

COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY

What is this developmental skill?

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to adapt thinking when situations change. It allows children to shift between ideas, consider different perspectives, adjust to new routines, solve problems in multiple ways, and recover when things do not go as planned. Rather than becoming "stuck" on one way of thinking, children with strong cognitive flexibility can modify their approach as circumstances change.

How does this normally develop?

Cognitive flexibility develops gradually as children gain experience with new situations and receive support from responsive adults. Young children often prefer routines and may struggle when plans change, but with guidance they begin learning that problems can have more than one solution. As the brain continues to mature throughout childhood and adolescence, children become increasingly able to switch between tasks, understand another person's point of view, and adjust their thinking without becoming overwhelmed.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere with cognitive flexibility because children often grow up in environments where survival depends on responding quickly rather than thinking adaptively. Chronic stress can reduce the brain's capacity to shift attention and consider alternative solutions. Limited opportunities for play, exploration, and supportive problem-solving may also restrict experiences that help build flexible thinking. As a result, children may become rigid in their routines, have difficulty tolerating change, or struggle to find new solutions when faced with challenges.

What might this look like?

A child with reduced cognitive flexibility may:

- Become upset when routines or plans change.
- Insist there is only one "right" way to do something.
- Have difficulty transitioning between activities.
- Struggle to recover after making a mistake.
- Become frustrated when a solution does not work.
- Misinterpret others' intentions because they have difficulty considering different perspectives.
- Give up easily when faced with a new or unexpected challenge.

Parenting Implications

Children develop cognitive flexibility when adults create safe opportunities to experience change and solve problems together. Encourage children to think of multiple solutions, ask open-ended questions, and model flexible thinking aloud. Prepare children for transitions when possible, while also helping them learn that unexpected changes can be managed. During moments of frustration, guide them toward curiosity rather than immediately providing the answer.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, *"They're being stubborn,"* consider, *"They may be having difficulty shifting their thinking."* This perspective helps caregivers respond with patience instead of power struggles. By gently supporting children through changes, encouraging problem-solving, and remaining calm during transitions, adults help strengthen the flexibility children need to navigate an unpredictable world with greater confidence.