



# Teaching Transitions

## Techniques for Promoting Success *Between Lessons*

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Even in an otherwise well-functioning classroom, transitions may pose a challenge to teachers and students alike, as student misbehavior is more likely to occur and educational time can be wasted (Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 1998). In transitions, we demand a lot from students—we ask them to halt their current routine, perform a long chain of tasks, and initiate a new activity, all without breaking classroom rules. The following are some examples of not-so-effective transitions that we have observed over the past year:

- When lining up for recess, two students started pushing each other and lost their recess privileges.
- A class returning from lunch took 30 minutes and two discipline referrals before math instruction started.
- A teacher was reprimanded by several peers and her principal during a whole-school staff meeting for her

students' high noise level in the hallway.

Transitions can be particularly difficult for students with autism spectrum disorders (Winterman & Sapina, 2002), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Carbone, 2001), and other behavioral disorders. It is no surprise that children with behavioral challenges can experience difficulties during transitions (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Children who are easily distracted and overactive often have difficulty monitoring, managing, and directing their own behavior to successfully move from one routine to the next, especially when given detailed, multistep directions.

Adding to the confusion, many classrooms are full of implicit transition expectations—routines that teachers expect students to follow with no instruction. Some students pick up on subtle clues and teach themselves how to transition effectively. Students with

disabilities, however, are most likely to learn these routines by mistake—by failing to adhere to the hidden curriculum and being reprimanded. In addition, these expectations vary as students move from room to room.

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Rather than assuming that students know (or should know) how to transition appropriately, teachers can enhance their classroom behavior management with explicit instruction and

practice in behavioral expectations and routines (Darch, Kame'enui, & Crichlow, 2003). A growing body of evidence emphasizes the importance of using instructional procedures to teach social behavior (Gresham, 2002; Langland, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 1998; Todd, Haugen, Anderson, & Spriggs, 2002).

Fortunately, the strategies needed to teach behavioral expectations are the same as those that effective teachers already use to teach academic skills (Darch et al., 2003; Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988). These include careful preparation, planning, and design; effective delivery; opportunities to practice; ongoing assessment and evaluation; and performance feedback (Colvin, Kame'enui, & Sugai, 1993). Research suggests that providing clear structure, including specific rules and expectations, increases student attention and reduces hyperactive behaviors among children with and without ADHD (see Gardill, DuPaul, & Kyle, 1996).

Behavioral errors are corrected in the same manner as academic errors. From an instructional model, one might construe misbehavior either as a skill deficit ("can't do") or performance deficit ("won't do"); and both indicate a need for further instruction. Students with skill deficits may benefit from learning the behaviors, and students with performance deficits may benefit from practicing the behaviors to become fluent.

### Planning for Transitions

Successful transitions require careful planning, teaching, monitoring, and feedback (Sprick et al., 1998). Effective instruction about when and how to perform transitions is essential and may mitigate many problems associated with transitions. As educators, we know a great deal about how best to design and deliver behavioral instruction so that it is more likely to increase student compliance. In this article, we present four techniques to promote smooth transitions: teaching routines, precorrections, positive reinforcement procedures, and active supervision (see box, "Techniques for Effective Transitions").

### Teaching Routines

Teaching transitions as behavioral routines is an effective method of promoting appropriate classroom behaviors while discouraging inappropriate

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behaviors. Whereas other strategies like posting expectations can be valuable in reminding students about the rules, teaching with examples and providing practice with feedback shows students exactly how to behave. Although the focus of this article is on transitions, you can use these techniques to teach any behavioral routine, such as raising a hand to ask for help, ignoring other students who are misbehaving, taking notes, or completing independent seatwork.

To provide an example of the process, Figure 1 shows a lesson plan for an especially important transition routine (lining up at the door). In many classrooms, lining up to leave the room can be a context for misbehavior. Instead of viewing students as willfully disobedient or victims of their disabilities, this approach assumes that students may behave more appropriately after learning and practicing expected behavior in lining up. Figure 2 provides a blank reproducible behavioral lesson plan (adapted from Langland et al., 1998).

This process includes five steps (Colvin & Lazar, 1997) useful in teaching any behavior:

1. Provide a rationale.
2. Explain the expected behavior.
3. Model the expected behavior.
4. Practice the expected behavior.
5. Monitor and provide feedback.

Providing a rationale involves giving students a reason why a rule is important to follow. In Figure 1, the teacher names the behavior, "Line up right," and explains why it is important. Giving a rationale is a short and direct step—one or two sentences often suffice. When reviewing skills in a booster lesson (a lesson designed to firm up previously taught behaviors) the teacher may briefly ask students why walking quietly in the hallway is important. The les-

#### Techniques for Effective Transitions

These four teaching techniques may help teachers improve their students' transition skills:

- Teaching Routines—Explicit teaching of expected behavior.
  - Model the skills (both correct and incorrect examples).
  - Provide multiple opportunities for student practice.
  - Monitor and provide feedback.
  - Reteach as needed.
- Precorrections—Quick reminders of expected behavior before the transition.
  - Additional support to firm student skills.
  - Can be faded or withdrawn as needed.
- Positive Reinforcement Procedures—Incentives for appropriate behavior.
  - Specific praise can be more powerful than tangible rewards.
  - Provide attention contingent on correct behavior.
  - Ignore or quickly redirect incorrect behavior.
- Active Supervision—an effective method for monitoring students.
  - Scan, move, and interact to create a positive classroom culture.
  - Avoid performing tasks or conversing with other adults in key transitions.

**Figure 1. Sample Transition Lesson Plan**

## Lesson for Teaching Expected Behavior

### Skill Name

*“Lining up right” (to leave the classroom)*

### Rationale for Teaching the Skill

Lining up right is a key skill in smooth transitions. Tell students, *“When we all line up right, we make more time for activities and recess. Lining up right is safer and helps us all to follow directions.”*

### Modeling the Skill—Teaching Examples

Teach by *telling and showing* students the correct *and* incorrect (nonexamples) ways to line up:

When it is time to leave the room, the teacher (or line leader) will stand at the door and say, “Time to line up right.”

1. Stand up and push in their chairs section by section when called (e.g., “Bear section, time to line up right”).  
(NONEXAMPLE: All students all line up at once instead of section by section, or do not push in chairs.)
2. Walk slowly and quietly to the door.  
(NONEXAMPLE: Students run to the door, or bump into each other on the way.)
3. Stand in line quietly, hands at sides, “with two people spaces between you.” (teach this idea).  
(NONEXAMPLE: Students talk in loud voices, stand directly next to each other, or push.)
4. Students walk quietly in the hallway, with two people spaces, on the right side of the hallway.  
(NONEXAMPLE: Students call out, run, walk too closely, or in the middle of the hallway.)

### Practice Activities

1. Play “Correct the teacher.” After instruction, the teacher performs both examples and nonexamples for the class. Students use thumbs-up and down signals to evaluate the teacher’s behavior. If the students signal thumbs-down, the teacher calls on a student to tell the teacher the correct expectation and demonstrate it for the class.
2. Play the “Lining Up Right Game.” The class practices lining up right. Every time they line up perfectly, the class gets a point. If the class doesn’t line up perfectly, the teacher gets the point, and the class practices the missed step again. Play until the class gets 3 points in a row.

### After the Lesson—During the Day or Week

1. Before the class needs to line up, ask a student to tell the class the steps for lining up right.
2. Give specific praise and attention to students who are lining up right (“Keisha, thank you for walking slowly to the line!”). Provide more attention for appropriate behavior than misbehavior.
3. When you see a student line up incorrectly, remind him or her how to do it right and have the student show you the right way to do it.
4. Play the “Lining Up Right Game” at every opportunity to line up. Keep score on the board. Once the class reaches a pre-determined point goal, they earn a celebration (preferred activity, extra minute of recess, sticker, etc.).

Note. From “Teaching Respect in the Classroom: An Instructional Approach”, by S. Langland, T. Lewis-Palmer & G. Sugai, 1998, *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 8, pp. 245-262. Copyright 1998 by Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. Adapted with permission.

**Figure 2. Reproducible Lesson Plan Form**

<b>Lesson for Teaching Expected Behavior</b>
<b>Skill Name</b>
<b>Rationale for Teaching the Skill</b>
<b>Modeling the Skill—Teaching Examples</b>
<b>Practice Activities</b>
<b>After the Lesson—During the Day or Week</b>

Note. "From Teaching Respect in the Classroom: An Instructional Approach by S. Langland, T. Lewis-Palmer & G. Sugai, 1998, *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 8, pp. 245-262. Copyright 1998 by Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.. Adapted with permission.

son, however, must focus on performing the skill, not talking about it.

Next, teachers (or, perhaps, trained student volunteers) model the skill the lesson is teaching. Modeling expected behavior is a critical step in demonstrating what the expected behavior looks like. Explicitly showing students what to do provides a clear example of both acceptable and nonacceptable behavior. Providing both examples (correct) and nonexamples (incorrect) of how to perform the behavior further clarifies the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior, particularly for instructionally naive learners (Kame'enui & Simmons, 1990). The teacher may tell the class, "Here is how *not* to line up right," and stand up before being asked (by a student acting as teacher), then say, "Here is how to line up right," and stand up when asked. Ending with the correct example is prudent. Teachers may identify or ask students to identify the specific transition behavior that is being demonstrated or violated in the examples (e.g. "Who can tell me why this is *not* lining up right?") Engaging instruction during this step is key in maintaining student attention. Adding humorous nonexamples (as long as they are instructive) can be one way to increase engagement. It is insufficient for students merely to see a demonstration of the behavior—students then need to perform and practice the new skill. Practicing can actively engage students with attention difficulties, increasing the likelihood that they will retain the information (Gardill et al., 1996), but there are additional benefits. Asking students to perform the behavior many times provides checks for understanding, opportunities for praise or corrective feedback, and practice to become fluent with the behaviors. By practicing with teacher guidance and without pressure, students will be better prepared to perform the behavior when more distractions surround them.

The example lesson provides a few activities for practice, including choosing the correct behavior when the teacher models examples and nonexamples and playing games that use repeated practice and performance feedback

### Examples of Transition Routines to Teach

The following are a few of the types of transitions that could be taught in this format:

- Entering and exiting the classroom at various times of the day.
  - Start of day/entry activities.
  - Recess or lunch.
  - Moving to or from another class.
  - End of day.
- Putting materials away and preparing for the next task.
- Cleaning up a work area.
- Moving from group to independent work.
- Turning in homework.
- Choosing partners for small group activities.
- Preparing for a lesson.
- Choosing a book in the library.
- Returning equipment at the end of recess.
- Checking in with a mentor before or after school.

(see box, "Examples of Transition Routines to Teach").

### Precorrections

Once students have learned transition behaviors, some will still benefit from additional support and structure. Precorrections are quick reminders of how to perform skills given directly

**Precorrections may be effective with the whole class or with individual students who need more support to be successful.**

before the opportunity to use them (Kame'enui & Simmons, 1990; Walker et al., 1995). Researchers have shown that precorrections reduce problem behavior during transitions in classrooms and in settings like cafeterias, playgrounds, and hallways (Colvin,

Sugai, Good, & Lee, 1997; Kartub, Taylor-Greene, March, & Horner, 2000; Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 2000). This technique is especially helpful when teachers can anticipate that students will have difficulty performing skills correctly. You may use precorrections with the whole class or individual students who need more support to be successful.

Examples of precorrections for lining up might include statements such as, "Make sure to wait until I excuse you before you line up," or questions like, "How far apart should you be when you line up?" These precorrections should happen *just before* a teacher asks students to line up. As students become more fluent with transitions, precorrections can be changed to subtle cues like hand signals, or faded or phased out completely.

### Positive Reinforcement Procedures

Teachers may use positive reinforcement procedures to encourage students to transition appropriately. A student may obtain verbal praise, good grades, or extra recess for certain kinds of appropriate behavior. If students continue to line up correctly in exchange for acknowledgment for their behavior, you have positively reinforced the correct behavior by your attention. On the other hand, the same is true if students continue to yell in the hallway: They get one-on-one attention when you reprimand them. Effective use of reinforcement requires two skills: providing attention or other incentives for appropriate behavior *and* minimizing any reinforcement for inappropriate behavior (Sprick, Sprick, & Garrison, 1993).

Effective reinforcers may include teacher praise, a preferred activity, a tangible incentive (such as a sticker or candy), or a combination (Alberto & Troutman, 2003). One of the most powerful and readily available reinforcers is teacher attention. For example, simply praising students for pushing in their chairs when they leave their seats may maintain their behavior.

When providing incentives, keep in mind that certain incentives may be aversive to some students. For example, many older students (such as middle

and high school students) may not respond favorably to effusive teacher attention or public recognition. In this case, you should provide other incentives, such as homework reduction or a choice of rewards, for appropriate behavior.

Allowing students to earn 1 or 2 extra minutes of recess or a fun group activity may be more acceptable to some educators (and more social for students) than providing tangibles (Alberto & Troutman, 2003). Self-monitoring point sheets (Condon & Tobin, 2001); token economies (Carbone, 2001); or the “Lining Up Right Game” from the provided lesson are examples of positive reinforcement procedures. In the “Lining Up Right Game,” students earn points toward a designated incentive with each correct transition.

Schoolwide positive reinforcement procedures, particularly raffles in which students earn tickets for good behavior, have also been used effectively to improve the transition behaviors of an entire school (Kartub et al., 2000).

In addition to providing attention or incentives contingent on appropriate behavior, providing *specific praise* can be even more effective in increasing correct behaviors (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). Specific praise serves two purposes: first, it tells students exactly what they are doing well, and second, it provides a cue for other students on how to earn the teacher’s attention. For example, when you tell a student, “Good job,” the student may not know the expectation, or question the sincerity of the praise. When you say, “Thank you for standing quietly with your hands at your sides,” the student knows what he or she has done to earn the praise, and other students may try to mimic the appropriate behavior in hopes of receiving praise for their own behavior.

### Active Supervision

Active supervision is a specific method for monitoring students in classroom transitions and nonclassroom settings. Researchers have found active supervision effective in both decreasing inappropriate behaviors and increasing appropriate behaviors in school settings

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**Be specific in your praise:  
Instead of saying “Good  
job,” say, “Thank you for  
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hands at your sides.”**  
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(Colvin et al., 1997; DePry & Sugai, 2002; Lewis et al., 2000).

Active supervision is defined by its three behaviors—scanning, moving, and interacting—which increase supervisor awareness and heighten responsiveness to student activity (Colvin et al., 1997). Because of these aspects, active supervision is a good way to promote student safety and well-being in the schools (Colvin & Lazar, 1997; Colvin & Lowe, 1986).

- *Scanning* is a technique used to examine the environment frequently, looking for both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. This allows teachers to be aware of all the behaviors that students are displaying during transitions. Teachers who use effective scanning glance around the classroom or other setting regularly, looking for multiple opportunities to reward students behaving appropriately. Though recommended ratios vary, you should strive to praise students for appropriate behavior *at least* three times as often as you reprimand them (Sprick et al., 1998).
- *Moving*, as one might guess, consists of walking around the setting, visiting problem areas often, and making one’s presence known to students. Instead of using a regular pattern, teachers should move unpredictably, so that students will not know where or when an adult will be in direct proximity.
- *Interacting* includes teaching behaviors, providing precorrections, and even conversing with students informally (DePry & Sugai, 2002). Interaction allows teachers to build a positive relationship with students, prevent inappropriate behavior, and emphasize positive behavior.

You can use active supervision to provide consistent and preventive monitoring of student behaviors, especially during transitions when there may be changes in staff, settings, and behavioral expectations (Colvin et al., 1997). Adequate monitoring requires effort and attention. Using transitions as an opportunity to gather materials or plan for the next activity or spending more time interacting with other adults than with students may negate other efforts to improve transitions. Prior planning and staff training emphasizing the three key behaviors of active supervision may help mitigate these difficulties (see box, “Active Supervision”).

### Revisiting and Reviewing Instruction

Teaching students transition routines, providing practice activities, and using precorrection, reinforcement, and active supervision allow students to learn how to transition efficiently and effectively and receive support and incentives for appropriate behavior. Defining, teaching, and rewarding correct transitions can result in approximately 80%-90% of students being successful in transitions (Colvin et al., 1997; DePry & Sugai, 2002; Kartub et al., 2000; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). We recommend teachers revisit expectations and teach “booster” lessons as needed throughout the year, particularly after vacations, long weekends, when new students join

#### Active Supervision

The following are important active supervision activities:

- Scan.
  - Examine the environment frequently.
  - Notice both inappropriate and appropriate behaviors.
- Move.
  - Move around the entire area unpredictably/
  - Visit problem areas frequently.
- Interact.
  - Elicit conversations with students.
  - Provide precorrections and reminders.
  - Provide positive reinforcers.

the class, or when transition routines start to unravel.

Some students will need additional support to be successful. Students with behavioral challenges may benefit from specific adaptations to get through transitions. Visual structures, such as taping squares on the floor to show students where to stand when lining up, or picture schedules (Winterman & Sapina, 2002) are common and effective adaptations. As with all students, minimizing attention for misbehavior while emphasizing attention for positive behavior is critical.

### Final Thoughts

Though teaching transitions requires time and energy, initial investments in teaching behaviors result in lasting improvements throughout the year (Taylor-Greene et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2002). We encourage teachers to share these techniques with other teachers and paraprofessionals (such as librarians, recess monitors, music teachers, and educational assistants) who work with their students throughout the day. Students with disabilities are more likely to be successful when they know all of their daily routines. Teaching transitions saves considerable teaching time and frustration, especially given how many transitions students experience throughout the school day.

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