Transitions and Neurodivergent Brains

It's not behavior, it's how the brain lets go, shifts, and resets.

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Here is a common scenario that plays out often in Neurodivergent households. Transition stress.

Your child is getting settled in to their favorite video game. You call to them "We have to leave in 5 minutes!"

Your child nods but barely hears you and gets wrapped up in their game. This is called hyper focus.

Your child is all in, and the dopamine hit comes. They lose track of time. Suddenly you come in: "Time to go!"

A full meltdown occurs and your child gets stuck. You keep increasing demands, "We are late!" you shout.

What could we do differently? Let's better understand transitions and the stress they place on Neurodivergent brains

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What are Transitions?

A transition is any time we move from one activity, place, or state to another. Transitions happen constantly throughout the day, often without us noticing. For Neurodivergent brains (including those with ADHD, Autism, and more), these can be especially difficult.

Throughout the day, we might face hundreds of transitions.

Examples of Transitions

- Turning off a video game → coming to dinner
- Leaving the house → going to school
- Finishing playtime → starting homework
- Moving from one classroom activity → another
- Showering → getting dressed

When a transition occurs, the reaction may be:

- "Not listening" or a delayed response
- Resistance or refusal
- Big emotional reactions
- Negotiating or stalling
- Shutdown or withdrawal

Transitions are harder for neurodivergent brains because letting go, switching tasks, and resetting takes more effort and time which can lead to distress.

These reactions are not signs of defiance, they are signs the brain is having difficulty shifting to the next thing. With understanding and some strategies, we can help make this shift less painful.

A Helpful Reframe

Instead of: "They aren't listening!"
Try: "Their brain is still engaged and needs support to shift."

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Why Transitions are Hard

Transitions can be especially hard for Neurodivergent brains, including ADHD and autism, because they are primed for Hyperfocus, especially when doing a preferred task. (Think: a favorite video game).

Using the "Tendril Theory" (a great theory designed by Erin Human, eisforerin.com), we can better understand why: Neurodivergent attention, especially if on a preferred task or topic, doesn't simply turn on and off. It stretches outward like tiny tendrils, connecting deeply to what someone is doing and to themselves.

When a child is fully engaged, those tendrils are strong and active. So when we ask them to stop, their brain is still fully connected to that moment, and it can feel uncomfortable or even painful to suddenly pull away.

That's why transitions can feel intense or lead to big reactions.
Not because they are being difficult, but because their brain is still engaged.
Transitions require the brain to:

- Let go of the current activity
- Shift attention
- Prepare for something new
- Stop and move on

For many neurodivergent kids, this process takes more time, support, and intention.

When we understand what's happening underneath, we can move from "just stop" to "let's transition together."

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How to Help

Here are some quick tips, strategies and supports to make transitions easier for Neurodivergent brains

Make time visible

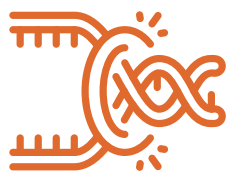
Use timers or visual countdowns so time can be seen, not just heard. Practice using them during calm moments first.

Get their attention first

Before giving a warning, connect. A gentle tap, saying their name, or asking for eyes helps the message land.

Give multiple warnings

Offer predictable countdowns—10, 5, 3, and 1 minute can work really well.

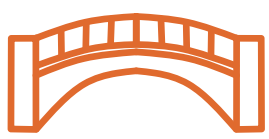


Support the "unwinding"

Let them pause, save, or finish a step. Help them release one piece at a time.

Offer choices

Give some control in the transition: "Do you want to pause now or in one minute?"



Bridge to what's next

Make the next step clear and predictable: "First we pause, then we go to dinner."

Stay close and co-regulate

Your calm presence helps their nervous system settle. When a child is dysregulated use proximity and less words.