

Helping children see the signs

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Remember when your little league football team lost the game because someone ran the ball back into their own end zone? Take heart, one University of Alberta researcher says it may be the player's unfamiliarity with perceiving transitional cues and not a reflection on their playing skills.

Whether changing ends during a football game or performing different mathematical operations on a test, [developmental psychologist](#) Sandra Wiebe says that some [children](#) display challenges in set-shifting, or switching from one task to another. Her study identified that some children may not notice that a change has occurred that necessitates a need for them to switch [behaviours](#) or processes. The implication can be far-reaching for those who missed the change in areas such as team sports, math and even later in life with multi-tasking in the office or driving.

However, providing some form of reminder seems to go a long way to improve children's ability to switch tasks on their own. "One of the problems that children have is simply noticing when the rules have changed or when they're supposed to adapt to change, or when different types of responses are required," said Wiebe, a professor in the Department of Psychology. "We found that having transitional cues made a huge difference."

In her study published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, Wiebe and her colleagues at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln used characters bearing various shapes and colours. A group of five-year-olds

were asked to name either the character's colour or shape, depending on a visual cue. In addition, auditory cues were sometimes provided to signal when children had to switch between colour and shape naming. The simple presence of [auditory cues](#) helped the children switch tasks, she said, and they did not have to be meaningful cues in order for the participants to recognize and adapt to a change.

Wiebe indicates that not paying attention to contextual clues that signal change can have consequences from mild—getting math problems wrong—to dire—driving the wrong way in a controlled lane at rush hour. In a school context, children first learn to add numbers. However, if they fail to pay attention to the other arbitrary mathematical symbols (subtraction, division, multiplication) and continue to only add, they may always find themselves constantly reaching wrong numbers.

"The students may know how to do these individual tasks perfectly well, but when you put them in a situation where it is hard for them to recognize that something different is called for, that's when children run into difficulty applying what they know," she said.

For younger players in team sports such as hockey, football or soccer, switching field ends and shifting from offensive play to defensive may lead to some general confusion in players with otherwise solid skills. The ability to awaken the transitional notion of which skills need to be used and when may only require a simple adjustment from the coach, such as pointing out buzzers at the end of a hockey period to help players understand what to do at the start of the next period.

"On their own, kids might not attend to the important information in the game environment—they have to work on it rather than parents or coaches simply assuming that they'll figure it out on their own," said Wiebe. "When coaching young children, in addition to teaching kids particular game skills, it might be helpful to also incorporate some

training in recognizing 'transition cues' in the game setting that might help children recognize when to apply these skills."

Provided by University of Alberta

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