5 Tips for Teaching Flexible Thinking in Unpredictable Times

by Kari Dunn Buron



Children with autism are often frustrated with changes in their daily schedule, let alone when there are so many confusing and scary things happening in the world. Parents might find themselves responding to the behavioral outcome of the stress and anxiety involved with this “inflexible thinking”, rather than teaching flexible thinking in a systematic way. If you can think about this as a cognitive issue, rather than a “behavioral” issue, you might be able to teach some valuable coping strategies during this difficult time.

The first step in teaching this skill is to realize that your child might not understand why the world works the way it does; why people make the decisions they do; or why routines have been so drastically disrupted. Your child might depend on some sense of predictability in order to be relaxed, and unexpected change might cause him significant stress.  An immediate goal would be to add visual and systematic order to your days of quarantine.

#1. Try using a calendar to teach “tolerance for change” in a very concrete, highly systematic way.   Make sure your calendar has room to write information on each day. Make note of birthdays, favorite TV shows, games or puzzles to play with, or books to be read. Then teach your child to "check" the calendar every morning to see what is happening and to check for any changes.  If a parent is going to work or to the store, you can mark that on the calendar so that your child clearly sees when someone is leaving and returning. If your child asks perseverative questions about when they are going back to school or when they can engage in a preferred activity, refer him to the calendar to find his answer.

#2. A “change board” can be used alone or in conjunction with your calendar. The classic change board is a white wipe off board hung in the kitchen. The board is always blank unless something is different about the daily schedule (a Dr. appointment, a visitor, or something like the monthly disaster signal). You will need to teach your child to look at the change board every day to check for changes. Make this a habit.

Once or twice a week, try creating a simple change (not too drastic or emotionally upsetting – something like playing a new game or having a new lunch menu item) so that your child gradually becomes used to seeing a change posted on the change board. Then, if your family has a last minute crisis that leads to an unexpected change in routine, you can write the change on the change board and prompt your child to check it. Changes might still be unpleasant but by using a system to introduce change, you can take “the edge off” and make the change easier to tolerate.

#3. Teach your child a calming routine. This is super important and will have life long benefits. An example might be just taking two slow deep breaths, rubbing hands together, closing her eyes and then taking two more deep breaths. Practice this routine several times every day. Make a habit of doing the routine prior to events that are predictably difficult for your child to tolerate (like checking the calendar or the change board or trying a new food item).

#4. Once your child understands the routine of checking the calendar and change board in your kitchen, try developing a portable warning system. For example, write the changes on the calendar on your phone and make it a habit to check the changes on your phone with your child throughout the day. Even a yellow “warning” card can be used to practice handling changes from remote spaces.

#5. Try using a 5-Point Scale “check in” chart to teach your child to recognize feelings of stress and anxiety. Pick 3-4 times during the day to “check in” and then make the check in a routine. Participate with your child. Everyone checks in and makes note of where their stress is at that time:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 5 |  | I am ready to explode! Please let me be alone in a quiet place. |  |
| 4 |  | I am so angry! I need to close my eyes, take a deep breath and relax my brain. Please be quiet – we can talk later. |  |
| 3 |  | I am really worried. I would rather not talk but I can take deep breaths, read a book, draw a picture or something else calming. | √ |
| 2 |  | I am a little concerned. Maybe we should talk about it. Maybe I could draw a picture of what makes me feel this way. |  |
| 1 |  | I am feeling really nice. I have a calm body and I am happy to be with other people. |  |

Using this check in scale on a regularly scheduled basis can increase everyone’s awareness about how they are feeling, how their body is feeling and how tolerant they may or may not be to life’s unexpected developments. Consider making your own chart so that the ideas about what to do are specific and helpful to your unique family. The ultimate objective here is to learn to identify your 2’s and 3’s so that you can more easily bring your worries or anxieties down to a 1 with deep breathing and relaxation. If we are not aware of our bodies and our brains, we will have problems regulating our emotions and staying safe.

Remember that all of this involves a ***learning style***. Rigid thinking is not a character flaw or manipulative behavior so much as a response to stress and anxiety. Teaching your child how to tolerate and handle emotions when things get too confusing or frustrating is one of the most important things you can do as a parent. Learning to think flexibly is an important part of learning to regulate one’s own emotions and responding to the world in a positive way.

**Resources:**

Buron, Kari Dunn. 2013. ***When My Worries Get Too Big***! Second Edition. AAPC.

Buron, Kari Dunn. 2012***. The Incredible 5-Point Scale – 2nd Edition.*** Autism Asperger Publishing Co. (AAPC).

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Than Sound LLC. Digital Edition.

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