

Helping Kids With Flexible Thinking

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How flexible thinking can help children handle uncertainty and change

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As the pandemic stretches on, we've all had to learn new skills to manage the stress: Bouncing back from disappointment, going with the flow when plans change unexpectedly, getting comfortable with change and managing uncertainty.

It's exhausting.

But there is an upside: Many of the skills we've been forced to practice rely on a key [executive function](#) called flexible thinking. It's a skill with lifelong benefits but it's one that many kids (and many adults) often struggle to learn. And the ups and downs and ins and outs and almost-overs, and wait-not-overs of the pandemic mean we're getting a crash course, whether we like it or not.

What is flexible thinking?

Flexible thinking is the ability to think about things in a new or different way. It helps us deal with uncertainty, solve problems, adjust to changes, and incorporate new information into our plans and ideas. Flexible thinking is also a key aspect of self-regulation and handling big emotions. When kids (and, let's get real, parents, too) are able to take a flexible approach to a problem they're less likely to fall apart when things don't go according to plan.

Kids who can think flexibly are more adaptable and less likely to see setbacks as unfixable disasters. For example, if a trip to see Grandma has to be cancelled, a child who can't think flexibly might break down ("Now we'll NEVER get to see Grandma!!!") and be unable to see a way out of their disappointment. A child who *can* think flexibly will also feel disappointed, but they are likely to be more open when you offer alternate solutions: "I know you're really sad that we can't see Grandma. I am too. What if we FaceTime her tonight and bake cookies together? Then we can make a card for you to give her when we do get to see her!"

How to help kids with flexible thinking

So what can parents do to help kids get better at thinking flexibly?

Validate emotions

Managing disappointment or uncertainty is hard. And that's okay. It's important to validate kids' feelings, no matter how outsized or confusing they may be, before trying to move on. "I see how sad you are that your cousins couldn't come visit this year. I know you miss them. I do, too. It's really hard." When kids feel heard and understood they're less likely to dwell on the negative emotion and more able to move on to finding a solution.

Get them involved

But remember, getting from frustration or sadness to acceptance and action takes time. Kids may not respond as quickly you'd like them to. When that happens, be patient and encourage kids to try flexible thinking to help manage distress and build resilience. "I can see you're still really missing your cousins, I wonder if there's anything that might help? Maybe we could write them a letter and you could decorate it?"

When kids are ready, invite them to help you come up with ideas for how to manage uncertainty as well as difficult changes. For example: "Okay. I'm really excited for your birthday party too, but there's a chance we might not be able to have your friends inside the house. Let's come up with some awesome ideas for what to do if that happens." When kids feel like part of the team, they'll have a greater sense of control and get the chance to practice their flexible thinking skills.

Model flexibility

Kids look to parents for cues on how to behave. Modeling healthy coping skills will help you, and your child, develop better habits and feel less overwhelmed when things don't go as expected.

Speaking your thoughts aloud as you solve a problem is a great way to do this. For example, if a friend says they're not comfortable eating at a restaurant for a planned dinner, let your child see you processing the change in a healthy way: "Aw, that's disappointing. I know! I'll suggest we all bundle up and eat takeout on the deck instead." When your child sees you navigate changes or surprises in a reasonable, solution-focused way, they'll be more likely to do the same.

It's also important to let kids see you cope when there's *not* an immediate solution to be had. For example, if your child is wondering whether changes in the pandemic will affect their school, you can say: "Right now, we just don't know. It can feel frustrating and scary to not have the answer, but there's no reason to panic right now." Relying on strategies to reduce your stress levels in the meantime — whether that's going for a walk, listening to music, taking deep breaths, calling a friend or whatever works for you — shows kids that an uncertain situation doesn't have to feel like a disaster.

Get help if they (or you) need it

Flexible thinking can be very hard to practice if a child is experiencing mental health issues like anxiety or depression or your family has recently experienced a traumatic event like the loss of a loved one, job, or home.

Many families are still under significant stress. And new uncertainty may trigger difficult emotions for families still reeling from the pressures of the pandemic. If you notice that your child is unusually inflexible, upset, anxious, or sad, it may be a sign that they are struggling with a mental health issue. Talk to your child about how they're feeling, and reach out to a pediatrician, clinician, or school guidance who can help.

And remember, kids aren't the only ones who are affected. Parents are only human and the stress and difficulty of the pandemic can take a serious toll. If you've been feeling unusually anxious, angry or sad, you may need some help to bounce back. If you're struggling, don't ignore it or keep it to yourself. Practice self-care, reach out to friends, or make an appointment with a therapist or doctor. Caring for yourself is an essential part of caring for your family.

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