



Pathways to Success

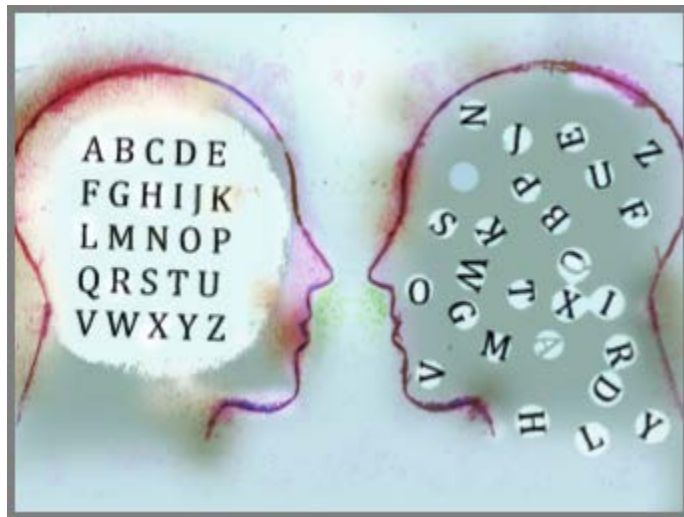
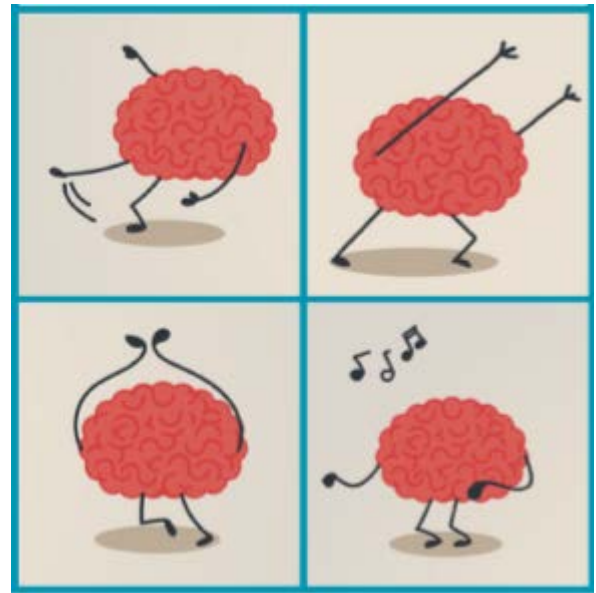
Helpful Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

Executive Functioning Series: Mental Flexibility

To be 'flexible' reflects how we approach challenges, tasks, and daily problems. In our everyday, it means being able to think about something in a different way and going with the flow. Being flexible, or having the ability to adapt, is a skill that some are born knowing, while others struggle to manage.

A child who struggles with mental flexibility can be described as rigid, a rule follower, and does not like change or the unexpected.

Children rely on their environment, supports and experiences to guide their growth and development of executive functioning skills, including their ability to be mentally flexible.



Research has shown that a child's brain has the best potential for increasing their mental flexibility during their preschool years.

In their preschool years, the three areas that support their learning of mental flexibility are creative/imaginative play, routines, and opportunity to influence their learning experiences.

Source: Buttelmann, F., & Karbach, J. (2017, June 20). *Development and Plasticity of Cognitive Flexibility in Early and Middle Childhood*. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5476931>

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2009). *Smart but Scattered*. The Guilford Press: New York.

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Encouraging Flexibility in Our Everyday

When we meet children, who struggle to be 'flexible', it can create stress and worry for everyone else. We know that unexpected things happen everyday. When a child is not able to problem solve, 'go with the flow', or relax when this happens, it can create challenges for their ongoing social, emotional, and mental growth.

Routines

Having a consistent and predictable routine is central to building a child's executive functioning skills. When a child knows the routine of the day, and what is expected of them, they can begin to predict what comes next and be flexible when something unexpected happens.

Increase flexibility: providing choices when available, adding a small 'surprise' to the day, making small changes to routines (different order, or in a different way, or with a non-preferred person).



Imaginative Play

A rigid child will re-create the familiar in imaginative play. When playing with an adult or peers, imaginative play encourages children to expand the rules and incorporate a multitude of ideas in a safe way. Allowing children to create, substitute and imagine how different people, objects and scenarios can be used (e.g. a box into a boat or a house).

Increase flexibility: 'Loose parts' play, making the rules of the game together, or adding small changes to the play, shifting roles that are traditionally assigned to the same people.

Press Pause

When a child who struggles with mental flexibility encounters a complex or challenging task they will often shut down, become emotionally reactive or walk away leaving the problem behind. Their response is panic. Panic that they will not do it right, will not remember the right steps or feel the problem is too big for them to handle. Allowing them a moment to STOP - BREATHE - TRY AGAIN gives them the power and control to be successful.

Increase flexibility: Break the task down to more manageable parts, provide them advance warning that it is happening, provide choices, using a 'script', or call a 'friend' to help them through it.

