

What Is Flexibility and What Does It Look Like?

What is flexibility?

Flexibility refers to the cognitive capacity to adapt one's thinking processes in response to the shifting demands of a given situation. This critical skill set involves the ability to adapt and creatively improvise both emotional and cognitive reactions when faced with environmental changes, shifts, or transitions.

To effectively utilize flexibility, an individual needs to develop an awareness of their own thought processes that allows them to recognize when current problem-solving strategies aren't as effective. This awareness then helps the process of choosing different, more effective ways of doing things. This process also includes a reflective component which involves thinking about what has been attempted before, how it turned out, and what can be done differently next time for improvement. A great way to begin to improve flexible thinking is to try new and different activities that change and disrupt your usual ways and patterns of thinking and break your normal routines.

In developmental contexts, particularly for children, fostering cognitive and emotional flexibility is foundational. It equips them with the ability to identify and implement effective problem-solving strategies, navigate and manage the inherent uncertainties of life, and successfully transition between various activities or contexts. Ultimately, it also allows them to more confidently engage with and manage new or significantly different situations they encounter.

In addition, being a flexible thinker is key for learning from mistakes because it allows for mistakes to be seen as chances

to grow instead of plain failures. When it comes to kids' development and growth, helping them become flexible in their thinking and feelings is incredibly important and valuable. It gives them the tools to find and use effective ways to solve problems, handle the everyday unknowns in life, and switch smoothly between different activities or situations. In the end, flexibility helps children by making them feel more sure of themselves when dealing with new or really different experiences.



What does flexibility look like?

Flexibility isn't just a handy skill for doing well in school; it's a vital part in all areas of life, including social and emotional life. Whether a child is coping with a disappointment like a cancelled playdate, adjusting to changing expectations from a caregiver, or handling sudden changes in plans or daily routines, they are actively utilizing, practicing, and strengthening their flexibility skills. These moments are crucial opportunities to practice bending without breaking.

Children who have developed strong flexibility skills often exhibit several positive traits:

- **They can think quickly and adapt with ease:** When new situations arise or plans change unexpectedly, they don't get easily flustered. Instead, they can readily adjust their thinking and actions to fit the new

circumstances without much dysregulation or struggle.

- **They navigate transitions smoothly:** Moving from one activity to another, such as stopping playtime to come for dinner, or ending screen time to start homework, is generally manageable. They can mentally switch gears without significant resistance or distress.
- **They demonstrate patience and social awareness:** They can understand the concept of taking turns and might willingly let a sibling go first or wait for their chance in a game, showing an ability to delay gratification and consider others.
- **They handle setbacks with resilience:** Losing a game or not getting what they want doesn't typically lead to a major meltdown. While they might feel disappointed, they can process this emotion and move on, perhaps even looking forward to the next opportunity. They may even be able to brainstorm how things can go better next time.
- **They show empathy and perspective-taking:** A key aspect of social flexibility is the ability to step into someone else's shoes and try to see things from their point of view. This helps in resolving conflicts, understanding social cues, and building stronger relationships.

Children with underdeveloped flexibility skills may face consistent challenges:

- **They may experience significant difficulty with changes, transitions, and new environments:** Unfamiliar situations or changes to their routine can trigger considerable distress, anxiety, or resistance, making everyday activities more stressful for everyone involved.
- **They may become overly insistent or react with resistance in new situations:** When faced with something unexpected or not to their liking, they might dig in their heels, argue excessively, or seem personally

offended by the change, struggling to see beyond their own immediate wants. Their whole attention gets stuck on how they feel and what they wanted, making it hard to think about anyone else's viewpoint or other ways to handle things.

- **They often react poorly to constructive criticism or negative feedback:** Instead of viewing feedback as a chance to learn, they might become angry, defensive, or shut down, finding it hard to separate the feedback from their sense of self-worth. So when they hear even helpful suggestions, it can feel like they're being told they're 'bad' or 'not good enough' as a person, since their inflexible thinking makes it hard to imagine other reasons for the feedback.
- **They can struggle to understand and adapt to differing expectations:** It can be confusing or upsetting for them when rules or what's expected are different between, for example, home and school, because they struggle to change how they act depending on the situation or who's in charge.
- **They tend to dwell on negative past events or comments:** Instead of processing and moving on, they might repeatedly bring up or fixate on something negative that was said or done, finding it hard to shift their focus. This could look like them sighing heavily and staring blankly at their worksheet minutes after being told 'no' to more screen time, clearly still stuck on that disappointment instead of starting their task.
- **They find it extremely hard to alter their plans:** Even minor changes to an anticipated event or activity can cause significant upset, as they may have a rigid idea of how things "should" be and struggle to accept deviations.

Being flexible—the ability to change how one thinks and acts in new situations—is an important skill for a child's success in school, with friends, and at home, helping them manage

everyday changes and emotional ups and downs. 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.

Stay tuned for more articles on flexibility, including a robust list of resources and strategies to help improve your child's flexibility.