



## PARENT NEWSLETTER - COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY!

This month our focus is on building **cognitive flexibility**. What will cognitive flexibility do for my child?

Life doesn't always follow a predictable pattern; cognitive flexibility helps our children navigate this uncertainty and feel like they have more options when faced with challenges. As things change around them, they need to change in order to maintain their wellbeing.

With cognitive flexibility your child will be better able to change strategies when faced with new and unexpected situations, make sense of the unfamiliar and thrive in uncertainty. Cognitive flexibility is important for innovating, coming up with new ideas and solving problems, and is essential to creativity. It will also help them understand people and situations that are different from theirs and improve their relationships.

This month we can't wait to walk you through this cool skill and help you find ways to flex this part of your child's brain.

### **COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY TIP #1**

#### **Success isn't all about getting serious**

Positive mood has been found to enhance creative problem solving and focus at school. How does this happen? Cognitive flexibility! The handy dandy skill can be increased just by using a little humour. Use this month to focus on having some good family laughs before getting started on homework or trying new things. It's easy to get really serious about our child's future success and what they need to accomplish in order to get there. Unfortunately, the stress of this approach can actually move them in the opposite direction of the success they were hoping for.

This month, laugh a little more as you help your child through the struggles of picky eating, examtime or learning a new skill. Try telling a few jokes back and forth to set the tone for learning. You may find this approach makes everybody more flexible.

### **COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY TIP #2**

#### **Mix up your routine for a more flexible brain**

Does your child thrive on routine? Do you and the school go out of your way to make the world predictable for them? While I'm all for a good bedtime routine, sometimes we can take this too far and prevent our children minds from building the confidence to deal with uncertainty.



I see many kids in my practice who struggle with stepping outside their comfort zones and the natural tendency is to alleviate anxiety by keeping things the same and creating routines that the child's brain can predict. While this may work to reduce anxiety in the short term, it doesn't help them navigate the inevitable uncertainty waiting for them in the future.

To overcome this, start a brain training program. Much like upping the weights at the gym, start with small manageable changes to the routine that make them flex this part of their brain. Move the furniture around more often, drive to school a different way, send them to a new summer camp or generally just shake things up. The more times your child sees that different is safe, the more new pathways they will build and the more flexible their brain will get.

Let your kids in on the plan. It's more fun when they can see their successes and these should be celebrated. Even if your child isn't struggling with anxiety now, help them proactively build this skill in advance of needing it. There's nothing wrong with liking routine but make sure it is a point of pride in your family to be ok with the unfamiliar too.

### **COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY TIP #3**

#### **Use picky eating to build cognitive flexibility**

Cognitive flexibility is all about having an open mind and being able to shift our perception of something. Nothing could be better practice for this than eating. Kids are notoriously stubborn when it comes to ruling foods in or out in a very black and white fashion. Instead of accepting these decisions as the food rules you will obey, instead help them think flexibly about food.

There are millions of ways to prepare each food. In fact, there is an entire industry built around new ways to prepare the same foods. Even the foods we love can be prepared in ways we don't like and likewise you can find preparations of most foods that can shift your child's perception of a food from black and white to grey.

Here's an example in my house: my kids will often profess to disliking zucchini. While they don't like it stir-fried, they love the zucchini chocolate chip muffins we make. When they try to rule out zucchini forever, I remind them that they just don't like zucchini prepared that way but they do like zucchini in our muffins (i.e.: it's about preparation, not the food itself). This way when we encounter a new preparation of zucchini they are much more likely to put it in the grey category and open-mindedly give the new dish a try.

The best part is the more new things they try, the more cognitive flexibility they will build and then the more new things they will be willing to try, and the cycle continues. You just have to start the snowball rolling and it will gain its own momentum even when you step out of the equation. The eventual goal of parenting is to create adults that can make good decisions for themselves and this is a great place to start when it comes to food and flexibility.



See this blog for a more detailed look at coaching children through the challenges of building cognitive flexibility: <https://umbrellaproject.co/category/cognitive-flexibility/>

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