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Switching Gears

Helping your ADHD child transition from this to that with less stress



By Megan Ryan

FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH ADHD

Before We Start

Picture this. It is 5:52 on a Wednesday evening. Dinner is ready, and you can hear the Nintendo Switch from the living room. You call out, "Dinner!" Nothing. You call again. Still nothing. You walk in, and your seven-year-old is so deep into building something in Minecraft that he doesn't even register that you're standing there. You say his name, he says "one more minute," and you both know that minute is not real. Ten minutes later somebody is crying (but at least at the table now), the dinner is cold, and you're wondering how "come eat" turned into a standoff. Again.

If that scene, or one like it, feels a little too familiar, you are in the right place.

Transitions are the moments when your child has to stop one thing and start another. Stop Minecraft, start dinner. Stop playing, start cleaning up. Stop the day, start bedtime. For most kids, transitions are a small bump. For ADHD kids, they can feel like a wall. And because a typical day has dozens of them, transitions are usually where the friction in a house with an ADHD kiddo piles up.

This eBook is about the in-between moments from here to there: transitions. Each chapter teaches one transition strategy you can use anywhere: at the pool, at pickup, at the dinner table, at bedtime. I'll show you each strategy in action first, then explain why it works, then give you some words you can try out. Over time, you will find your own way of communicating with your child, but I'm happy to lend you some sample scripts to get you started.

You'll also meet a word in this guide that is a crucial one to know when it comes to transition management: *antecedent*. Don't let it scare you. It's a simple idea, and once you start looking for it, you'll find it behind most of your child's hardest moments. This was one of those a-ha moments that changed the way I look at my own son's.

Quick version of who's talking to you: Hi! I'm Megan and I'm a Family and Consumer Sciences professional. I taught in a public school classroom for years, designed curriculum for adult learners for decades, have ADHD myself (diagnosed at 44), and have a son who was diagnosed at age 5. I've stood in that living room at 5:52 more times than I can count. When I say "we" in these pages, I mean you and me. I'm not here to judge, because I've done nearly everything in the "been there" lists myself, even though I spent years studying child development and was a teacher. It's really that challenging parenting a child with neurodiversity, so let's take any shame or embarrassment about not being the best parent in the world 100% of the time out of the equation right now. 😊

It may seem too hard now, but it does get easier the more you learn. So, let's see if we can get the next few transitions to go a little better than the last few. Progress, not perfection.

Why Transitions Are Hard for ADHD Brains

Switching from one activity to another sounds simple. It isn't for an ADHD brain. A transition asks your child to do four hard things in a row: notice that time has passed, let go of something interesting, hold the next step in mind, and manage the feelings that come with all of that. Each of those four steps leans on an executive function skill, and executive function is exactly where ADHD kids run behind their same-age peers (Kofler et al., 2024).

Then there's the dopamine piece. If you read *The Morning Reset*, you already know about glitchy dopamine. Quick recap for everyone else: ADHD brains tend to run low on steady, background dopamine and lean hard on quick bursts triggered by interest, novelty, or urgency (a small brain-imaging study of adults found this pattern; Badgaiyan et al., 2015). Minecraft, the trampoline park, and a pile of Pokémon cards all deliver those bursts. Dinner, the car, and the bath do not. Asking your child to stop a high-dopamine activity for a low-dopamine one is asking their brain to give up its best fuel source with nothing to replace it. To us parents, that can look like stubbornness. Really, it's a brain losing its footing.

Hyperfocus makes it harder still. Researchers describe hyperfocus as a state of intense concentration on something interesting, where everything else fades into the background (Ashinoff & Abu-Akel, 2021). While many people who do not parent a child with ADHD only think of the diagnosis as an inability to focus, those of us who spend a lot of time with our kiddos know that hyperfocus can be just as big of a hurdle to navigate. Think about those times when your child is lost in the sauce with that dreamy, peaceful look in their eyes: LEGO, drawing, playing trains, making jewelry. When your child "doesn't hear you," there's a good chance they truly *did not hear you*. Their attention was locked because that is what happens in hyperfocus, and your voice from the kitchen didn't even make it through.

Add in time blindness, where a five-minute warning doesn't feel real until the five minutes are already gone (ADHD kids judge time less accurately; Zheng et al., 2022), and slower emotional brakes, where big feelings arrive fast and are hard to rein in (Shaw et al., 2014), and you have a kid who is set up to struggle at exactly the moments we most need them to cooperate. And isn't that a doozy?

There are a lot of moving parts here, and I'll be showing you some strategies for each of them. But one thing that may be really helpful for you to consider is this: your child is not doing this to you. They are just doing this. They are having a hard time, not giving you a hard time.

The Antecedent: What Happened Right Before the Meltdown

Most of us were raised to think about behavior in two parts: what the kid did, and what happened to them because of it. Behavior, then consequence. Timeout. Lost screen time. "Go to your room." All of our attention lands after the behavior, and we spend our energy trying to find a consequence big enough to stop it next time.

Behavioral researchers add a third part, and they put it first. It's called the antecedent (pronounced an-tuh-SEE-dent), and it simply means whatever happened right before the behavior. The full pattern is called the ABCs: Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence (Bijou et al., 1968). It's the backbone of behavioral parent training, which is a well-established, guideline-recommended treatment for ADHD kids (Doffer et al., 2023).

> **A**ntecedent is what came right before.
>
> **B**ehavior is what your child did.
>
> **C**onsequence is what happened next.

Here's why it matters for transitions. The antecedent of a meltdown is almost never "my kid decided to be difficult." It's a hungry stomach, a tired body, a game that was not quite finished, a loud room, a warning that didn't land, or a demand that arrived out of nowhere. Change the antecedent, and you very often change the behavior without ever needing a consequence at all.

This is where "get curious, not furious" stops being a cute phrase and becomes a method. Furious looks at the behavior and asks, "Why can't you just do this?" Curious looks at the antecedent and asks, "Hmmm. What was going on right before this happened?"

Getting Ready to Get Ready: Your Transition Toolkit

Two small things to have in place before you implement the concepts in Chapter 1.

1. ### A Time Timer

   Because "five more minutes" is an abstract idea to your child, it can be very helpful if you externalize the time. A Time Timer is a physical, visual timer with a red disk that shrinks as time passes. It will help everyone to clearly see how time is passing and to gain a shared understanding about what five minutes is. If you already own one from *The Morning Reset*, great, it's about to earn its keep again. If not, it's a useful thing to purchase. You can order them online and there are plenty to choose from.

2. ### A pocket notebook, or a note on your phone

   You're going to be an antecedent detective for a few days in Chapter 1, and you'll want somewhere to jot things down. Information like the time of day, what came right before, and what happened. Use whatever method will work best for you, but do take the time to write down some observations so you can look at your child's patterns. Not forever. Just for a week or so.

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CHAPTER 1

Before the Hard Transition

The antecedent hunt

PICTURE THIS

It's 3:40 on a Tuesday. You've been in the pickup line for twenty minutes, and your daughter climbs into the back seat looking like she had a fine day. You hand her the granola bar you always keep in the console. She looks at it and says, "I wanted the chocolate chip one." You explain that this is the only one you have. And then it happens: full meltdown. Kicking the seat, sobbing, "You never get the right one," the works.

You feel your own temperature rise. Another parent in the carpool line casts you an unkind look. Part of you wants to say, "You know what? No granola bar at all." Part of you is embarrassed. Most of you is confused, because she was fine four seconds ago and her teacher literally just told you she had a great day.

What's actually going on

The granola bar is not the problem. The granola bar is what happened to be in front of her when she ran out of gas.

Think about what came before. She woke up at 6:45. She spent six and a half hours holding still, following directions, managing noise, waiting her turn, and keeping her ADHD as invisible as she could, because at school the stakes for standing out feel high. She hasn't eaten since 11:15. And then she got into the one place on earth where she doesn't have to hold it together: your car, with you.

Parents and clinicians often call this after-school restraint collapse. It's not a diagnosis, and you won't find it in a medical textbook, but you'll recognize it instantly. Your child spent every bit of self-control she had at school, and there's nothing left for the granola bar. Emotional dysregulation is part of ADHD for many kids, and the emotional brakes engage more slowly in an ADHD brain (Shaw et al., 2014), so once the feeling starts, it's hard to stop.

One more thing worth holding onto: she chose your car to fall apart in. Kids melt down where they feel safest. It's a backwards compliment, but it's a compliment that you are considered a safe person in your child's life.

The strategy: be an antecedent detective

For the next three or four days (a full week if you have it in you), you are not going to fix anything. You're going to notice. Every time a transition goes sideways, grab your notebook and jot down four things:

1. **What time was it?**
2. **What came right before?** School pickup. Leaving grandma's. Coming inside from the yard. The end of a show.
3. **What was the state of the body?** When did they last eat? How did they sleep? Had they been holding still for a long time? Was the room loud?
4. **How did the demand arrive?** Did they see it coming, or did it land out of nowhere? Was it a voice from another room, or were you close?

After a few days, read your notes back. I'd bet money you find a pattern, and I'd bet it's not the pattern you expected. Most parents I work with discover that the "big" meltdowns cluster around two or three specific antecedents. Once you can name the antecedent, you can change it.

In the granola bar story, the fix was almost embarrassingly simple: the mom started buying only the "good" granola bar so there was no chance of a mix-up, and she stopped talking for the first five minutes of the drive. No questions about the day. Just a predictable and preferred snack, quiet, and the playlist her daughter had chosen. Much better outcomes.

Questions to ask your child

Later, not in the moment. Once everyone is calm, usually at bedtime or over a snack the next day, try one of these. Then stop talking and listen.

- "I noticed the car has been a hard place after school lately. What's up?"
- "What's the hardest part about the end of the school day?"
- "If you could change one thing about pickup, what would it be?"

Your job here is to gather information, not to solve. If your child says "I don't know," that's a real answer, and you can say, "That's okay. Let's keep thinking about it." Kids this age often can't name the feeling yet. Your calm interest is doing work even when the answer is a shrug.

IN A PARENT'S WORDS

I thought back to when I was a kid and remembered how exhausted I felt at the end of a school day. I too craved predictability in my snacks, so I actually do understand why she wants the same one every day. Once I stopped taking it personally and realized she was just done, I found the compassion I needed to parent differently.

Mom of a seven-year-old

Been there, done that

- Took the granola bar away as a consequence, which produced a much bigger meltdown, which we then had to consequence.
- Asked "How was your day?" four different ways before they were even buckled.
- Assumed a great day at school meant a great afternoon at home, then felt blindsided every single time.

Words that work

“You held it together all day, and now you're out of gas. That's okay. Let's just drive for a bit.”

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THIS WEEK'S EXPERIMENT

Keep the notebook for at least three days. Write down what came right before every rough transition. Don't change anything yet. Just look for the pattern.

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CHAPTER 2

Build a Ramp, Not a Cliff

A predictable, slower way to bring an activity to an end

PICTURE THIS

Saturday afternoon at the neighborhood pool. Your six-year-old has been in the water for two hours, and the lifeguard blows the whistle for the last adult swim of the day. You say, "Okay bud, time to go," and start gathering towels. He does not get out. You say it again, louder. He swims to the far end. By the third time, you're standing at the edge in your flip-flops saying things like "I am counting to three," and you can feel every other parent on the deck watching. He finally gets out, sobbing and furious, and refuses to put his shoes on. You carry a wet, screaming kid and two pool bags to the car, and the ride home is silent except for you explaining, at length, why we do not act like that at the pool.

What's actually going on

From your side, he had plenty of warning. The whistle blew. You said it three times. From his side, the afternoon was going perfectly, and then a wall came out of nowhere.

Time blindness means the end of pool time did not feel real to him until it was already here (Zheng et al., 2022). The whistle was background noise. Your first "time to go" landed while he was mid-cannonball, and an ADHD brain in the middle of something fun has a hard time pulling back out of it. By the time it registered, the transition was already an emergency, and his body responded like it was one.

Then he was dysregulated, and you were explaining. Here's something that took me a long time to learn: a dysregulated child cannot take in language. When the alarm system is on, the thinking part of the brain goes offline, and every word you add is more noise. I think of it like a garage door coming down. Once it's down, nothing is getting in until it comes back up. Regulation has to come before communication, every time.

The strategy: build a ramp

A cliff is a demand with no runway. A ramp is a transition your child can see coming, with a defined ending and a body-first exit. Here's how to build one.

1. **Give the ending a shape.** "Last jump" is a closure ritual. It lets the activity end on a high note that he controls, instead of on your whistle. For a playground it might be "three more slides." For a playdate, "one more round, then goodbye high-fives."

2. **Preview at the start, not the end.** Before he gets in the pool, kneel down and say, "We're swimming until the red is gone on the timer. When it's gone, we do one last jump and then we go." Set the Time Timer on the towel where he can see it. This turns "time to go" from a surprise into a plan he already agreed to. No Time Timer today? See if you can find a clock you can both see or another external way for your child to also keep track of how much time they have left.

3. **Give two warnings, close and low.** At ten minutes and at two minutes, walk to the edge of the pool, get his attention with a hand on the shoulder or a wave he can see, and say the warning in one short sentence. "Ten minutes, then last jump." "Two minutes, then last jump."

4. **Make the exit physical, not verbal.** Hand him a towel and ask him if he could please carry the pool noodle. Movement helps a revved-up body come down, and it gives his brain a next thing to do instead of a thing to lose.

5. **Say nothing about the meltdown until everyone is regulated.** If it goes sideways anyway, get to the car, put on the music, and let the ride be quiet. The conversation about what happened can wait an hour, or even for another day.

Questions to ask your child

At a calm moment.

- "What's the hardest part about leaving the pool?"
- "What should our last thing be next time? You pick."
- "Would you rather I tell you two minutes, or show you on the timer?"

> **IN A PARENT'S WORDS**
>
> *The last jump thing seemed too simple to work. But it does. He gets to decide what the last thing is, and it's like his brain can let go because he finished on his terms instead of mine.*
>
> Dad of a six-year-old

Been there, done that

- Counted to three in a voice that got a little scarier each number, and then had no idea what to do at three.
- Announced "we're leaving in five minutes" from a lounge chair forty feet away, then got into a conversation with a neighbor, then tried 20 minutes later to say "we have to go NOW!"
- Used the entire ride home to explain, in detail, how we're going to act next time.

Words that work

“You're not in trouble. You're just having a hard time leaving something fun. Let's get to the car, and we'll talk later.”



THIS WEEK'S EXPERIMENT

Pick one regular transition out of a fun place. Preview the ending before it starts, give two close-up warnings, and let your child choose the last thing.

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CHAPTER 3

Connect Before You Direct

Enter their world before asking them to enter yours

PICTURE THIS

Sunday evening, 6:10. Your eight-year-old has been playing Roblox on the iPad for the last forty minutes, and you've decided that's enough for today. From the kitchen, you say, "Okay, screens off." No response. You say it again. "I said screens off." She says, "I'm in the middle of something!" You walk over, take the iPad out of her hands, and hit the power button. And that's when the evening goes from fine to catastrophic in about four seconds. She screams that you ruined it, that she was almost done, that she hates you. You're furious and feel you have every right to be, because you gave two warnings and she ignored both.

What's actually going on

Let's look at the antecedent. She was deep in a game with other players, mid-round, close to finishing something. Then a voice from another room asked her to abandon it. Then a hand came into her world and ended it for her, mid-sentence.

Working memory research tells us that ADHD kids have a hard time holding an outside instruction in mind while they're engaged in something else (Kofler et al., 2024). "Screens off" from the kitchen didn't get ignored. It didn't get in. And when it finally did, the ending was imposed instead of reached, which meant she got none of the closure her brain was chasing.

There's some interesting research on this exact moment. A team at the University of Washington studied how families end screen time and found that transitions went far more smoothly when the ending was built into the plan or the device itself, like a show ending on its own or a set routine, than when a parent stepped in and ended it by force (Hiniker et al., 2016). The study was with younger kids, but every parent of an eight-year-old I've shared it with has nodded. An ending your child can see coming is not the same as an ending you deliver.

The strategy: connect, then direct

Direct means the direction you want your child to follow: "screens off," "come eat," "time for bath." Connect means the thirty seconds before that, when you enter your child's world so they're willing to come into yours. It goes like this.

1. **Walk over.** Never give a transition direction from another room. Get within arm's reach. That's called proximal communication.

2. **Look at what they're looking at.** Kneel or sit next to her and actually look at the screen for a few seconds. You don't have to understand Roblox. You just have to look.

3. **Say what you see.** "You've got a lot of people in this round." "That's a big build." Plain description, not praise and not judgment. It tells her you noticed, and it turns you from an interruption into a person who's in the room with her.

4. **Ask for the stopping point.** "Where's a good place to stop?" or "How long until this round ends?" This is the ramp from Chapter 2, adapted for screens. If the answer is "two minutes," set the Time Timer right there next to the iPad and say, "Okay, when the red is gone, we save and stop."

5. **Then direct.** "When the timer's done, iPad goes on the shelf, and you come pick which vegetable we're having." One direction, one step, and a small choice on the other side of it.

If you're thinking that this takes longer than yelling from the kitchen, you're right. It takes about ninety seconds. Yelling from the kitchen takes less than ninety seconds, but then you need to add on the thirty more minutes of fallout!

A note on the games themselves. Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite, and most of the games your kid loves are designed with rounds, levels, and save points. Learn where they are. Together, you and your child can decide that the rule is "we stop at the end of a round, never in the middle of one," and then the game itself becomes the timer. That's Hiniker's finding in action, and it's a rule most kids will help enforce because it's fair.

Questions to ask your child

At a calm moment.

- "What's the worst part about stopping a game in the middle?"
- "How could I let you know time's almost up in a way that doesn't feel like I'm ruining it?"
- "What's a good stopping spot in this game? Show me."

IN A PARENT'S WORDS

I used to think sitting down and looking at his game was giving in. Now I get it. Thirty seconds of looking at his Minecraft house buys me a kid who actually comes to the table. It's not giving in. It's saving me time and stress in the end.

Mom of an eight-year-old

Been there, done that

- Turned the iPad off mid-game and then wondered why the response was nuclear.
- Said "you've had enough screen time" in a tone that made it sound like a moral failing.
- Gave two warnings from two rooms away and counted that as fair notice.

Words that work

“I can see you're right in the middle of it. Where's a good spot to stop? I'll set the timer so you can see it.”

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THIS WEEK'S EXPERIMENT

Before the next screens-off, walk over, look at the game for thirty seconds, say what you see, and remind them what the agreed-upon stopping point is. Then set the timer together.

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CHAPTER 4

Solve It Together

Working with your child to turn tough transitions into a workable plan

PICTURE THIS

Every weeknight at 6:30, right after dinner, it's homework time in your house. And every weeknight at 6:30, your eight-year-old finds a reason not to sit down. He needs water. He needs a different pencil. He has to tell you something about a video. When he finally sits, he's sliding off the chair within four minutes, and by 7:00 you've said "just do it" in eleven different tones of voice and you're both miserable. The homework is a single worksheet. It should take fifteen minutes. It has never once taken fifteen minutes.

You've tried a reward chart. You've tried taking away the Switch. You've tried sitting right next to him. Nothing sticks, and you're starting to dread 6:30 more than he does.

What's actually going on

Two things. First, this is a transition from something self-chosen (playing after dinner) to something adult-chosen (a worksheet), which is the hardest kind. The dopamine drop is steep, and the destination is a low-interest task that takes sustained attention, which is just really hard for kids with ADHD.

Second, you've been trying lots of solutions, but none of them came from the child. Reward charts, consequences, and sitting closer are all things you did *to* him. Kohn (2005) draws the line between "doing to" a child and "working with" a child, and most of us, most of the time, are doing to. In this very eBook I have advised you to do some of these things! That's because I often find that, given the daily reality of transition struggles, parents need a bridge to understanding their child's world before collaboration is truly effective.

Ross Greene has a phrase that I come back to almost daily: kids do well if they can (Greene, 2021). If your son could sit down at 6:30 and knock out the worksheet, he would. Something is in the way. You don't know what it is yet, and he might not either. So the first job is not to solve it. The first job is to find out.

The strategy: three questions, in order

This is a conversation, not a confrontation, and it happens at a calm time, never at 6:30. Saturday morning over pancakes is perfect. It has three parts, and the order matters.

1. **Ask what's up, and then be quiet.** Start with "I've noticed," name the problem plainly, and end with a real question.

> *"I've noticed that starting homework after dinner has been really hard lately. What's up?"*

Then stop. Don't offer theories. Don't say "is it because you're tired?" Wait through the silence. If you get "I don't know," try "Take a guess" or "What's the worst part?" If you get a partial answer, reflect it back ("So the worksheet feels really long") and ask, "What else?" Keep asking "what else?" until he's out of answers. You might hear things you'd never have guessed. One kid told his mom the kitchen light buzzed. Another said he couldn't stop thinking about the show he'd been watching. Another said, "My brain is still at dinner."

2. **Say your worry, plainly and without blame.** Once you've really heard him, it's your turn. Keep it to one sentence about the actual concern, not about his behavior.

> *"Here's what I'm worried about. When homework doesn't get done, you go into school the next day feeling stressed about it, and I don't want that for you."*

Notice what's not in there: no "you never listen," no "I'm tired of fighting about this." Just your concern, stated the way you'd state it to a friend.

3. **Invite him to solve it with you.** This is the most powerful part.

> *"Let's think about how we can work that out. What ideas do you have?"*

Let him go first. His idea might be unworkable ("no homework ever"), and that's fine. Say, "That would solve your part, but it doesn't solve my worry. What else?" Keep going until you land on something that works for both of you. In this family, they landed on homework at the kitchen table before dinner with a stuffed animal friend, instead of after dinner in his room. He picked it. It wasn't perfect, but the nightly standoff became a twice-a-week grumble, and the worksheet started taking fifteen minutes.

This approach has real evidence behind it. For decades, the gold standard for oppositional behavior has been parent management training: sticker charts, point systems, and privileges earned and lost. In randomized trials, collaborative problem solving (the term for this three-step method) worked just as well, using conversation instead of reward systems (Ollendick et al., 2016; Murrihy et al., 2023). A 2026 meta-analysis of studies in homes, schools, and treatment settings found the same: big drops in behavior problems, on par with standard parent training (Norman et al., 2026).

So why choose the conversation over the sticker chart? A reward motivates a child to perform, but it doesn't teach the skill that was missing. Every time you solve a problem together, your child practices the skills that make transitions hard: flexibility, putting a worry into words, and making a plan (Greene, 2021). That's the difference between extrinsic motivation, doing something for a prize, and intrinsic motivation, doing it because it makes sense to you. Rewards still have their place, and a 2025 research review suggests they work best for getting a child started, not for keeping them going (Bardach & Murayama, 2025). The skills your child builds go with them long after the sticker chart is gone.

You're not just solving a homework transition challenge. You're teaching him that his perspective matters and that problems are things you two figure out by talking them through together. Can you imagine what a different place the world would be if every child had the opportunity to learn collaborative problem solving in their early years? This method does take longer, but think of it as an investment. Having this skill set will be an asset for your child when they become a teen and then a grown-up.

Questions to ask your child

These three questions are the strategy.

- "I've noticed that _____ has been hard. What's up?"
- "What's the worst part?" and "What else?"
- "Let's think about how we can work that out. What ideas do you have?"

IN A PARENT'S WORDS

I was ready for him to say the homework was boring. I was not ready for him to say the chair hurt his legs. We'd been fighting about a chair for a month when I thought it was homework resistance. It was painful chair resistance!

Mom of an eight-year-old

Been there, done that

- Offered a sticker chart, a screen-time bonus, and a threat, all in the same week, and called it "trying everything."
- Asked "why won't you just do it?" as if a seven-year-old could produce a thoughtful answer mid-standoff.
- Decided on the fix ourselves and then announced it, and were surprised when it didn't take.

Words that work

"I've noticed this has been hard for you. I want to figure it out with you, not for you. What's up?"



THIS WEEK'S EXPERIMENT

Pick your one most predictable transition fail. At a calm time, ask the first question, "I've noticed _ _ _ _ _ _ _. What's up?", and then listen for as long as it takes. Share your worry, then see if your child can come up with a workable solution.

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CHAPTER 5

Regulation Before Communication

They're having a hard time, not giving you a hard time

PICTURE THIS

It's 8:15 on a school night, and you've done everything right. The bath went fine. You read two books. You gave the two-minute warning before lights out. And then your six-year-old realizes that Blue Bunny, the stuffed rabbit she has slept with every night since she was two, is not in the bed. You look. It's not in the bathroom or the laundry or in the car. And now she's screaming, and it's not a "sad about the bunny" scream. It's the kind where her body is rigid and she can't hear you. You are so tired. You have dishes to do and an email to send and you were nine minutes from being off duty. Part of you wants to say, "It's a stuffed animal. Go to sleep." A bigger part of you is about to cry too.

What's actually going on

Sometimes the antecedent is something you couldn't have planned for. A lost bunny. A sibling who said something. A sock seam. And sometimes you built the ramp perfectly and the garage door came down anyway, because it was the end of a long day and there was nothing left in the tank.

This is not a failure of the strategy or of you. It is what a nervous system does when it hits its limit. Her emotional brakes are slower than yours (Shaw et al., 2014), her day was long, and the bunny was the last straw. Once the garage door is down, she cannot reason, negotiate, or "calm down" on request. The only thing that helps is time and a calm body nearby.

There's a term for that calm body nearby: co-regulation. Researchers describe it as one person's steadier nervous system helping another person's settle, and they now think of it as something that happens at the level of the family, not just inside one kid (Paley & Hajal, 2022). Translation: you can't calm her down. But you can lend her your calm, and her system will borrow it. That only works if you actually have some calm to lend, which is why my eBook *Calming the Storm* exists and why the first step below is about you.

The strategy: ride it out, then repair

1. **Check in with your body first.** Notice your jaw, your shoulders, your breath. Take three slow breaths before you say a word. If you can't get there, it's okay to say, "I'm going to get you a cup of water," and take sixty seconds in the hallway. A stressed parent cannot co-regulate a stressed kid.

2. **Fewer words, closer body.** Sit on the edge of the bed or the floor. Don't ask questions. Don't explain. Something like "I'm right here" is plenty. Your job is presence, not solutions.

3. **Wait for the garage door to come up.** You'll know. The breathing changes, the body softens, she might reach for you. Now, and only now, you can talk. "That was really hard. Blue Bunny is important." Name the feeling, not the behavior.

4. **Solve the small thing if you can.** "Let's pick a stand-in for tonight. Which one?" A choice, even a tiny one, hands a bit of control back. If nothing can be solved, "We'll look for Blue Bunny again first thing tomorrow, together" is a plan, and plans help.

5. **Repair tomorrow.** In the morning, or at the next calm moment, circle back and lead with empathy: "Last night was really hard when Blue Bunny went missing. She's your bedtime buddy, and going to sleep without her felt awful." Then let her tell you about it. You might learn that the bunny goes missing more than you realized, and that's an antecedent you can plan for. A designated bunny spot. A backup bunny. Sometimes the fix is that simple.

And if you lost it? If you said "it's just a stuffed animal" in a voice you didn't like? Repair that too. "I got frustrated last night and I wasn't kind about Blue Bunny. I'm sorry. I wish I could've been kinder." Kids don't need us to be perfect. They need to see what it looks like to mess up and make it right.

Questions to ask your child

The next day.

- "Last night was so hard without Blue Bunny. She's really important to you, isn't she?"
- "What would have helped when you couldn't find Blue Bunny?"
- "Should we make a spot where she always lives, so she doesn't get lost?"

> **IN A PARENT'S WORDS**
>
> *I used to think if I just found the right words, I could talk her down. Now I know there are no right words when she's like that. I sit on the floor and I wait. It takes half the time it used to when I just stay calm and stay there.*
>
> Dad of a six-year-old

Been there, done that

- Said "calm down" to a child who was, in that moment, biologically unable to calm down.
- Explained, mid-meltdown, why the meltdown was unreasonable.
- Assumed that one terrible bedtime undid every good strategy we'd built that week.

Words that work

“I'm right here. You don't have to talk. I'll wait with you.”

@myadhdkiddo



THIS WEEK'S EXPERIMENT

Next time the garage door comes down, try saying nothing for a full minute. Sit close, breathe slowly, and wait. Notice what happens.

The Framework, If You Remember Nothing Else

If you only take one page from this guide, take this one. Every transition has a before, a during, and an after.

Before the transition (this is where most of the work happens)

- Hunt for the antecedent. What comes right before the hard moments? Hunger, no warning, a high-interest activity ending?
- Preview the ending at the start. Set the Time Timer where they can see it.
- Give warnings close and low, never from another room.
- Let your child pick the last thing: last jump, last round, last page.

During the transition

- Walk over. Look at what they're looking at. Say what you see.
- Ask for the stopping point instead of imposing one.
- One direction, one step, and a small choice on the other side.
- If the garage door comes down: fewer words, closer body, wait.

After the transition

- Regulation before communication. Nothing gets processed in the parking lot.
- At a calm time, ask: “I've noticed _____. What's up?” Then, “Here's my worry.” Then, “Let's think about how we can work that out.”
- Repair if you need to. Try again tomorrow.

And underneath all of it, always remember: they are not doing this to you. They are just doing this.

Before You Go

You made it to the end of this guide! You picked up a book with the desire for change. You want better outcomes and you're willing to learn about how to help your child. In case no one has said it to you lately, thanks for being that kind of parent!

Remember, progress over perfection means you don't need to run all five strategies by Friday. Pick the one transition that's hardest in your house right now, keep the notebook for a few days, and see what you find. Then try one ramp, or one thirty-second connect, or one "what's up?" conversation. Let the rest wait. Some transitions will still go sideways, and that will not mean you're back at the beginning. It'll mean it was a long day.

Kids do well when they can, and their parents do too.

Need More Help? Let's Connect!



Megan Ryan

If transitions are not the only time you feel challenged as a parent, that's normal, and you don't have to sort it out on your own. I know how heavy ADHD parenting can feel. If you want to talk through what's going on in your house, or you're curious about working together more closely, I'd love to hear from you.

Drop me an email anytime:
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Check out my website: www.myadhdkiddo.com

Follow me on Instagram: @myadhdkiddo

Thanks for reading! Cheers, Megan

References

Parenting advice is everywhere and can oftentimes be contradictory. Here's where the research in this guide came from, noted in the text right where each claim is made.

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