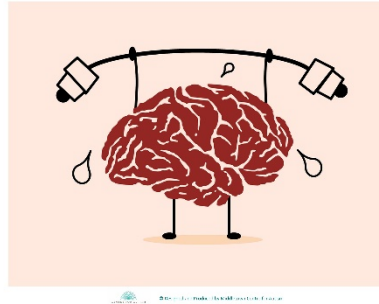


## Teaching Flexible Thinking



### What is flexible thinking?

The ability to think about how you do or say something in a new or different way. It is a cognitive skill, forming part of the executive functions which can be difficult for people with autism.

Types of flexible thinking include understanding what people mean when they use homonyms and homophones (words with multiple meanings), knowing that things may have to happen in a different way or order than we are used to and figuring out why people might do something we don't immediately understand.

### Why teach flexible thinking?

This is a very important social cognitive skill and is often an area that can be challenging for individuals with autism. Typically developing individuals learn how to be flexible implicitly, by watching and learning from other people. We need to offer opportunities to teach flexible thinking explicitly to autistic children and young people, as they often do not learn this from their peers.

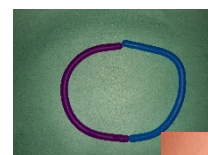
Being flexible means individuals are better able to work cooperatively with others, remain calm and less anxious, problem solve and try new experiences or ways of doing things.

### Ideas and activities

- A good starting point is to **introduce the concepts and vocabulary** "flexible" or "stretchy" and "inflexible" or "rigid" or "hard" (depending on your child's language abilities). Start with concrete examples of items that are flexible – such as pipe cleaners, rubber bands, stress balls and play dough – and inflexible – such as lollipop sticks, hair grips, toothpicks, and dried spaghetti. Get your child to sort these into each category.



Next, support them to make a circle shape on a piece of paper with the pipe cleaners or play dough and then toothpicks or hair grips. Which was better and why? Remark on how it is easier to work with the flexible materials.



Move on to the idea of being physically flexible vs. rigid. Ask them to try drawing a picture with their arms 1. Straight out and 2. Flexible. Again, ask what was easiest and why?

- Having introduced the concept of our bodies being flexible, it is now a good time to point out that our brains can be flexible too. **Flexible brains make flexible thoughts.**  
As a family, think about the different ways you can do an activity (making a cup of tea, putting on your shoes and socks, walking or driving to a certain, familiar place). Point out that there might be a different order in the steps, different materials used, different routes; and all achieve the same end result.
- Look for **examples** of flexible thinking in their **favourite film or TV programme.**  
Make “flexible” and “inflexible” signs and stick them on the end of lollypop sticks to use as Scoring Paddle Boards to rate which character is being flexible or not.  
Good examples where characters are often flexible and inflexible include The Big Bang Theory, Mr Bean, Shaun the Sheep and Elf, The Movie.



- Use the language in everyday situations when we have to use flexible thinking skills. For example, "the coat I wanted to wear is being washed, I will be flexible and chose another coat."