Smooth Transitions

Helping Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder Navigate the School Day

Kara Hume, Melissa Sreckovic, Kate Snyder, and Christina R. Carnahan

Mr. Wright, a special educator, and Ms. Gomez, a general educator, were co-teachers in a fifth-grade classroom. A month into the new school year, they recognized that their classroom was not functioning as smoothly as they had hoped. Mr. Wright and Ms. Gomez were comfortable differentiating the curriculum to meet the academic needs of their learners. However, this year, one of their students was struggling. Sara, a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), was academically on grade level. However, she was not participating in lessons or interacting with her peers at recess and frequently ended up in tears during the school day. The teachers knew that they needed to make some changes to better support Sara. After collecting data for several days, Mr. Wright and Ms. Gomez recognized that the frequent transitions during their daily class schedule presented a significant challenge for Sara. Transitions often led to a series of time-consuming, reactionary strategies to help Sara get back on task, ultimately affecting the quantity of instruction that she received and the overall quality of her day.

All students transition from one activity to another and from one setting to another throughout the day. Whether at home, at school, or in the workplace, transitions occur naturally and frequently, requiring students to stop an activity, move from one location to another, and begin something new. In school, students are expected to navigate different types of transitions every day, including those between instructors, subjects, and instructional formats, as well as classrooms. Despite the routines that many teachers develop to facilitate efficient transitions and maximize instructional time, many learners with ASD continue to struggle with change during the day. As a result, these students require even more structure and thoughtful planning to be successful. Box 1 describes how the learning characteristics of students with ASD may affect transitions during the school day.

Transition supports can be implemented to help assist students with ASD during transitions. Transition supports are techniques used to support students with ASD using changes in or disruptions to activities, settings, or routines. These supports increase predictability for students with ASD and create positive transition routines. For students with ASD, using transition supports may reduce the amount of time that it takes to transition, increase appropriate behavior during transitions, facilitate less reliance on adult prompting, and encourage successful participation in school and community outings (Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007). There is a four-step sequence for implementing transition supports for students with ASD: identifying problematic transitions, selecting appropriate transition supports, implementing transition supports, and collecting data and problem solving. Each step includes guiding questions that can assist school teams in supporting students with ASD.

**Step 1: Identify Problematic Transitions**

Guiding questions: What are the transition expectations during the school day? What data support the assumption that transitions are presenting a challenge for the learner? What are the specific behaviors of concern? How frequently are they occurring? When do they most often occur in relation to a transition (i.e., before, during, after)?

The first step requires assessing when, where, and with whom the challenging transitions occur. There are three types of transitions to consider and observe: transitions between staff members; transitions among activities, subjects, and instructional formats; and transitions between locations. Transitions between staff members occur when there is a change in who is providing instruction. Within
Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may demonstrate certain characteristics that affect the fluidity with which they transition throughout the day. Some students with ASD may have difficulties associated with changes in routine or environments, and they may have a need for “sameness” and predictability. Specifically, the unpredictability and uncertainty of transitional situations may cause anxiety for many students with ASD (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2005).

A variety of factors related to ASD may contribute to these difficulties during transitions, including problems in understanding verbal directives or explanations (Mesibov et al., 2005). For example, when a teacher announces that an activity is finished and then provides multistep directions related to upcoming activities, students with ASD may not comprehend all the verbal information. Students with ASD may also demonstrate challenges attending to a number of simultaneous stimuli or environmental cues (Marco, Hinkle, Hill, & Nagarajan, 2011).

Difficulty sequencing information and recognizing relationships among steps of an activity can affect transitions. Learners with ASD may not recognize subtle cues signaling a transition (e.g., students packing up their materials) and may not be prepared when it is time to move (Carnahan, Hume, Clarke, & Borders, 2009). In addition, students with ASD are likely to have restrictive patterns of behavior, which can be hard to disrupt and which may create transition challenges.

### Box 1. Characteristics of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Impact on Transitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder</th>
<th>Impact on Transitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students with ASD demonstrate restricted patterns of behavior that can disrupt transitions.</td>
<td>Students with ASD may have difficulty sequencing information and recognizing relationships among steps of an activity, which can affect transitions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Step 2: Select Appropriate Transition Supports

**Guiding questions:** What are the existing structures and supports to
Table 1. Data Related to Sara’s Daily Morning Transitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitions</th>
<th>Type of transition</th>
<th>Frequency data*</th>
<th>Other considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast to morning warm-up activity</td>
<td>Classroom location, building location, staff member</td>
<td>3 days; after transitions</td>
<td>In classroom, Sara has to put jacket and backpack away in the classroom before sitting down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning warm-up activity to math</td>
<td>Content/activity, staff member</td>
<td>4 days; 2 during transition, 2 after transition; both days after occupational therapy</td>
<td>At 9:15 on Tuesday and Thursday, occupational therapist comes into classroom to work with Sara.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math to music</td>
<td>Content/activity, classroom location, building location, staff member</td>
<td>1 day; before transition (and after overhearing that there was a substitute teacher in music)</td>
<td>In classroom, Sara has to put away her work and line up before going to the music building; music is a highly preferred activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Frequency data refer to how many times across 5 days she cried, put her head on desk, or was unresponsive to direct questions just before, during, or after the transition.

facilitate transitions? Are they effective? How do you know? What additional transition supports may be helpful to facilitate transitions?

Transition supports can be used before, during, and after a transition and can be presented to students by visual or auditory means. A number of supports to assist students with ASD during transitions have been explored in the research, including visual supports (e.g., priming, cueing, visual schedules) and auditory supports (e.g., advance warning, high-probability request, behavioral momentum; Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007). These supports can be used within and across settings. Many of these supports may also be useful for other learners who have difficulties with transitions; however, the examples we describe were provided to students with ASD.

Visual Transition Supports

A variety of visual supports can be used to help decrease challenging behavior, reduce latency (i.e., the amount of time that it takes to complete a transition), and promote independence during transitions. **Priming and cueing are two supports that can be implemented before a transition occurs.** Priming allows students to preview an activity or event before it occurs so that it becomes more predictable (Werner, Vismara, Koegel, & Koegel, 2006). Pictures, videos, and stories are helpful tools for priming students. For example, a paraprofessional at the middle school met 12-year-old Tova at her school bus each morning and presented photographs of the morning transition routine (e.g., hang up backpack, get out homework, sit at desk). This picture priming helped to prepare Tova for the morning routine so that she was able to be more independent during those transitions.

**Video priming may be effective for students who like to watch video.** This type of priming can be implemented using televisions, computers, and handheld devices (e.g., iPod, personal digital assistant, PDA). First, select the challenging transition. For example, Adam was a 7-year-old student who struggled transitioning from the classroom to the gymnasium. During this transition, he often flopped on the floor, complained, and refused to move. Next, videotape the student successfully transitioning, and show the video to him or her before the transition. This may require creative editing or combining clips from several transitions. Adam’s second-grade teacher videotaped him transitioning successfully one afternoon and then played this video for him on an iPad before future transitions to the gym. His teacher found that video priming was helping to decrease Adam’s inappropriate behavior during this transition. Researchers report similar success with video priming (e.g., Cihak, Fahrenkrog, Ayres, & Smith, 2010). Several mobile applications, or apps, for Apple iOS devices are available to assist in creating videos to prime students before an activity (see Table 2). When using a handheld device such as an iPod, students have the flexibility to take the video with them to the next activity and replay it as needed.

Written or picture stories also can help prime students to transition to novel events. These stories, sometimes called social stories, present concepts and situations in a visual format that may increase understanding for students with ASD (Gray, 2000). Social stories describe a situation, identify common social cues, and demonstrate desired behaviors and responses. These stories can be read out loud with a student before a transition. Visual components, such as a photographs or illustrations, take advantage of the visual processing strengths of many students with ASD. Cedric was a high school student who had difficulty transitioning from the computer lab back to his homeroom classroom. His case manager was concerned about how long his transition was taking and...
Table 2. Apps for Transition Supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>App</th>
<th>Transition support</th>
<th>Special features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pictello</td>
<td>Priming (social stories), visual schedules</td>
<td>Upload own pictures, choose from many voice options, record own voice; [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iPROMPTS</td>
<td>Visual schedules, priming (social stories), choice prompts</td>
<td>Upload own pictures, choose pictures from a library of stock photographs, download pictures from the Internet, see passage of time with countdown timer; [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Then Visual Schedule HD</td>
<td>First/then boards, visual schedules, priming (social stories), task analyses, choice boards, timers</td>
<td>Upload own pictures, choose pictures from a library of preselected pictures, search Internet for pictures, use audiovisual prompting, check steps off as completed or drag and drop them to another column or to an envelope, set interval timer for each task within a visual schedule; [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Scheduler</td>
<td>Visual schedules, priming (videos)</td>
<td>Create picture or video schedules, share schedules with others, use pass code function to prevent users from skipping to preferred activities within a schedule; [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Timer</td>
<td>Timer</td>
<td>See the passage of time, alarm or vibrate options; [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vis Timer</td>
<td>Timer, advance auditory warning</td>
<td>See the passage of time, choose color of time dial, receive 1-min warning before time is up, use variety of sound options; [link]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VoCal</td>
<td>Auditory cue</td>
<td>Be reminded of an event in one's own voice (e.g., &quot;Time to go to the library&quot;); [link]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the instructional time that he was missing as he slowly moved from one end of the high school building to the other. She created a story using PowerPoint that described how he could move quickly from one location to the next. She reviewed this with Cedric on his iTouch before his transition from the computer room and included several comprehension questions to ensure his understanding. After introducing the social story, Cedric's transition times decreased, comparable to results found in similar studies (e.g., Schneider & Goldstein, 2010). For more information about how to write a social story, see Carol Gray’s website: [link]. A number of apps can assist in creating social stories, as described in Table 2; for a description of implementation strategies for video and print priming, see Box 2.

**Cuing** students with ASD before a transition can also be a beneficial strategy (Sterling Turner & Jordan, 2007). In many settings, a simple **verbal cue** is used to signal an upcoming transition (e.g., “Put your math away”). **Another approach is to allow technology to provide the cues.** For example, the VoCal app allows users to record a reminder using their own voice and to set a time for the reminder to go off. Using this app, students, teachers, or parents can set the time and message to cue students to transition throughout the day. For example, a parent could set a reminder for the student to bring home any homework at the end of the day. Verbal cues alone may not be the most effective way to signal a transition to students with ASD, because verbal information may not be easily processed or understood. However, cues can be verbal, visual, or both—for example, a teacher says, “It’s time to go to the library” while handing the student a card with a picture of the library.
Box 2. Implementation Steps for Video- and Print-Based Priming

Video Priming
1. Determine whether the student might respond well to priming through videos.
2. With a video camera, go to the location, and walk through the steps that will be required during the transition (e.g., taking off the coat, hanging up the backpack, finding the appropriate desk). While taping, provide a simple narration about the process and requirements. Recommended video length: 1 to 4 minutes (Schreibman, Whalen, & Stahmer, 2000).
3. After completing the video, view it with the student several times over a period of days before making the identified transition.

Print Priming
1. Determine whether the student might respond well to priming through print, and assess the student’s comprehension level so that the story is written appropriately.
2. The story should briefly describe the upcoming transition and activities that will occur. It may include photographs or illustrations to assist the student’s understanding.
3. Read the story to or with the student consistently over a period of days, and provide a copy for use at each pertinent location (e.g., home, school, work).

Power cards are visual cues that support transitions by using a student’s interest to increase a desired behavior (Gagnon, 2001). Power cards typically include a picture of a student’s favorite character or topic along with a written script about the desired behavior. Yuke was an elementary student who had difficulty transitioning to work with the student teacher. The team decided to use her love of Hello Kitty to create a power card with pictures of Hello Kitty and text that read “Hello Kitty wants Yuke to work with a new teacher. Hello Kitty is proud of Yuke when she works with a new teacher.” The power card was read with Yuke before her transition, and, over time, appropriate behavior during transitions increased. Research indicates similar results (Angell, Nicholson, Watts, & Blum, 2011). Although cueing has been an effective strategy to improve transitions, providing the cue immediately before the transition occurs may not provide enough time for some students with ASD to shift their attention from one task to the next. Allowing more time and providing more than one concrete cue (e.g., visuals) may better prepare students with ASD for upcoming transitions.

In addition to providing supports before a transition occurs, supports such as visual schedules can be implemented before and during a transition. The consistent use of visual schedules for students with ASD can assist them in successfully transitioning (Hume, 2008). Visual schedules sequentially display pictures or images that represent a student’s schedule or a list of tasks that a student is expected to perform (Banda & Grimmett, 2008). Visual schedules allow students to view an upcoming activity, have a better understanding of the sequence of activities that will occur, and increase overall predictability. A number of studies have indicated that visual schedules used in classrooms and home settings for students with ASD can decrease time and challenging behaviors during transitions as well as increase independence (Banda & Grimmett, 2008; Pierce, Spriggs, Gast, & Luscre, 2013). Abby was a 4-year-old preschool student who often cried when her favorite activities were finished. She required physical prompts to move on to the next activity. The staff hypothesized that Abby might be helped to transition if she could “see” where she was going next, so they created a visual schedule using objects that represented where she would be going during the school day. For example, a puzzle piece represented the fine-motor skills activity area; a plate represented the snack area; and a paintbrush represented the art area. As Abby transitioned from activity to activity, she was given the object to carry with her and to serve as a visual reminder and support. Staff noted that although Abby still cried at the beginning of the transition, after using the visual schedule and handling her the object representing her next activity, the crying diminished, and she was able to move with fewer prompts from the team.

Although visual schedules can be created with objects, photos, drawing, words, or other mediums (e.g., PDAs, iPhone, Blackberry). Using a PDA, students can watch a video prompt or see a picture of the task that they need to complete and, when finished, return to the PDA to view the next task (Mechling & Savidge, 2011). A number of apps can assist in developing visual schedules (see Table 2). For example, the app First Then Visual Schedule HD allows users to create visual schedules by choosing pictures from the Internet, a preselected library, or their own photographs. Users have the options to mark their completion by checking off the task, dragging it to another column, or using drag-and-drop to put it into an envelope. Using a consistent visual strategy to indicate when it is time to transition is beneficial to students with ASD because concrete cues can reduce confusion and help in developing productive transition routines. Table 3 provides an overview of other visual strategies that can be used before and during a transition.

All learners, regardless of whether they have autism or not, go through periods when they need more or less
### Table 3. Visually Based Supports to Aid Transitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>What Is It?</th>
<th>How Do I Use It?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual timer</td>
<td>A visual timer helps a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) &quot;see&quot; how much time remains before an upcoming transition.</td>
<td>A visual timer is set for a determined length of time, and the student is able to watch time elapse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual countdown system</td>
<td>A visual countdown system helps a student &quot;see&quot; how much time remains before a transition. Unlike the visual timer strategy, no specific time increment is used. This tool is beneficial if the timing of the transition needs to be flexible.</td>
<td>A 3-2-1 numbered countdown is one example. Starting from the left, numbers are revealed by a team member. Once the final item is revealed, the student is taught that it is time to transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual cue (transition object, photo, icon, or words)</td>
<td>A visual cue during a transition can decrease challenging behavior and increase compliance with transition demands. It may be beneficial to show only one piece of visual information at a time.</td>
<td>A team member presents the visual cue to student, who then carries it during the transition and places it in a designated area in the next location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First/Then</td>
<td>Some students with ASD may benefit from seeing a sequence of two activities so that they can better predict what will take place during the day.</td>
<td>This allows students to see what activity they are currently completing and what will occur next. It should move with students as they transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual schedule (VS) and related transition card</td>
<td>Some students with ASD may use a VS that includes the sequence of the day's activities rather than only one or two activities at a time. A transition card provides a visual cue indicating that it is time to transition to the schedule to determine the next activity.</td>
<td>When it is time for student to access the VS, present him or her with a visual cue that means &quot;go check your VS.&quot; Student is taught to carry the cue to the VS, match the cue in a designated location, and refer to the VS for next activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished box</td>
<td>A finished box is a designated location where students place items that they are finished with when it is time to transition. A &quot;To finish later&quot; box may be appropriate if a student has not had time to complete an activity.</td>
<td>The box may be located in the student's work area, as well as in any center of the classroom or room in the home, and it can be labeled with a word or a visual cue to indicate its purpose.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
support in specific areas. For students with ASD, the same is true, and it is unlikely that one support will work for all students in a classroom. Thus, adapting these strategies to meet individual needs is critical for success. Recognizing the types of symbols that a learner understands, the number of materials with which a learner can work, and the location of the supports is critical for modifying these supports.

For students who have more significant support needs or who are younger (e.g., preschoolers), concrete objects, actual photographs, or colored visuals may be necessary. When using a first/then or other visual schedule, a visual cue (e.g., a transition card), or a countdown system, it may be helpful to use an object-based system. These learners may be overwhelmed if too much information is presented at one time, thus needing just one or a few activities presented at a time. For example, a student may have a first/then schedule to indicate that he or she will first read a book, then go to lunch. A small board book may represent reading on the schedule, with a plastic or toy fork representing lunch. When reading is finished, the student removes the book, placing it in a finished bin or on a shelf. Then, she or he takes the fork from the schedule and carries it while walking to lunch. In addition, placing the visual supports in a consistent, central, and visible location in each setting may assist students in using supports successfully during transitions.

For older students or students with ASD who require less support, using more sophisticated symbols (e.g., black-and-white symbols or printed words) and longer sequences of visual information that emphasize independence is critical. These supports are often portable, moving with the student across the school day (e.g., on a handheld device, taped into a daily planner). For example, a high school student: Included in general education classes may still need substantial transition supports. However, these supports will likely be embedded in his or her paper-based or electronic calendar. At the end of each class, the student may open the calendar for a reminder of where to go, any specific rules related to the next class, and a list of materials to have available. These lists can easily be printed on sticky notes and placed into a school calendar or embedded in a phone. In addition, finished work or materials can be placed in folders stored in desks or binders. For these learners, the transition supports also often help increase organization and independence across the school day.

Auditory Transition Supports

Auditory supports can also be effective in preparing students for transitions. The simplest approach is providing a verbal advance warning, such as "In 2 minutes, we will go to music." (Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007). Address the verbal warning specifically to the student with ASD as well as to the larger group. Other auditory cues to signal a transition or end of an activity—such as, timers, music, or singing—may assist in creating faster and easier transitions. Advance warnings can also be provided via apps. For example, one feature of the app iPrompts is a countdown timer that includes a picture of the activity as well as a bar that empties as time expires. Neel was a high school student who struggled with transitions to a new activity (e.g., literature circle) if he had not finished his previous activity (e.g., word study). He often insisted on finishing what he was doing and refused to transition. His English II teacher used a countdown timer projected onto the SMART Board to cue the whole class about time remaining, allowing Neel to easily see how much time he had left in the current activity. Neel’s teacher reported that the timer helped him prepare to stop working and to transition when time had elapsed (Zamfir, Tedesco, & Reichow, 2012).

High-probability requests are another auditory support strategy effective at decreasing time and increasing independence during transitions. A high-probability request involves a series of directions that involve tasks the student has previously completed independently; this is quickly followed by a more difficult, low-probability directive (Banda & Kubina, 2006). A high-probability request is a directive or question that a student is likely to follow or respond to appropriately. High-probability requests may include "Give me a high five," "Touch your nose," and "Pick up the pencil." High-probability requests will vary by student depending on what is interesting and motivating to the student. A low-probability request is a directive or question that a student is not likely to follow or respond to appropriately. These may include requests to complete less appealing or more difficult activities or to respond to complex or challenging questions. Low-probability requests also vary by student but may include, for example, "Clean up," "Time to go," or "Start your work."

Research has shown that an easy-hard sequence seems to decrease resistance to following through with difficult tasks, establishing behavioral momentum (Banda & Kubina, 2006). Jalen was a middle school student who often ignored his teacher or engaged in challenging behavior during three of his morning transitions: to his locker, to emptying his backpack, and to arranging his visual schedule. His teacher identified a number of questions to which Jalen could easily respond, such as "Did you watch football yesterday?" and "How was your day?" Several of these requests for responses were given before Jalen was asked to comply with the transition task (e.g., "Please empty your backpack"). The teacher collected data that demonstrated a decrease in overall transition time with fewer prompts during transitions (Banda & Kubina, 2006). Presenting a series of high-probability requests before requesting a student transition (a low-probability request) may be a necessary strategy for students with ASD during transition.

Determining Appropriate Supports

Transition supports offer a menu of options for teachers to consider when
choosing supports to help students with transitions. Team members may consider the following when choosing supports:

- the staff's understanding of and familiarity with various transition supports (e.g., does the team know what a visual schedule is?),
- the resources available to help create the supports (e.g., is technology available for video priming?),
- the student's interests (e.g., would including a favorite character be helpful?), and
- the student's needs (e.g., review the data gathered in Step 1).

These considerations allow team members to select the best supports to meet the needs of each student.

Ms. Gomez and Mr. Wright looked through various online resources to gain an understanding about supports that might be appropriate for Sara that they could incorporate into their classroom. Some of the sites they visited included Autism Internet Modules (http://www.autismininternetmodules.org) and National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders (http://www.autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/). After familiarizing themselves with transition supports, Mr. Wright and Ms. Gomez began to analyze the transitions they identified. Keeping in mind what they understood about Sara’s learning characteristics, they revisited their transition matrix to identify appropriate supports that would be appropriate for Sara’s learning needs (see Table 4).

**Step 3: Implementation of Supports**

*Guiding questions: What information do you have about the learner to help plan for implementation of appropriate transition supports (e.g., responds best to visual directions, manages information best when provided in small group setting)? How will the new strategy be introduced to the learner? Who will provide this instruction? When will this instruction be provided?*

The next step is to determine how the transition supports will be introduced to the student, who will introduce the strategy, and when it will be introduced and used. This step is based on the age and support needs of the student with ASD. For example, older students may prefer supports that are less noticeable to their peers—a visual schedule presented on an iPod or attached to one’s agenda rather than on a sheet of construction paper posted on one’s desk. The modality of the support is based on the learning characteristics of the student. For example, if a timer is needed to support a student with transitions and the student responds best to visual supports, a visual countdown timer may be the best approach. Conversely, if the student responds well to auditory supports, a timer that provides a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitions within morning schedule</th>
<th>Transition support to implement</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All transitions</td>
<td>Timer to provide 5-min warning to class that a transition is approaching</td>
<td>[Image of timer]</td>
<td>Sara can get anxious and cry when there is little to no warning before transitions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast to morning warm-up activity</td>
<td>Written visual cue hanging at her locker to clarify each step of the transition</td>
<td>√ Jacket off √ Hang up backpack √ Sit down</td>
<td>Sara sometimes struggles to manage large sequences of information (all of the steps required when arriving in the classroom).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning warm-up activity to math</td>
<td>Small first/then with photo of current/next instructor on her desk</td>
<td>[Image of first and then]</td>
<td>Sara sees a lot of instructors throughout the day and does not always remember whom she will be working with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math to music</td>
<td>A “finish later” folder in her desk</td>
<td>[Image of folder]</td>
<td>Sara becomes frustrated when she is unable to complete her math work before transitioning to the next activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 4. Transition Supports Identified for Sara |
Jamie is a seventh-grade student with autism spectrum disorder at Rocky Ridge Middle School. She is served primarily in a self-contained class but moves frequently around the school building to attend specials, inclusive opportunities, lunch, and recess. She works with multiple adults, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and therapists. At the beginning of the school year, her teacher, Ms. Rogers, noticed Jamie getting frustrated and often crying as a result of the frequent transitions across the school day. Ms. Rogers and Ms. Wagner, the classroom paraprofessional, decided to work through the four-step transition process to help Jamie better navigate the transitions throughout the day.

**Step 1: Identify Problematic Transitions**

Ms. Rogers and Ms. Wagner made a matrix and wrote down all transitions through which Jamie navigates each day. They identified transitions among staff members (Jamie works with an occupational therapist and speech language pathologist twice a week), activities in the special education classroom, and locations (from class to physical education, recess, and the cafeteria). They collected data across 5 days, taking notes and recording how frequently she demonstrated frustration behaviors during each transition. After 1 week, they met to select appropriate transition supports.

**Step 2: Select Appropriate Transition Supports**

After reviewing the data, Mrs. Rogers and Ms. Wagner noticed which transitions were most problematic for Jamie: that in the morning into the classroom, those between buildings, and those between instructors. They decided to implement a social story for the morning transition, a visual schedule with removable pictures for building transitions, and a first/then board for transitions between instructors.

**Step 3: Implementation of Supports**

Ms. Rogers and Ms. Wagner created a social story using iPrompts. They used pictures of Jamie to illustrate the social story. Jamie viewed the social story every morning in the car on the way to school. Next, they created a visual schedule of each building transition on a small board at the front of the room. On the board was a picture of Jamie working (special education class), a picture of her eating (lunch), a picture of her on the track (recess), and a picture of her shooting a basketball (physical education). When it was time for a building transition, Jamie would move the picture to a box located next to the board. Finally, on days when Jamie received instruction from the occupational therapist or speech language pathologist, a first/then board was put on her desk. Ms. Wagner facilitated the use of these transition supports by prompting Jamie to look at her visual schedule, and she reviewed the first/then board with Jamie each day.

**Step 4: Collect Data and Problem Solve for Successful Transitions**

After getting the transition supports in place, Ms. Rogers and Ms. Wagner collected data again to determine if the transition support strategies were working. Although they noticed a few “hiccups” when there was an unanticipated change in the schedule, they were pleased with how quickly Jamie positively responded to the transition supports.

The beeping noise may be more effective.

| **Table 3** provides additional examples of how to individualize implementation of supports based on student age and abilities. |

In addition to determining how the transition supports will be implemented, it is important to determine who will implement the supports and when. For example, if a social story will be used for the morning transition, who will read and review it with the student (e.g., the parents, a general or special education teacher, a peer)?

After completing their analyses and problem solving, Mr. Wright and Ms. Gomez were satisfied that they had identified important supports that would make a significant difference for Sara. They decided that Mr. Wright would introduce the new transition supports to Sara and provide direct instruction about when and how they were to be used. The teachers decided to alternate responsibility for data collection based on who was serving as lead instructor. Feeling optimistic and enthusiastic about the potential of the supports that they identified, Ms. Gomez suggested that they also consider some classwide transition interventions that they could implement. Mr. Wright and Ms. Gomez agreed that an auditory “advance warning system” would be an easy but potentially powerful strategy that could benefit the entire class. In fact, Mr. Gomez thought that the strategy might help him begin to “switch gears,” as well as remind both teachers to have materials ready for the next activity. They decided that they would set a timer that would ring 5 minutes before the end of each period to serve as a transition alert. They also decided to use a first/then strategy with the entire class, which would be written on the whiteboard.

Mr. Wright and Ms. Gomez began using their new transition supports almost immediately. After approximately 1 week of instruction, implementation, and data collection, they were amazed by the impact that these small changes had on the overall function of their classroom. Although they were continually problem solving around what they began referring to as “hiccups” in Sara’s day (e.g., instructor absence, reluctance to put highly preferred activities in the “To finish later” folder), they noticed a significant improvement in her willingness and ease in moving from one activity or location to another. They were pleased with how these supports helped facilitate smooth transitions, and they noted an increase in instructional time, which they

Cole is a 10th-grade student with autism spectrum disorder at Cedar Oaks High School. Cole is educated all day in the general education classroom, excels academically, and enjoys playing computer games. Cole receives consultation services once a week from the special education teacher, Mr. Smugger. Ms. Feke, Cole’s case manager, noticed Cole displaying challenging behaviors during lunch (i.e., shoving students in the lunch line, running in the halls on the way to cafeteria). Ms. Feke met with Mr. Smugger to discuss these behaviors. Together they decided to work through the four-step transition support process to help Cole navigate the transition to the cafeteria.

Step 1: Identify Problematic Transitions
When Mr. Smugger and Ms. Feke met, they decided that it would be best to examine the classes before and after lunch to identify the challenging transitions. They observed for 1 week and split the observation times based on their schedules and availabilities. They collected data in a matrix during Cole’s honors literature class, lunch, and biology class, making notes and recording the types of transitions that occurred and how frequently challenging behaviors happened. After 1 week, they got together and went over their notes.

Step 2: Select Appropriate Transition Supports
When Ms. Feke and Mr. Smugger reviewed their data, they noticed that during honors literature, the class immediately exited for lunch when the bell rang, but Cole looked flustered and rushed to finish his work. The teacher told Mr. Smugger that the rest of the class finishes incomplete work the next morning, but Cole consistently tries to finish it before leaving for lunch. To help prepare Cole for lunch, they decided to (a) implement a timer to give him an advanced warning and (b) create a “To be finished later” box (a predictable place where Cole can put his incomplete work each day).

Step 3: Implementation of Supports
Ms. Feke and Mr. Smugger helped Cole use the timer on his watch, setting it for 5 minutes before the bell rang in honors literature. When the timer went off, Cole was instructed to finish the last sentence that he was reading/writing and put his work in the “To be finished later” box (just a file box on the teacher’s desk). Cole’s teacher assured him verbally that it was acceptable to put his incomplete work in that box each day. The box remained by his teacher’s desk, a location that Cole could easily see.

Step 4: Collect Data and Problem Solve for Successful Transitions
After getting the transition supports in place, Ms. Feke and Mr. Smugger collected data again to determine if the strategies were working. Cole immediately responded well to the timer and the “To be finished later” box but was observed shoving students in the lunch line. Ms. Feke and Mr. Smugger examined environmental factors that could be influencing Cole’s behavior and recognized how noisy the cafeteria line was. They thought that the noise might be influencing Cole’s behavior. Mr. Smugger approached Cole and suggested that he use the restroom before he goes to the cafeteria; that way, once he gets to the cafeteria, there would not be a line. Cole tried Mr. Smugger’s suggestion, and challenging behaviors in the lunchroom immediately decreased.

Attributed to a decrease in problem behaviors during transition.

Step 4: Collect Data and Problem Solve for Successful Transitions

Guiding questions: What ongoing monitoring strategies and data collection will help determine the effectiveness of an intervention? Who will collect this information and when?

It is important to continually collect data to determine if the transition support strategies are effective. Even when teachers carefully plan and implement transition strategies, difficulties may still occur. Team members may also need to consider adjusting the activities that students are transitioning to and from if transition difficulty continues. The length of an activity, its difficulty level, and the interest level of a student may contribute to transition challenges. Review these factors along with environmental factors that can contribute to transition difficulties. For example, if an area is too crowded, loud, overstimulating, or aversive (e.g., temperature of room is too hot or too cold, student dislikes instructor), students may resist transitioning or exhibit problem behavior. In addition, the sequence of activities may need to be reviewed. Team members may review activities required of the student throughout the day and categorize them as preferred, nonpreferred, or neutral. If the student has difficulty transitioning, it may be wise to strategically sequence certain activities, when possible, so that students are moving from nonpreferred activities to preferred activities and from preferred activities to neutral activities. Boxes 3 and 4 provide snapshots of the four-step process to identify, implement, and evaluate transition supports for students with ASD.

Final Thoughts

Making successful transitions across locations or activities can be difficult for students with ASD. Following the four steps outlined to identify problematic transitions, select appropriate supports (e.g., visual or auditory), implement supports, monitor progress, and problem solve should help students with ASD transition more smoothly from one activity or location to another, increase their independence, and successfully
participate in activities during the school day. These transition supports can also be implemented in settings outside school, allowing students to access new environments in the community (e.g., extracurricular activities, jobs). Implementing transition supports requires a relatively small investment of time and resources. The benefits of these supports include an improved quality in a student’s school experience as well as additional time for instruction.

References


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