

# WAIT

# FOR IT

Daily transitions can cause anxiety and spark difficult behaviour, so mastering change is key to a more peaceful classroom, says Paul Dix...

Teachers who change direction without warning, indication or even hand signals can find children travelling the wrong way. Ask children to stop working and stack the chairs and some change direction instantly; others like a cruise liner – very slowly and only with lots of tricky negotiation. Even fully mature adults who otherwise appear to be entirely rational fear change. They actively organise their lives to avoid it. It is hardly surprising that some children find it difficult.

At home the link between change and behaviour is clear. I turn off the TV without warning and a look of shock, upset and mild revenge scrunches the face of my eight-year-old. In the classroom, where learning is dynamic, flexible and open to change, the connection is not immediately obvious.

Preparing children for change reduces low-level disruption and instant protest. And it is the beat before you give instructions that's of most importance; the pause to remind children of the routine. In our heads we hold the fine detail of the routines and behaviours we expect. We have a secret and detailed filing system of rules, routines and

rituals. The problem is that we don't communicate this in fine detail. It is usually when the child transgresses that we remind him of responsibilities he was previously unaware of!

You can prevent poor behaviour by preparing yourself and, most importantly, preparing the children to anticipate change. Children who dislike change are trying to cope in an environment where change is the whole *raison d'être*. They need support so that the day is spent learning and not worrying about what is going to happen next. An efficient routine that prepares children for change is an essential part of a teacher's banter; be it signs, symbols, non-verbal cues, countdowns, timers on the screen, warning flags or whistles.

### Organise groups

Changes in groupings can quickly cause children (and adults) some anxiety. It is left to a teacher's best judgement as to whether the children should stay with the same groups or work randomly with anyone. Each class is different. If your preference is the latter then try a random group generator (e.g. [brendenisteaching.com/tools/sortinghat](http://brendenisteaching.com/tools/sortinghat)). If you have time to spare then a more analogue solution can be enjoyed by

drawing names from a hat! Random group selectors stop most of the arguments and can make change more exciting. Children still feel the disappointment of having to work up close with Whiffy Darren, but at least the process engages and prepares.

Often, transferring a small piece of the classroom environment from one part of the day to the next can smooth change. For younger children a cushion might move as the activity changes. Older children might be given control of the egg timer. Fear of change is often fear of losing control. With these small concessions the control is retained by the child and transitions are eased.

### Map out the day

For some children an outline of the lesson or day is important as it helps them to predict the types of activities, groupings and environments they will experience. Display your outline of the day as a set of photographs (of children doing the activity) or agreed symbols. The more information children have the easier it is for them to cope with change.

### Ask the expert

Do you have a behaviour issue that you would like Paul Dix to address? Or perhaps you'd like to share a comment on his article? If so, send your questions and letters to [joe@teachprimary.com](mailto:joe@teachprimary.com) (questions will be treated as confidential).

Some children thrive on change, whilst others prefer to sit in the same place with the same people around them and the same bit of wall behind them. I had the privilege to work with a specialist teacher of children with Asperger's at Littlegreen School in West Sussex, who saw the effect that an unpredictable environment was having on children's behaviour.

To cocoon the children from each others' behaviour, she had screens built around every desk. The behaviour in the classroom was transformed. In their own predictable, controllable space, the children became a completely different class to teach. For this particular group the environment was critical. The screens protected the children from the threat of sudden, unpredictable change. I am not suggesting that you do the same in a class of 30, but the environment that is unpredictable and not constant can be unsettling – threatening, even. There are many children who have no diagnosis for ASD who display many of the traits

Use partial agreements

## MAP OUT THE DAY

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## Organise groups

### Whistle while you work

I have a collection of animal call whistles that are excellent for building transition routines. The owl whistle for 'still and silent', the duck call for 'one minute peer assessment', the crow call for 'changing activity' and quail call for 'lining up' (see [acmewhistles.co.uk](http://acmewhistles.co.uk)). The children enjoy the challenge of remembering actions that relate to the different sounds and you appear to be a modern day Mary Poppins to the amazement of colleagues. Of course, if your routines are relayed non-verbally you spend less time nagging children and more time teaching. You also save your voice for more important conversations. In time, the children will be able to create their own routines and can be left in charge of signalling change to their peers. Everything becomes a little more predictable. Routine but never dull.

with regard to change. You know them. They become fractious if they can't use the same pencil, unsettled if they cannot fulfil their morning routine and find group work socially impossible.

### Use partial agreements

It is often during transitions that the best preventative work is done. When negotiating change it is important to show some understanding and demonstrate you are prepared to listen:  
> 'I understand that you would rather not...'

- > 'Yes, you may prefer to spend the day lying down...'
- > 'I know that the library is a good place to spend the day...'
- > 'The underside of the table is fascinating, I agree, yet...'

Persuading some children of the need for change is tricky. Instant acknowledgement and reinforcement is a useful

lever as the child considers your proposal for change: 'Thank you for putting (...er throwing...) the paintbrush down (we will deal with the multicoloured splash-back on Charlene's shirt later). That's a good decision. I know that you can move quickly to our next job.'



## Brian Blessed Booming

The sharp change in direction that some teachers initiate when castigating children for their behaviour often provokes an emotional response. As a mild rebuke this can be useful, but go too far and the shock of the shout can create tears that cloud the issue. It is easy to waste a great deal of time waiting for the tantrum to subside. As children get older they start to recognise your anger and can feel resentment for the attack rather than responsibility for the behaviour. If you are prone to moments of 'Brian Blessed Booming' it is worth considering the effect of your behaviour on the children who are sitting quietly and getting on. They thrive in a safe and predictable environment. A five second shout for one child comes and goes. For other children it can disturb for longer and leave them working with 'one eye open'.

If everything else in the child's life is inconsistent, then the consistency you provide every day is vital. For many children having a 'normal' day at school provides the counter balance for an unpredictable home life. There will be children who need to be given more time to accept change; children who need to be warned early; children who need to start braking and turning well before the others. Subtle, agreed signals mean that you can do this privately and selectively. You differentiate your support in behaviour just as you differentiate support for learning. Taking care over transitions does not mean everyone will suddenly welcome change. It does mean that children can adjust to a new activity feeling safer, better prepared and more in control.

## > Establish a routine

HOW TO MAKE CHANGE CONSISTENT AND PREDICTABLE...

- > Use a visual timetable to map the main activities of the day with all children
- > Run through the routine before each change of activity and ask the children to repeat back the expectations
- > Give regular time checks or use a mechanism for the children to take responsibility for deadlines/changes in task
- > Make transition times (first thing in the morning, after break, returning from assembly, etc) utterly predictable and routine. "We cannot deal with breaktime problems in learning time." "You know the routine for silent reading."
- > Cushion those who resist change with small compromises over groupings, seat, partner, etc.
- > Deal with poor behaviour with the same unemotional, almost mechanical response. Be predictably over-enthusiastic about good behaviour!



Tweet us...

Follow @teachprimary and @PivotalPaul to join the conversation on Twitter. Let us know your thoughts on the issues raised in the article, and put your behaviour questions to Paul.

Paul Dix's one-man show, *Changing Behaviour: The Light at the End of Your Tether* is at The Space Theatre in London on November 8th. Tickets are limited and offered to *Teach Primary* readers first. For more information go to [pivotaeducation.com](http://pivotaeducation.com), call 020 7000 1735 or email [ellie@pivotaeducation.com](mailto:ellie@pivotaeducation.com)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Dix is a leading voice in behaviour management in the UK and internationally. A National Training Award winner, he is a member of the Restraint Accreditation Board and has presented evidence to the Education Select Committee on behaviour.

