

Helping Children with Transitions | Child Behavior Problems

 childmind.org/article/why-do-kids-have-trouble-with-transitions

Katherine Martinelli is a journalist who has published internationally on a variety of topics including parenting, food, travel and education. She is also mom to an inquisitive toddler.

Humans are creatures of habit. Even when we welcome it, change takes more energy. So perhaps it's not surprising that children often find it difficult to make transitions between activities, places and objects of attention. Being asked to stop one thing and start another is a very common trigger for problem behavior, especially for kids who have emotional or developmental challenges.

"Transitions are hard for everybody," says Dr. David Anderson, senior director of the ADHD and Behavior Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute. "One of the reasons why transitions may be hard is that we're often transitioning from a preferred activity – something we like doing – to something that we need to do."

What does trouble with transitions look like?

Difficulty with transitions can manifest in a number of ways depending on the child and the setting. It can take the form of resistance, avoidance, distraction, negotiation or a full-blown meltdown. Some of these reactions are the result of kids being overwhelmed by their emotions. And some are what they've learned works to successfully delay or avoid the transition.

A child told it's time to leave the playground might throw a tantrum initially because he can't manage his anger or frustration, but if he's found that it has worked to delay leaving the park, he's more likely to do it again. "It really depends on how the adults in his life have responded," says Dr. Matthew Rouse, a clinical psychologist in the ADHD and Disruptive Behavior Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute. Other kids may not tantrum but instead master the art of whining, distracting, or negotiating with the adults in their life.

What's behind transition problems?

While transitions are triggers for lots of kids – what parent hasn't gotten resistance from a child being asked to stop playing a video game and come to dinner? – they are particularly difficult for kids with emotional and developmental issues. And while the behaviors may be the same, experts point out that the reasons behind the behavior are different for kids with different challenges. Here we look at why children with ADHD, anxiety, autism and sensory processing issues, find transitions particularly difficult.

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ADHD

For kids with ADHD, it all comes down to what they perceive as rewarding, says Dr. Rouse. While the disorder is described as an attention *deficit*, experts say it may be more useful to think about it as difficulty *regulating* attention – turning your attention to something you are expected to do, rather than something that you find rewarding.

“Kids with ADHD have fewer neurons in their reward centers, or neurons that aren’t as active in the reward centers of their brains, so they find things throughout their day less rewarding,” he explains. When they do find something rewarding, they tend to hyper-focus on it, which explains why someone with ADHD seems all over the place but then can play video games for hours. Ask them to do something less rewarding (like putting away Legos), and you might hit resistance.

Dr. Michael Rosenthal, a clinical neuropsychologist, adds that children with ADHD have a tougher time managing their emotions than other kids. “There’s also research that shows that the wiring in the brain centers that are involved in helping kids exercise control over their emotions are less developed, so you get bigger emotional displays from them compared to kids who don’t have ADHD.”

Autism

Although transitions can be similarly challenging for kids with autism, the reactions tend to be more extreme, and the issue is rooted in a different difficulty. “For kids with autism,” says Dr. Rosenthal, “the world is just an incredibly confusing and overwhelming place, so the need for sameness and predictability is adaptive,” or practical. It’s not simply that changing activities is upsetting, it’s that any deviation from the routine can feel like the rug is being pulled out from under them.

Dr. Rosenthal refers to this as cognitive inflexibility, and says that it also explains why those on the autism spectrum have hyper-focused interests and tend to prefer doing the same things in the same order. “Any unexpected changes or transition for a kid with autism disrupts their equilibrium.”

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Sensory processing challenges

Although sensory processing is not a diagnostic term like ADHD or autism, kids with either disorder-or no disorder-can have sensory processing issues, which can lead to problems with transitions. For kids who are easily over stimulated, the world feels confusing and seems to move too fast. They crave order, which helps them feel calm and in control. “When you change things up on them too quickly,” says Dr. Rosenthal, “then you see resistance or problem behaviors.”

Kids with sensory issues are sometimes prone to dramatic meltdowns-emotional outbursts that they can't control-when they are overwhelmed by unexpected changes.

Anxiety

For kids who suffer from anxiety, trouble with transitions might come from a place of fear. “It could be fear of the unknown, or fear of what’s going to happen when they’re put in a new situation,” notes Dr. Rosenthal. The problem is “usually some stimuli that’s connected to the transition, rather than the process of transitioning itself,” he adds.

If they’ve had an upsetting experience in a particular setting, the prospect of a transition to that location itself could also trigger anxiety. If a child is terrified of dogs, being asked to leave for the home of someone with a dog could trigger a tantrum, or even make a child lash out in anger.

Some kids with anxiety, especially those with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), have an intense need to do things perfectly. If they are interrupted before they are able to do something exactly the right way-forming letters perfectly in a writing assignment, or lining things up or doing a series of things in a prescribed order-they can get very upset, leaving an adult not aware of the anxiety mystified.

Understanding the triggers that make kids balk, or get upset, at transitions, is the first step to managing them better for both kids and adults.