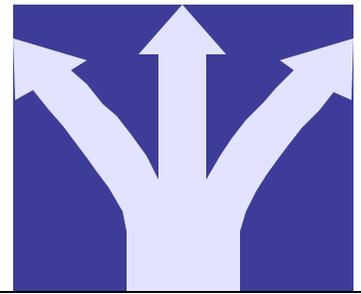


# OUTLOOK ASSOCIATES of New England

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## Transitions: Flashpoints in Parenting

Did you ever notice that tempers flare when you are trying to get your children ready for school, you are dashing out the door to get an appointment or trying to keep to an 8:00 p.m. bedtime? You are just trying to get through your normal routine and there is no need for little Susie or Johnny to be so difficult. You find yourself feeling more and more tense and determined that your youngster will do what is expected of himself/herself (after all, isn't every other kid doing what they are supposed to do?) What do these events at various points in the day have in common? In a word, transitions.

When transitions go well, we take them for granted. Do you ever think that a parent says to oneself, "Gee, didn't we all do a great job getting off to school this morning!" There may be a momentary sigh of relief when the children climb aboard the school bus but we don't have much time to think about it; the day's schedule beckons. When transitions are not handled well by parent, teacher, caregiver or child, they become points of conflict. Transitions that go badly on a regular basis become dangerous patterns that become challenging to break, those parts of the day we begin to dread.

### Time Constraints

So what is it about transitioning with children that at the least, threatens our composure and at the worst, sends us over the brink? Time is one factor. We don't have a lot of it and we are trying to use it judiciously. Children, however, do not have the same sense of time that we do. They are much more oriented to the present. They do not see the urgency of putting the toys away, getting on their jacket and getting in the car. Frequently, we are asking them to stop doing something pleasurable and to embark on a less pleasurable activity.

As the child becomes oppositional around our requests, we begin to feel like they are purposefully "pushing our buttons." Our anger escalates. Parental requests become commands. The child, who may already be feeling tenuous about the change you are implementing, feels threatened by your tone and/or your words and "digs in". The power struggle begins. Anger escalates on both sides and no one is going anywhere fast. Sometimes parents say, "but I had to yell at him to get him to do what I needed him to do!" Using anger as a behavior management tool may have some short-term effectiveness but ultimately will not facilitate a pattern of smooth transitions. Children cannot learn what is expected of them when they feel threatened or afraid.

So how can parents cope better with the multitude of transitions they encounter in a day? Here are a few suggestions:

### In the Moment:

- First, as soon as you feel the tension mount, **take some deep breaths.** This may sound like a trivial suggestion. However, Hans Selye, a researcher in the area of stress, found that when you perceive a problem or threat, your brain may send an alarm which in turn stimulates your nervous system to produce a series of changes in your body; increased heart and breathing rates, muscle tension and increased blood pressure. These changes are not helping you deal with your child. Taking a few deep breaths is a way of turning off the alarm so you can problem solve through the transition.
- **Remember, this transition is *your* agenda, not *your child's*** (even if you are about to engage in an activity that he finds enjoyable). He/she cannot appreciate that you have to go to the park *right now* because you have an appointment later.

(Continued)

- **Tell yourself**, “My child is *not* trying to torment me!”
- Although you would like immediate compliance, **consider problem-solving** with your child. Identify what you want and what you think he wants and the possible solutions and consequences. It may feel time consuming but may be of shorter duration than a temper tantrum.
- If you find yourself losing control, **take a time-out** if you can. This may mean placing a very young child safely in his crib while you try to calm yourself in another room. Or have another parent or adult take over while you try to calm yourself. Come back to resolve the issue when you have regained composure. Time out is not always an option when you are caring for children but use it if you need to.

### Later On, When Things Have Settled Down or Ahead of Time:

Dr. Stanley Greenspan, a child psychiatrist and author of several books about children, writes, “When your words are likely to push your child’s buttons, use anticipation.” Here are other specific suggestions:

- ♦ **Give a warning** about the upcoming change, “In five minutes, we will be leaving for the park so you will need to stop playing.”
- ♦ **Don’t be afraid to talk about a recent transition that didn’t go well** with the goal of doing better next time. (ex. “We had a hard time getting out the door to school this morning. How can we make tomorrow a better morning?”).
- ♦ **Keep a log. Look for patterns** and plan accordingly.
- ♦ **Limit the number of transitions in your day.** Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, a parent educator and author has written about children she calls “spirited” who may be more sensitive, intense and persistent than typical youngsters. She notes, “When you recognize your child’s limits and know when to quit, your child will be more successful and your days will run more smoothly.”
- ♦ **Find time for child’s agenda.** Dr. Greenspan calls this “floor time.” In the hurried, harried world in which we live, floor time is a way to establish a sense of involvement, security and warmth between

between parent and child. He describes it this way:

*The parent simply joins the child at her level, playing or engaging in the child’s chosen activity for about twenty minutes each day. This is an essential foundation for a child who is feeling overwhelmed by the world. The idea is to follow the child’s initiative.*

From The Challenging Child, by Stanley Greenspan

Sometimes children’s difficult behavior around particular transitions may be their way of communicating to you that something is wrong (ex. morning procrastination because he has a bully problem at school). You may need to consult a professional child therapist if transitions difficulties are persistent or pervasive or particularly explosive.

### Suggested Readings:

1. Brooks, Robert. Angry Children, Worried Parents: Seven Steps to Help Families Manage Anger. Speciality Press, 2004.
2. Greene, Ross W. The Explosive Child. Harper Collins. 1998
3. Greenspan, Stanley. The Challenging Child. Addison Wesley Publishing Co. 1995
4. Kurcinka, Mary Sheedy. Raising Your Spirited Child. Harper Perennial. 1991

### **School Spirit Overboard**

A judge in Bentonville, AK ordered the mother of a junior high-school cheerleader into anger management classes after the woman admitted that she harassed the sponsor of the Cheerleading team. Melissa Leach, 33, was also fined \$500 and given a suspended 30-day jail sentence for pushing and shouting at Lincoln Junior High cheerleading coach Helen Campbell last August. Campbell had disciplined Leach’s daughter for skipping practices. (AP)

### **~~Study Says Bullies, Victims Risk Later Violent Acts~~**

Federal researchers have found that children who bully others, as well as the victims of bullying, are more likely to engage in subsequent violent behaviors according to the *National Institute of Child Health and Human Development*.

Of the boys who had bullied others at least once a week in school, 52.2% had carried a weapon in the past month, 38.7% were involved in frequent fighting and 45.7% reported having been injured in a fight. The study also found victims of bullying were more likely than youth who had never been attacked to engage in violent behaviors themselves. Of the boys who said that they had been bullied in school every week, 36.4% had carried a weapon, 22.6% said they were involved in frequent fighting and 31.8% had been injured in a fight. (Join Together, April 2003)