transitions be eliminated?** Teachers can plan ways to minimize daily transitions, especially those that require all children to move at the same time. By reviewing the schedule, teachers can omit unnecessary transitions. For example, teachers might schedule longer center times during which they can focus on goals with small groups of children. This change gives children more time to be engaged with materials and the teacher more time to work with individual children as well as more flexibility to bring small groups together based on their interests or needs.

It is important to note that a longer center time can also lead to challenging behavior if the teacher does not plan engaging activities, support children’s engagement in those activities, individualize that support, and ensure that activities are individualized to reflect a range of difficulty and interests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Schedule</th>
<th>Revised Schedule</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:15–8:25 Arrival/hand washing</td>
<td>8:15–8:45 Arrival/hand washing/table toys—Children have a choice of table activities, such as playdough, cutting scraps, or manipulatives, allowing easy entry after finishing arrival routine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:15–8:45 Free play</td>
<td>8:45–9:00 Large group—A few routine activities, plus review of the day’s schedule and center time plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45–9:15 Calendar, weather, and lesson</td>
<td>9:00–10:20 Center time/hand washing/snack—Teachers support play and teach skills in small groups or with individual children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:15–10:00 Centers/small groups—Children rotate every 15 minutes between three small group activities or play in a designated center.</td>
<td>— Snack is a center choice, allowing varied lengths of time to eat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00–10:15 Hand washing/snack</td>
<td>10:20–10:40 Book time and music—Children finish cleaning up, then choose a book to read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15–10:30 Music</td>
<td>— A few children at a time are dismissed to get coats while the other children continue singing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30–10:40 Book time—Everyone is dismissed from circle at the same time to put on coats.</td>
<td>10:40–11:00 Outdoor time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:40–11:00 Outdoor time</td>
<td>11:00 Dismissal—Class sings good-bye song and plays waiting games until arrival of families or bus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11:00 Dismissal—Children wait for families or bus to pick them up.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Do children have something to do while waiting for the next activity?** After observing and recording what happens during transitions, teachers can modify them so children move in small groups or design activities for children to do while they wait. While one teacher calls a few children at a time to wash their hands, another teacher could lead an activity that allows for children to flow in and out easily, like singing songs or reading familiar books. Such transitions also encourage social interactions (“When you are finished washing your hands, tap a friend to take your place”). Interactive songs and games can help make transitions engaging, teach children what to do, and introduce new skills. For example, the cleanup song “Clean up, clean up everybody everywhere...” serves as a cue that one activity is ending and another is about to begin. Children can sing while they transition. When waiting for other children during a transition, children can play simple games such as “Guess What Is in My Bag,” in which a teacher or child puts something in a bag and children take turns asking questions and guessing what it is. The goal is to keep children engaged, thus preventing challenging behavior (see “Daily Transition Tips” for additional ideas).

**Teach children the expectations for transitions**

Often children do not know what to do during transitions. Consider a transition that happens every day, washing hands. Some children may be learning the hand-washing process and how to do it in a new setting. There are usually...
procedures to follow, such as how much soap to use, what
to do when it is not your turn, and how many paper towels
are needed. When a child does not follow the steps for hand
washing (or any other transition), teachers should deter-
mine if the child understands the expectations and steps.

For children to learn the expectations associated with any
transition, teachers need to explain or model expectations
multiple times in multiple ways (Sandall & Schwartz 2002).
One way to accomplish this is to describe the steps using
pictures and then role-play each step during group time.
After a few days, mix up the photos showing the steps and
recruit children to rearrange them. Place the pictures near
the area where the transition is going to occur and model
the expectations while referring to the pictures. This shows
the children how to use the visual supports on their own.

Children also can be models for their peers. One child can
demonstrate while the teacher narrates. For example, Ms.
Lin might say, “Let’s watch Noel at the sink. First, she turns
the handles a bit. What does she need next? That’s right,
soap! She pumps once because that is all she needs! Now she
is rinsing off the bubbles and is ready for her paper towel.
How many pulls does she need? Let’s say it together—1, 2,
that will do!” (Such rhymes are a fun and easy way to help
children remember transition expectations. Another example
is to have children chant, “1, 2, 3, save some for me!” to keep
the line moving when getting water.)

Visual cues or representations (for example, photo-
graphs, clip art) assist children in understanding expecta-
tions, anticipating the transition, and knowing what to do.
Post a visual schedule with removable pieces that each repre-
sent activities. As the class completes activities, children
remove the corresponding pieces from the schedule. This
will help children learn the order of activities across the
day, prepare for what is going to happen next, and antici-
pate transitions between activities. Teachers can place
visual reminders strategically throughout the classroom.
For example, laminated pictures on the floor cue children
about where to line up; a paper strip with photos of the
cleanup routine can remind children what to do after snack;
and a stop sign on the daily calendar can cue children that
something different is happening that day.

**Use transition times to teach social skills and
foster emotional development**

Transitions provide opportunities for supporting social
skills and emotional competencies. Teachers can encour-
age children to work together and can provide descriptive
feedback when they do so (“Look at all of you cleaning up!”
“Wow, you have your coat on already? That was fast! Can you
help Michael get his coat on?”). Promoting friendship skills
can make transitions easier for children: have children find
a buddy to sit with, walk down the hall in pairs, work with a
friend to clean up, choose a friend to play with, and so on.

Acknowledging a child’s feelings validates emotions,
teaches emotion words, and helps children learn to handle
their feelings appropriately. When a child shows frustra-
tion, anger, or sadness at the end of an activity, the teacher
can use this as a teachable moment. Acknowledge the emo-
tion (“Caleb, it’s hard to clean up. I can tell you’re worried
about leaving your castle”); engage the child in problem
solving (“What can we do? Would you like to take a picture?
Save it on my desk?”); and help the child follow through
on a solution (“Let’s save it on a shelf for tomorrow and go over to
snack”). By labeling emotions and
finding a solution, teachers help
children transition while simultane-
ously teaching appropriate ways to
respond to difficult situations.

**When some children still have difficulty:
Individualizing transition strategies**

Even when teachers plan transi-
tions, use visual schedules, and
create interactive activities, some
children may have a difficult time.
Teachers can give 5- or 10-minute
warnings prior to transitions, use
visual cues, and provide prompts
to help all children; but when some
Consider the case of 3-year-old David, who has trouble responding to classwide transition strategies. David enters the classroom crying and clinging to his mom. He resists washing his hands, putting toys away, and joining group activities. When the rest of the class begins transitioning to large group, David throws himself on the floor and screams. When adults attempt to redirect him, he hits, kicks, and screams. During centers, David wanders around the room without engaging in an activity. At afternoon pickup, he refuses to put on his backpack and cries.

Ms. Maggie already uses a classwide visual schedule, structures the day so children have choices, and implements strategies to engage children during transitions. Although a few children occasionally have difficulties, most of the children transition easily. However, David’s challenging behavior continues to escalate. Ms. Maggie asks herself a series of questions about David’s behavior and collects data on David’s behavior during transitions. Based on her observations, she comes up with some solutions and puts individualized supports in place for David (see “Individualized Transition Strategies for David”).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted transition</th>
<th>Why does the behavior occur?</th>
<th>How can I prevent the problem?</th>
<th>How can I respond to the problem?</th>
<th>What skill(s) should I teach David?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cleanup (moving from centers to large group)</td>
<td>D does not want to leave the activity</td>
<td>• Give D a signal before the transition (“Two more minutes” or “Three more blocks”)</td>
<td>• Ignore inappropriate behavior</td>
<td>• How to clean up using turn taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• After the class cue, go over to D and cue him</td>
<td>• Immediately praise D for cleaning up</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Model and take turns cleaning up (“First I put a block away. Then you put a block away.”)</td>
<td>• Use “First, Then” statements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Use a photo board to show the “First, Then” actions modeled above</td>
<td>• Redirect and model turn taking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival and dismissal</td>
<td>D does not want to leave his mother</td>
<td>• Use a story about what happens at school</td>
<td>• Help D wave and say good-bye to his mother</td>
<td>• How to ask for a hug or comfort item</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Allow D to carry his blanket in the morning</td>
<td>• Read a comforting story about school</td>
<td>• How to use a visual schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide a fun job for D at arrival</td>
<td>• Use visual cues to redirect D to the next activity</td>
<td>• How to say good-bye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Have a peer buddy greet D and invite him to play</td>
<td>• Model the expectations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Use a visual schedule with a photo of D’s mother</td>
<td>• Point out peer models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to centers</td>
<td>D does not know what to do next</td>
<td>• Prepare the next activity before signaling for transition</td>
<td>• How to use the visual schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Give D an individualized choice card</td>
<td>• How to imitate peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Allow D to play with a small item while waiting</td>
<td>• How to choose a transition activity (books, puzzles) during wait time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Some children find it difficult to cope with transitions, and this can lead to challenging behavior. When several children have difficulty with transitions, there may be issues with the way the program plans or implements transitions. In such cases, teachers can evaluate the schedule in terms of the number and length of transitions and what children are expected to do during transitions. This information can be used to modify transitions in order to better support children, likely leading to fewer challenging behaviors. If an individual child continues to have ongoing challenging behavior, it may be necessary to develop an individualized plan for that child.

When teachers have evaluated transitions, put strategies in place to help children transition more easily, and implemented individualized plans for those who need them, transitions can be fun and successful times for children and teachers alike.

References


Later this month join authors Mary Louise Hemmeter and Michaelene Ostrosky for a special distance learning opportunity based on this article. Send your questions related to routines, transitions, and positive guidance to jill.giacomini@cudenver.edu. The authors will respond to them as a part of their presentation. Look for details at http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200805.