

Helping Children with Wait Times and Transitions

A quick-reference guide for reducing waiting, supporting transitions, and strengthening social-emotional regulation

Young children do best when they know what to expect. Long waits and sudden changes can feel frustrating because children are still learning patience, flexibility, and self-control. When adults reduce unnecessary waiting and give children notice before transitions, **children feel safer, calmer, and more ready to cooperate.**

Why Reducing Wait Times Matters

Children are not trying to be difficult when waiting is hard — their brains are still developing the skills needed to sit still, delay wants, and manage big feelings. When wait times are reduced, children:

- Feel calm and secure because they are not left wondering what will happen next
- Stay engaged because they spend more time playing, learning, and connecting
- Have fewer behavior challenges because boredom and frustration are reduced
- Build confidence because routines feel manageable and predictable

Simple Teacher Examples

INSTEAD OF

Having all children line up and wait while coats are found

TRY

→ Sending a few children at a time to get ready

INSTEAD OF

Saying, "Clean up now"

TRY

→ Saying, "In five minutes, we will clean up and go outside"

INSTEAD OF

Expecting children to wait quietly with nothing to do

TRY

→ Singing a song or doing finger plays

INSTEAD OF

Rushing a child who is upset about leaving play

TRY

→ Saying, "You worked hard on that tower. Take one more picture in your mind, then we'll clean up together"

INSTEAD OF

Surprising children with a change

TRY

→ Using a visual schedule or first-then statement: "First bathroom, then snack"

Easy Strategies for Teachers

- Give a simple warning: **"Two more minutes, then it's time for lunch."**
- Use songs, timers, pictures, or routines to show what comes next
- Offer small choices: **"Do you want to hop or tiptoe to the sink?"**
- Keep short waits active with counting, fingerplays, or conversation
- Prepare children who need extra help before the group transition begins
- Notice success: **"You stopped playing and came to wash hands. That was helpful."**

Social-Emotional Benefits

- **Self-regulation:** Children have time to prepare, calm their bodies, and shift attention
- **Trust and security:** Predictable routines help children feel safe with adults
- **Positive peer interactions:** Fewer crowded waits can mean fewer conflicts
- **Independence:** Clear routines help children begin to follow steps on their own

KEY REMINDER

Reducing wait times is not just about making the day easier for adults — it is a social-emotional support. When children know what is coming next and are not expected to wait too long, they feel respected, regulated, and ready to learn.