

TRANSITION PLANNING

GOAL

To help you prepare for your child's developmental transitions—big and small—by using ABA strategies that build independence, reduce stress, and support lifelong learning.

BACKGROUND

Every child goes through transitions—starting school, moving classrooms, entering adulthood. But for autistic children, these shifts can feel overwhelming.

Changes in routine, environment, or expectations may bring uncertainty and anxiety. As a parent, you play a key role in helping your child navigate these transitions smoothly.

ABA strategies can help. Whether your child is starting preschool or preparing for adulthood, you can use simple, evidence-based tools to make each step feel more predictable and manageable. With the right support, transitions can become opportunities for growth and independence—not setbacks.

HELPING YOUR CHILD PREPARE

Big changes don't have to be scary. In this lesson, you'll learn how to:

- Use shaping to build independence gradually
- Teach communication skills that support self-advocacy
- Practice flexibility and problem-solving in everyday life
- Prepare for major life changes like starting school or learning job skills

You don't need to plan everything all at once—but taking small, steady steps now can make a big difference later. Your BCBA® can help you individualize the plan to fit your child's needs and strengths.

UNDERSTANDING TRANSITIONS

Transitions are a part of life—but they aren't always easy. Whether it's starting school, moving homes, or adjusting to a new daily routine, every change can feel big to your child. This page will help you understand the different types of transitions, why they're hard, and what you can do to support your child through them with confidence and care.

WHAT COUNTS AS A TRANSITION?

Transitions aren't just about moving from preschool to kindergarten or high school to adulthood. They happen all the time—some big, some small. Helping your child with both types builds long-term success.

Big transitions might include:

- Starting a new school or program
- Moving to a new home or city
- Preparing for adulthood or aging out of services
- A family member moving out, getting married, or passing away

Smaller—but still important—transitions include:

- A new teacher or therapist
 - Shifts in daily routines (e.g., going from summer to school schedule)
 - Moving bedrooms or rearranging furniture
 - Ending one activity and starting another
-

WHY TRANSITIONS ARE CHALLENGING

Transitions often involve more than just a change in environment—they come with new expectations, routines, and people. For children who thrive on predictability, this can feel overwhelming. Some children struggle with:

- Uncertainty or fear of the unknown
- Difficulty adjusting to new routines
- Loss of familiar supports or relationships

Recognizing these challenges helps you provide the support your child needs.

PLANNING FOR BIG CHANGES

Transitions—big or small—can feel overwhelming for both you and your child. Whether it's starting a new school, moving to a new home, or adjusting after a major life event, thoughtful planning can help reduce stress and increase success.

START EARLY AND PREVIEW THE CHANGE

The earlier you start talking about a transition, the more time your child has to understand what's happening. Children with communication or processing delays often need extra time and repetition to feel secure.

- Talk about the change in clear, concrete language. Use simple terms your child understands.
- Use visual aids. Calendars, pictures, or visual schedules can help show what will happen and when.
- Visit or explore together. If your child is changing schools or moving homes, take pictures of the new place or visit ahead of time.
- Create a social story. A personalized story about the upcoming change can reduce fear and increase familiarity.

BREAK THE TRANSITION INTO TEACHABLE STEPS

Transitions aren't just one big event—they're made up of many small skills and expectations. Break them down and teach them one at a time.

- Identify what's new. Will the routine be different? Will there be new people or rules?
- Teach one skill at a time. Focus on one part of the transition, like learning to pack a lunch or asking for a break in a new setting.
- Practice in low-pressure settings. Role-play or rehearse routines without pressure or urgency.
- Use visuals to guide the routine. A step-by-step chart can help your child remember what to do and feel more in control.

USE REINFORCEMENT TO BUILD POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS

Change is hard—but it can still feel safe and rewarding. Reinforcement helps your child build confidence and feel supported during the process.

- Start with what your child already enjoys. Use special interests or favorite items to reinforce new routines.
- Celebrate every step forward. Reinforce trying, even if it's not perfect.
- Use praise that describes the behavior. Say things like, "You walked into your new room so calmly," or "I love how you tried something new today."
- Be consistent. The more predictable the reinforcement, the more motivated your child will be to participate.

BUILDING TOWARD INDEPENDENCE

Every child grows at their own pace, but building independence is possible—even in small steps. Whether your child is in preschool or high school, it's never too early (or too late) to teach foundational skills that support long-term independence, including future jobs or adult responsibilities.

Teach Skills with Real-Life Purpose

Think beyond worksheets and flashcards. Skills that help your child participate in everyday routines or community settings are valuable steps toward independence.

- Household chores: Matching socks, wiping a table, or helping put groceries away can build responsibility and confidence.
- Daily self-care: Dressing, brushing teeth, and packing a bag are life skills that promote autonomy.
- Community tasks: Practice ordering at a restaurant, waiting in line, or greeting familiar people.

Use Task Analysis to Break Skills into Steps

Many independent tasks can feel overwhelming at first. That's where task analysis comes in—breaking big tasks into smaller, teachable parts.

- Choose a functional skill your child will need to do regularly.
- List the steps in order, as specifically as possible.
- Teach one step at a time, using prompting and reinforcement.
- Use visual supports like picture cards or checklists if your child benefits from them.

Focus on Pre-Vocational Skills Early

Even if your child isn't ready for a job, you can teach skills that lead in that direction.

- Follow simple directions from someone other than a parent or sibling.
- Stay on task for increasing amounts of time—even just a few minutes at first.
- Accept feedback and corrections with support.
- Complete preferred and non-preferred tasks with adult guidance.

Whether it's sorting utensils or helping in the garden, the goal is to build focus, flexibility, and persistence—key skills for future opportunities.

ENCOURAGING VOICE AND CHOICE

Every child deserves a say in their own life. As your child grows, supporting their ability to express preferences, make choices, and participate in decisions builds self-advocacy—an essential life skill that supports dignity, safety, and independence.

Start with Everyday Choices

Children build self-advocacy through simple, everyday decisions. These may seem small, but they teach your child that their voice matters.

- Let your child choose between two snacks or shirts.
- Involve them in planning activities ("Do you want to go to the park or the library?").
- Allow them to say "no" safely when appropriate (e.g., during non-essential tasks).
- Validate their choices, even if you can't always say yes.

Practice Self-Advocacy in Real Life

You don't need a formal curriculum to build advocacy skills. Look for natural opportunities:

- Let your child answer for themselves when someone asks a question (with support if needed).
- Encourage them to make simple requests in public (e.g., asking for ketchup at a restaurant).
- Practice scripts or role-play situations in a calm, safe setting.

Respect Communication in All Forms

Some children express needs with words. Others use gestures, devices, or behaviors. Self-advocacy starts by listening to your child—however they communicate.

Focus on:

- Recognizing signs of discomfort or refusal (e.g., moving away, covering ears).
- Teaching simple communication skills like "all done," "help," or "stop."
- Modeling respectful communication with others.

Honor Assent and Teach Boundaries

One of the most powerful ways to teach self-advocacy is by respecting your child's "yes" and "no." When your child learns that they are allowed to say no—and that you'll respect it—they become more confident, more connected, and more willing to engage.

- Pause when your child resists or says "no," and acknowledge it respectfully.
- Use the moment to teach safe alternatives
- Model asking for permission before helping physically, when possible.

TURNING TRANSITIONS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Transitions can be overwhelming—but they also offer powerful opportunities for growth. With the right support, your child can learn new routines, build confidence, and gain independence one step at a time.

STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT SMOOTH TRANSITIONS

When preparing for a change, whether big or small, these tools can help your child feel more secure:

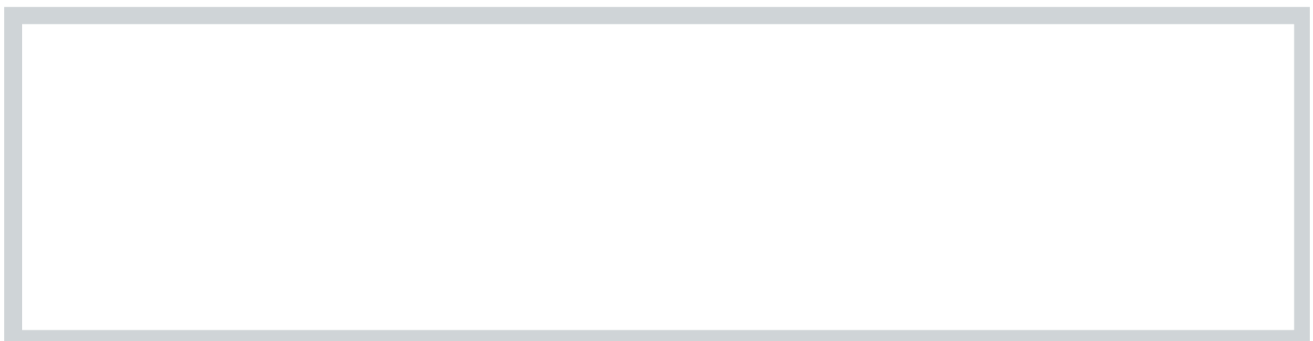
- Visual Schedules: Show what's happening now and what's coming next.
- Social Stories: Help your child understand unfamiliar places, people, or routines.
- Countdowns: Use timers or visual countdowns to prepare for upcoming changes.
- Advance Practice: Rehearse new steps in a calm setting before they're required.
- Consistent Elements: Keep familiar routines, objects, or people nearby when possible.


TEACH SKILLS THAT BUILD INDEPENDENCE

Some transitions require your child to learn new tasks. Use ABA strategies to break these into small, teachable parts:

- Use Task Analysis: Break down complex tasks into manageable steps.
- Provide Support, Then Fade: Offer help at first, then slowly reduce it as your child gains confidence.
- Reinforce Every Effort: Celebrate small steps, even if the task isn't yet complete.
- Use Visuals and Checklists: These can help your child remember and complete steps independently.

What's one upcoming transition your child will experience? What's one way you can begin preparing for it now?



A grayscale photograph of a person from behind, standing on a skateboard. They are facing a wall with several hand-drawn rectangular outlines of varying heights. The person's right arm is raised, touching the top of the tallest rectangle. The skateboard has a distinctive starburst pattern on its deck. In the bottom left corner, on the ground, there are some small, white, broken pieces of what might be chalk or a small object.

**The secret of change is to
focus all of your energy
not on fighting the old, but
on building the new.**

~Socrates