



Together for Neurodiversity

Empowering Futures, Embracing Differences

Supporting
with
Transitions

Introduction

Transitions — moving from one activity to another, starting or stopping something, or changing environments — can be very difficult for autistic children. For many autistic children, transitions bring uncertainty, loss of control, and anxiety. Stopping something they enjoy can feel overwhelming, and waiting for something new to start may feel stressful.

This booklet will help you understand why transitions can be hard and give you practical, visual tools to make them easier.

Why Transitions are Difficult?

Autistic children often find transitions challenging because:

- They may need predictability and routine.
- Changes can feel sudden or confusing.
- Time is an abstract idea — “five minutes” might not mean much.
- Ending something they love can feel like a big loss.
- Waiting without knowing “how long” can create anxiety.

Visuals, timers, and structured supports can reduce this anxiety by making transitions clear and predictable.

Wait Card

A simple card with the word WAIT and a clear symbol.

- Use when you need your child to pause before starting something new.
- Pair with calm language: “Wait. Then snack.”
- Helps children know what you expect in that moment.



Waiting Visual

This is a visual strip with removable pieces (for example, 3–5 symbols). Each time a piece is taken away, the child can see that waiting is getting shorter.

- Place the strip where your child can see it.
- Start with small waits (10–30 seconds).
- Gradually increase waiting time as they become comfortable.
- Pair with language: “Wait... nearly finished... all done!”

Time to Wait



5-4-3-2-1 Countdown Visual

A visual with the numbers 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 that you remove one by one.

- Show your child at the start: “Five left.”
- Take away each number as time passes.
- When you reach 1 → All Done, move on to the next activity.
- Great for stopping an activity in a calm, structured way.

Countdown



Timers

Timers give a clear start and end point. Choose one that is visual, not just auditory.

- Sand timers (1, 2, 5 minutes) are simple and concrete.
- Digital visual timers (with colours that fade) can help older children.
- Always show your child the timer as it starts, so they understand.
- Pair with language: “When the sand is gone, we tidy up.”



Other Helpful Ideas

- Visual timetables: Show what is happening now and what comes next.
- Transition objects: Allow your child to carry a favourite toy or object between activities.
- First–Then boards: “First tidy up, then tablet.”
- Songs or cues: Use the same song or phrase for repeated transitions (e.g. tidy-up song).
- Practice small transitions: Build tolerance by practising simple changes at home.



Tips for Success

- Be consistent – Use the same visuals and language each time.
- Keep it simple – Short phrases like “Wait. Then snack.” work best.
- Show what’s next – Don’t just say “finished”; show the next activity.
- Give warnings – Use timers or countdowns to prepare your child.
- Start small – Begin with short waits and easy transitions, then build up.
- Involve your child – Let them remove countdown pieces or start the timer.
- Stay calm – Your calmness helps your child feel safe.
- Celebrate small wins – Praise or reward when they manage a transition.
- Share strategies – Use the same approach at home, school, and with family.



Final Thoughts

Transitions are part of everyday life, but for autistic children they can feel especially hard. By using visuals, timers, and consistent routines, you can help make these moments more predictable and less stressful.

Remember, progress may be slow and that's okay. Every small step — waiting for 30 seconds, moving from one room to another, or finishing a favourite activity calmly — is an achievement worth celebrating.

What works one day may not work the next, and that doesn't mean you or your child are failing. Be patient with yourself, and flexible with your child. Over time, these strategies will become familiar, and transitions will feel easier and safer for both of you.

Above all, know that you are not alone. Many families experience the same challenges, and with the right tools, you and your child can succeed together.

