

# Tips for Navigating Transitions with Your Teen/Adult with Down Syndrome

Katie Frank, PhD, OTR/L | Occupational Therapist

## Why transitions can be hard

- **Strong visual memory + routines (“the groove”)** → change feels disruptive.
  - **Time is abstract** → “in 5 minutes” or “next week” may not mean much.
  - **Slower processing + literal language** → long or figurative instructions overwhelm.
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## Tips for Parents & Caregivers

### BEFORE

- Show, don't just tell: Use pictures, short checklists, or a simple daily/weekly calendar.
- Practice in small steps: Tour the new place, do a short trial, arrive late/leave early at first.
- Pair the change with a motivator: “First the appointment, then Starbucks.”
- Plan the environment: Quiet route, noise-canceling headphones, fidget, night-light, fan, etc.
- Keep sleep-wake consistent: Same bedtime and wake time—even on weekends.

### DURING

- Use few words: “Shoes on. Backpack. Door.”
- Give processing time: Ask once; wait. Use a timer (e.g., “2 minutes, then we go”).
- Offer choices you can accept: “Blue coat or gray coat?” “Now or in 5 minutes?”
- Name the feeling + next step: “Stopping is tough. Two more minutes, then dinner.”

### AFTER

- Praise the effort: “You handled that change really well—nice work!”
  - Debrief briefly: What helped? What should we try next time?
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## What to do when someone “shuts down”

- Lower the load: Switch to visuals/gestures; stop extra talking.
- Offer space + a return point: “I’ll check back in 3 minutes.”
- Reset with a starter action: “Stand up” → “Shoes on” → “Door.”

## How to speed someone up

- Use visual supports.
- Consider sensory regulation and sensory demands to complete the task.
- Reduce the task load-simplify the task to only necessary components.
- Incorporate motivating rewards.

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## Scripts you can use

- First-Then: “First shoes on, then music in the car.”
- Choices: “Shower now or after your snack?”
- Countdown: “Two more minutes... one more... time to go.”
- Validate: “It’s okay to feel mad about stopping. I’m here to help.”