

# Thinking About Thinking: How to Build Stronger Executive Functioning Skills

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## Flexible Thinking Behaviors

Like any complex cognitive skill, learning to be flexible requires more than just 'telling;' we need to 'teach' it. The steps to effective teaching include: discussion, modelling, practicing and feedback. You can do the components simultaneously, using naturally occurring opportunities as well as deliberate, targeted practice. Following these steps increases the likelihood that learning will occur.

### Discuss

- Make flexibility part of your family vocabulary. Talk about what 'being flexible' looks like. Discuss during natural opportunities.
- Talk about options and offer plenty of choices. "I could have cereal or toast for breakfast. I think I'll have toast. What do you want for breakfast?"
  - Offer concrete choices to start
- Talk about different ways to look at situations.
  - "David is playing with Sally right now. It doesn't mean he doesn't like you anymore. You can play with him later." "Tommy didn't answer you. He is playing with Lego. He might have missed what you said because he was thinking about his Lego"
  - "Your boss snapped at you today, when you didn't do anything wrong. Can you think of some other possible reasons why your boss might be upset? Maybe they got some bad news from home, or have a headache."
- Play the Favorites game (take turns telling your favorite pet, food, game etc.) and point out how different people like different things and that's ok
- Teach the concept of compromise. A compromise is when we try to be flexible and let another person get at least part of what they want.

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## Model

- Label it when a person or a character in a video or story is 'flexible.'
- Talk out loud when you are making decisions and planning your daily life. "No rice for dinner?? Oh no! That's ok. I can be flexible -we will have pasta."
- Model compromising in naturally occurring opportunities throughout your day.
- Set up opportunities to demonstrate examples and nonexamples of flexibility (e.g., Adult A can verbalize wanting to do something that is not in the plan or is not possible. Adult B can ask her to be flexible, and Adult A can model staying calm even if she doesn't get what she wants). Describe the steps. "Adult A didn't get what she wanted, but she stayed calm. She knows she can play that game later."
- Examples of helpful statements:
  - We can do this another way
  - I wonder what would happen if we tried another way
  - Let's see what else we can do
  - If we use the fork to pick up peas, they stay on better. If we use the spoon to pick up peas, we can pick up more. Which will you choose?"

## Practice

### *Beginner/Younger children*

- Matching games and play:
  - Color, shape, size, number
  - Associations – matching
    - Pillow to bed (what else could go with bed?)
    - Hat to gloves (what else could go with hat?)
    - Sock to foot (what else could go with foot)
    - Optional: Teaching app called Things that go together
- Teach categorizing ("find all the animals/birds/cars")
- Teach DIFFERENT "Find me a different animal/bird/car"
- Get creative. Think of different ways to:
  - Clean up toys
  - Put socks/shoes on your hands
  - Do silly unexpected things like putting a pan on your head, or rolling up a piece of paper and using it as a trumpet/megaphone
  - Play a familiar game
  - Walk across the room or to the car
  - Play follow the leader
  - Use a familiar object (spoon, toothbrush, piece of paper)
  - Carry water
- Introduce a 'surprise' into your day. If you have 3 activities on the schedule, introduce a surprise where you do a preferred activity instead, and praise the individual for being flexible. If the plan is to go to the grocery store, say "surprise – we are going to get an ice cream and eat it by the river" and then offer praise/acknowledgement for being flexible.

## **Teens and Adults**

- Sorting games and play
  - Sort the same stimuli by different features/characteristics. E.g., the same white ball could belong to the category: white, round, a ball, something that you throw etc.)
- Ask the individual to be flexible. “What else could you do? What else could you say? What could we do differently next time?”
- Play iPad/phone/computer games that foster flexibility (escape games, problem-solving games) together.
  - Take turns (this allows practice for both initiation and inhibition), commenting on flexibility, trying a different way, making mistakes (point out they are sometimes necessary in order for us to learn) and other cognitive skills as they happen.
- Create opportunities to explore “How else can I look at this?” using books or a moment in a video. Talk about what the characters might be thinking, what will happen next, what else could happen, and what else could the character do?
- Play word fluency games: e.g., “Let’s see how many animals you can think of in one minute.” Take turns going through the alphabet and thinking of words that start with each consecutive letter (animals, countries, first names, books, movies, TV shows etc.)

## **Feedback**

- Describe flexible behavior when it occurs and offer acknowledgement/praise for demonstrating flexibility.
  - Be specific in your praise (rather than “Great job being flexible” say “You calmly made a different choice – that’s great flexibility!!”
  - Include social consequences in your feedback. “I feel happy when you are flexible. We don’t get so frustrated when we can be flexible.”
- Ask “what could we do differently next time”

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