Transitioning Children Between Activities: Effective Strategies for Decreasing Challenging Behavior

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Young children and their families may encounter several types of transitions while receiving early intervention (EI)/early childhood special education (ECSE) services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) stresses effective planning for smooth transitions from early intervention to early childhood special education programs, and most people are familiar with this type of transition. However, other transitions that children may experience are those *within* programs (e.g., from toddler room to preschool room as children age) (Weinberger, 1996) as well as *across* programs or centers (e.g., day care to early childhood special education) (Donegan, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 1996). Transition *between* regularly scheduled activities also occurs in a child's day.

Children may experience as many as 15–20 transitions between activities each day that can collectively consume up to 70 minutes of instructional time (Fisher et al., 1980). A child may transition from free-play to morning circle or morning circle to morning snack. Other programmatic transitions may include movement to and from special classes (e.g., music or art), outside/gross motor activities, and lunch. These transitions may be difficult for children, particularly children with disabilities (Buck, 1999; Kern & Vorndran, 2000). First, children may lack skills to transition between activities. Second, children may have difficulty ending a preferred activity, or they may refuse to begin a non-preferred activity (Kern & Vorndran, 2000; Singer, Singer, & Horner, 1987). Last, transitions may be unpredictable for children (Flannery & Horner, 1994; Kern & Vorndran, 2000).

Transitions between activities may be difficult for teachers as

well. Many tasks need to be done simultaneously (Doyle, 1986), and children often exhibit high levels of challenging behavior during this time (Bender & Mathes, 1995; Buck, 1999).

Since teachers report that transitions are frequently difficult and often provoke challenging behavior in children, intervention strategies may be especially useful during these transition times. This paper will describe strategies teachers may use to decrease or prevent problem behavior during transitions. Particular attention will be given to transitions that occur during early childhood programs or preschool programs for children with disabilities. Additionally, all intervention strategies will be linked with a hypothetical function of problem behavior to enable teachers to choose interventions to fit a particular child's need. To help clarify strategies, examples will be used from teacher Donna's classroom, a preschool program that serves children with and without disabilities.

Challenging behavior is defined as behavior exhibited by a child that results in self-injury or injury to others, causes damage to the physical environment, interferes with the acquisition of a new skill, and/or socially isolates the child (Doss and Reichle, 1991). Challenging behavior includes disruption (e.g., crying or throwing items), aggression (e.g., hitting or kicking others), and self-injury (e.g., head banging or self-biting). Research in the area of challenging behavior indicates that it occurs for two primary reasons: to obtain something preferable (e.g., an item, activity, sensory stimulation, or attention) or to avoid something nonpreferred or difficult (e.g., an item, activity, sensory stimulation, or attention) (Iwata, Dorsey, Sifer, Bauman, & Richman, 1982/1994).

The purpose or function of challenging behavior can be determined by conducting a functional behavioral assessment (Neilsen, Olive, Richardson, & McEvoy, 1998; O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey, & Sprague, 1997). A functional behavioral assessment should be completed prior to selecting one of the intervention strategies described. Before any intervention strategies can be used, however, teachers may want to consider planning strategies that may decrease the probability that challenging behavior will occur. This paper will begin with planning strategies, follow with intervention strategies based on potential functions of behavior, and conclude with instructional strategies to teach transition skills (see *Figure 1* on the following page).

Planning Strategies

Teachers often make the mistake of failing to plan for transitions (Buck, 1999). Planning transitions ensures that all components of the transition have been well thought out, resulting in smooth transitions (Crosser, 1992). All transitions during the day should be planned. Teachers may plan which staff will be where, which children will be paired together, what materials are necessary, and how transition warnings will be used.

Teacher Donna stations her educational assistant (EA) at the new activity. The assistant greets children as they arrive and helps them become engaged more quickly upon arrival. Donna remains stationed in the existing activity area to guide clean up and help children who may have difficulty concluding the activity. Planning the adult placement prior to the transition helps prevent confusion in Donna's class during the

Figure 1 STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR DURING TRANSITIONS
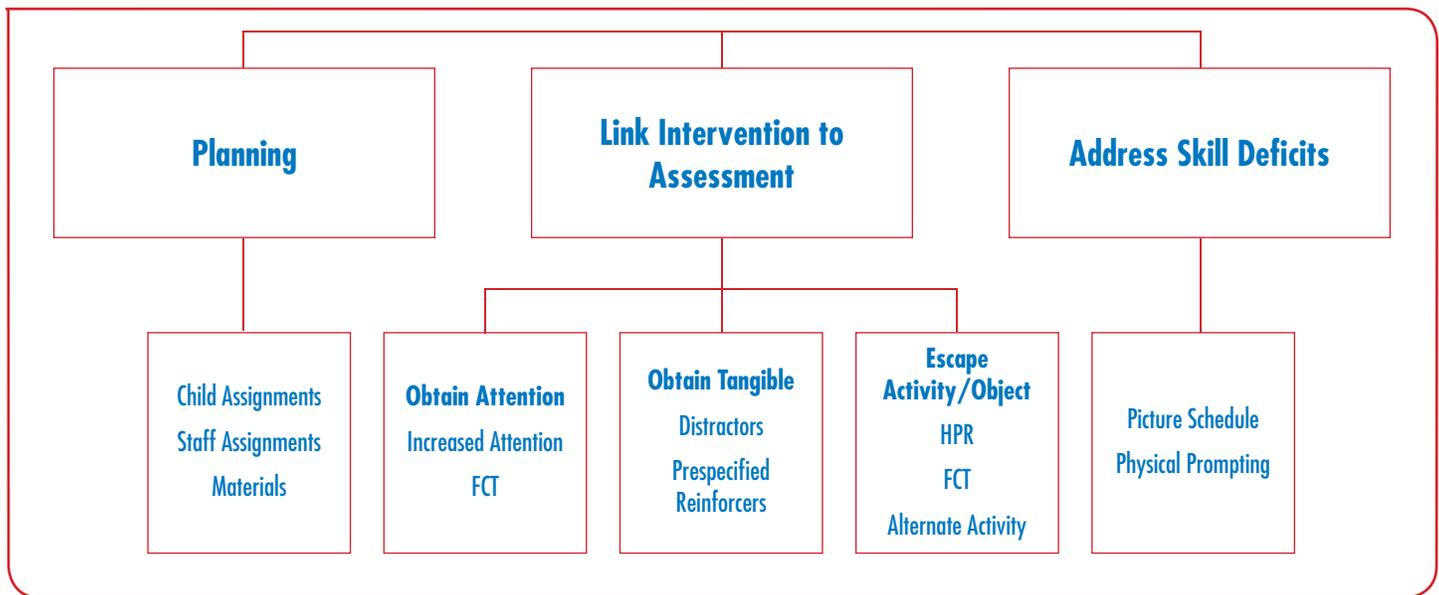
transition time because her teaching assistant knows in advance where he should be at each transition.

Teachers may also consider planning for how to group children during the transition. Donna pairs Lindsey, a child who follows directions well, with Courtney, a child who has difficulty following directions. This pairing helps ensure that both children arrive safely at the new activity. Donna also pairs Cedric, an overly active child, with Mattie, a boy with motor delays who does not move as quickly as others in the class. Cedric provides some physical assistance to Mattie as needed during the ransition, keeping his hands busy helping a friend.

Teachers may also consider planning activities so all materials are ready for child engagement (Crosser, 1992; Whaley & Bennett, 1991). For example, Donna has her EA set out the snacks, plates, glasses, and juice just before transition to snack time begins. Similarly, Donna lays out art materials, such as paper, paint, and paintbrushes, in a manner that invites children to engage in the activity as they arrive in the art area. Any premixing of materials (e.g., paint powder and water) is done prior to children's arrival to the program.

Other materials to consider when planning are picture cues and schedule reminders. Visual cues are helpful for many children, even those without disabilities. Visual cues may help children better understand what is expected to happen during and after the transition because the picture supplements the oral directions, very much like pictures assist with word decoding when reading a book. This is particularly true for children who have difficulty understanding or processing language (i.e., receptive language delays). Donna plans the use of relevant visual or three-dimensional cues to serve as schedule reminders for her children. For example, when Donna prepares for a transition from morning group to center time, she uses picture cards to represent each center choice (e.g., art, books, blocks, and housekeeping). She also uses three-dimensional cues because she has a student who has difficulty processing language. Her three-dimensional symbols are a block, a paintbrush, and a spoon to signify the play areas of blocks, art, and housekeeping.

Teachers may also plan when to prepare children for transitions. Some authors have recommended that teachers warn children before impending transitions (Smith, 1984; Tustin, 1995). However, certain activities may be wrapped up in less time than others, requiring a longer warning time for children who are engaged in other activities. Donna gives children in art or other creative activities a five-minute warning to ensure ample time to finish their creations. On the other hand, children in housekeeping are reminded three to four minutes before the transition is started. Donna gives a verbal warning that the transition is approaching and then she rings a bell to communicate that the transition has officially started. Donna sets a timer for two minutes and asks that her students try to finish the transition before the timer rings. These clear beginnings and endings may prevent problems from occurring around transitions (Buck, 1999).

One final strategy that may be used to prevent challenging behaviors is the use of effective communication across programs. Donegan et al. (1996) reported that children with disabilities might be enrolled in multiple programs (e.g., home day care and preschool special education) and that communication between these programs may be limited. Donna uses regular communication about child progress and effective intervention strategies to ensure that her students are successful in each setting. First, Donna plans a time for regular phone communication between staff

in her program and the programs her children attend before and after her program. *Figure 2* shows a form that Donna created to be completed by staff at the conclusion of their time with the child. This form is shared between programs and the family so that all adults who come into contact with a child are better informed.

Once all transitions have been planned, teachers may then consider using one of several intervention strategies designed to decrease challenging behavior based on the function of the problem behavior.

Interventions for Attention-Seeking Challenging Behavior

One reason that many children engage in challenging behavior is to obtain adult attention (O'Neill et al., 1997). In fact, the function of most challenging behavior is to obtain attention, particularly for young children (Wacker, 1998). Unfortunately, it is common in some classrooms for children to receive attention only when they misbehave (Wehby, 1993). Three interventions will be described that teachers may use when a child is using challenging behavior to obtain attention during transitions.

Increased Adult Attention
Donna uses increased attention two ways during her transitions. First, two minutes prior to transition, she

walks over to Quincy and gives him a high five. She then tells him that there are two minutes until clean up (i.e., she gives a "transition warning"). Then, during the transition, Donna "checks in" on Quincy by coming to his clean up area and exclaiming, "Wow, Quincy, you picked up three cars!" Donna's consistent use of these two strategies slightly before and during transition decreased Quincy's challenging behavior during transitions (see *Figure 3* on the following page). Children who receive attention prior to and during the transition may not feel a need to misbehave to gain adult attention (Olive & McEvoy, 2000).

Increased Peer Attention
When children use challenging behavior during transitions to obtain a reaction or attention from their peers, teachers may try a strategy similar to the one Donna uses with Martina. First, Donna identifies a child, Seung, whose attention seems important to Martina. Then, just prior to the transition, Donna asks Seung to go with Martina to the next activity. This intervention provides Martina with attention from Seung without the need for challenging behavior.

Functional Communication Training
Another effective intervention for challenging behavior that is reinforced by attention during transitions is functional communication training (FCT). This intervention teaches the child to recruit attention using an appropriate communicative behavior. For example, Sherise cries during clean up. A functional behavior assessment was completed, and it was determined that Sherise was trying to obtain Donna's attention. Sherise was taught to recruit attention

for good work (e.g., "Teacher Donna, look how I cleaned up!") and her challenging behavior decreased.

There are also other options for using FCT, particularly for children who have limited communication skills (Neilsen et al., 1998). For example, a picture card or graphic symbol could be used to recruit adult attention. An assistive technology device such as a Big Mack® could also be used. This device consists of a button that, when pressed, activates a prerecorded message. Many communication alternatives are available given new technology and advances in the field of augmentative and alternative communication (Beukelman & Mirenda, 1998).

Behavior to Obtain Preferred Items

Another reason that young children may engage in challenging behavior is to obtain a desired or preferred object/activity. Sara often falls on the floor and bangs her head during a transition from gym back to the classroom. The functional behavioral assessment indicated that when she did this, the EA remained in the gym with Sara while she played on the tire swing. This was done until Sara calmed down enough to go back to the classroom. Careful observation revealed that Sara could swing much higher with the EA pushing her and that this rarely happened when all children were present. Donna developed an intervention that consisted of the EA swinging Sara high a few times just before the transition, and Sara's challenging behavior soon stopped. Over time, Sara's peers were taught to push her, and this decreased the amount of teacher time needed to implement the intervention.

Preferred Item/Activity as Distracters
Another strategy that may decrease challenging behavior during transitions is the use of preferred items as a distracter. These are preferred quick activities or small objects that teachers use to capture the attention of the children. There are several ways to

Figure 2 SAMPLE DAILY REPORT FORM

Daily Report for: (child's name) _____

on (today's date): _____

   1. I was in a <u>happy average grumpy sad sleepy</u> mood today.

   2. I ate all <u>most some none</u> of my snack/lunch today.

   3. I played <u>mostly some very little</u> with my friends today.

   4. I took a <u>long medium short</u> nap today.

   5. I have important forms in my backpack for my parents.

            YES   NO

Comments:

Figure 3 SAMPLE GRAPH OF QUINCY'S TRANSITION DATA

Quincy's Transitions
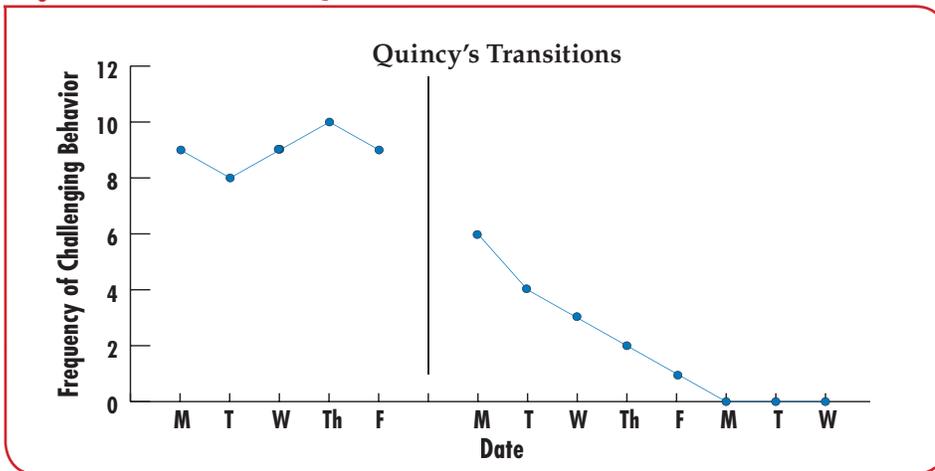
implement preferred item/activity as a distracter. For example, Donna begins dismissing children from circle-time based on a color of clothing they are wearing (e.g., if you're wearing blue, line up). Donna also has children engage in a specific behavior during transition. For example, she has children snap their fingers while transitioning to the music lab. Another preferred item/activity distracter is to give the children something to do when they arrive at the transition destination. Donna asks that each child ring a bell when he or she reaches the block center. This works well because the children are anxious to ring the bell signifying their arrival to blocks and do not engage in other off-task or distracting behaviors when transitioning.

One of Donna's students had difficulty transitioning from the gym back to class. Donna asked Dante to carry her keys (a preferred item for Dante) back to the room for her. This resulted in decreased problems during transition from gym to class. Simple items and activities distract the children with something more preferred, resulting in transitions that are fast, successful, and relatively free from problem behavior. The key to this particular intervention, however, is that the distracter items and activities must be preferred. If the children are not interested in the items, challenging behavior is likely to continue.

Prespecified Reinforcers

Another intervention strategy that may be used with children who are using challenging behavior to obtain preferred items during transitions is prespecified reinforcers. In this intervention, Donna first identifies items Monique prefers, information that is often available from functional behavioral assessment results. Next, Donna informs Monique that the preferred items will be made available immediately following the transition. For example, Monique had difficulty transitioning to the classroom following outside time because she enjoyed gross motor activities. Donna discovered that Monica liked any book about dinosaurs. Donna approached Monique and announced that a dinosaur book would be read immediately following the transition inside and that anyone who wanted to hear the book should meet Donna in the book corner. After a week of successful transitions, Donna offered to read a book every other day. Over time, Monique discovered that fun activities often followed outside time, and her tantrums decreased.

Behavior to Escape Non-Preferred Activities

Another reason children may engage in challenging behaviors during transitions is to escape a non-preferred activity. A child might be trying to avoid the next activity, possibly a

non-preferred activity, or the child may be trying to avoid the transition because transitions often entail distressing noises and higher activity levels. Four possible interventions are available. Two have already been described: preferred items/activities as distracters and prespecified reinforcers. The other two interventions that are available are high probability requests (HPR) and alternative activity.

High Probability Request Sequences

High probability requests (HPR) is a multistep intervention that has been used successfully during difficult transitions (Kim, Sainato, Davis, Ospelt, & Paul, 1998; Singer et al., 1987). First, Donna identifies a set of activities in which Henry is likely to engage (i.e., high probability activities). These include high fives, quick jumps, and head pats. Donna then asks Henry to engage in three to five of the high probability activities, taking care to provide social praise following each instance of compliance. Donna then asks Henry to begin the transition (i.e., low probability request). Research indicates that teachers should take care to vary the sequences of activities presented to children (Davis & Reichle, 1996). When the same high probability requests were presented in the same order over time, children were less likely to engage in the low probability activity when compared to children who were given a series of requests that varied over time. While this seems like an intervention that requires extensive effort on the teacher's part, research has also indicated that, when given the choice, teachers prefer this intervention to other seemingly simple interventions.

Alternative Activity

Another intervention that can be used during transitions when children engage in challenging behavior to escape or avoid an activity is to provide an option of an alternative activity. This intervention can be implemented in two ways. First, Donna offered Chuck a choice of two activities to do at a nearby table when the rest of the class

was in circle. The functional behavioral assessment indicated that Chuck was using challenging behavior to escape circle. Chuck always chose one of the alternate activities and remained at the table. Interestingly, Chuck engaged in the alternate activities but watched circle from a distance. Over time, Chuck discovered that circle was a fun activity and eventually chose to come to circle on a regular basis.

The other variation for this intervention is the use of functional communication training (FCT), an intervention described previously. In this intervention, Donna prompts the child to request an alternative activity. Again, this request can be made with a verbal, vocal, gestural, symbolic, or assistive technology signal. This intervention teaches the child to develop communication skills while also decreasing the need for challenging behavior.

Skill Deficit Behaviors

While some children engage in challenging behavior to communicate something (e.g., obtain something preferred or escape something non-preferred), others have difficulty with transitions because they lack certain skills that make transitioning successful. For example, a child may not have the receptive skills to understand that a transition is about to occur and that the current activity will end and a new activity will begin. Other children may lack independence to clean up during transition, and still others may not have the skills to complete multiple successive steps. In these instances, skills should be taught to children to ensure successful transitions. While there are many interventions that can be used to teach children new skills, the interventions presented here focus on teaching skills to be used during transitions.

Picture Schedule

A picture schedule may be helpful for children to see how their day will progress (Brown, 1991; Polloway & Patton, 1997). Donna reviews her daily

schedule during circle as well as before transitions begin. Donna discusses any new people or events (e.g., a new student or field trip) during circle and revisits them just before transitions. Donna uses a picture before each transition to communicate to children where they will go and what they will be doing next. Donna has a picture schedule on the wall where group is held twice each day. Velcro® is used to hold the pictures on the wall in the order activities will occur. The front of the picture card shows a picture and word for the activity, while the back of the card consists of the word "Finished" and the gesture for the word. Just before transition, Donna shows each child the picture card for "Finished" followed by the picture card for the new activity. After each daily activity is completed, she turns the card over, communicating to the children that activities are completed.

A monthly calendar can also be used in a similar manner to the picture schedules described here. A bus or a school picture can represent each school day and a home or family picture can depict each weekend day. Special events such as field trips, visitors, holidays, or parties can be displayed with special pictures such as birthday cakes.

Another type of schedule is the use of a three-dimensional object to communicate about activities and transitions. For example, Donna used a maraca to communicate to Ariel that she was going to music. Just before music, Donna walked over to Ariel, showed her the maraca and stated, "It's almost time for music." Ariel carried the maraca when children lined up to transition to music and on the way to music. Ariel understood the three-dimensional symbol better than words or pictures, and this resulted in a transition to music that was free of challenging behavior.

The picture schedule can be used to help children who are unable to complete directions with multiple, successive steps by using a picture cue with each step of the transition. For example, Donna uses a picture

of clean up to indicate that it is time to put toys away. When the toys are put away, Donna shows a picture of snack to communicate that it is time for snack to begin. Donna shows a picture of the table and chair next to indicate that it is time to sit down.

Physical Prompting

Physical prompting may be used in two ways to help children learn how to transition. An adult might physically prompt the child during steps the child cannot complete independently (e.g., cleaning up toys). The other prompting method, peer assistance, was described earlier: A peer who is successful during transitions can be used to prompt or physically assist a child who is not able to transition independently.

Summary

Transitions between activities can be difficult for both young children and their teachers. Multiple strategies may be used to decrease the likelihood that children engage in challenging behavior during transitions. Teachers plan where staff and children will be as well as when transitions will occur each day. Teachers plan how and when to communicate with staff from other programs. Teachers may also plan what materials are needed during activities.

Linking effective interventions to functional behavioral assessment results also helps decrease challenging behavior during transitions. If children are using challenging behavior to obtain attention, increased adult attention or FCT to request adult attention are effective strategies to use. If children are engaging in challenging behavior to obtain preferred items, interventions such as prespecified reinforcers or preferred items as distracters will help. If students are engaging in challenging behavior to escape a non-preferred activity, interventions such as FCT to request an alternative or HPR should result in effective decreases in undesirable behavior. Last, teachers must teach children critical skills to be used during transitions. Skills

such as cleaning up toys, following multistep directions, and predicting routines will help children transition successfully between activities. Planning, linking intervention to assessment, and using interventions to address skill deficits should result in decreased challenging behavior, leading to stress-free transitions for children and their teachers.

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