

# Simple TRANSITIONS

for Infants and Toddlers



Karen Miller

# **Simple Transitions for Infants and Toddlers**

**by Karen Miller**

## **Acknowledgments**

All books take shape as the result of an author's exposure to the ideas and talents of many people. I wish I could acknowledge personally the hundreds of childcare teachers who are in my mind from the over 30 years I have spent observing and learning from them. And then there are the countless dedicated infant and toddler teachers, administrators, and trainers who have generously shared ideas and insights at professional conferences and training workshops around the country. It is this professional caring and sharing that has made our field dynamic and ever-improving. Specifically, I would like to thank Leah Curry-Rood for helping me to conceptualize this book and brainstorm its initial outline, as well as providing the various lists of children's books provided in the content. Finally, the magic touch and hard work of a good editor, in this case Kate Kuhn, make a book come together effectively. Thank you, all of you!

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated, with respect and admiration, to infant and toddler teachers everywhere. Your influence is tremendous.

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Karen Miller

Illustrations: Marie Ferrante Doyle

Photographs: Mary Duru



**Gryphon House**

Lewisville, NC

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Printed in the United States of America.

Published by Gryphon House, Inc.

10770 Columbia Pike, Suite 201, Silver Spring, MD 20901

301.595.9500; 301.595.0051 (fax); 800.638.0928 (toll-free)

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Cover art: Comstock Images, [www.comstock.com](http://www.comstock.com)

Reprinted February 2018

## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Information

Miller, Karen.

Simple transitions for infants and toddlers / by Karen Miller. p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-87659-298-4

1. Child care. 2. Infants--Care. 3. Toddlers--Care. 4. Child care services. I. Title.

HQ778.5.M55 2005

362.71'2--dc22

2004022104

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# Introduction

When I told a professional friend that I was writing a book about transitions with infants and toddlers, she said, “Simple! Transitions: as few as possible. End of book!” Of course, she is right! However, I do think there is more to say on this topic.

Because the topics covered in this book usually are not addressed in early childhood education classes, new teachers often struggle to make it through the day and sometimes end up exhausted and discouraged. Yet, it doesn’t have to be this way. The ideas and strategies in this book came from many years of observing real caregivers in hundreds of childcare settings who had developed the knack of moving smoothly through the day with contented infants and relatively cooperative toddlers. For the purposes of this book an infant is from birth to 18 months of age. A toddler, one who is up and “toddling,” is from 13 months to three years of age. Yes, there is an overlap. This is to allow for individual differences in maturation.

In the context of childcare, the word *transitions* implies the “in-between” times, moving from one part of the daily routine to another throughout the day. This book is really about helping children handle themselves in time and space, so that they know what to expect and what is expected of them. This book is also about helping children learn to deal with new situations, such as entering childcare for the first time or making the transition from the infant room to the toddler room.

Even when a child is cared for at home, not in a childcare center, transitions can be a challenge, as any parent who has tried to get a toddler out of the house in the morning can tell you. It takes effort and finesse to get toddlers to stop doing one thing and start doing something else, especially to conform to an adult’s agenda. In a childcare setting, the caregiver must be conscious of the whole group. It takes teamwork with other staff, deciding ahead of time, and sometimes on the spot, who will be stationed where to support children while their partner gets something else done. Once beyond the infant room where most actions are individualized, transitions become major social activities. Toddlers move “en masse.” Young children become conscious of each other as they gather or start something new. They are learning about getting things done.



Transitions make up a major portion of the real curriculum in infant and toddler child care. Infant and toddler teachers may feel that they don't have time for curriculum, viewing "curriculum" as special, planned learning activities. However, children often gain the most from what happens in everyday routines. We know that there are learning opportunities in virtually everything we do with these youngest children. Certainly, children's vocabularies grow as they learn the meaning of the words you speak. Children gain self-confidence and self-esteem as they find out what is expected of them and start to function independently. They come to "know the ropes" and develop a sense of belonging. How adults treat children, consistently, from day to day, has perhaps the largest impact on their healthy growth and development.



Life is full of transitions. We move from one developmental stage to another, in and out of relationships, from dependence to independence. We go from being the oldest in one school to the youngest in another. We enter the job market and change jobs. We move. How we handle both the large and the small transitions in our lives has a great impact on our general success in life. Is our ability to deal with life's transitions anchored in early childhood? Everything else seems to be, so it is likely that our earliest experiences with transitions influence how we will deal with change.

The truth is, transitions are hard! Any transition in life is challenging. We hang on to the old, and feel uncertain about the new. After the transition is made, we may question if we did the right thing. Narrow this down for very young children. Small daily transitions feel quite large to them. Their lives are small; therefore, the segments within seem big.

I hope this book helps you live in the moment with the infants and toddlers in your care. Slow down. Give them the time they need. Every moment has value. While you must keep the day moving and get things done, try to let go of the rush. Get out of the mindset of getting them ready for the next activity, the next stage, "the next life," and enjoy the wonder in front of you. Enjoy the NOW.

# How to Use This Book

Although it is not necessary to read this book from cover to cover, it is important to read “General Principles and Techniques” (see Chapter 1, pages 11-15) and “Developmental Notes” (see Appendix page 138) before trying the transition ideas in the book. It is essential to have appropriate expectations for children in this age group. Certain principles and techniques make many situations go more smoothly. An understanding of these techniques, as well as where infants and toddlers are on the developmental spectrum, will make the advice in the rest of the book make even better sense.

After reading these sections, turn to the chapter or the particular daily transition that you find challenging. Pick and choose from the ideas and activities in this book that address your current needs. Try different things to discover what works best in your situation. Undoubtedly, you will come up with many variations of your own. Every childcare center and every group of children is different. Caregivers will constantly adjust and “tweak” the routine of the day to accommodate the children in the group. Variations in age and energy level will determine how you handle your daily routines.

This book includes transitions using different songs. Don’t worry too much about the melody of the songs. Adjust the tunes and the words any way you wish. Make these songs your own, and make up your own.

With good planning, an understanding of the age of the child, and a few good techniques and activities up your sleeve, the days will go smoothly for you, the children, and parents, and everyone can get maximum benefit from your program.





# General Principles and Techniques

CHAPTER

1

This chapter offers some basic transition techniques that apply in most situations. Keep them in mind when planning activities and routines. More discussion and specific examples of these principles appear throughout the book.

## Develop Consistency in the Daily Flow of Activities

One of the best things you can do for yourself and the children in your care is to develop a basic, daily routine and stick to it. This is especially important in toddler rooms. Infants, on the other hand, benefit more from individualized, “demand” schedules. However, even in infant programs, you can establish a daily routine that forms the framework of your day. After a few days, the children learn this order. With consistency from day to day, they know what to expect. This gives children a sense of security and control. It makes transition times so much easier because the children, perhaps in order to demonstrate that they “know the ropes of this place,” often automatically prepare to do the next thing. For instance, if you read books to the children in the Cozy Corner after snack every day, the children will begin to gather in the Cozy Corner without being told, as you help others finish their snacks.

This does not mean that you cannot vary what you do within segments of your daily schedule. Just remember that infants and toddlers like to do the same things over and over again, and they will look for the familiar.





## Invent and Use Rituals

Rituals are specific ways of doing things that don't vary from day to day. For instance, you might sing the same lullaby at rest time, or always place an infant in a certain chair when it's time to eat. You might bring a certain puppet out to greet children at the beginning of the day, or always begin story time by singing a particular song. See how many of these mini-rituals you can develop for various segments of the day. Just as consistency in your daily routine helps children relax and feel in control, knowing what

will happen and what is expected of them in many small parts of the day will help them be cooperative.

## Make Your Classroom Space Work for You

Infants and toddlers orient themselves in space according to where certain objects are in the environment. For example, they may know they can find their favorite red truck on the shelf by the green rug. This is not to say that you should never rearrange the furniture, but do it only when there is a good reason. Have a "place for everything and everything in its place" as much as possible. Again, this gives very young children a sense of mastery and helps them to feel comfortable in the classroom, which, in turn, leads them to a greater sense of independence.

## Tell Children What Is Going to Happen Next

No one likes abrupt change, especially when deeply involved in an activity. It is a courtesy to children to let them know what is going to happen next. Even babies can get the sense of this. *"Soon we will put the toys away and get ready to go outside."* If it happens every day, the children might even start the transition immediately. And even if they don't, resistance to the transition will likely be less.

## Offer Rehearsals

When you're going to do something new, it's a good idea to have a rehearsal, to walk the children through the procedure, so they can know what to expect. Are you going to take the children on their first neighborhood walk, using a walking rope? First, let them practice holding onto knots in the rope while walking around the room or the playground. Will a child be moving to a new classroom? Many visits to the new classroom beforehand make it easier for the child when the transition occurs.

## Create Nonverbal Signals

Use as many nonverbal signals as possible to prepare children for new segments of the day. Remember that language is not yet their primary way of figuring out their world. Find things that don't use words to signal your routines. For example, bring out a puppet to signal story time, or play a certain song or melody to signal cleanup time. When you dim the lights, children know it is time to rest. When you start slapping your knees in a certain rhythm as you walk around outside, children know it is time to go back inside.

Use words along with these nonverbal signals. In this way, children will receive the same message in a few different ways. Each message reinforces the other. Children even find it “fun” to comply with the nonverbal signals—it is almost like using a code.

## Use a Pet Puppet

Although many people work with young children successfully without using a pet puppet, don't deprive yourself of this valuable aid. Children of all ages are drawn to a puppet and are eager to cooperate with it.

A “pet puppet” is different from other puppets that you might have in the classroom for children to use. You are the only one who manipulates the pet puppet. When you are finished using the pet puppet, put it away in its “house.”



