Understanding Rigid Thinking in Autism

Brief Informational Guide



Many autistic children experience rigid thinking—a strong need for routines, predictability, and sameness. This thinking and behaving is common and is not intentional "stubbornness". Learning more about how an autistic child may respond to change can help caregivers support them more effectively.

Scan for Resources

What Does Rigid Thinking Look Like?



- Needing to follow the same routine everyday
- Feeling distressed when plans change
- Becoming upset if a familiar route is changed
- Wanting the same foods or having food arranged in a certain way
- Having strong interests and difficulty shifting to new topics
- Holding firm opinions and struggling to see other perspectives

Helping children build flexibility early on can reduce stress, support coping skills and help them thrive.

Why Does Rigid Thinking Happen?



Following specific routines or having strong preferences for topics or items can help children cope when they

- are anxious or uncertain
- experience sensory sensitivities
- are having difficulty predicting what will happen next
- are having trouble shifting attention or transitioning

How Can You Help?

A combination of structure, practice and positive support can make a big difference. Behavioral specialists, occupational therapists, mental health providers, and teachers can help tailor strategies

Helpful Strategies

Remember: Rigid thinking is part of your child's neurotype. With support, understanding, and practice, they can become more comfortable with flexibility while still feeling safe, respected, and understood.

The following strategies can be adapted to your child's specific needs and abilities:

- **Introduce Change Gradually:** Start by making a small change towards the new experiences, such as: Switching the order of two activities, taking a slightly different route home, or adding a new food on a plate next to a preferred food. Small steps build confidence.
- **Use of Visual Supports:** Visual tools help children understand routines and anticipate changes. These may include: Visual schedules, calendars, social stories and choice boards. Visuals provide predictability, while open-ended choices help kids practice flexibility.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Celebrate small steps toward flexibility. Praise, stickers, tokens, or preferred activities can motivate children to try new things and help make change feel safer.
- **Prepare for Changes:** Prepare children ahead of time when you know change is coming. This may include: Previewing the day, using a countdown ("In 5 minutes we will…"), showing pictures or videos of new places, and talking through what to expect. Predictability lowers anxiety.
- **Play Games That Encourage Flexible Thinking:** Games with surprises or changing rules help practice flexibility in a fun way. Examples: Uno, Chutes and Ladders, simple role-play, pretend play where children imagine different scenarios. These activities help children adapt to new information and shift perspectives.
- **Support Social Flexibility ("Social Thinking"):** Teach children how social situations may change and how to look for clues, such as: Facial expressions, tone of voice, other people's needs. This can help them shift their behavior based on the social context.
- **Consider Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for Older Children:** For older or verbally advanced children, CBT can help them notice rigid or anxious thinking, practice problem solving, learn new coping strategies and gradually try new ways of thinking or behaving. CBT is structured and works well for children who need help managing anxiety around change.
- **Practice, Practice, Practice:** Building flexibility takes time. Small, consistent practice—paired with encouragement—helps children feel more confident about managing change.

Visual Schedule



Reward Chart



Facial Expressions



ECHO AUTISM COMMUNITIES
echoautism.org

If you have questions about rigidity, please talk to your healthcare clinician.