

Planning Your Time with Children

Transitions

Transition times provide fantastic opportunities for reinforcing concepts and skills. However, they also can be chaotic and even stressful, especially if children are waiting around with nothing to do.

Transitions play a crucial role in promoting children's sense of security in the classroom, their independence, and their understanding of themselves as members of the classroom community. By structuring transitions in mindful ways, you can turn these potentially chaotic moments into peaceful opportunities for continued learning.

Here are some ways to structure transitions so they go smoothly and encourage learning.

Give children notice. For example, 5 minutes before cleanup time, talk to the children in each interest area:

“You have time for one more puzzle.”

“There is just enough time to finish your painting.”

“I see that you three are pretending to bake muffins. Let's take your muffins out of the toy oven to cool off as we start the kitchen cleanup.”

Keep in mind that cleaning up some areas, such as the Block area, may require more time than others. You might encourage children who are involved in those activities to start finishing projects a little earlier than the rest of your group.

Use a consistent, nonverbal signal, such as a xylophone sound, a clapping pattern, or a light being turned on and off. This signals to English-language learners that it is time for a transition, even if they do not yet have the receptive skills to understand the verbal reminder.

Allow sufficient time. Treat transitions as valuable experiences in and of themselves and allow enough time so children do not feel rushed.

Give children specific tasks. Children can help set up a snack or lunch, clean up after art, and collect trash after a meal. Be specific about what you want children to do. “Please clean up the plates” is not as effective as “Please scrape the food off each plate and into the trash can. Then, stack the plates on the cart.”

Be clear and consistent. Provide clear directions to children during transitions and be sure that your expectations are age-appropriate. Keep the same routine each day so children learn what to do and how to do it without a lot of adult guidance.

Be flexible. When possible, allow children extra time to complete special projects or activities in which they are particularly involved. For example, give some children time to complete their block city while others begin cleaning up the art materials or dramatic play props.

Meet individual needs. Try to avoid having all children move from one activity to another as a group. It is also best not to require children to wait around doing nothing until everyone else is finished. Give children who have completed their tasks something to do, such as getting a book to read or straightening up a display, until everyone is ready to move to the next activity.

Use transitions as opportunities to teach. Think of how to move children from one activity to the next in ways that teach and reinforce skills. For example, say, “If your name begins with the same beginning sound as *bike*, *banana*, *baseball*, and *boat*, you may choose an interest area now.” It is not easy to come up with ideas on the spot, so keep a set of *Mighty Minutes*® cards with you. These little cards include many ideas for those moments of the day between activities.

Transitions can be especially hard for some children. If children are having difficulty, make sure you that you are allowing sufficient time for transitions and that the children know what is expected of them.

When you establish consistent routines for ending one activity and beginning the next one, you help children understand the predictable nature of transitions and routines, which helps build their sense of security in knowing what comes next and what is expected of them.

The Daily Schedule

The daily schedule blocks out time and establishes a sequence for routines and experiences. When the daily schedule suits the children’s individual and group needs, classroom life proceeds smoothly, is enjoyable for everyone, and children thrive. A good schedule for preschool children is balanced, offering choices and a range of activities, some initiated by children and others planned by teachers.

A daily schedule establishes the consistency that helps young children predict the sequence of events and thus feel more secure and in control of events. They delight in reminding you, “Snack comes next,” or telling a visitor, “Now, we go outside.” Consistency does not preclude flexibility, responsiveness, or spontaneity and does not mean that the clock rules the day. A special occurrence can be reason enough to alter the daily routine. For example, an unexpected snowfall might inspire you and the children to pause in the middle of choice time, put on jackets and hats, and go outdoors. Keep in mind what is most important: you want children to be excited about and engaged in what they are doing.

In deciding your schedule, start with the fixed times of daily events that cannot be changed. A fixed period might be lunch or the time when a shared playground is available. Keep in mind the developmental abilities of your children. Waiting should be minimized, and adequate time should be allotted for putting on coats and hats, eating meals and snacks, and cleaning up. Work periods should be long enough to give children a chance to select materials and activities, plan what they want to do, explore freely, and clean up afterward without feeling rushed.

A pictorial schedule helps all children, and particularly English-language learners, learn the sequence of the day’s events. Post the schedule in both English and the first language that is predominant in the classroom.

Daily Schedule Guidelines

- Offer a balance of active and quiet activities throughout the day.
- Allow at least 60 minutes for each choice time, if possible, so children can become deeply involved in their play.
- Allocate 40–60 minutes for each outdoor period.
- Plan two or three read-aloud times every day.
- Include times for teaching literacy and math skills intentionally every day.

To give you an idea of how to organize a full-day program, we provide a sample full-day schedule (6 hours) with an explanation of what takes place during the estimated time periods. We also offer suggestions for designing an all-day (11-hour) schedule and a half-day (3-hour) program. These sample schedules may be adapted to suit your situation.

The schedule is more than your guide for each day—it is a valuable tool for promoting literacy skills and understanding about time and sequencing. Display the schedule at the children’s eye level. Refer to it during the day and focus children’s attention on the order of daily routines and activities. For example, say, “Let’s look at our schedule to see what comes next. We just finished large-group time. Next, we have choice time! Maybe you could build with blocks, draw or paint, or examine our new collection of shells.”

Full-Day Schedule 9:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.

Arrival, preparation, and choice activities	<i>30 minutes (before and while children arrive)</i>	Review the plans for the day. Conduct a health and safety check (e.g., refill bathroom supplies, remove any broken or torn materials, check outside for trash). Prepare interest areas (e.g., add new materials, mix paint, set out ingredients for a cooking activity, collect materials needed for small groups). Greet each family and child as they arrive. Help children store belongings, respond to the question of the day, and select an activity (e.g., play with toys and games, draw, continue to work on a project, look at books, listen to recorded stories, or use the tablet or the computer). Talk with individual children as you supervise hand washing and a self-service breakfast as appropriate.
Group meeting	<i>20 minutes (9:00–9:20)</i>	Give a signal to gather the group together. Start with a welcome song. Discuss attendance and job charts, invite children to share news, discuss the question of the day, record children’s ideas, lead a song or fingerplay, conduct an activity or discussion related to the study topic, discuss plans for the day, and introduce any new materials added to interest areas.

Choice time	<i>60 minutes (9:20–10:20)</i>	Transition children gradually to choice-time activities (e.g., say, “If you are wearing red, you may choose an interest area.”). Guide children in selecting where they want to start and what they want to do. Circulate around the room as you observe and interact with children to extend play and learning related to the study topic and other areas of interest. Give a 5-minute warning before cleanup time and help children put materials away in each interest area.
Cleanup, handwashing, and snack	<i>20 minutes (10:20–10:40)</i>	Sit with children and lead discussions about what took place during choice-time and small-group activities. Have conversations with individual children. Those who finish early may go to the large-group area and look at books while others are finishing.
Small groups	<i>20 minutes (10:40–11:00)</i>	<p>Gather children for small-group activities to introduce new concepts and reinforce skills they are developing. If one or more other adults are in the room, you may choose to conduct two or more small groups at once. Otherwise, invite children not currently participating in a small group to select a quiet activity (e.g., play with toys and games, draw, continue to work on a project, look at books, listen to recordings, or use the computer). An alternative is to continue choice time for an additional 20 minutes, conducting a small-group activity during that time.</p> <p>Detailed guidance for conducting small-group activities is provided in <i>Volume 4: Language & Literacy</i> and <i>Volume 5: Mathematics. Intentional Teaching Experiences</i> also offer ideas.</p>
Outdoor choice time	<i>40 minutes (11:00–11:40)</i>	Supervise children who are using the playground toys and equipment (e.g., swings, climbers, slides). Observe and interact with children as they jump rope, play ball games, blow bubbles, explore nature, and so on. Lead activities related to a study, or assist games and movement activities that promote large-muscle development. Help children put away or carry in toys and materials, hang up jackets, use the toilet, and wash their hands.
Read-aloud	<i>15 minutes (11:40–11:55)</i>	Focus children’s attention by beginning with a song or fingerplay that ends quietly. Read a story or discuss a book related to the topic of the class’s current study.
Lunch	<i>40 minutes (11:55–12:35)</i>	Help children prepare the tables for lunch. Eat with the children to encourage conversations about the day’s events, the meal, and other topics that interest them. Guide children in cleaning up after lunch, brushing teeth, setting out cots or mats, and preparing to rest.

Rest and quiet activities	<i>45 minutes (12:35–1:20)</i>	Help children relax and get comfortable. Supervise the rest area at all times. Provide quiet activities for children who do not sleep. Adjust the length of rest time to suit the age of the group and the needs of individual children.
Outdoor choice time	<i>30 minutes (1:20–1:50)</i>	Supervise children in independent activities, have conversations, and lead an activity (sometimes a neighborhood walk).
Read-aloud	<i>20 minutes (1:50–2:10)</i>	Introduce a new story or reread a familiar one, asking questions and involving children in the reading.
Limited choices and small groups	<i>30 minutes (2:10–2:40)</i>	As you facilitate small-group activities with those children who did not participate earlier in the day, invite the other children to play in quieter interest areas, such as Library, Discovery, Art, or Technology.
Group meeting and departures	<i>20 minutes (2:40–3:00)</i>	Lead a movement activity; teach children a fingerplay or an activity with musical instruments. Review the children’s responses to the question of the day. Invite children to talk about the day, including what they want to remember about it. Record highlights on the class calendar and talk about plans for the next day.
Teacher planning time	<i>As time allows</i>	Review how the day went and your observations about individual children (skills, needs, and interests). Work on portfolios and observation notes.