



When It's Time to Change, You've Got to Rearrange: Improving Transitions

Adapted March 2018 by Meme Hieneman for Home & Community PBS by Meme Hieneman, John Hoch, & Tahra Cessna, Parenting Special Needs Magazine, 2014 (May/Jun), pp. 24-27.

We borrowed the first part of our title from an episode of the classic 70's show, the Brady Bunch, because adjusting to change forces you to rearrange. People face a variety of transitions in their day-to-day activities and lives in general. They can, however, be particularly challenging and frustrating for those with special needs because of difficulties with communication. You can use these steps and questions to guide you in a problem-solving process that may make transitions easier:

1. *Gather as much information as possible*

- **Setting:** What materials will available and how does the place look?
- **Schedule:** What activities and routines occur and how long do they take?
- **People:** Who will be there? How will they interact with the person?

2. *Create adjustments to ease the change*

- **Control:** What will the person be able to choose or control?
- **Familiarity:** Can you bring familiar items or activities to the new setting?
- **Previews:** Can you visit or share pictures/video of the new situation?
- **Exit strategy:** Can you plan a break or leave early when needed?

3. *Figure out what the person will need to learn*

- **Transitioning:** How will the person enter and exit the setting?

- **Participating:** What will he or she need to do in the activities?
- **Communicating:** How can the person express his or her needs?

4. *Teach the person new expectations and skills*

- **Say:** Can you explain in phrases or simple words?
- **Show:** Would it be helpful to show pictures or videos?
- **Rehearse:** Will the person role-play or watch demonstrations?
- **Do:** How about practicing the steps of activities?

5. *Reward small successes*

- **What:** What activities or items does the person particularly enjoy?
- **How:** Can you embed rewards in natural routines of the setting?

By gathering information regarding upcoming changes, making adjustments ahead of time, communicating expectations in a language the person can understand, and teaching skills that allow for them to cope, a person with disabilities can handle changes better. To re-word the Brady Bunch song: BEFORE it is time to change, YOU have to rearrange (the environment). See the stories of transition planning on the following page for examples.

Going Between Homes

Although Jimmy is living in a supported living apartment, he visits his family home regularly. He looks forward to the visits, as well as returning to his apartment afterward, but the transitions are stressful. Upon arrival to either home, Jimmy typically begins hitting his head and crying. His behavior upsets his parents, little sister, housemates, and support staff – so much that they are considering stopping the visits. Instead of simply making this decision, however, they decide to investigate what is occurring to maintain Jimmy’s behavior and make a different plan to manage the transitions.

When the team really examines the situation closely (i.e., by watching and talking about the patterns), they figure out a few things. First, Jimmy does not seem to know when to expect the transitions and how they fit into his typical activities. Second, the people in both settings tend to be busy with other things when Jimmy arrives, making it hard for them to attend to Jimmy’s needs. Third, Jimmy appears distressed that he has to leave some of his favorite belongings behind when leaving the homes. And finally, they discover that people’s expectations for Jimmy in each setting are very different, often leaving him confused.

With this information, the team commits to some changes. They create a calendar with pictures to display when family home visits will occur. The staff prepare Jimmy by reviewing the calendar every week and talking him through plans for packing, pick up, and moving between settings on the days transitions occur. They make sure someone is available to talk with Jimmy, sharing their plans and providing support, upon his arrival. And they ask Jimmy if he would like to take anything with him. Additionally, the team meets and creates shared expectations that include household rules and responsibilities (e.g., chores). With these changes, the home visits improve dramatically.



Starting a New Job

After weeks of searching, Anita and her employment coach find just the right job for her. She will be able to use her organizational skills and interacting with people in a relatively quiet office environment, working as a clerical assistant. This position may also pose challenges for Anita. Unlike her school and vocational experiences, daily events may be unpredictable and rules of social interaction in a work setting may not be obvious.

To prepare for starting the job, Anita and her employment coach spoke with other staff and observed office operations for a couple days. They learned that changes in routine were common. For example, the mail might arrive at different times with incomplete addresses, some of the items that needed to be filed might not fit clearly in particular categories, and interruptions and shifting priorities were the norm. In addition, they learned that professional decorum was very important, but that the expectations could be subtle. To clarify, Anita’s employment coach asked several staff members to share what they viewed as the “dos and don’ts” in the setting.

Using this information, Anita and her coach made a list of her responsibilities, routines that were likely to change, important timelines and deadlines, and situations that could be difficult. For each potentially challenging circumstance, they created possible strategies. These included things like finding something else to do and asking for clarification or help. They arranged for Anita to have time with people with whom she would work most closely so they could develop rapport. Her supervisor agreed that Anita would be allowed brief breaks (what she wanted to call “step-outs”) when she was frustrated and that she would give Anita positive feedback on her work. With these preparations, Anita blended in well – and was even able to propose some organizational changes that would improve the efficiency of the office. She celebrated her successful first week by inviting a coworker out for a slice of pie (Anita’s favorite food) after work.