# Supporting Transitions within the School Day

Students encounter many transitions in the school environment. There are major transitions that most students experience, including those from kindergarten to primary school, between grades, into high school, and beyond. There are also micro daily classroom transitions that occur, such as moving from one lesson, space, or event to another during the school day. These smaller transitions can happen several times a day and they can be simple, contained within the classroom, or more complicated, with a need to change locations and the collecting or swapping of books and equipment. Students may experience as many as 15 to 20 transitions between activities each day that can collectively consume up to 70 minutes of instructional time. The nature of Language Disorder is such that transitions can be extremely stressful for students, no matter what their age or how big or small the transition may be.

**Keywords:** *transition, change, emotional regulation, social emotional skills*

### Why can change be difficult for students with a Language Disorder?

Many students with Language Disorder can be challenged by change because they find it difficult to predict and anticipate future events and situations. This is partly because students with Language Disorder can find it challenging to identify and respond to natural cues, interpret and generalise situations and communicate their concerns. Changes to the environment, routines and activities can appear to take place without any warning and therefore can be distressing, resulting in attempts to control or avoid the change.

### Stress Signals

In the context of transitions, students with Language Disorder may have difficulties receptively (i.e., understanding the language used for transitions) and with expressing themselves during transitions. This may contribute to these students becoming tense, stressed, or anxious, and they may react to this in several ways.

Some students may ask repetitive questions, as receiving the same answer each time can make them feel more secure in an environment or situation that they perceive as uncertain or challenging. Asking repeated questions may also reflect that the student has not gained all the

information they need to adequately process the change.

Some students who have difficulty with transitions may become withdrawn, stressed, or revert to topics of choice or interest to avoid the change. Others may become overly loud and increasingly agitated when dealing with changes. Some may attempt to 'take control' of the activity in an effort to predict the outcome or order of events.

**Strategies to support students with Language Disorder to achieve successful transitions**

It is important to consider ways to help students with Language Disorder cope with the inevitable changes that happen at school. Maintaining consistent routines where possible can increase predictability and minimise the stress of transitions. Preparing the student for a change in an activity by giving an advanced warning is another way to support the student.

Understanding the student, their learning strengths, and areas of needs can also help with planning the supports needed for them to process the language around transitions more effectively. It is also useful to present information visually as it provides a permanent point of reference which can decrease feelings of fear and insecurity.

The following strategies can support students with Language Disorder to manage transitions between tasks and activities.

- Know your students, their strengths, and challenges, and plan supports for transition times based on these.
- Provide warning of transitions.
- Provide instructions of upcoming change when the student is showing attention and, in a calm, regulated state.
- Use routine and structure to help the student predict what is required of them and what is likely to happen. Routines can be comforting and calming.
- Use visual cues such as a timetable, visual schedule or list of tasks to support understanding. Check the student can 'read' the schedule. Use symbols, words or images that mean something to the student and ensure the amount on the visual cue is appropriate for the student.
- Try to give the student a concrete time that the changes or transition will occur, for example "After we pack our bags/when we go to music/when I ring the bell/when I sing my change song…".
- Initially, introduce transitions that are positive and preferred by the student so that they may learn that change is not always bad but can in fact be a good thing, for example, "After you pack up, we can read your book".

- Present tasks with a visually clear beginning and end, such as a puzzle, shoe box or folder task which are practical and visually clear. This helps the student know when tasks are finished and supports the development of functional and independent transition skills.
- It may be necessary to keep reiterating the plan for the session so the student is continually reassured, for example saying, “First we have maths books, then puzzles, then we will choose something from our busy boxes”.
- Use a preferred item as a distractor during transition times. These are preferred quick activities or small objects that can be used to capture the attention of the student that they can engage with whilst moving from one activity/place to the next. For example, having the class snap their fingers while transitioning to the music room or providing students with an instrument (e.g., a maraca or clash symbols) when he or she reaches the destination.
- Manage the social demands of the task by reducing group size or providing a list to follow (minimising interactions with others).
- Adjust demands to ensure success. If transitions are difficult, start with one change of activity then a reward, break or choice.
- Progressively increase the demands. Add another job to the list (motivating job/activity last) and increase the complexity of the tasks or the length of time between preferred tasks.

**Want to learn more?**

To learn more about Language Disorder and how to support children and young people for whom language is their primary disorder, please **contact us**. Language Disorder Australia provides holistic, innovative and effective therapy, education and support services and has a transdisciplinary team of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, educators, psychologists and physiotherapists.

Contact: 1300 881 763 or **hello@languagedisorder.org.au**

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