

What is Flexibility?

The importance of cognitive flexibility skills, and how to help your child improve them.

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What is Flexibility?

Kids With Good Flexibility Skills:

1. Are able to think on their feet and adapt readily to new situations.
2. Do well with transitions, such as leaving gameplay to sit down at dinnertime.
3. Are able to wait their turn so that a younger child can have a first opportunity to do something.
4. Are able to deal with disappointment when they lose a game.
5. Are able to view situations from others' perspectives.



Flexibility is the Thinking Skill that focuses on a child's ability to adapt to new situations, improvise, and shift strategies to meet different types of challenges.

For example, when taking a test that contains both multiple choice and essay questions, a child with good Flexibility skills will be able to switch easily between the two formats, while a child who struggles with Flexibility skills may get stuck and become frustrated each time the format changes.

Flexibility is not only an important skill for academic success, it is vital to a healthy social and family life. Because it involves the capacity to improvise, shift approaches, and adapt to new situations, Flexibility is often utilized in social and peer interactions. When a child needs to deal with disappointments, shifting expectations, and unexpected changes in events and routines, they are utilizing Flexibility skills.

Flexibility is a commonly-identified executive function in many theories. It is typically defined as the capacity to adapt to new situations and deal with changes in routine. It is a core component of Dawson and Guare's theory of executive functions, after which we have

patterned our thinking skills at LearningWorks for Kids.

As an executive function, flexibility often refers to a cognitive skill that allows one to learn from one's mistakes and to change one's approach to a task. It helps individuals to deal with novel situations and to adjust to situations that do not go the way they expect. For children, we often observe flexibility in the capacity to deal with disappointment or changes in plans. Flexibility skills support problem solving and are often combined with planning and time-management skills in accomplishing goals.

The LearningWorks for Kids Thinking Skills Assessment is based on the Executive Skills Questionnaire (ESQ) which measures flexibility primarily by

how one adjusts to changes in daily routines, the ability to adapt when one does not get what one wants, and how effectively one changes one's behavior in response to environmental conditions.

Kids With Underdeveloped Flexibility Skills:

1. Experience significant problems with changes, transitions, and new situations.
2. Have difficulty understanding the differing expectations of parents and teachers.
3. Continue to dwell on something that was said to them in the past.
4. Cannot change their plans readily.

Improving Flexibility



These are some general strategies and ideas for helping kids to improve their Flexibility skills.

1. Encourage thinking about things differently. For example, see if you and your child can generate alternative uses for common household items. Discuss the different ways to use a phone book, such as for a booster seat, a doorstop, a fire starter, or for looking up telephone numbers.
2. Encourage gameplay that requires flexible thinking. Many games involve strategies that require Flexibility in response to changes on the board and to the actions of one's opponents. Similarly, many single-player video games change which skills are necessary from one level to another.

“ Unexpected situations can be fun and provide new opportunities and learning experiences...”

For example, during the first level of a game, a player may simply need to run and jump in order to get from one place to another; however, for subsequent levels, this method may be inadequate, so the player will need to think of alternative strategies to be successful. Encourage your children to recognize the need for changes in strategy in these games and discuss together how they can apply this sort of flexibility to their daily lives.

3. Practice trial-and-error learning. Do something with your child for 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, put together a flower arrangement, or try various recipes for a smoothie or an ice cream shake.
4. Play games that operate strictly by chance. These include flipping coins, playing “war” with a deck of cards, or playing any number of board games that do not rely on skill, such as Candy Land or Chutes and Ladders.
5. Find two versions of the same thing. This can be particularly interesting in showing how different

perspectives and eras in time can change the presentation of media. Watch two versions of the same movie and discuss the differences with your child. Consider how different actors portrayed their roles, the different times and cultural settings in which the movies were produced, and some of the technological differences. Movies such as “The Bad News Bears,” “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,” “101 Dalmatians,” “Oceans 11,” “King Kong,” or “Planet of The Apes,” are all good examples to compare and contrast.

6. Turn new experiences into positive experiences. Children who have trouble with the Flexibility thinking skill are often unwilling to try a new activity or travel to an unfamiliar place. Starting regular conversations about the positive aspects of new experiences can prove to be helpful. Help your child make the distinction between unfamiliar situations and bad situations. This can be particularly important for children who are rigid and tied to routine. Help your child to understand that unexpected situations can be fun and provide new opportunities and learning experiences.



Flexibility and Academic Skills

Flexibility is an important skill when learning new information.

This is particularly true when learning complex material in which making mistakes and trial-and-error learning may be the best way to achieve mastery. Flexibility also plays a very important role in long-term projects as well as in any assignments, such as writing

tasks, for which revising and editing play an important role.

Reading

- Flexibility helps kids to manipulate and correct sound patterns when decoding words.



- Flexibility is an essential skill for making inferences that require guessing and conjecture in reading comprehension.

Math

- Flexibility helps kids while shifting between different groups of problems, such as between word problems and equations.
- Flexibility skills are important for your child to be able to shift strategies or approaches when they are unable to obtain the correct answer.

- Flexibility aids in shifting between modes of representation, such as vertical or horizontally presented problems, written sentences, charts or graphs, or equations.

Writing

- Flexibility is helpful for writing a first draft that will need to be modified.
- Flexibility skills are vital when kids are editing and rewriting, as these tasks require a willingness to make changes and see mistakes



Flexibility and Digital Play

Digital Play is filled with opportunities to improve Flexibility.

Playing video games, searching the Internet, trying out the newest app, or Facebooking a friend demands a variety of Thinking Skills. Proficiency with any of these digital tools requires the ability to apply skills such as Planning, Organization, Working Memory, or Self-Awareness. For children, the attraction of video games and technologies makes them an ideal teaching tool for practicing game-based skills and learning to apply them to school and daily activities.

How do video games and interactive digital media practice and improve Flexibility?

Flexibility is a core Thinking Skill necessary for learning how to master

“For children, the attraction of video games and technologies makes them an ideal teaching tool for practicing game-based skills”



video games and other interactive digital media. Part of what makes video games interesting are shifting challenges and increasing complexity as one advances to higher and higher levels. This requires flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to learn from mistakes.

Similarly, individuals must use Flexibility when mastering an app or a program on the computer. When people can't figure something out on their new cell phones, they usually "play" with them, flexibly trying out new approaches to see what works. While you can read the directions if you want, most often the best way to learn how to master interactive digital media is to try

a variety of approaches and see what suits your particular need.

Digital play can help kids improve Flexibility skills by helping them to:

- Get to the level of the "boss" battle, where they need new and flexible strategies to beat a super-hard foe and are likely to make a number of mistakes initially.
- Quickly identify when a previously useful skill needs to be discarded for a new strategy.
- Learn about the functionality of a new cell phone or other digital device by pushing buttons, making mistakes, and discovering new applications.

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