

Transitions, Routines, and Rituals: What are They and Why Do They Matter?

From the moment a child is born, they experience a significant change in their environment or experience, also known as a transition. After leaving the womb, they take their first breath and begin feeding, no longer relying on the placenta for oxygen or nutrients. While this transition is significant, early childhood is filled with many others.

To support families in navigating transitions, Trying Together developed the following family resource. It includes information on transitions, routines, rituals, and strategies families can use to help their children work through changes in routine successfully.

What is a transition?

In early childhood, the term “transition” refers to situations in which children need to move from one environment, activity, or experience to another. Common transitions include:

- shifting from a state of energized excitement to a state of sleepy calm for bed,
- moving from home-based parental care or child care to Kindergarten,
- moving to a new house, neighborhood, or state, and
- losing a loved one through death, divorce, or separation.

It can be hard for young children to navigate these transitions, especially when they include unfamiliar things. Although it may not always seem like it, children crave consistency. In fact, they thrive when they have it. So it is understandable that when something changes their day-to-day experience or challenges them to switch from something they like to something they do not like, they are going to resist or feel hesitant.



These transitions often include multiple steps as well, which can confuse or overwhelm children in the moment. That is why it is important to talk to children about the transition before it happens. That way, they know what to expect and have time to prepare.



What can families do to support children during transitions?

Families can navigate and work through transitions together by:

- creating a consistent family schedule that includes routines and rituals,
- describing what the transition will look like and how it may feel,
- asking your child how they are feeling and what they want to know,
- using vocal visual timers to let children know when a transition is coming,
- offering choices to children when possible to give them a sense of control,
- adding playfulness to your transition through song, dance, rhymes, or movement, and
- teaching children mindfulness strategies like belly breathing or mindful coloring.

What are routines and rituals?

One way to add consistency into your child's life is through a family schedule. These schedules typically consist of several routines throughout the day, such as

morning routines, bedtime routines, and everything in between. They are made up of individual action steps that need to be followed to complete a larger goal, such as getting ready for bed, taking a bath, or going to school. These routines are critical to a child's wellbeing, and it is important that their daily schedule remains as consistent as possible each day.

However, another element to consider is the addition of rituals. While rituals are similar to routines, the difference between them is the intention behind the action. For example, if your goal is to simply get ready for bed, you might bathe your child, change them into pajamas, brush their teeth, and tuck them into bed. That would be considered their nighttime routine.

A nighttime ritual, on the other hand, adds meaning to daily actions by fully focusing on the experience and fostering a sense of belonging. For example, bathing before bed could include a simple play activity while in the bath followed by a gentle baby massage and attentive, loving interactions as you change them into their pajamas. Instead of focusing on completing the action, rituals focus on the connection between caregiver and child.

Why are family rituals important?

According to the Evergreen Psychotherapy Center,

children from families with meaningful rituals do better academically and socially. In fact, in addition to enhancing a child's sense of belonging, family routines and rituals:

- improve emotional self-control and reduce stress;
- increase trust, comfort, and a sense of security;
- reinforce family stability and identity; and
- strengthen caregiver-child relationships.

Examples include family mealtime, cultural traditions, morning snuggles, a special handshake during drop-off, and more. To learn more, visit: bit.ly/evergreen-center or bit.ly/rituals-au

Questions to Consider

Does my family have a consistent schedule or routine?

How am I preparing my child for this transition?

How can I make sure my child feels safe, loved, heard, and valued?

Am I allowing space for my child to express their feelings, thoughts, and opinions?

How can I incorporate mindfulness into our daily lives?



Additional Resources

Developmentally Appropriate Parenting Series

Developmentally Appropriate Parenting is a family resource content series developed by Trying Together as an effort to empower caregivers to create high-quality experiences at the earliest stages of their child's life. To learn more, visit:

tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website features information on building family routines, creating rules, and communicating with children. To learn more, visit the CDC website:

bit.ly/cdc-routines

Raising Children Network

The Raising Children Network website features articles on family rituals, routines, and more with content specific to children at every age level. To learn more, visit: bit.ly/rituals-au

Montessori in Real Life

Montessori in Real Life has a blog piece on tackling transitions with a toddler. Additionally, their website features blog posts on transitioning from naptime to quiet time, creating a daily rhythm, and more. To learn more, visit: bit.ly/toddler-transitions

To learn more, visit: tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources

