Transitions within the Classroom

Helpful Hints Series #8
from Dr. Barry Ziff

Most special needs students have a difficult time transitioning from one activity to another. The teacher can make transitions easier for students by being prepared, organized and having specific routines to follow each time there is a transition.

Successful teachers develop strategies and reinforce appropriate behavior utilizing verbal praise, rewards and practice. Students need to learn how to transition from one activity to the next. Students need to be given ample opportunities to practice the transition so it becomes part of the normal day routine. The first time I had my class stand for the flag salute, I asked one student to demonstrate the proper way to stand and push in the chair quietly. Then I proceeded to ask everyone at that table to stand and push in their chairs quietly. I then moved on to the next group and repeated the procedure. Each time the students were provided with enthusiastic verbal praise. Before I asked the entire class to stand for the flag salute I challenged the class to notice which group stood the quietest. Each week the class practiced this routine until the class performed with the utmost efficiency. After a short vacation the class was asked to practice the routine again as a reinforcement to provide the appropriate behavior.

Many students find it challenging to move from one activity to another. This is usually when the beginning teacher loses control of the classroom. The teacher can help students perform this task without chaos by establishing another routine and having the students practice often. Some teachers provide verbal warnings so students will know that their time is almost up. Usually by proving a verbal signal five minutes and two minutes before it is time to clean up prepares students for the transition. Some students may need additional guidance and support from the paraprofessional.

Once the students clean up from the previous lesson the teacher needs to provide some down time from academics. This is an opportunity to sing a song, play a group game, or do some physical exercise. Once the students have had their short break they will be ready to move on to the next academic lesson.

Lining up for an activity such as recess, lunch or an assembly causes problems for some students. It is important that the class has had an opportunity to practice this activity once the teacher has explained the guidelines for lining up. The teacher needs to provide positive verbal praise to all students who behave in an appropriate manner. The student(s) who have difficulty performing this task may need extra guidance and support from the teacher or paraprofessional. By standing near the disruptive student the adult has a better chance of controlling the inappropriate behavior. The teacher needs to remember not to punish the entire class because of the misbehavior of a few students. It’s best practices to excuse those who are ready for the next activity and provide guidance and consequences for those who do not follow the directions.

Guidelines for Moving in the Classroom

• Explain how you want students to travel within the classroom setting.
• Practice moving so students understand the concept of which direction they are supposed to move.
• Reward students for properly following the directions.
• Post a sign/bulletin board to reinforce the concept.

**Signaling Transition Time**

• Switch lights on and off
• Use music as a trigger for transition
• Utilize a specific hand-clapping pattern
• Sing a song
• Verbally ask students for their attention (“Eyes on me”)

Many of the activities that we engage in every day become routines. We usually do not even think about what we are doing because the routine becomes such a natural part of our lives. For example, did you know that how you bathe is a routine? You bathe each day following the same routine. Some people begin with the left side of their body and then move to the right side before finishing up with washing their hair. Whatever the pattern, the point is each and every day you follow the same routine. Starting and driving your car is a similar experience. Check it out! Teachers can reinforce student behaviors by continually practicing appropriate activities so that they become routine. This is how we can cause effective change in student’s behavior. However, the student has been acting in an inappropriate manner for some time, therefore it takes time to change the behavior. Utilizing teaching strategies such as modeling, practice and rewarding appropriate behavior teachers can effectively change a child’s behavior.

Before school begins the teacher needs to think about and plan how to organize the transition time in the classroom. Remember not to take anything for granted. You will need to teach, practice and reteach the routines until all your students are able to function according to your vision of how you want the students to perform. It is amazing, but given the opportunity students do respond in positive ways.