FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

# Making Transitions Between Homes Easier

Practical strategies for creating calmer transitions, maintaining consistency, and giving children space to adjust before and after time between households.

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Practical strategies for creating calmer transitions, maintaining consistency, and giving children space to adjust before and after time between households.

Moving between homes asks a lot of a child. Within a few minutes they may switch rooms, rules, routines, and the parent they are with. Even when a child feels loved and comfortable in both places, the switch itself can be the hardest part.

These strategies apply to any kind of handoff: regular time between two homes, visits with a parent, custody exchanges, and reunification sessions. Small, steady habits before and after can make those moments calmer for everyone.

## Supporting Your Child Before & After Transitions

- Give a heads-up before each transition
- Keep goodbyes calm and brief
- Let comfort items travel freely
- Allow time to decompress afterward
- Trade questions for an open door
- Keep routines predictable

# Before, During & After

1

BEFORE

## Prepare without pressure

Children handle transitions better when they know what is coming and don't feel rushed.

- **Give a heads-up.** Use a calendar your child can see, and mention the plan the night before and again that morning.
- **Pack early and together.** A short checklist takes the scramble out of leaving. Keeping basics like pajamas, a toothbrush, and chargers at both homes means less to carry and less to forget.
- **Keep a comfort item close.** A stuffed animal, blanket, photo, or favorite book that travels freely between homes gives your child something steady to hold on to. Let these things belong to your child, not to one house.
- **Save big conversations for another time.** The hour before a transition is not the moment for hard news, discipline, or schedule debates.

WORDS YOU CAN USE

*"After school today, Mom is picking you up. You'll be back here on Sunday."*

2

DURING

## Keep the handoff calm

The handoff is brief, but children remember how it feels. Your steadiness tells them it is safe to go.

- **Keep goodbyes short and warm.** A hug, "I love you," and when you will see them next. Long or tearful goodbyes can leave a child feeling responsible for your feelings.
- **Be courteous with the other parent.** A simple hello is enough. Save logistics and disagreements for a text, email, or co-parenting app later.
- **Be on time and predictable.** The same place and the same routine help your child know what to expect.
- **Choose a neutral handoff if exchanges are tense.** When one parent drops off at school and the other picks up, your child moves between homes without standing in the middle.

WORDS YOU CAN USE

*"I love you. Have a great time. I'll see you Sunday."*

3

AFTER

## Give them space to land

Coming back takes adjusting too. Many children are tired, quiet, clingy, or irritable for the first few hours. This is usually about the switch itself, not about you or their other home.

- **Build in time to decompress.** Plan twenty to thirty low-key minutes before homework, chores, or plans. A snack, quiet play, or time outside all work.
- **Trade questions for an open door.** A string of questions about the other home can feel like a test. Let your child decide what to share and when.
- **Create a welcome-back ritual.** The same snack, a walk with the dog, or a favorite dinner on return nights gives them something familiar to come back to.
- **Hold your usual rules, with extra patience.** Consistency is comforting, even when your child pushes against it.
- **Listen without reacting.** If your child shares something that concerns you, stay calm and thank them for telling you. Take adult concerns to the adults involved, not back through your child.

WORDS YOU CAN USE

*"I'm so happy to see you. I'd love to hear about your week whenever you feel like sharing."*



REUNIFICATION

## Visits and sessions during reunification

When a child is rebuilding a relationship with a parent, the time just before and after contact matters as much as the visit itself. The goal is to keep pressure low so trust can grow at your child's pace.

- **Tell them what to expect.** Who will be there, where it will be, how long it will last, and what happens afterward.
- **Make room for mixed feelings.** Nervous, excited, angry, hopeful, and unsure can all show up at once. None of them are wrong.
- **Avoid coaching.** Let your child's words and feelings be their own, before and after.
- **Plan something calm afterward.** Quiet time at home is often better than a big outing or a debrief in the car.
- **Bring your observations to the therapist.** What you notice is valuable. Sharing it with the professional guiding the process keeps your child out of the middle.

WORDS YOU CAN USE

*"However you feel about today is okay. I'm here if you want to talk, and it's fine if you don't."*

# When Transitions Stay Hard

Some bumpiness around transitions is expected, especially in the first months of a new schedule. It often eases as routines become familiar.
If your child's distress is intense, keeps growing, or continues well after the schedule has settled, or if they share something that makes you concerned for their safety, reach out to their therapist, their pediatrician, or the professionals involved with your family. You may also find *When Your Child Is Having a Hard Time* helpful.

## Before, During & After at a Glance

1

**BEFORE**

Prepare without pressure

2

**DURING**

Keep the handoff calm

3

**AFTER**

Give them space to land

## *You don't have to navigate this alone.*

If you're wondering whether your child or family could use more support, a consultation is a simple place to begin.


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*This guide offers general information for parents and caregivers. It is not a substitute for therapy, medical care, or legal advice specific to your family. In crisis? Call or text 988, or call 911 in an emergency.*