

# Supporting Sensory Needs Through Transitions

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## SPEAKERS

Priscilla W., Narrator, Alyssa Mason, Beth Menninga

### **Narrator 00:02**

Welcome to Inclusion Matters, a podcast about children's development from the Center for Inclusive Child Care.

### **Priscilla W. 00:16**

Welcome to Inclusion Matters a podcast from the Center for Inclusive Child Care. I'm Priscilla Weigel, the Executive Director, and I'm here today with our coaching manager, Beth Menninga and we have a wonderful guest back with us to continue our conversation about sensory needs. Her name is Alyssa Mason, she is a Pediatric OT. And we are looking forward to our conversation today. Welcome back. Today we're going to talk about those big transitions in the early childhood classroom setting or the family childcare setting. Whatever early childhood setting you're in, there are transitions and transitions can cause challenges for just about anybody if you're not ready for them, but especially for a child that might have some unique sensory needs. And so when we think about those big transitions, one that comes to mind, Alyssa, is that before lunchtime, what are some things that you can think of that might be happening during that time that can cause a challenge? And also, how can we combat some of those with some strategies.

### **Alyssa Mason 01:23**

Yes. So transitions are hard. And I feel like when we have this conversation, we have to think about like, what what's the connection between like sensory and transitions. And so one of the things that happens is there's tends to just be more sensory input, like more noises, more people talking, more movement, more all the things, as well as we're unpredictability. So even if we're learning to manage our sensory differences, when things become unpredictable, they surprise our sensory system or things like that. So that's kind of where the connection is here. And why we see such difficult times and I love that you mentioned like transitions can be hard for all of us. Because what I always say again, and again, and again, when I talk about this is that this is not something that's special for kids, this is all people all the time. So that pre lunchtime, some of the things that you might, so if you're pretending you're a kid in a

classroom, you might, your classroom might play transitional music, which might be lovely, but might be too much for you as a kid who has sensory differences. Lots of times, you might have like a peer who's crying or upset because they don't want to clean up. Some classrooms will do like a light cue. So maybe the lights flickered on and off, or now all the lights are on, whereas they were off before. Something like that can impact you. We also have lots of movement between kids going all over the place. So you get those bumps and those kids who are knocking into you or you've bumped the table, and all of that stuff is impacting our internal sensory systems. So all that stuff. And then I also like to talk about the interoceptive system, which is a sensory system that we don't always talk about, which is kind of how our body is connecting to our internal organs. So when we think about pre lunch, we think about the fact that we might be feeling hunger. And that's going to impact our ability to manage or manage our overall sensory systems, because that is one of our sensory systems says we've got all that going on. And then we've got to manage our classrooms. So one thing that I really suggest with any transition is to really lean into routine, the more predictable that we can make it, the more kids are going to be able to learn how to manage that kind of up and down of sensory things going on. So whatever your routine is, lean into it and make it regular, consistent, predictable as much as you can. Things that I love for a transition like a pre lunch is to do maybe a music transition that gets your body involved, just so you think about like, lots of us know, the sleeping bunny song where all the kids go to sleep on the rug, and then they get up and they hop and maybe we let kids go between each song, you know, two kids go to wash their hands or whatever that next transition is. But when we can get our body moving and get some sensory input to that transition versus even just like a seated songs and we get a whole body's getting some good input which can really, you know, calm our bodies down from a sensory perspective, especially when all of this stuff has been going on. And it gets us right into the routine and it gets our body you know, we get this kind of input every day. And that can really kind of ease that transition and hit their system to be there and our proprioceptive system to love something like that as well as having kids help you with preparing. So maybe you have two kids carrying a bucket of plates and cups to the table that's getting that heavy work which targets are proprioceptive system. And again, can be really calming input for the body. It also gives us a job, a routine something that's predictable Oh, so it hits all of those things.

**Priscilla W. 05:04**

As we think of transitions to it's anxiety producing, you mentioned, the child who doesn't really want to make the transition who's really enjoying that heavy work can be super calming. And those jobs can kind of take your mind off the transition, and really focus on the job. And best you are going to chime in on something I noticed, what were you going to add?

**Beth Menninga 05:30**

Well, I'm just thinking about lunchtime as well, everybody might be a little bit hangry right? hungry, crabby. But then I've as when I was a preschool teacher, children are often really tired by this point, like they're worn out from being together all day, they're ready for nap, but there's hungry first. So any thoughts about if a child is really feeling that kind of their their worn out how to help any additional things maybe to do or?

**Alyssa Mason 06:02**

Yeah, that's a really, that's a really big challenge. I think that in the long term that when we do you know, lead into a routine and get kids more used to it, that's going to help in the long run, we'll be able to kind of adjust with our body. In the meantime, I actually think that the heavy work kind of activities are still good, even for kids who are feeling really tired, it can get her body back to kind of again, like a regulated state where even though we're feeling kind of tired, and we might be, you know, that makes us sets us off a little bit more, because we're feeling tired and hungry. If we can still get to that kind of more regulated state have you worked tends to not be like a big alerting things, we think when kids are tired, let's get them really alerted. Let's jump up and down and play around. But that might just put them onto like a big wave of ups and downs. And now we just can't regulate. So something like the heavy work would be where I would probably start with kids who are maybe managing that, it's like carrying something a little more heavy, moving things around the classroom, to just kind of hopefully give them a little boost to maintain engagement and regulation through the meal and get to that like nap time period,

**Beth Menninga 07:10**

Maybe even like arranging the chairs, or I'm just trying to think of things they can carry to like, I guess you don't want to maybe carrying the milk jug, but that, you know, for them that might be closed, you know, if there's a water pitcher or something like that,

**Alyssa Mason 07:27**

Or if you clean up with bins? Yeah, if you clean up with bins on the floor, having kids carry the bins back to their spot on the shelf can be a good one. And maybe you know, having all the bins on the floor might be a little bit much for some classrooms. But yeah, then we can, you know, transport them back and forth to get that heavy work in at the end of cleanup to.

**Priscilla W. 07:46**

So giving the children you know, those really clear signals. That's, you know, that routine is super helpful. And it's helpful for all the adults as well, because then we can follow a pattern. And we have that established in a routine sort of way, a consistent sort of way. So we get everyone bathroomed, hands washed. And then it's lunchtime. And so

you have that, when you were talking about that unpredictability. Everyone has different eating skills, and eating habits and levels of engagement with what's served, somebody may not like the lunch at all, and they're going to be done in like, a half a second. That's a lot to manage all at the table where that adult is supposed to be monitoring and making sure that everybody's getting their nutritional needs met for that day. So with that tall order Alyssa, suggestions?

**Beth Menninga 08:42**

When you throw in one more thing, and that is picky eaters, kids who sensory systems get set off by certain foods and combination of foods, teachers often or provider, is often waiting for, you know, oh, I'm gonna have to address that issue in the next year or two.

**Alyssa Mason 09:03**

Yes. Very good points. So one of the things that I think to me is like at the top of my suggestions for lunchtime is you guys are just exactly right. Like, there's smells, there's textures, there's unfamiliar foods, there's kids doing all different things that are tables. So one of the things that I like to say is like it from from a feeding kind of feeding therapy standpoint, which I also am engaged in that, we don't want to force kids to eat. If kids learn that they can come to the table and they're not going to be forced into trying this this that they feel safer from a sensory standpoint and to remain at the table or to have more adaptive behaviors at the table. Eating is related to almost all of our sensory systems. So if we're feeling like we're unsafe in an eating situation, it's no surprise that we're seeing fleeing or hitting or throwing our plates or all those kinds of things. So setting up your routine where kids are safe, we're not forced. And I know this is hard, because we're like, they're not getting enough food and their parents want them to eat and things like that. And so, I have much more to say about that. But I think I'm gonna leave it at that, because I could talk about it all day. But we don't want to force kids to eat. And then one of the biggest things, too, is trying to make sure that we have chairs that fit our kids. So we've got, if we can find ways to make chair or foot rest we were talking about in the last podcast, finding the best way that we can get chairs to fit our kids will help them stay at the table a little bit longer. And then finding a way to work in heavy work. So maybe we do, you can pour your own water, we have a water pitcher, so we're able to do something like that. And then having what giving kids direction, I'm like, what do they do if they're not eating. So imagine you're two years old, and you're not eating this food, and nobody's forcing you to eat this food. But now you're just sitting at the table. And as a teacher, you'd really love for them to stay at the table, but they have nothing to do and now they're bored. And so we have to figure out what makes sense in our environment, which is tough, you know, if we give them a sensory bag, then everyone wants a sensory bag. And maybe now we're not eating. But maybe there's a hand game they can do at the table, that's going to be you know, something everybody can do. Or maybe we have like stickers on the table in front of this child or something like that, that gives them it's really I want I it's gonna have to be individualized, every classroom,

but really giving kids direction on what they can do. We don't want it to just be now you're sitting here with nothing to do. They could do chair push ups in their chair, which is another heavy work thing, you just put your hands down on the bottom of your chair and push your body up. We can also have kids serve themselves, which is great. Even if they're not going to tie it sometimes they like to use the big spoon and serve themselves, it also could get some of that heavy work and depending on what we're eating, and gets them engaged in doing something, even if they're not putting the food in their mouth. And then different things like visual timers or something that say like we're gonna stay at the table for this long. So that if this kid is working really hard to like, stay at the table do the thing they're supposed to do. They also have a concept of how long do I have to work this hard and do this thing. And then when the timer goes off, I can get up and do the next step. It's really a learning skill for kids. But I do think it helps with that like are over overall sensory experience of a mealtime is like, hlong am I working this hard and doing this adaptive behavior that everyone wants me to be doing, because it's a challenge for me.

**Beth Menninga 12:36**

You know, I love the suggestions you gave about sitting and figuring out things to do when you're sitting because that applies to circle time, it applies to transitions where you, we don't want to have kids wait, we try to avoid that. But every once in a while that we have no choice. Um, they're going to have to wait a little while and if they can get some skills that they can use, especially when they're sitting, you know, like the push up the chair push up, or even something where they're pushing their hands against one another. Things like that, and actually verbalizing that with the group of kids. I'm picturing a teacher or provider saying, you know, as kids join the group, or they start in the fall, or whenever they introduce kind of our routine around meals saying, and "here are some things you can do." If you get done before we're all ready to get up and kind of everybody knows that everybody has that pool and you practice it, everybody has it. They can use that skill. And it also teaches them to think about well, how am I occupying myself, you know, which is something as adults, we forget that we've got all these things in our head. We can occupy ourselves easily when we're waiting. And therefore you just want to get up and do so I love those ideas.

**Priscilla W. 13:58**

Yes, one thing that was coming to mind is I was picturing myself as that adult in the classroom with or in a family childcare setting with all these children at the table who are varied, have these varied eating needs. Also, we have a wonderful podcast about picky eaters, and it was done with a nutritionist ideas on how to get folks excited about trying new foods without that point that you were making a list of forcing. And you know, you're gonna sit here till your plate is clean and those kinds of things. But you know, I'm thinking so often we have kids make placemats that make their, their area really denoted in the table space, giving little stickers or things that they can add to their placemats as they go throughout the meal. Maybe there's a basket of stickers in the middle of the table so that when there's a lull when we're passing foods, every child can take a moment and do a little decorating of their, you know,

just I'm talking like teeny tiny stickers so that they have to use their fine motor skills really carefully. And it doesn't take up a ton of space and so they say, oh my, my placemats completely already decorated, when they only put like three stickers on, it's going to take some time. But just thinking about those kinds of things as you were just discussing the options, we as the adults, and to your point that we have to be the creative ones, because we have those tools in our toolbox. And we have to be sharing those with children. So we've gone through the mealtime, we've staggered we've we've set the boundaries. Clearly, we have those visual timers in place that can tell a child Oh, you only have to work this hard for this much time. Yay. So that is all gone. Guess what's next? So what do you suggest as next because oftentimes that transition after lunch is that clean up bathroom before nap nap? So there's a lot of things that need to get accomplished during that period. What are some suggestions that you have, and also you are, you're so good at helping us get in the mind of the child to have what's happening for that child during that time, too.

### **Alyssa Mason 16:02**

Yeah, so thinking about like a clean up after lunch situation, we've got so many things going on from dishes dropping and cleanup and stuff going in the trash, metal forks banging on things. Also, you see from that interoceptive standpoint, like maybe I've got some food stuck in my mouth, but I don't have the oral motor skills to get it out. And I don't know how to explain the fact that I've got like something stuck deep in my cheek. We don't like that might have a full bladder because you've gotta go to the bathroom. Now you're feeling tired. Bathrooms have a lot of challenges. We've got echoes loud noises, oftentimes kids are laughing or goofy in the bathroom. And those are all getting louder. We've got bathroom fans, flushing toilets. Oftentimes, we have automatic toilets these days that we don't have full control over when they're flushing. So it's just all the things, so many big things going on. So one of the things that I like to talk about with, especially when bathroom comes into it is that bathrooms are a unique challenge for lots of kids who have sensory differences. And so we really want to support them in growing and developing their skills for being able to manage all the things going on with bathroom. So maybe for this kid who we've realized might have some sensory struggles, we have them have a little bit of a different and unique routine, maybe they get to go first, every single time. Because we are individualizing for kids. And I know that gets tough in preschool, because why does Alonso get to go first all the time. And, and that is a challenge. And maybe we have to just talk about the differences and unique things for all kids and how we individualize. But maybe we do have them go first. And maybe as we progress their skills, we have them go first with another kid. And then maybe we can have them go first with three kids in the bathroom. And we can help them manage those sensory things and build their tolerance for that. But identifying that that is truly just such a challenging place to be is a bathroom a lot of the times. And we also have you know, lots of kids who have difficulties with the sensory aspects around going potty and what that feels like in their body, if they're potty training, if you know all these different things that are going on. So validating that for kids and helping them meet them where they're at to help progress those skills, because we want them to be able to get

to school age and go to the bathroom freely with their peers and things like that, that's wonderful, but we have to meet them where they're at and help them get there. And so that's a place where I really think individualizing can definitely help. Similarly, with setup, I say if we can have any kids help with cleanup, so maybe we hold up the dump bin in we you know have two helpers doing that or one kid helps clean up all the dishes and the kids leave them on the table or something like that, where they can get involved and have that thing to do. And then if there are there tends to be wait times when there are so many transitions kind of going on at the same time. So thinking what can we do while we're waiting, so if we're gonna do something like a song, maybe we don't want to be laying on the floor in the bathroom. So we want to do like a sleeping bunnies. But if you think about songs, a lot of times we have kids like sitting still crisscross applesauce to sing the song. But if you can do a song instead where their bodies getting involved, they're more likely to go more towards regulation and be more engaged in that for that transition. Something that I love is like I shake the sillies out where we can shake our body which lets out a lot of tension that we're holding in our muscles and our joints. So we can get our body shaking or like a head, shoulders, knees and toes it gets that head off of our upright axis and let them stand up. We know that you can not what I see we're doing it sitting down in a crisscross applesauce, even though we're doing her shoulders, knees and toes and we've got to let them get up and do that. Do that song but yeah, getting ones that get our bodies involved or having you know, maybe your weight time activity is a sensory bag and you get to use it and when you go into the bathroom, you give it to the teacher and when you come back out you can get it again or head to your cot or whatever is kind of that next step. But it's the same idea of like, waiting presents a lot of challenges. And so if we can give kids something to do in those moments, it can help keep our body regulated to do those things that we want them to do.

**Priscilla W. 20:17**

Yeah, and children are creative, and they'll fill that time. And so if we're helping them build those skills and tools, as you talked about with the bathroom routine, and just as we transition to that nap, which is very difficult, and we know in our coaching work, that is a very common challenge that comes up for folks when they're calling to get support. How do we get everybody to get on their cots stay on their cots, and ideally, take a nap in a large room, usually, filled with a lot of other bodies, sometimes light, and noise and music, and all of those things that can really create for a child, especially one that has some sensory difficulties and challenges. It's pretty much impossible to be successful in a lot of ways. And so I'm thinking that, you know, we'll just maybe scratched the surface, but it might be like a whole podcast on the successful napping period. Alyssa, what do you think?

**Alyssa Mason 21:21**

Yeah. So I mean, you mentioned so many of the challenges of naptime. And I remember this time of the day when I was teaching so very well, because it is such a challenge. Thinking, you know, trying to get us in the perspective of kids. We're oftentimes listening to teachers now having adult conversations we're typing on a computer, which we

talked about last podcast like sounds, we process sounds at different kind of volumes. So maybe that typing is registering at like a level six in your head, and you're like, maybe if that typing stops, then I can relax and go to sleep. But we don't have the words to say that yet. Also, like maybe you think the cot that you're laying on is really scratchy because your skin is kind of sensitive. Again, those are things we're not able to say, but they're things we're experiencing, and then our body's reacting from a sensory standpoint. So a couple of things that I really like to help get our bodies ready for naptime would be like a, I call it the burrito roll up where like maybe we roll ourselves up, or we help kids roll themselves up in their blankets. Honestly, you think like swaddled for babies. And lots of times, things that work for babies still work for older kids, but we don't think of them because we think they're only for babies. But maybe we do have a burrito roll up, which just gets us nice and snug. And maybe that helps our body kind of come down, it can also get us into a different, like, if we hate the feel of the sheets, now we're wrapped up in a blanket. So maybe that's better for our body. And we don't have to leave them in the burrito, maybe we do that during the bulk of the transition. And then we can loosen it if they you know, if they want it loosen, they're gonna we're gonna listen to their cues, we're not going to leave them stuck in a swaddle for a long period of time. But lots of kids just like it and I'll pretend to you know, take a bite of their burrito. And they think it's super funny. And, and that's a good one. And the other thing is lots of times you see classrooms have, you know, activities that kids can do if they're not tired yet or to get them tired, like read a book or do a quiet time activity. And there's a place for those too. But I also always think about like, how do we get our body ready for sleep? And how do we get our body feeling calm for sleep. So having maybe like, naptime movement cards of like a couple of yoga strategies that get us into, you know, that vestibular movement where heads getting off of our access, and maybe we can do some of our movement cards instead, Big knee hugs, you could do that while you're on your cot and bring your knees up and give your knees Big hugs five times or 10 times. Maybe before you're ready to go, everybody can choose to go push the wall over before they go to there before they go to their cot. Maybe you can do deep breathing, you know, maybe we whoever wants to join can do this, you know, blow out the candles activity before we go to naptime because we know those things can have positive impacts on the body. But I don't always see them worked into those naptime opportunities.

**Priscilla W. 24:17**

Yeah. And that, I think, too, one thing to remember and I love that you're giving so many suggestions because I think that for folks who do this every day, this is part of their day. There's often the comment of well, if we do this all the time, the kids are going to get you know used to it, it's not going to be meaningful. So changing things up in a regular fashion is really important to do be aware of getting stuck in a rut with some of these activities and be creative but also even just infusing a little bit here and there of the same favorites like the yoga poses and the calming, those burrito things that we know are essential and then infusing some of those other new things here and there on the side, maybe.



**Beth Menninga 25:03**

And I would add one important element which is ourselves, so that we when we can take part in the deep breathing, when we can do the shake the sillies out, that we need to stay regulated too. So that's a great thing about doing these activities with kids is we can do it at the same time and help ourselves stay calmer, but also model it. And so if kids see us, I mean, I think of naptime yes, I brings back lots of memories too, as a teacher, the times when I was calm, you know, and just sort of resting, I was not asleep, but I was taking the time to let my body rest. Those were generally better nap times. And if I found myself getting wound up, or I felt wound up entering into that time period. So I think, you know, being mindful of our own abilities and practices at the same time, and we have the great opportunity, when we're doing it with kids.

**Priscilla W. 26:00**

We're going a little bit longer than usual in our podcast, but it's been so essential to really span some of these big transitions. And I'm going to just say that we're going to end with the favorite transition of many of early childhood educators is getting all the kids up from nap and ready for the rest of that day. How can we do that successfully without just negating all of that good rest that they just had, especially children who may be challenged with transitions. And so now we're turning on the lights. And we're, I mean, you, you can just imagine, and you can put yourself in that. And I'm even just getting anxious thinking about it. Alyssa?

**Alyssa Mason 26:46**

Yeah. So just like you said, from a kid's perspective, so many things going on, the lights might get turned on over noises are coming back, we got peers crying, laughing, talking, parents maybe picking up , all the things, maybe your bladders full, because you're hungry again, because it's snack time, all of these things are going to impact that, making it a really tough transition, I would say this is another area where if you're able to kind of individualize for certain kids, that can be really helpful. Like, if we need a slower wakeup time, and we need a little bit more time, then maybe we start your transition a little before a lot of the other kids while they're still asleep. And I know that all sleep is also super important. So it's always balancing, like, where are our needs at and how is this going to work in the classroom. But if I wake you up five minutes earlier, which gives you a quieter entrance back into the world, and you're able to get a little more awake before all of our peers wake up. And that's gonna make this transition for the rest of the day better for you, then maybe that's where we want to be versus wake up when everyone else wakes up and now I'm upset and crying and I can't manage it, right. So learning about kids needs , seeing kind of what their cues are. And then I think for most kids, having a slower sensory experience back into the world as much as we can. So thinking about how if we just flip on all the lights, that's a lot just like it is for us, if somebody comes into your bedroom, or your sleeping and flips on all the lights, that's a lot. So thinking about those things, let's not just play

super excited music because now we're all awake, and we're all lights on let's, let's slowly bring all the kids back up into this high sensory environment that tends to be a classroom, and be really mindful of how we make those choices. And you know, maybe we don't do anything else with no more lights, no more sounds further, you know, the first five minutes will everyone's up. And we just do quiet time on our cots for anybody who wants it or things like that. And thinking about giving kids the time that they need to kind of process that information and, and get back into the typical kind of preschool classroom environment. So doing kind of an environment check in that way I think is super helpful.

**Priscilla W. 28:56**

I'm also thinking about one suggestion that we tend to make when we is if there's any way to do a dimmer switch in your classrooms, and I can't remember if we talked about this the last time you were on the podcast, but dimmer switches are really so helpful in these situations, because it's like, the lights are waking up with each of you know, with the kids and with all of us because as adults, we've been in this dark space as well. It's been quiet there's been and we're flared and into this alert mode when lights go flashing on. So dimmer switches, if at all possible. That's a great addition. It takes a little work on the front end, but well worth it. I think as you think about transitioning, and Alyssa I'm really excited about our next part of our podcast because we're having you back again to talk about children who maybe have or are currently experiencing trauma and looking at their sensory needs in an early childhood setting and what are some things that we can do. You also did some fabulous videos for us through a grant with United Way that I would direct everyone to this. There's two parts to it and it's, It's wonderful hands on just techniques and strategies to really support children and their sensory needs. So, thank you, Beth, for being here today and for Alyssa and I look forward to you joining us back for part three of our conversation

**Narrator 30:36**

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