

Transitions and Social stories  
A resource booklet



# Supporting SEND Children Through Transitions

## A Parent Guide to Social Stories and Change

Transitions can feel overwhelming for many children, especially children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). This guide explains why transitions can be difficult, how parents can help, and how social stories can make change feel safer and more predictable.

## Why Are Transitions Tricky for SEND Children?

Many SEND children thrive on predictability, routine, and knowing what to expect. Changes, even small ones, can feel confusing, stressful, or frightening.

A transition often means:

- stopping something familiar
- changing attention from one task to another
- coping with uncertainty
- processing new sensory information
- managing emotions and expectations

Children with autism, ADHD, sensory processing differences, speech and language difficulties, anxiety, or learning differences may find transitions especially difficult because they may:

- need more processing time
- struggle with flexible thinking
- find unexpected changes distressing
- experience anxiety around uncertainty
- have difficulty understanding verbal instructions alone
- become overwhelmed by sensory demands or social expectations

Research and SEND guidance highlight that even “micro transitions” throughout the day can cause stress, not just major life changes.

# What Is Considered a Transition?

A transition is any change from one activity, place, routine, person, or situation to another.

## Big Transitions

These may include:

- starting nursery or school
- moving class or year group
- changing schools
- moving house
- starting clubs or activities
- holidays or travel
- puberty and growing up
- moving from child to adult services

## Small or “Micro” Transitions

These happen every day and are often overlooked:

- turning off a tablet
- stopping playtime
- moving from home to school
- getting dressed
- moving from one lesson to another
- bedtime routines
- leaving the park
- changing from indoors to outdoors

For many SEND children, small transitions can feel just as difficult as major ones.

# How to Support Children with Transitions

## 1. Prepare Early

Children cope better when they know what is happening beforehand.

Helpful ideas:

- talk about changes in advance
- use calendars or countdowns
- show photos of places or people
- visit new places beforehand
- explain what will stay the same

## 2. Use Visual Supports

Visuals help children process information more clearly than spoken language alone.

Examples:

- visual schedules
- now-and-next boards
- timers
- symbols or pictures
- checklists

## 3. Give Warnings Before Change

Avoid sudden endings when possible.

Try:

- “5 more minutes”
- visual timers
- countdowns
- songs or transition cues

## **4. Keep Language Clear and Simple**

Too much talking can increase overwhelm.

Instead:

- use short sentences
- give one instruction at a time
- allow processing time

## **5. Create Predictable Routines**

Routine helps children feel safe.

Even when change is unavoidable:

- keep familiar comfort items nearby
- maintain parts of the usual routine
- explain what is different and what is staying the same

## **6. Validate Feelings**

Children may feel:

- worried
- angry
- sad
- excited
- confused

It helps to say:

- “It’s okay to feel nervous.”
- “Changes can feel hard.”
- “We will do this together.”

# How Can I Support as a Parent?

Parents are a child's biggest source of safety during transitions.

You can help by:

- staying calm and reassuring
- preparing your child ahead of time
- using consistent routines
- reducing surprises where possible
- advocating for support in school or settings
- celebrating small successes
- recognising triggers and patterns

Remember:

A child struggling with transitions is not "being difficult." They may genuinely feel overwhelmed, anxious, or unsafe.

## What Is a Social Story?

A social story is a short, personalised story that explains:

- what is happening
- why it is happening
- what the child might see, hear, or feel
- what they can do to cope

Social stories were developed by Carol Gray to support autistic children and others who benefit from clear, structured explanations.

Social stories are:

- calm
- reassuring
- predictable
- non-judgemental
- written from the child's perspective

They often include:

- simple sentences
- photos or visuals
- coping strategies
- positive reassurance

# How and When to Use Social Stories

Social stories work best when used:

- before a transition happens
- regularly and repeatedly
- during calm moments
- alongside visuals and routines

## Use Social Stories For:

- starting school
- doctor or dentist visits
- haircut appointments
- bedtime routines
- leaving activities
- changes in routine
- school trips
- holidays
- making friends
- toileting
- moving between activities

Social stories should be personalised for the child's:

- age
- communication level
- interests
- sensory needs
- understanding

# Why and How Do Social Stories Support Transition?

Social stories help because they:

- make situations predictable
- reduce uncertainty
- explain hidden social rules
- prepare children for what to expect
- reduce anxiety
- increase confidence

- support emotional regulation

Many SEND children struggle with the “unknown.” A social story helps turn an unknown situation into something familiar.

Instead of:

“I don’t know what will happen.”

The child begins to think:

“I know what this looks like. I know what I can do.”

## Example of a Social Story

### “Stopping Playtime”

Sometimes I need to stop playing and move to another activity.

Stopping something fun can feel hard.

I might feel upset, frustrated, or worried.

Grown-ups will help me know when it is nearly time to stop.

I may hear:

- “5 more minutes”
- “2 more minutes”
- “Time to finish”

When playtime finishes, I can:

- take a deep breath
- choose one last thing to do
- ask what happens next
- use my visual schedule

After playtime, there will be another activity.

I am learning how to move from one activity to another.

Transitions can get easier with practice.

# How to Use Social Stories Effectively

## Read Them Often

Read the story several times before the event or transition.

## Keep Them Positive and Calm

Avoid threats or punishment language.

Instead of:

“You must behave.”

Try:

“I can try my best.”

## Use Real Photos When Possible

Photos of:

- the child
- the school
- teachers
- rooms
- routines

can make stories more meaningful.

## Pair With Visual Supports

Use:

- timers
- schedules
- symbols
- first/then boards

alongside the story.

## Revisit After the Transition

Talk about:

- what went well
- what felt tricky
- what helped

This helps build confidence for next time.

Transitions are part of everyday life, but for SEND children they can feel exhausting, unpredictable, and overwhelming. With preparation, understanding, visual support, and social stories, transitions can become safer and more manageable.

Progress may be gradual — and that is okay.

Every successful transition helps build trust, confidence, and emotional resilience.

## Helpful Resources

- [National Autistic Society – Transitions Support](#)
- [Nottinghamshire NHS – Social Stories Guide](#)
- [Autism Toolbox – Transitions Support](#)
- [Good Schools Guide – Social Stories](#)