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Transition Model: Supporting Individuals with Neurodiversity

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Abstract
Supporting children with neurodiversity requires a paradigm shift from traditional deficit-based approaches to inclusive, strengths-based frameworks that honor cognitive and behavioral differences. Neurodiverse children—such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and related conditions—face unique challenges related to communication, sensory processing, executive functioning, and emotional regulation. This paper explores effective strategies for supporting these children across home, school, and social environments. Emphasis is placed on the use of visual schedules, sensory accommodations, clear communication, predictable routines, and individualized transition planning. Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of fostering inclusive classroom practices, promoting self-advocacy, and building collaborative partnerships between families, educators, and professionals. Drawing on current literature and neurodiversity-affirming models, the study underscores the value of creating environments that empower neurodivergent children to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Ultimately, supporting neurodiverse children is not only a matter of accommodation but a commitment to equity, dignity, and human potential.

Keywords: Neurodivergent, transition, from childhood, to adolescent, supporting neurodiversity

Introduction

The term neurodiversity was first used in relation to people with autism (Singer, 2017). It is now generally used to concede the diversity in brain functioning associated with a range of developmental conditions and experiences (Kapp, 2020). These conditions can include autism, intellectual disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, fatal alcohol spectrum disorder and early life adversity (McLean and McDougall, 2014; Sattler, 2014). The concept of neurodiversity is generally associated with placing value on the strengths and benefits that are associated with diversity in brain functioning; and on an accepting and inclusive approach to individual who experience this diversity. Some neurodiversity conditions are not really obvious hence, individuals with neurodiversity may present to service without formal or clinical diagnosis. Most parents or guidance bring neurodivergent individuals for therapeutic interventions mostly due to the challenges encountered with their communication skills, cognitive skills, behavioural and emotional difficulties, lack of basic and advanced occupational skills and lack of vocational skills. Children with neurodiversity may experience difficulty with developing behavioural and emotional control (Cummings et. al, 2020). This is a common referral issue, although the severity can vary between children and developmental conditions. As such, many children with behavioural difficulties may have diagnosed or undiagnosed problems associated with neurodiversity.

The consequence of neurodiversity may not be well understood by child and family practitioners and other mental health professionals. Conventional counselling approaches may not be as effective in individuals with neurodiversity and these approaches may need to be adapted to better suit the needs of these individuals. Individuals with neurodiversity can be underprivileged by services, systems and social attitudes that do not recognise their needs (Armstrong, 2015), and this may include a range of non-specialist child and family services (McLean, 2019). Therefore, it is important for any practitioners who support children with developmental

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conditions or early life adversities to understand the key developmental domains of neurodiversity. The points or stages of the therapeutic interventions as regard the age and skills of individuals with neurodiversity is key. Specialists for the various multidisciplinary interventions and parents of the neurodivergent must be knowledgeable of the transition stages and what are essentials before, during and after the transition.
Early therapeutic intervention is key to fast recovery but with good transition stages optimal living for the neurodivergent is a reality.

Concept of Transition Model
Change is an inevitable part of life, but navigating change—especially for neurodivergent individuals—can be challenging. To better understand and manage the human response to change, psychologist **William Bridges** introduced the **Transition Model,** a framework that distinguishes the psychological journey individuals undergo during change from the external event of change itself (Bridges, 2003). Unlike change, which is situational (like starting a new job or moving homes), transition is deeply personal—it's the internal process of adapting, letting go of the old, and embracing the new.

The **Transition Model** is structured into **three interrelated phases: Ending, Neutral Zone,** and **New Beginning**. Each phase plays a crucial role in helping people adjust psychologically and emotionally to change.

1. Endings – Letting Go of the Old
Ironically, every transition begins with an ending. This phase involves individuals recognizing what they are losing—be it routines, relationships, identities, or familiar ways of doing things. Letting go can bring up feelings of sadness, fear, or even denial, especially for those who rely heavily on routine and structure, such as children and adults with neurodiversity (Anderson et al., 2022). In neurodivergent populations, this phase may be intensified due to difficulty coping with the unexpected and managing emotional upheaval (Poon, 2022).
Recognizing these endings is essential. People need time and support to grieve what's being left behind before they can fully embrace what lies ahead.

2. Neutral Zone – The In-Between Space
The **neutral zone** is the psychological "no man's land" between the old and the new. During this stage, the old way is gone, but the new way hasn't fully taken shape. It can feel disorienting or even chaotic. However, this phase is also a fertile ground for **innovation, self-reflection, and personal growth** (Bridges, 2003).
For neurodiverse individuals, the neutral zone may be particularly stressful due to a lack of clarity and predictability. Strategies such as structured routines, visual schedules, and transitional support systems can help reduce distress during this ambiguous time (Wilkinson & Twist, 2022). While unsettling, the neutral zone is vital for "repatterning"—creating new habits, relationships, or cognitive frameworks that support eventual stability.

3. New Beginnings – Embracing the Change
Finally, individuals enter the **new beginning.** This stage is marked by renewed energy, clarity of purpose, and a reestablished sense of identity. It's not simply about arriving at a new situation; it's about embracing it with a fresh mindset. For successful transition, people must develop an emotional connection to the new reality, see its personal relevance, and feel equipped to handle it.
Neurodivergent individuals benefit most when new beginnings are **structured, purposeful, and gradually introduced.** Empowering them through choice, routine, and accessible support tools enables greater independence and emotional resilience (Anderson et al., 2022).

Applying the Model in Everyday Contexts
From moving to a new school to adjusting to a new caregiver, the **Bridges Transition Model** is especially useful for educators, therapists, and families working with neurodiverse populations. Whether it's a child starting a new school year or a teenager transitioning into adulthood, recognizing the emotional and cognitive stages of transition ensures that support is **empathetic and individualized.**
Research continues to affirm the usefulness of this model in both clinical and educational settings, especially for vulnerable groups. It offers not just a roadmap through change, but a compassionate approach to human growth and adaptation (Bridges, 2003).

Supporting Children with Neurodiversity
Children with neurodiversity—such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, or other developmental differences—experience the world in unique ways. Their cognitive, sensory, emotional, and behavioral profiles often differ from neurotypical norms. Supporting

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them is not about "fixing" their differences, but understanding, respecting, and scaffolding their abilities so they can thrive in diverse environments such as schools, homes, and communities ((Esbenson, 2016).).

Understanding Neurodiversity

The term neurodiversity recognizes that neurological differences are natural variations of the human brain and should be respected as a form of human diversity, not deficits (Armstrong, 2012). Neurodivergent children may learn, communicate, play, and interact differently. For instance, a child with autism might prefer routine and predictability, while a child with ADHD may need frequent movement and varied stimulation. These differences can present challenges, especially in environments not designed with them in mind.

Key Principles for Support

Supporting neurodiverse children effectively requires a strengths-based, individualized, and inclusive approach:

1. Emphasize Strengths Rather Than Deficits

Instead of focusing only on what the child struggles with, support should center on identifying and amplifying their strengths. For example, many neurodivergent children exhibit intense focus, creativity, pattern recognition, and memory skills (Esbenson, 2016). A child with dyslexia may struggle with reading but excel in spatial reasoning or problem-solving.

2. Foster Predictability and Routine

Predictable environments reduce anxiety and help children feel secure. Visual schedules, consistent routines, and advance warning of changes can be powerful tools—especially for autistic children who may experience transitions as distressing (Poon, 2022). For instance, using visual timetables or 'first-then' boards can support smoother activity transitions.

3. Provide Sensory Supports

Many neurodivergent children experience sensory processing differences—either hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to stimuli such as sound, light, texture, or touch. Allowing access to sensory tools (e.g., noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, quiet corners) and reducing environmental triggers can enhance focus and emotional regulation (Anderson et al., 2022).

4. Use Clear, Concrete Communication

Children with neurodiversity often benefit from clear, direct, and literal language. Avoid idioms or abstract phrases that may confuse. Visual aids, picture exchange systems, or written instructions can support comprehension. For some, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices may be necessary.

5. Build Emotional Regulation and Social Skills

Supporting emotional development is key. Many neurodivergent children may find it difficult to identify, express, or regulate emotions. Teaching strategies like deep breathing, journaling, or using a "feelings thermometer" can support emotional awareness. Likewise, social narratives, role-play, and social scripts can help children learn and navigate social situations (Wilkinson & Twist, 2022).

6. Foster Inclusive Classrooms and Relationships

Inclusive environments benefit all learners. Educators and caregivers should promote empathy and respect among peers, model inclusive language, and celebrate neurodiverse traits. Flexible seating, multiple ways to demonstrate understanding (e.g., drawing instead of writing), and differentiated instruction are inclusive practices that support learning diversity.

7. Collaborate with Families and Professionals

Families are the child's first experts. Regular communication between schools and families ensures consistency in approaches and promotes shared understanding. Collaborating with speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, or special educators can offer tailored interventions and strategies for home and school environments (Curtin, 2021).

8. Support Transitions with Care

Whether transitioning between tasks, environments, or life stages (e.g., starting school, moving homes), transitions can be challenging for neurodivergent children. Advance preparation, gradual introductions, social stories, and allowing time for adjustment are essential (Bridges,2003).

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9. Promote Self-Advocacy and Independence
As children grow, they should be supported in understanding their own needs and preferences. This empowers them to ask for accommodations, communicate their feelings, and develop self-esteem. Encouraging decision-making and problem-solving builds confidence and autonomy.

Insights from Recent Applications

- **Organizational Use & Limitations**

Studies from 2022–2023 highlight the importance of blending emotional support during transitions with practical execution strategies. Leaders are encouraged to validate what is ending, aid employees through uncertainty in the neutral zone, and help solidify the new beginning through clarity and ongoing support EBSCO+2Change Management Hub+2TSW Training+2.

- **Youth Transitions in Foster Care**

In a 2024 exploratory study using the Bridges model, researchers supported adolescents transitioning out of foster care. Results showed better educational enrollment, higher levels of social support, and more stable employment outcomes when youth were guided through the transition stages with structured support (Nesmith et al., 2024)

Modern Challenges & Adaptations

Contemporary discourse suggests that the classic Bridges framework remains highly relevant but benefits from adaptation to today's digital, global, and culturally diverse contexts. Variables such as remote work, cultural dynamics, and ethical considerations now play a larger role in how transitions are experienced and managed (PsychometricTesting.org, 2024)

Transition Model Strategies
Transition strategies are a specific set of techniques designed to support children with neurodiversity before, during, and after a transition between routines, environments, or activities. These strategies employ visual, verbal, and auditory cues to build consistent transition routines and increase predictability for the child, thereby reducing anxiety and enhancing participation (Hume et al., 2021; Poon, 2022). Pre-Transition Preparing a neurodiverse child before a transition is critical for a smoother experience. While a brief verbal cue (e.g., "It's group reading time") may suffice for some, it is often not enough for many children with neurodivergent profiles. It is essential to consider whether the child can process verbal information in a noisy or overstimulating environment and whether they have enough time to shift their attention from the current task (Hume et al., 2021).

Effective pre-transition tools include:
Visual Timers: These help the child visualize the time left before a transition occurs. Since many neurodiverse children struggle with abstract time concepts, visual timers (e.g., Brili Routines, Time Timer, Visual Countdown Timer) provide clarity and predictability (Hodgson et al., 2019).
Visual Schedules: These support successful transitions by offering a visible, structured representation of upcoming activities. When well-designed and personalized, visual schedules can significantly reduce challenging behaviors and increase independence (Hume et al., 2021; Wilkinson & Twist, 2022).
Tangible Visual Cues: These may include images, written words, or physical transition objects. For example, a card with a picture of the bathroom and images of the bathing sequence can signal that it's time for that activity (Poon, 2022).
'First, Then' Cards: These are particularly useful for helping children accept non-preferred tasks when they are paired with preferred activities. For example, "First reading circle, Then snack" is a common structure that supports task engagement and motivation (Steinbrenner et al., 2020).
During Transition With pre-transition preparation in place, the child can move into the transition process itself with additional support. Visual cues often continue to be more effective than verbal cues during this time.
Examples include:
Transition Cards: These cards consistently cue transitions by displaying an image of the upcoming activity or setting. They offer a straightforward visual link to what is expected next (Hodgson et al., 2019).
Cueing to Visual Schedule: A verbal cue such as the child's name, followed by pointing to their visual schedule, helps reinforce routine and autonomy.

Post-Transition Model
After a transition, additional support may be required depending on the child's emotional and sensory regulation needs, the activity involved, and the environment. Effective post-transition strategies can help stabilize the child and increase participation (Wilkinson & Twist, 2022).

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Post-transition support might include:
Quiet or Sensory Break Spaces: Providing access to quiet areas or allowing for calming sensory activities can reduce overload and ease the transition into the new context (Poon, 2022).
Transition Objects: Familiar objects can offer comfort during or after the transition.
One-on-One Support: Some children benefit from adult assistance during complex transitions, especially when routines are novel or involve multiple steps.
When used consistently, transition strategies promote independence, reduce distress, and improve daily functioning for children with neurodiversity, across home, school, and therapeutic settings (Hume et al., 2021; Steinbrenner et al., 2020).
Some other strategies might include;

1. Open/Choice communication: Encourage open discussion about their needs and concerns. Providing clear communication about upcoming changes and offering options where possible to promote a sense of control.
2. Clear expectations: Provide clear instructions and outlines of the transition process.
3. Gradual exposure: Introduce changes slowly to allow for adaptation.
4. Sensory accommodations: Offer tools to manage sensory overload, like noise-cancelling headphones or designated quiet spaces.
5. Flexible arrangements: Allow for adjustments in schedules or work styles where possible.
6. Access to support: Ensure access to mental health professionals or other support services to manage anxiety and stress.
7. Times of change
8. Visual cues: Using visual timers, picture schedules, or color-coded systems to signal upcoming transitions.
9. Sensory activities: Incorporating calming sensory activities like deep breathing exercises or fidget toys during transitions.
10. Predictable routines: Establishing consistent routines with clear expectations for transitions between activities.

Transition Model Management Process
Transition management in individuals with neurodiversity addresses the inner psychological process that they experience during change. Successful transition management involves these steps:

1. Communicating with the person about why the change is needed.
2. Collecting information from those affected by the change to understand its impact on them. Gaining their benefit in the outcome.
3. Doing a review of the person' transition readiness.
4. Educating family/relatives/guidance about how the change will affect individuals in the family to manage the transition effectively. (Hume, 2008)

Tips for a Successful Transition Model

1. Maintain a consistent, supportive routine as much as possible. This increases predictability for the child, reducing anxiety.
2. Increase predictability for the child through clearly defining the starting and finishing points (e.g. using a visual timer) and communicating what is coming next (e.g. using a visual schedule).
3. Consider the child's preferred activities, and create a schedule that balances preferred activities with less or non-preferred activities. When transitioning from a preferred activity to a non-preferred activity consider engaging the child in a neutral activity between them to support the transition.
4. Consider the child's anxiety and how to reduce it using;
5. Transition toy or object that the child finds comforting.
6. Minimising time spent waiting and providing fun and interesting objects or activities to engage the child while they wait.
5. Use sensory breaks between activities. Sensory breaks can be short and simple e.g. hopping on one foot, or longer e.g. going for a walk depending on the child's need and what is possible in the setting.
6. Be prepared for transitions, respond consistently and avoid hurrying the child through a transition. It is likely that this will lead to stress, and may impact the child's ability to transition smoothly.

Challenges with Transition Model for the Neurodivergents

1. **Executive Functioning Issues:** Neurodivergent individuals often face challenges with executive functioning, including difficulties with planning, organizing, managing time, and adapting to new

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routines. These impairments can hinder their ability to prepare for and cope with transitions effectively (Anderson et al., 2022).

2. **Sensory Overload:** Changes in environments can introduce overwhelming stimuli—such as loud sounds, bright lights, or unfamiliar smells—that may trigger distress, shutdowns, or meltdowns, particularly in individuals with sensory processing differences (Poon, 2022; Tomchek & Dunn, 2007).
3. **Social Challenges:** Difficulties in interpreting social cues and adjusting to new social environments can lead to discomfort or withdrawal during transitions involving group dynamics, such as moving to a new classroom or joining a new peer group (White et al., 2010).
4. **Communication Barriers:** Differences in communication style may lead to misunderstandings with peers, caregivers, or educators. These miscommunications can escalate during transitions, when clear communication is most critical (Wilkinson & Twist, 2022).
5. **High Sensitivity to Change:** A strong preference for sameness and routine is common among neurodivergent individuals, making unexpected or even planned transitions a source of significant anxiety (South et al., 2005).
6. **Stigma and Misunderstanding:** The social stigma surrounding neurodiversity, and a general lack of awareness or support, can amplify stress during transitions and create additional emotional and social barriers (Kapp et al., 2013).
7. **Emotional Regulation Difficulties:** Intense emotional reactions to change, such as anxiety, anger, or sadness, are common in neurodivergent individuals and can interfere with the ability to successfully manage transitions (Mazefsky et al., 2013).
8. **Difficulty with Task Switching:** Transitioning between tasks or activities, especially when they differ in structure or demand, is often difficult due to cognitive inflexibility and difficulty disengaging from previous tasks (Anderson et al., 2022).
9. **Hyperfocus or Hypofocus:** Intense focus on a preferred interest (hyperfocus) or difficulty initiating and maintaining focus on required tasks (hypofocus) can disrupt transitions and create frustration when shifting from one activity to another (Russell et al., 2020).

Benefits of Transition Model

For neurodivergent individuals, transitions can provide significant benefits by promoting increased independence, improved emotional regulation, better understanding of their own needs, reduced anxiety related to change, and a greater sense of control over their environment, allowing them to navigate different situations with more ease and confidence; essentially, helping them to adapt to new situations and environments more smoothly.

Key benefits of transition for neurodivergent individuals include the following:

1. Reduced anxiety: Transitions can be structured with clear visual cues and predictable routines, which can significantly lessen anxiety associated with change for neurodivergent people who may struggle with uncertainty.
2. Enhanced independence: By providing clear expectations and support during transitions, neurodivergent individuals can learn to manage changes on their own, fostering greater autonomy and self-reliance.
3. Improved emotional regulation: Transition strategies like visual timers or sensory activities can help neurodivergent people manage their emotions during changes in routine or environment, leading to better emotional regulation.
4. Better communication and understanding: Open communication about upcoming transitions and the ability to express needs can improve understanding between neurodivergent individuals and their support network.
5. Increased self-awareness: By actively planning and managing transitions, neurodivergent individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their own sensory needs and triggers, allowing them to better advocate for themselves.
6. Positive participation in activities: With appropriate transition strategies, neurodivergent individuals can engage more fully in activities at school, work, or within their community.

Conclusion

It therefore very obvious that the transition stage for individuals with neurodiversity is very challenging. The understanding of the transitional stages and the areas/ skills to focus on before, during and after transition by parents of individuals with neurodiversity as well the team of professionals who attend to them are the keys to a successful transition that would lead to optimal living. For proper transitioning, it is of utmost important to consider the transition strategies, processes, materials and the uniqueness of the individual going through the transition. In as much as transition is of great importance for impactful living the challenges should not be ignored. Strategies should be set and intentionally implemented to overcome the challenges to give us the expected glory at the end.

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Recommendations:

The paper recommends that:

1. Parents of individuals with neurodiversity should be educated about the point at which transition starts and what is expected of them; the skills are of utmost importance at transition stage.
2. The teams of professionals should be knowledgeable about the transition stage as well, as to be able to guide parents on decision making for individuals at transition stage.
3. Both parents and team of professional for the neurodivergent should be well knowledgeable about the transitions strategies, process, materials and the uniqueness of the individual(s) to be transited.
4. There should be high level of communication between the parents and the team of professionals attending to the person; this is to faster adequate generalization of the skills acquired at transition stage.

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