Hints, Strategies, and Games for Improving Flexibility

If you are looking for practical ways to help your child improve their flexibility and adaptability, you have come to the right place. The previous article in this series [linked here](#) explored what cognitive flexibility really means, outlining what it means to be a flexible and adaptable thinker, and highlighting why this skill is important for a child's success and well-being. Now that you have a solid understanding of the "what" and the "why," this article moves towards the practice of flexibility. This article will serve as a guide for improving flexibility by focusing on the "how." Below, you will find common situations at home and school that require flexibility, followed by a wealth of concrete strategies, games, and everyday activities you can use to actively strengthen this vital skill in your child.

First, let's review some common situations where flexibility might be tested both at home and at school:

- **Trying new things:** Whether it's a new task, food, or after-school activity, change pushes children out of their comfort zone. Humans naturally prefer familiar patterns because they are predictable and feel safe. Trying something new requires cognitive flexibility because a child must override the impulse to stick with what they know and venture into "unsafe" (unknown) territory.

- **Receiving feedback or constructive criticism:** When a child is told their approach is wrong or could be improved, it challenges their ideas of right and wrong. Flexibility is important in being able to understand and

utilize feedback effectively. A flexible thinker can update their approach based on the new information and someone who is less flexible may see the criticism as an attack on what they perceive as correct. Flexible thinking involves the ability to understand that the way you think is not always the only way.

- **Shifting from one task to another:** Transitioning between activities, such as from playing with friends to coming inside for dinner, is a classic test of flexibility. The child must completely shift their mindset from one set of thoughts and feelings to another completely different mindset. Inflexibility can look like resistance, whining, or negotiating because the child's brain is "stuck" in the first activity and mindset and is struggling to shift to the next.

- **Feeling frustrated by a task:** Frustration is a natural response when things aren't going as planned, but it is what the child does with that frustration that tells us about their flexibility. A child with rigid thinking might get stuck trying the same failed strategy over and over because they struggle to find ideas outside of what they know. Flexibility might look like a child recognizes that an approach isn't working and works to find a new strategy. The difference is in their problem-solving strategy.

- **Changes in routine:** Routines provide a sense of predictability and allows children to know what is coming next and change disrupts their expectations. This tests flexibility by forcing a child to adapt to unexpected circumstances and adjust their expectations in the moment. A child that is able to "go with the flow" likely has strong cognitive flexibility.

Now, what can we do about this? Let's review some strategies and tips for improving flexibility.

1. **Trial and error:** Engage your child in an activity or decision where there is no right or wrong answer. Examples of this might include picking a movie to watch, rearranging their bedroom to see how the furniture fits best, creating a splatter painting, or choosing the fastest route to get to school. This exposes the child to flexible thinking, since they are having to consider different options. This could be helpful for a child who gets "stuck" and struggles to think outside the box.

2. **Playing change games:** Games that are strictly chance, like coin flips, the card game "war," or dice and board games like "Yahtzee" and "Candy Land." These games, because they don't require skill, teach children how to accept outcomes they cannot control. Since the winner is determined purely by luck, players need to adjust their expectations after setbacks.

3. **Learning new things:** Having your child help you learn how to play a new game, put together a toy or a piece of furniture, or follow a recipe can help them learn from their mistakes. Allowing children a safe, low stakes medium to make errors and figure out what to do to adapt when it happens can be really helpful for flexibility. Be reassuring, encouraging, and offer ideas to broaden the child's ability to think abstractly when solving

problems.

4. **Trying new things:** Something that can be a struggle for inflexible children can be trying new things. Find some new things your child can choose from that are low impact to expose them to and increase their comfortability with new things. This could mean trying a new restaurant similar to one they already like, driving a different route to school, playing a familiar card game with different rules. The increased exposure will increase their level of comfort with the unknown.

5. **Flip your routine around:** Have leftovers for breakfast, cereal and pancakes for dinner, pajamas during the day and wear clothes to bed, and even read a bedtime story first thing in the morning. Make this a really fun experience for your children that will allow them the space to laugh and enjoy themselves while learning how to adapt to change.

6. **"What's another way" game:** This game encourages flexible thinking and taking on different perspectives. See if you and your child can brainstorm different uses for everyday items. For example, what's another way to use a dictionary? Perhaps as a booster seat, or to make paper airplanes? What's another way to use a straw? Maybe as a small cookie cutter, or a sword? This type of practice can help kids feel "unstuck."

7. **Model flexibility:** Flexibility is a skill we all use all the time, so describe how you overcome feeling stuck to your child. If your plans are ruined by the weather, describe to your child your thought process and how you handle it. Model your ability to adapt and change without dysregulation and narrate how you handle it.

8. **"MadLibs":** This style of book or activity can be really fun and silly while also demonstrating flexible thinking. This opens up the child's mind to different

possibilities and allows them to adapt to their initial expectations about what the story is about. Another low impact way to increase your child's cognitive flexibility skills without them even knowing your intention!

Building cognitive flexibility is a skill that needs small, consistent practices over time. By recognizing the moments that test your child and finding ways to increase their comfortability and adaptability, you give them essential tools for resilience. Every game you play and every time you model flexibility helps create a more confident child who is better prepared to navigate a changing world.

If your child often seems inflexible, perhaps by getting very upset over small changes or minor setbacks, it's worth exploring why. When these kinds of difficulties are present, a neuropsychological evaluation can offer a clearer understanding of how your child thinks and processes emotions. Our skilled team at the South County Child and Family Consultants can perform this evaluation to pinpoint specific challenges and recommend effective ways to support your child.

See the original article describing what flexibility is and why it is important [here](). Stay tuned for more articles on flexibility, including a robust list of resources and strategies to help improve your child's flexibility.