

Tips For Transition  
A Resource Booklet

-Autism Explorers

# Supporting Transitions

## A Practical Guide for Parents of SEN & Autistic Children

Autism Explorers C.I.C

### What Are Transitions?

A transition is any change from one activity, place, or expectation to another.

For many children this is manageable, but for autistic and SEN children transitions can trigger:

- Anxiety
- Meltdowns
- Refusal
- Aggression
- Running away
- Shutting down
- Crying
- Freezing

Common difficult transitions include:

- Leaving the house
- Turning off screens
- Stopping a favourite activity
- Moving between rooms
- Bedtime routines
- Leaving school
- Going somewhere new
- Moving from play to learning
- Getting dressed or ready

## Why Transitions Are Hard

Many SEN children struggle with:

### **Predictability**

Children feel safer when they know what will happen.

### **Executive Function**

Switching attention between tasks can be difficult.

### **Sensory Regulation**

Moving environments can mean new noises, lights, smells, and sensations.

### **Emotional Regulation**

Change can trigger anxiety or overwhelm.

### **Communication Difficulties**

Children may not have the words to explain what they feel.

## **Signs a Child Is Struggling With Transitions**

You might see:

- “Just one more minute!” repeated many times
- Refusal to move
- Meltdowns before leaving places
- Anxiety when routines change
- Aggression when asked to stop activities
- Running away
- Crying or hiding
- Shutdown or going silent

These behaviours are often distress responses, not deliberate defiance.

# Strategies That Help

## Prepare in Advance

Unexpected change is often the biggest trigger.

Helpful tools include:

- Visual schedules
- Timetables
- Talking through the day in the morning
- Showing pictures of where you're going
- Social stories
- Countdown reminders

Example language:

"First we play. Then we tidy. Then we go to the car."

## Use Countdowns

Many children need time to mentally prepare.

Try:

- 10-minute warning

- 5-minute warning
- 2-minute warning
- “Last turn” reminders

Example:

“In 5 minutes we are turning the tablet off.”

## **Use Visual Supports**

Many SEN children process visual information better than verbal instructions.

Examples:

- Picture schedules
- “Now and Next” boards
- Timers
- Countdown clocks
- Transition cards

Example:

NOW → Lego

NEXT → Dinner

## **Use Timers**

Timers remove the sense that the adult is suddenly stopping the activity.

Helpful options:

- Kitchen timers
- Visual timers
- Phone timers
- Sand timers

Example language:

“When the timer finishes, we tidy up.”

## **Offer Small Choices**

Choice gives children a sense of control.

Examples:

- “Do you want to hop or walk to the car?”
- “Do you want to carry your coat or wear it?”
- “Do you want to tidy the blocks or the cars first?”

Control reduces anxiety.

## **Make Transitions Fun**

Turning transitions into a game can help.

Try:

- Racing to the door
- “Hop like a frog to the bathroom”
- Silly walks
- Countdown games
- Singing tidy-up songs

Movement often helps regulate the body.

## **Use “First–Then” Language**

This makes expectations clear.

Examples:

First tidy toys → then snack

First shoes → then playground

First bath → then story

This reassures the child that the next activity is coming.

## **Build Predictable Routines**

Children cope better when routines stay consistent.

Example evening routine:

Dinner → Bath → Pyjamas → Story → Bed

The more predictable the routine, the fewer transition struggles.

## **Allow Processing Time**

Some children need longer to process instructions.

Instead of repeating commands, try:

1. Give instruction
2. Wait 10 seconds
3. Repeat calmly if needed

## **Regulation Before Demands**

If a child is already dysregulated, transitions will be much harder.

Signs of dysregulation include:

- Stimming more than usual
- Irritability
- Avoidance
- Restlessness
- Crying

Helpful supports:

- Movement breaks

- Deep pressure
- Quiet space
- Snack or drink
- Calm breathing

## **What Can Make Transitions Worse**

Parents often report that these make things harder:

- Sudden demands
- Shouting or rushing
- Too many instructions at once
- Unpredictable routines
- Removing favourite activities suddenly
- Expecting immediate compliance

## **When Meltdowns Happen**

Even with preparation, transitions may still be difficult.

Helpful responses include:

- Stay calm
- Reduce language
- Offer space
- Validate feelings

Example:

“I know stopping the game is hard.”

Once calm, gently guide to the next step.

Meltdowns are okay, we have another booklet on meltdowns to support you and your family.

## **A Reminder for Parents**

Transitions are not difficult because your child is being “naughty.”

They are difficult because your child’s brain processes change differently.

With time, support, and understanding, many children develop better transition skills.

Progress might be slow — but small steps matter.

# **You Are Not Alone**

Many families supporting autistic and SEN children experience daily transition challenges.

Seeking support, sharing experiences, and learning new strategies can make a real difference.