



Flexibility

Flexibility is the capacity to switch one's thinking based upon the demands of a situation. It incorporates the ability to adapt and improvise one's emotional and cognitive responses based upon changes and transitions in one's environment. When using flexibility, one must recognize the need to utilize different problem-solving strategies and to take reflective, careful approaches based on previous attempts.

Flexible thinking helps you learn from mistakes. Cognitive and emotional flexibility helps children to find effective problem-solving strategies and deal with uncertainty. Flexibility is important for a child to be able to transition from one activity to another and helps a child deal with new or different situations.

Home and School Situations Requiring Flexibility

- Receiving constructive criticism
- Trying out new activities or tasks
- Shifting from playing with friends to going home for dinner or homework
- Handling frustrations while attempting to complete a task
- Losing a game or facing disappointment
- Transitioning from one classroom activity to another
- Adjusting to a change in routine, such as having a substitute teacher or babysitter

Hints and Strategies to Improve Flexibility

- Practice trial-and-error learning. Do something with your child in which it is clear that there is no right or wrong answer. For example, rearrange the books on a bookshelf to see how they look best, work on a flower arrangement, or try variations in making a smoothie or ice cream shake.
- Play games that are strictly chance. These include flipping coins, playing "war" with a deck of cards, or playing any number of board games that do not rely upon skill, such as Candy Land or Chutes and Ladders.
- Ask your child to help you learn how to use a new cell-phone, a new game, or piece of software that you have just bought. Compliment your child's willingness to make errors, try new things, and learn from his mistakes when engaged in this type of activity. Engage in a discussion as to how this applies to many other things in his real world.
- Try new things. For example, have everyone in the family try something new at a restaurant, take a new route to school, or try a new routine at home. Discuss with your child the pros (e.g. broadening one's perspective, finding a better way) and cons (e.g. discomfort, fear) of new experiences.

- Turn your day upside-down. Have chicken, salad, rice, and vegetables for breakfast and cereal and milk for dinner. Wear pajamas during the day and sleep in jeans and a T-shirt, all the while laughing and being comfortable with this unusual routine.
- Encourage thinking about things differently. For example, see if you and your child can generate alternative uses for common household items. Discuss how many ways you could use a telephone book, such as a seat booster, a doorstop, a fire starter, or to look up phone numbers.
- Encourage video and board game play that requires flexibility of thinking. Many games, such as Risk or Blokus, involve strategies that require cognitive flexibility in response to changes on the board and the actions of one's opponents. Similarly, many single player video games change the skills needed from one level to another. For example, during the first level of a game, one may simply need to run and jump to get from one place to another, however, on subsequent levels this method may be inadequate and one will need to think of alternative strategies to be successful. Encourage your child to recognize the need for change in strategy in these games and discuss together how he can apply this sort of flexibility to his daily life.
- Ask your child for help while you play a video game that requires changing strategies. Many online video games, such as Diner Dash, require changing strategies as one moves along in the game. These are relatively simple games for many parents to get started on but they may struggle when coming up with solutions as the game progresses. Many of your children will be able to help you. The goal is to get your child not only to help you, but to explain how and why he shifted his thinking from one set to another. The focus is to help your child recognize the changing of thinking sets in game play and how this may help them in the real world.
- Model flexibility in your daily routine. Everyone experiences the common occurrences of running out of an ingredient for a recipe, having weather ruin plans, or being called to stay late at work for an emergency. These are all opportunities for displaying flexibility of thinking and approaches. When these circumstances arise, model your capacity to adapt and change. For example, while you adapt, talk about how you will make something different for dinner or how you will find something to be happy about when you change your plans from going to the beach to a movie.

Books and Articles on Flexibility

Cooper-Kahn, Joyce, Ph.D. and Laurie C. Dietzel. (2008). *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House, 2008. [Chapter 12]

Cox, Adam J., Ph.D. (2007). *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control--The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive*. New York, NY: Penguin Books [Chapter 4]

Dawson, Peg, Ed.D. and Richard Guare, Ph.D. (2009). *Smart but Scattered*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Richard, Gail J. and Jill K. Fahy. (2005). *The Source for Development of Executive Functions*. East Moline, IL: Lingua Systems.

Websites on Flexibility

LearningWorks For Kids (<http://www.learningworksforkids.com/EF/flexibility.html>): The premier resource for executive function information, offering a detailed explanation of flexibility, tips for parents, and activities to improve this skill.

National Middle School Association

(<http://www.nmsa.org/publications/webexclusive/helpfulhints/tabid/649/default.aspx>): A compilation of tips for parents of children who are transitioning from elementary school to middle school.

Family Communications

(<http://www.misterogers.org/newsletter/hints.asp?newsletterid=3>): Helpful hints for parents to assist their children with the transition periods they face everyday.

Scholastic (<http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3747078>): Author provides a variety of outdoor problem solving activities that can be used with children of different ages.

Games and Activities That Can Practice Flexibility

- **MadLibs Books**
This interactive game helps your child to both practice grammar and to recognize that sometimes nonsense and silliness are acceptable.
- **Big Brain Academy**
Big Brain Academy offers your child the opportunity to test his “brain” abilities in five different categories by playing 15 mini-games, which allows him to practice adapting to varying routines.
- **Bejeweled**
This puzzle game, commonly available on the Internet, allows your child to practice trial-and-error learning and problem-solving skills in order to perform well in the game.
- **Chess and Checkers**
Traditional board games, such as chess and checkers, will allow your child to practice flexibility when he must react and adapt to his opponent’s moves
- **Charades and Guesstures**
The traditional word guessing game and its modern-day equivalent, Guesstures, will allow your child to practice laughing at himself, use trial-and-error learning, and constantly adapt to the situation at hand.
- **Cooking**
Cooking, especially when one does not follow a recipe, allows your child to practice problem-solving and trial-and-error learning as he creates a hopefully edible concoction.
- **Construction around the house**
Like cooking, construction around the house, particularly when one does not have a kit or detailed set of instructions for a project, allows for your child to practice problem-solving and trial-and-error learning.
- **Rearranging the furnishings in a room**
By rearranging the furnishings in a room in your home, your child will have the opportunity to try and adapt to new things.