



*Lucy Daniels*

*Center for Early Childhood*

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Trouble With Transitions**

Many very young children struggle with transitions: situations in which adults ask children to shift activities. We would like to offer some advice for how parents can help their 3- and 4-year-old master this important task.

**Children like to be part of decisions about them:** Difficult transitions are most likely to occur when the change of activity is imposed on the child, because all children wish to be active participants. Also, a child may not be at a satisfactory stopping point when the change is imposed.

A child may feel disoriented, unsettled, and even anxious if he or she cannot finish a game or resolve a fantasy play. To reduce anxiety, children use coping mechanisms. Some children become hostile or defiant, attempting to feel active and subdue the grown-up who is "causing" their anxiety in their estimation. Others "space out," pretending that they don't need to stop. Some "cooperate" but dawdle, remaining connected with their play and indirectly expressing resentment. Yet others seek more help than they might actually need with the transition, keeping peace at all costs and avoiding the problematic options of anxiety or hostility. These behaviors are most constructively understood as the child's efforts to cope. Some parents may mistakenly interpret this behavior as the child's way to control or manipulate because they "enjoy showing who is boss."

Parents will be able to be most helpful to their child when they understand their child's perspective. Children use these coping behaviors because they

feel unable to tolerate their emotions. They would be more cooperative with transitions if they could manage their emotions better. The following is an illustration:

*Laurie, age four, was visiting her best friend, Joan. When her mother arrived for pick-up, Laurie giggled and yelled that she was going to stay and mommy should go home. Laurie's mother said that she understood that Laurie did not want to stop playing, and that it was hard to say goodbye to Joan. Laurie's mother suggested that the mothers and children have a good-bye tea party. Laurie and Joan leaped at the opportunity to serve their mothers "tea." The final parting was difficult but manageable, and Laurie left with a feeling of success.*

Laurie's mother offered her daughter the fun of a tea party to ease the pain of leaving and a chance to be active (serve tea). Laurie also had the opportunity to leave her friend gradually and to reconnect with Mommy as she gathered her resources for leaving. Her mother offered a middle ground between defiance and defeated compliance, because Laurie was not able to find this middle ground by herself. With such helpful modeling, Laurie will learn this skill; perhaps when she is six, she will be able to ask for "just two more minutes," and wrap things up on her own.

**Verbalizing emotions:** It can be helpful to children when their parents identify the emotions that they are struggling with during a transition. The following illustrates how one parent helped their child to verbalize emotions:

*Three year-old Nicholas did not want to stop playing and come inside his house. He called his mother a poo-head and ran away giggling. Recognizing that Nicholas had responded with resentment to the pain of the transition, and that he was running away and giggling because he was anxious about having called his mother a poo-head, Nicholas' mother caught him. She said, "I know you are angry about having to come inside, but it was not all right to call me a poo-head. Next time you can tell me*

*that you don't want to come inside. That way, Nicholas, you can let me know that you are angry, and you won't have to be worried about calling me a name." On the next occasion, Nicholas yelled at the top of his lungs that he did not want to come in. Although his mother continued to insist that Nicholas come in the house, she accepted this replacement of denigrating words with yelling as an important temporary step that did not require comment for the time being.*

**Preparation:** Advance preparation also helps a child with transitions. For example, a parent might tell their child that she or he will need to clean up in a few minutes. Such preparation will help a child to feel more active, because the transition will not be a surprise. Offering choices will also help a child feel more active; perhaps they can choose to put away just the puzzle or just the book. The following illustrates this kind of preparation:

*Three year-old Jill was building a Lego house. Her mother had given Jill several "warnings" that they would soon be leaving to visit Grandmother. Seeing Jill's frantic efforts to finish, her mother suggested that perhaps Jill could put the beds in the house, put the Lego people to sleep, and ask an animal stuffy to watch the house and keep it safe. The Lego family could pretend that they were camping. When it was time to go, Jill furnished the bedroom, put her Lego people to sleep, and arranged her lamb to watch the unfinished house. Mommy put a Kleenex over the Lego people "to keep them warm," and Jill and Mommy departed in good spirits.*

Jill's mother thoughtfully helped Jill prepare by providing warnings as well as solutions for the problem of leaving an unfinished house without a roof and leaving people without a finished house to live in. Her mother understood that the Lego house was more than an incomplete task for Jill; it was an unfinished emotional interaction between Jill and her doll people. Respectfully communicating her understanding of the meaning of the situation for Jill, her mother suggested ways that Jill could protect her unfinished house and

homeless family. Jill's mother allowed her to reflect on these ideas, to make them her own, and to eventually carry them out.

Parents are most helpful when they see transitions through their child's eyes, as times when their daughter or son is challenged to resolve an emotional situation. Of course, transitions can be messy and try parental patience, and there will be times that a parent will just have to put their foot down. However, parents will be rewarded for their patience and effort by the progress their child will make toward emotional sturdiness.