



Handling Transitions

Toddlers often have a hard time moving from one activity to another. They like to stay in the moment and focus on what they are doing right now. Because their brains are still growing, it can be hard for them to “switch gears.” Even if they like what is coming next, they may still get upset. This is normal behavior. They are not trying to be difficult.

There are many ways you can help your child with transitions.

Give them time to get ready: Let them know a change is coming. You can say, “We will clean up in 10 minutes,” then remind them again at 5 minutes and 2 minutes. Or you can say “5 more pushes on the swing” or “2 more pages in the book.” Even if they do not fully understand time, the reminders help them prepare.

Give yourself extra time: Transitions can take longer than you expect, so try not to rush. When you are calm, your child is more likely to stay calm too.

Get your child’s attention before you speak: You can kneel down, look them in the eye, and use simple words. A gentle touch on their shoulder can help them focus on you.

Try a timer: You can say, “The timer will tell us when it’s time to stop.” This makes the change feel less like a command.

Make transitions fun: Try singing a song, doing a silly dance, or turning it into a game. For example, you might say, “Let’s see who can put their shoes on first!” Being playful can make your child more willing to move on.

Give choices: Let your child pick between two options (that are both acceptable to you), like “Do you want the blue shirt or the green shirt?” This helps them feel in control. Try not to ask questions when there is no real choice, like “Do you want to go to bed?” Instead, you can offer a choice of what book to read before bed.



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime



Routines help: When things happen the same way each day, children learn what to expect. This makes changes feel safer and easier.

Let them help: Let them turn off the TV or carry a toy to the next activity. A favorite stuffed animal or blanket can also help them feel comfortable during changes.

Talk them through it: Talk to your child before, during, and after transitions. Explain what is happening and why. For example, “After we clean up, we will go outside.” Then say, “Time to clean up,” and later, “Great job! Now we can go outside.”

Notice when your child cooperates: Say things like, “You listened right away. Great job!” Positive words help them learn.

Pay attention to your child’s feelings: You can say, “I know you feel sad when we leave the park.” This shows you understand, even if the plan does not change.

Stay calm and kind: Avoid threats, as they can make children more upset. Be consistent with your words and routines so your child knows what to expect. If your child doesn’t cooperate, help them. For example, you might firmly (but kindly) pick them up and put them in the car seat when it’s time to go to child care.

With time, practice, and patience,
your child will get better at handling transitions.

Have more questions? Talk to your baby’s healthcare provider
or one of the professionals supporting your family.

Text **SPARKS** to **274 448**

Receive messages like this on your phone

©2026 by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. All rights reserved.