



NEWSLETTER

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GOING WITH THE FLOW: SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Rohit is an adorable 3-year-old boy. From waking up in the morning, getting ready for school, having breakfast, navigating through different classes at school, in the garden and going back to bed at night, everything is a struggle for him. He hates leaving his house, and cries every time he has to go somewhere. Especially leaving for school involves a whole lot of screaming, shouting and crying, as it means he must stop racing his favorite car that he was playing with. At school, shifting from the classroom to the playground and back is eventful. Also, it gets difficult for the teacher to have Rohit switch from one setting to another. However, there is one class Rohit looks forward to; it is free play. During this class, he sits in a corner and plays only with a red car. When it's time to put the car away, Rohit is always in tears and his teachers are concerned for him.

It is his cousin, Nishant's birthday party next week. Rohit's mother is anxious, as she anticipates him having a huge meltdown there, just like last time when he was at his friend's birthday party.

Rohit is otherwise a happy boy but during transitions, he gets upset and has meltdowns. His parents always try hard to help him work through his day.

Change can be hard, but it is inevitable. Some of our children, just like Rohit, have difficulty sailing through this change or transitioning from one activity to another or one location to another. They may have a hard time if they are asked to stop doing something and start something new. Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may have difficulties shifting their attention from one activity to another, or with changes in their routine.

There are multiple reasons why a child with ASD may find it hard to cope up during transitions. Here are some of them;

- They have restrictive patterns of behaviors, which are hard to disrupt. They work well with predictability and like the sameness of their fixed routines.





“Choose the strategies appropriately and use them consistently!”

- They also have difficulties with information processing which makes it difficult for them to comprehend multistep verbal instructions.
- Limited social communication and perspective taking skills makes it hard for them to understand the subtle cues for transitions.
- Most of these children also have high anxiety levels that influence their behavior in times of unpredictability.
- Another reason is that their behavior at the time of transitions maybe a way of gaining attention from a significant adult or peer.
- They also have repetitive play and highly fixed areas of interest leading to transition difficulties; therefore, at times a preferred activity that they are currently performing can be more reinforcing compared to what is coming next.

The key to smoother transitions is strategies can be used before, during and after transitions

Let's look at Rohit's day, but now it's a little different.

Rohit is an adorable 3- years-old child. His mom wakes him up every day by tickling, squishing and hugging him. Once he's up, she shows him a visual schedule with pictures of his morning routine. She then sings to him a morning routine song to help him finish brushing, bathing and dressing for school. He finishes his breakfast quickly; as he is prepared well in advance that once he is done with his glass of milk and toast he can race his favorite car for 5 minutes. Rohit's father then sets him a visual timer for 5 minutes and places it right at eye level where Rohit can see it while he is playing with his cars. When there is one minute left his father brings Rohit's attention back to the timer, reminding him that it will soon be time to clean up and leave for school. While leaving for school Rohit's parents put a piece of his racing track in his school bag. At school, his teachers show him a visual schedule of all his classes in the day, which is kept in front of him, and at the end of each class he cleans it up by removing the visual and putting it in the finish box.

It is his cousin's birthday next week and he has been invited to the party. His mom has printed pictures of him, his cousin cutting a birthday cake with balloons around, for a personalized story to prepare him for what will be expected at the party. He enjoys reading this story and is also excited to attend his cousin's birthday.

Rohit is well regulated emotionally and behaviorally. He is calm and happy and so are his parents.

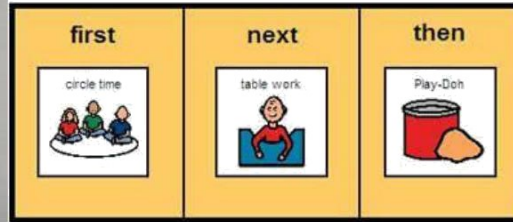
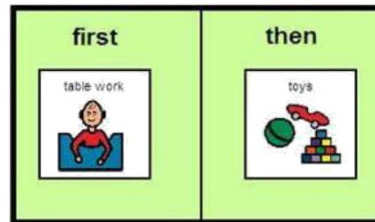
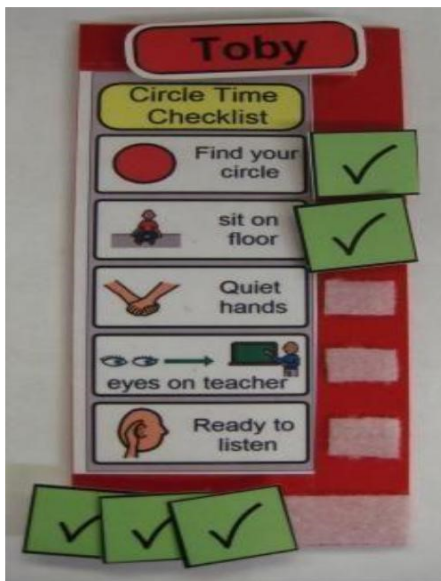
What led to this change? Rohit is in a happier place; things are no longer a struggle for him. He transitions smoothly through the day; all this has happened because of few minor but significant changes in his parents and teachers effort to help prepare for his unpredictable routine.

The key to smoother transitions is that the strategies can be used before, during and after transitions. Also, they should be chosen appropriately and used consistently. Some of them are;

Visual strategies:

Children with ASD are excellent visual learner's, hence visual strategies work best for them. Use a visual schedule, 'first this-then that' boards, choice boards etc. to visually prepare the child for what is coming next or what his routine of the day will look like. A number of studies have indicated that visual schedules used in classrooms and home settings can assist in decreasing transition time and challenging behaviors during transitions, as well as increase student's independence during transitions.

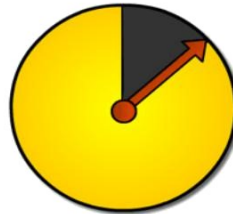
Using a finished box, kept at a designated location can be extremely beneficial. On completion of an activity the child must put the visual in this box. It promotes understanding the fact that this activity is over and it is time for the next one.



“No child is being difficult, it is the circumstances that are difficult”

Verbal preparation:

Children on the spectrum work very well when prepared beforehand. Prepare your child by talking to him about how his day will progress. Lay down short, simple and clear expectations, using countdowns, visual or verbal is helpful.



Use verbal preparation, not just when the previous activity is about to get over, but well in advance, for it to be effective. Visual timers are also great to ease transitions, as they allow the child to see how much time is left before he/she needs to clean up and switch tasks.

Social Stories:

Social Stories (using personalized pictures of the child) will help prepare him for an important upcoming social situation or a big change in their routine, where we might anticipate our child to be anxious or overwhelmed.

Transition songs and objects:

Using transition songs/objects aids the process of transition. Provide the child with a tangible, familiar object that he/she relates with the other setting or activity. This is a good idea to reduce the anxiety related to transitions and thus, makes it easier.

General strategies:

Redirect a child; this can be done mostly for a younger child. Using a story or involving the child in play can often avert a meltdown and smoothen his/her transition.

Also, it is best to avoid transition behaviors in the first place. Plan an activity such that you alternate an un-preferred task with a preferred or a neutral one. This will positively reinforce the child to respond for appropriate learning and expected behavior. Keep in mind the length of the activity, area of interest and the level of challenge for the child.

It is beneficial for us, as parents and professionals to analyze;

- How our child is coping with transitions?
- What is it that triggers his/her meltdown during this change?
- What may soothe and calm him/her down?

Use all this information along with appropriate strategies to aid easier transitions.

Remember that no child is being difficult; it is the circumstances that are difficult. Prior preparation on our end will help reduce the child's anxiety with respect to transition, save our time and effort and smoothen this process of change for them.

YOUR INNER CEO: EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILL

Each one of us has a CEO within ourselves! The CEO is responsible for making plans, multitasking, keeping track of time, solving problems, taking crucial decisions, engaging in group dynamics, thinking on our feet, and monitoring our actions to achieve success. This CEO in us, is our higher order skills or executive function skills.



Executive functions (EFs) involve a complex set of skills including,

- **Task Initiation:** is the ability to begin an activity/task; generate ideas, responses or problem solving strategies without procrastination.
- **Planning and prioritizing:** This is the skill that helps us create steps to reach a fixed end goal, and take decisions about what to focus on. It is the ability to manage present and future tasks.
- **Working memory:** is the ability of our brain to retain limited information, in order to use it to finish a task. It helps

in guiding decision making and behaviour.

- **Emotional/Impulse control:** is what helps us act rationally instead of letting our thoughts and feelings overpower us and our actions.
- **Inhibition:** is the ability to stop ones actions and thoughts; it is the opposite of impulse control i.e. it helps us to stop and think before we act.
- **Shift:** means to be able to shift from one activity to the other or change our track of thoughts, mid-course of an activity to make minor corrections. It helps us think flexibly and respond appropriately in situations.
- **Organization:** involves the ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information and materials.
- **Self-monitoring:** is the ability to evaluate and monitor our own performance and make changes accordingly.

All these skills together help us initiate, plan, organize and execute our daily tasks successfully.

Although, we are not born with executive function skills, we are born with the potential to develop them.

The development of EFs is a slow process, it begins as early as in infancy, continues through ones childhood and adulthood. Research shows that the brain of an older child has more specialized and well defined executive function networks as compared to that of a younger child. Hence, the brain becomes more organized, connected and specialized as it matures. **Executive function skills develop and improve with age.** Engagement in meaningful play and social interactions with adults helps a child build these skills.

Executive functions are shaped by one's experiences in life. During infancy while a child plays with adults, looks at his favorite rattle or listens to his mother's soothing voice; he will learn to focus attention,



build on his working memory and react to new stimulating experiences. This improves his self regulation skills. As the child grows older; engaging in creative play, games and schoolwork will help improve his attention, working memory and self control. These will in turn support his problem solving, planning and organization skills. By high school, the child is expected to independently organize his time, keep track of his assignments, and manage project submissions. Along with these, he is expected to demonstrate ability to reflect on his experiences, give valid explanation for his deeds,



think of the possibilities of what to do next, take effective decisions and monitor his own actions.

“Executive functions are shaped by one’s life experiences”

EF skills are soft skills that we use constantly in our daily lives. We can wait to eat dessert after dinner or calm ourselves down when angry because of effective use of our EF skills. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and many other neurodevelopmental disorders often display impairments in the use of their EF skills.

AT HOME: The child may have

- ✓ Difficulty completing his morning routine on time (planning, organization and time management)
- ✓ A messy room or cupboard (organization)
- ✓ Fights and argues with parents or siblings (emotional control, inhibition)
- ✓ Difficulty planning a project, he may not be able to anticipate how much time is required to finish it (initiation, planning, organization, and time management)
- ✓ Trouble remembering things he had to bring from the shop (working memory)
- ✓ Difficulty starting big assignments, he will often focus on less important detail (initiation, shift, planning and prioritizing)
- ✓ Problems with money management (working memory, planning and organization)

AT SCHOOL: The child may;

- ✓ Forget to turn in homework (shift, focusing)
- ✓ Have incomplete worksheets or unfinished assignments (Time management)
- ✓ Have a messy desk (organization of materials)
- ✓ Struggle to narrate or write a story in sequential manner (organization and planning)
- ✓ Loose his books, bottles, pencils, erasers etc. (organization of materials, focusing)
- ✓ Be still arranging for his science lab, while the other children are halfway through their experiment (initiation, planning and organization)



- ✓ Have a messy backpack, thus will be unable to find what they need at the right time (organization of materials)

IN THE PLAYGROUND: The child will

- ✓ Get into fights and arguments with peers (emotional control, inhibition)
- ✓ Be unable to follow rules of a game (impulse control/inhibition)
- ✓ Have difficulty with participating in team sports or playing in a group (planning, shift, inhibition)

In today's complicated and disconcerting world, deficits in EF skills can cause problems for children in managing their life and getting things done efficiently. They might take an extraordinarily long time to get dressed or become overwhelmed while doing simple chores around the house. Schoolwork can become a nightmare for them. But, it is important to remember that we can help them.

EF skills can be developed with practice and persistence. Early intervention and executive function training can help narrow the gap between the child's performance and his potential. This can be done using various strategies, alternative learning styles, games and activities that we aim to discuss in our next month's newsletter issue.

“Executive function skills are used constantly in our daily lives. We can wait to eat dessert after dinner or calm ourselves down when angry because of effective use of our EF skills”

For any question or concerns regarding the newsletter please write to us on:

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