Singing Smoothes Classroom Transitions

“A helper I will be.
A helper I will be.
There’s work to do.
There’s work to do.
A helper I will be.”

Katie, a 5-year-old, sings as she merrily bounces her head from side to side. The song is her kindergarten classroom cue to clean up. Katie is singing along with her teacher while she carries two boxes full of crayons to a shelf.

Just as humming a merry tune helped Snow White and her furry animal friends to quickly clean a filthy cottage in the movie ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’ (Disney & Cottrell, 1937), singing can be an effective way to help keep young children fully engaged during classroom transitions. The purposes of this article are to:

- consider why classroom transitions are often challenging for young children and teachers,
- review findings that support the idea of singing as a catalyst for easing transitions in the early childhood classroom,
- examine the benefits one teacher experienced when she incorporated singing into two of her classroom transitions, and
- suggest ways early childhood teachers can appropriately use singing as a classroom management technique.

Why Are Some Transitions Challenging?

Transitions are daily routines in early childhood classrooms. Every time children move from one learning activity to another, they experience a transition. Common transitions include:

- morning arrival
- clean up and change learning centers
- switch among small groups, individual explorations, and group times
- prepare for lunch
- move between indoor and outdoor play
- get ready for and wake up from nap time
- prepare to go home

Although transitions help children become familiar with routine schedules, moving from one activity to another in an early childhood classroom is often trying for both teachers and children for several reasons.

First, transitions can be difficult because some children may not know or understand the expectations of that specific transition. If children are unsure of how their teacher expects them to behave at any given time, behavior problems are likely to occur. A lack of routines was found to be the main cause of disrupted transitions in an elementary classroom (Erogan, et al., 2010).

Children with some disabilities may find it difficult to deal with change. Children with autism, for instance, often have a hard time coping with changes, even when the change seems as minor as a shift from circle time to art (Kern, Wolery, & Aldridge, 2006).
Another reason that children have problematic transitions is that they are happily engaged in what they are doing and do not want to stop (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman, & Kinder, 2008). Rethinking schedules to allow ample time for children’s explorations can often result in greater cooperation during transitions.

Although changes from one activity to another can be difficult, singing with children during those periods can help ease the transition, as evidenced by both research and a classroom teacher’s experiences.

One teacher also used “social signaling” in an attempt to shift children from one task or place to another. She used the song “Kye Kye Kule” from Ghana to call students to prepare for lunch, recess, or gym class. The call-and-response structure of this song was effective in focusing children’s attention (Lum & Campbell, 2007).

Why Sing During Transitions?

In seeking to understand the “nature and context of rhythmic and melodic expressions made and heard by children, emanating from other children, as well as adults within the school environment” (Lum & Campbell, 2007, p. 28), researchers found that chants, singing, and movement were naturally common activities on the elementary school playground.

Singing during transitions can have a profound impact on children with disabilities who may otherwise struggle during those times. In one study, the introduction of songs sung when the children first arrived at school made it possible for two young boys with autism to enter the classroom independently (Kern, Wolery, & Aldridge, 2006). Songs also facilitated more interactions between these two students with autism and their typically developing peers.

Teachers also occasionally use songs as a part of speech and language therapy. One school of thought regarding music and its effects on language acquisition “emphasizes the motivational properties or reinforcement value of music in the language context” (Lee, 2009, p. 28). Songs are often used to help children learn the alphabet and to count, for example.

Many professionals believe that “music is facilitative because it is a pleasurable and motivating experience for young children” (Kouri & Winn, 2006, p. 294). If music does possess such qualities and children

A call-and-response structure focuses children’s attention.
are naturally drawn to music, it follows that singing can be an effective way to ease classroom transitions.

Younger children seem to be more responsive to music and music activities than their older peers (Bowles, 1998; Denac, 2008). This suggests that while singing might be an effective way to ease classroom transitions in pre-K classrooms, it may be less effective by second grade.

These insights can help teachers make use of songs in beneficial ways and in situations where children are likely to be receptive to the songs and singing. “As with most teaching strategies, the better you know your students and their capabilities and needs, the better equipped you will be to decide which transition activities will best meet their needs (and yours)” (Kieff, 2007, p. 308-G).

**Figure 1. Transition Songs for Children and Teachers**

**Circle Time Song**  
*(Tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”)*

Hush, shhh (finger to lips), quiet please.  
Let’s all gather near.  
Find a friend and sit right down.  
Circle time is here.

**A Helper I Will Be**  
*(Tune of “The Farmer in the Dell”)*

A helper I will be.  
A helper I will be.  
There’s work to do.  
There’s work to do.  
A helper I will be.

A picker up I’ll be.  
A picker up I’ll be.  
It’s time to put the toys away,  
A picker up I’ll be.

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**What Happens When Children Sing**

For 2 weeks, a kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Moore, incorporated songs into two of her classroom transitions as an informal experiment. While her children were cleaning up and switching centers, she sang “A Helper I Will Be.” While preparing for circle time, she sang “Circle Time Song” (see Figure 1).

Singing in the classroom had positive effects on the children’s behaviors, even on the first day. As Mrs. Moore sang “Circle Time Song” for the first time, the children quickly and quietly made their way to the center of the classroom and took a seat on the carpet, while doing their best to sing along with the song. Before the song was introduced, it was a rare occurrence when all children were on task during that transition. Children continued to gather quickly each day thereafter. Her singing of “A Helper I Will Be” prompted similar changes in children’s cooperation during clean-up times.

After 2 weeks, Mrs. Moore stopped singing the songs, which sparked equally compelling results. That day, when it was time to clean up centers and move to the carpet, Ricky and Kyle, two especially loud and outgoing children, began singing “A Helper I Will Be” while they cleaned up, without any prompting from the teacher. As they sang, many other children joined in.
Later, when Mrs. Moore called the children to the carpet for circle time, one child called out, “Where is the song? You didn’t sing the song!” Clearly after just 2 weeks of singing, the songs had become an integral part of the class routines. These informal findings make a strong case for using singing as a classroom management technique during routine transitions.

Mrs. Moore’s Reflections

When asked if Mrs. Moore planned to continue the use of the songs during transition periods, she replied,

Oh yes! We love the songs. Because of the nature of the study, there was one week when I once again removed the songs from the transition periods. On the days we did not use the songs the children asked, “Are we going to sing the song?!”

And I would have to tell them, “No, not today.”

They ask for the songs. If I forget, someone will say, “Mrs. Moore, we need to do the song! We didn’t do the song!”

Mrs. Moore reported that she found singing to be a helpful classroom management technique, adding that singing is a more gentle way to kindly remind children that it is time to clean up and move on to the next activity, rather than asking them multiple times.

She also pointed out that songs are effective because children, especially in early childhood classrooms, enjoy singing, a statement supported by research (Bowles, 1998; Denac, 2008). Lastly, when asked if she enjoyed singing songs during transitions, Mrs. Moore indicated that she did, adding, “It doesn’t really bother me that my voice is off key…the children have really no inhibitions about that.”

Key Singing Strategies

Teachers who use these key strategies can easily incorporate singing into classroom transitions.

Set clear expectations ahead of time for each transition. This will ensure that children know how they are expected to behave. A central aspect of classroom management is establishing clear expectations and routines. Classroom management and expectations are some of the most important influences on school learning (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). After children know the expectations, teachers can pair a transition song with those expectations to establish an effective classroom routine.

Choose songs that fit the transition. When the song’s words state what children are expected to do, they can self-assess whether they are conducting themselves properly. Consider, for example, this song that reminds children what they do to prepare to walk through hallways:

“My hands are there behind my back,
I’m standing straight and tall,
My eyes are looking straight ahead,
I’m ready for the hall.”

Another example is this song that can be used for story time, sung to Children enjoy singing.

Nancy P. Alexander

Children have little concern about how teachers sound when they sing. Most young children are still gaining voice control so they are not likely to notice if a voice is severely off key.
the tune of “If You’re Happy and You Know It”:

“If you’re ready for a story, come sit down.
If you’re ready for a story, come sit down.
Let’s all gather near, so everyone can hear.
If you’re ready for a story, come sit down.”

Notice again that the song reminds children of what they should be doing—sitting on the carpet and gathering near—without a teacher having to remind the children about the expectations.

Teachers can burst into this song when children are gathering for music, too. Sing these words to the tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”:

“Sing, sing, sing with me.
Sing out loud and clear,
To tell the children everywhere
That music time is here.”

For more transition song ideas, see the Websites listed in Table 1. When selecting a song to incorporate into a transition period, keep in mind the ages and needs of children—the younger the children, the simpler the song.

**Consistently sing the same song.** Predictable daily routines are key to any efficient early childhood classroom because children know what activity is next. When teachers consistently sing songs with children during transitions, children are less likely to be confused or anxious. Singing offers stability to the daily routine and helps ensure that transitions run smoothly.

**Sing—on or off key!** Children have little concern about how teachers sound when they sing. Most young children are still gaining voice control so they are not likely to notice if a voice is severely off key.

**Key Strategies for Singing During Transitions**

- ahead of time, set clear expectations for the transition
- choose songs to fit the transition
- consistently sing the same song
- sing—on or off key!

**Singing Smoothes Classroom Transitions**

Teachers can kindly remind children that it is time to move on to the next activity and set the pace for doing so. Singing during transition periods can promote independence in classroom routines. Start singing tomorrow!

**References**


**About the Author**

Sarah E. Mathews, M.Ed., is a Pre-K Teacher at the Lamplighter School, Dallas, Texas. While earning her master’s degree at Texas Christian University, she researched the effects singing can have on transition periods in an early childhood classroom as part of her treatise work.

**Table 1. Sources for Transition Songs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.preschoolexpress.com">www.preschoolexpress.com</a></td>
<td>Rhymes and songs for transitions in classrooms with young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.songsforteaching.com/transitions.htm">www.songsforteaching.com/transitions.htm</a></td>
<td>Songs to use for classroom management. Teachers can sample songs, view lyrics, and purchase songs to play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.preschoolrainbow.org/transitions-rhymes.htm">www.preschoolrainbow.org/transitions-rhymes.htm</a></td>
<td>An abundance of children’s songs set to popular tunes such as “Farmer in the Dell.”</td>
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**Eensy Weensy Spider**

**(Part of Sing-Along Stories Series)**


This adaptation of the familiar rhyme “Eensy Weensy Spider” contains additional musical stanzas and a hand diagram for the finger play. Hoberman writes a whimsical extension of the familiar rhyme, including Spider’s interactions with a beetle, a glowworm, and a swimming frog. The watercolor illustrations bring this delightful garden scene to life for young children. The rhyme/song is an excellent one to sing as children transition from one activity to another.

**Classroom Ideas!**

*Eensy Weensy Spider* is an excellent book for helping children develop rhythm, body awareness and movement, and rhyming skills.

**LITERACY:** In small or large groups, children can listen to and repeat the initial rhyme/finger play and then look at illustrations in the book for cues to complete new rhymes. Create a chart (on paper or electronically) using pictorial representations of Miss Spider’s interactions so children can read the poem or sing the song. Children can create additional stanzas by drawing pictures and/or by adding their own text.

**MOVEMENT & MUSIC:** Demonstrate the hand motions while reciting or singing the rhyme. Children can also act out the stanzas, moving like Miss Spider or other garden inhabitants.

**ART:** Provide water colors for children to create garden scenes similar to those painted by Wescott. Suggest that children use thumbprints for bugs and insects or add those to their garden creations with markers, pastel chalk, or crayon. Children can add text with their own spellings, using the song chart for additional word cues.

**SCIENCE:** Teach this song during spring when pond and garden life is alive! Children can visit a habitat and take sketchbooks to draw both plant and insect life. Help children note differences between insects and other life around the pond or garden, using illustrated informational books.

**MATH:** Add small rubber or plastic animals to the math center for children to sort by color, size, characteristic (like number of legs), or habitat. Include informational books about pond and garden life as a resource for children. Chart results by counting the number of animals in each group and recording on a graph.

**COMPUTER:** Bookmark Web sites about insects or garden habitats. Play the “Eensy Weensy Spider” on the computer for children to sing along with or read and sing.

- [http://urbanext.illinois.edu/insects/01.html](http://urbanext.illinois.edu/insects/01.html)
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQZNkdxCMY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQZNkdxCMY)

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