

Helping Children to Manage Transitions

by John Hoffman

Moving children through transitions—like getting up and off to school in the morning—is one of the ongoing challenges of parenthood. Our tendency is to focus on compliance: getting children to do what we want, when we want by giving clear instructions, reminders, and warnings, often with increasingly raised voices.

Parents can use strategies as tools to help children get into the physiological and psychological state that makes it easier for them to comply with our instructions. Here are some examples.

- **Make transitions predictable, when possible.** Try to keep relatively consistent schedules at home (mealtimes, bedtime, waking up times, homework time, etc.). Go over any changes or special events in the daily schedule each morning so your child knows what is happening that day. Give a five to ten minute warning before a child has to leave an activity she is enjoying to get ready to do something else.
- **Help them wake up.** If your child finds it hard to get going in the morning, some physical activity may help him gear up for the day. This could include a few exercises, going for a walk, or even a brief physical game like Simon Says.
- **Use a timer.** If a child has to start practising piano, or get ready to go to a soccer game in fifteen minutes, try setting the timer. This helps to make the passage of time more real to young children, and it also often seems more “fair” to some children since it’s a machine counting down time, rather than Mom or Dad.
- **Try a change in routine.** Sometimes doing things in a different order can help. For example, if packing your child’s backpack after breakfast is a big hassle each day, the problem might be that your child finds it stressful to do the task at that time for some reason. Try doing most of the packing before breakfast or even the night before.
- **Offer an incentive (judiciously).** It’s not a good idea to bribe children into cooperation on a daily basis. But, let’s face it, if you’re late for work, you’re motivated to rush—but your child doesn’t share your urgency. In that case, small rewards like letting the child choose music to listen to in the car (or a toy to play with) or letting her choose what to have for dinner on Friday night may help motivate your child to hurry.