

YOUR TRANSITIONS TOOLKIT



DR. Naomi
FISHER

LIFE IS FULL OF TRANSITIONS

Waking up

Going from standing up to sitting at the table

Getting out of bed

Getting dressed

Going from sitting to standing again

Going upstairs to brush your teeth

Many parents say that before they had children, they never realised just how many transitions there were in a day. And then along came the child who found them difficult - and suddenly life was full of transitions.

When you have a child who struggles with transitions, life can start to feel like you're walking through quicksand. Every change is a potential problem and you'll get sucked down. Parents tell me that they can't move around their own house because of the distress it causes. It's easier just to stay put. Even going to the toilet requires forward planning if it is to happen without incident.

SO, WHAT'S GOING ON?

Firstly, the word 'transitions' includes lots of different things. Small daily transitions are the things which can make family life hard. Getting out the house, getting back in the house! Getting into car or bus. Moving around school.

But then there are also larger transitions – a new teacher at school. A new sibling. The holidays starting, and then going back into term time again. Moving house and changing school.

All transitions require some adjustment, and autistic children often find that hard. It takes some effort for them to get used to the new way that things are. It requires them to keep themselves balanced (or to get help from others to keep balanced).

THE BUCKET OF TOLERANCE

One way to think about this is with the metaphor of a bucket of tolerance. We all have a certain capacity to cope with the stresses and strains of life.

We can think of that capacity as our bucket.

Each thing that we have to deal through the day with adds a few drops to our bucket. We are all different and some people find things harder than others. Children in particular find things harder than adults because so many things are new and challenging for them.

There are also things which are going on in the background which also add to our bucket.



EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS ADDS DROPS TO THE BUCKET

Sibling being annoying?
More drops.

Tired? More drops.

Hungry? More drops.

Tricky time with a friend?
Lots of drops.

Having to go to the supermarket? More drops.

Homework?
A very large drop!

SOME THINGS EMPTY OUR BUCKETS

The fuller that bucket is, the less our capacity to cope with the next thing that comes along.

Of course, some things also empty our buckets. For parents, time by ourselves might empty our buckets. A nice meal cooked by someone else. An appreciative hug or card. Reading a great book or watching a good TV programme. A good nights' sleep. Delicious food.

All of those things make it easier for us to manage when life gets tough. We can manage the children fighting better if we've slept well and feel appreciated. We can cope with unexpected challenges like forgetting our keys much better if we aren't hungry and juggling a million other things.

When we can't look after ourselves, then our bucket overflows. We can't take it anymore. We get irritable, grumpy and everything goes downhill fast.

HOW COME THEY COULD DO THIS YESTERDAY, BUT THEY CAN'T DO IT TODAY?

For autistic children, their bucket of tolerance is often small, and they haven't yet learnt how to balance it for themselves. When things are going well in their life, their capacity to manage things is better. When things are more difficult, then their capacity to cope is reduced. Their buckets can overflow quickly.

Suddenly things which aren't usually a problem become really challenging.

This is confusing for parents – how come they could do this yesterday and they can't do it today?

That means that the first step to managing transitions better with your child is to think about their bucket.

YOUR CHILD'S BUCKET

Have a think. What fills and empties your child's bucket?

There will be obvious ones, like food they like, and getting enough sleep. Then there will be ones which just apply to your child. Maybe they love having their feet tickled, or maybe they enjoy bouncing for hours on their trampoline. Maybe they like nothing better than rolling around in a duvet cover with you singing to them, or maybe they just can't get enough of dictating dramatic stories to you. Or maybe it's about playing video games together or listening to them talk about their favourite TV show.

Something to try

- What are the things which fill your child's bucket? These are the things they find difficult to manage..
- Make a list of all the things which you can think about which empty your child's bucket. These are the things that replenish them.
- Next, think about whether there are any ways you could introduce more of the good things into your child's life.
- Could you carve out some time each day to do the things they love?

MANAGING YOUR CHILD'S BUCKET

THINGS THEY FIND HARD TO MANAGE	THINGS WHICH REPLENISH THEM

THE STAGES OF TRANSITION

Once you've thought about your child's bucket of tolerance (and keeping it balanced), the next step is to think about each transition itself. Each transition (even the tiny ones) has at least three stages.



LEAVING THE HOUSE

Anticipation

The anticipation is the period leading up to leaving. It's the bit when we know this is going to happen, but we're not quite ready to go. Maybe everyone is running around finding shoes and coats and water bottles. Or (more realistically) maybe you are, and your children are still on their tablets in their underpants. Anticipation is the stage when you're saying 'We need to get ready to go' and your child is saying 'No', either verbally or through their behaviour. This stage can go on for a few moments, or, in the case of bigger transitions, for weeks or even months.

Transition

The transition is the actual change itself. The moment when you go from being in the house to leaving the house.

Aftermath

And the aftermath is what happens next. Whether everyone calms down quickly, or whether that is the time when meltdowns and recriminations occur. If the transition has been hard, this might be the time when you actually lose it and shout. Or you might be upset about what has been said and how your children have behaved - and your children might quickly move on and appear to have forgotten all about it.

MY THREE STEP PLAN FOR EASIER TRANSITIONS

What can you do to make it easier? Here's my three-step plan.

- 1 Keep the bucket empty during the anticipation stage**
- 2 Make the transition as easy as you can**
- 3 Make space for the aftermath, for you and for them**

We talk about 'transitions' but actually what happens before and after that transition can take up more of your time and emotional energy.

All three of these stages are harder when your child's (and your) bucket is nearly full. That means that it's harder at the end of a school day. It's harder when your child is tired. It's harder when there are other pulls on your attention (like other adults trying to talk). It's harder when you're worrying about being late for school again.

- 1 Keep the bucket empty during the anticipation stage**

The anticipation stage is actually the one that most children find the most difficult.

It's full of uncertainty.

Will we really go?
When will we go?
Can I stop us going?

It's full of demands.

Can you get your shoes?
Time to stop playing
on your iPad.
Get your lunchbox.

Each of these different things act like drops in the bucket, and make it more difficult for the child to manage.

To make it easier, slow it down and talk less. Don't get in to debates with them about whether you're going to go or not – if it needs to happen, it needs to happen. Don't say things like 'We won't go if you keep on behaving like that' because that will add uncertainty. Try not to express your frustration through saying things like 'Why can't you just behave?' as that will also make it harder.

Reduce the demands. Just get their shoes and coat ready. If they won't put them on, put them in the car (or in your bag). Don't expect them to go and get their lunchbox. Think about keeping that bucket as empty as possible, to save their capacity for the transition itself.

For some children, lots of warning helps. For others, it makes things worse and they manage better with minimal forewarning. I've even met families where they had one child who really needed lots of warning and another child who absolutely didn't which was quite challenging to manage. You know your child best.

2

Make the transition as easy as you can

When it's time to leave, it is not the time to ask questions about whether they have remembered their water bottle or jumper. Each question is going to add to that bucket and potentially make the transition harder.

Just state that it's time to go and then give them some time to get used to the idea.

For some children it can help to leave the house yourself and stand just outside waiting (if they are safe to leave like this).

For others, you could stand next to them and say 'When you're ready, I'm ready to go'. If they are on a device, you don't need to make them put it down. You can let them stay on it and then put it in your bag outside.

You're aiming for calm and collected, and you want to be confident that this is going to happen. If they say no, don't panic. If they get angry, it's just a sign that this is frustrating and difficult for them.

Just empathise that sometimes it's hard, and tell them you're there when they are ready. Resist the urge to try and convince them with extra pressure (like saying 'it'll be fun once we're there'), it's likely to make things harder.

3

Make space for the aftermath, for you and for them

We've left the house. Often things get easier once the transition has actually happened. Even if it's been really difficult, once it's clear that it's over then usually anxiety reduces all round and the child gets on with the next part of their day.

However, sometimes there can be an explosion afterwards. It's like a releasing of the tension which has been building up. If that happens, it's okay. It doesn't mean you've done anything wrong. Just make sure everyone is safe and empathise (or keep quiet).

There is no need to tell the child off or find a 'teachable moment' at this stage. It's not the moment to say things like 'Why did you have to make such a fuss?' or 'See, it's not as bad as you thought'. You risk bringing back all the frustration of the transition itself.

Some parents find themselves with an emotional hangover after a difficult transition. Their child seems to have moved on, but they feel terrible about what happened. Your child might have called you names or sworn at you. You might have lost your cool. It all felt very personal and you're left feeling like a bad parent. You wonder if you're the only one for whom life is this hard.

Making space for your emotions

You're not alone and it's not your fault. It's okay if you feel really angry and frustrated after a hard transition. You've probably been so busy managing your child's emotions that you didn't have any time for your own. You might not get any space to really let yourself think about it until after they've gone to sleep. When you do have a moment, here's an exercise you could try.

Take a few deep breaths and scan mentally all the way through your body.

Notice where there are any areas of discomfort and just breathe.

Then, noticing the sensations in your body, direct your breath there.

Breathe slowly and repeat a phrase to yourself. This could be:

'This too will pass'
'It's okay to feel this way'
'How I feel is just how I'm feeling right now'.

Choose whichever resonates most for you.

Repeat it to yourself as you breathe, and give yourself the gift of a few moments of peace.

A QUICK RECAP

Transitions are hard for many autistic children and their families. They can be harder at sometimes than other times, depending how much capacity to manage the child has at that moment.

There are three stages in a transition.



Each stage is different and requires a different approach.

Sometimes parents have an emotional hangover after difficult transitions, and that can make it hard to move on.

Transitions are hard but important, and each transition is a chance for you and your child to learn more about how to manage them in the future.

Good luck!



MEET NAOMI FISHER

www.naomifisher.co.uk

Naomi is a clinical psychologist, EMDR-Europe Accredited trainer and author. Since she was a small child, she has asked the world why. Why do things have to be this way – and what would it be like if it were different?

She applies this to education, parenting and clinical psychology. She asks whether school is always the best way for children to learn, and whether the things ‘we all know’ to be true about parenting are in fact the case. She pushes for new ways to understand difference and to include voices which go unheard. Her work brings psychological theory and evidence-based practice together with real life clinical experience and open curiosity. The thread that ties her work together is her willingness to take a step outside the conventional and to challenge the status quo, even when others disagree.

Naomi supports parents each month with live-taught webinars, bitesize online courses and a range of free resources.

EXPLORE OUR SUPPORT



**DR. NAOMI
FISHER**