

Supporting Your Child to Return to School: Encouraging Flexible Thinking

Why Encourage Flexible Thinking?

Autistic Spectrum Condition is characterised by inflexible thinking. Children and young people on the spectrum in lockdown and not attending school are very likely to be in their comfort zone and getting them back into school will require flexible thinking. This is the heart of the challenge.

So, the first thing we need to attend to is introducing flexible thinking and its advantages. Demonstrate this by showing how an elastic band copes with force but not uncooked spaghetti, or how a tape measure can measure pretty much anything whereas a ruler does not go around corners. Demonstrate joint flexibility and mime what might happen if we did not have any.

Okay, so far so good but now you need to demonstrate flexible thinking. This will not be immediately obvious to you son or daughter. As with everything else, it needs to be made EXPLICIT.

Let me give you some examples - not from my own imagination. Here I am drawing on examples given in a book entitled *Solving Executive Function Challenges* by Laura Kenworthy et al. (2014).

DISASTER 1: The milk is off. You could say:

'There's no milk for my cereal this morning and I am getting stuck. I suppose it's time for me to come up with a Plan B and make toast for breakfast. It's not what I wanted the most but I will get some breakfast that way and I won't have to sit here being mad and hungry. I'll make a note to buy some more milk so this does not happen again and check that the fridge is running okay.'

DISASTER 2: Mail order item ordered as a gift arrives and it is a hideous shade of neon orange, not the pale tangerine shown in the photo. Demonstrate flexible thinking:

'Oh dear! I spent all this time hunting for just the right sweater for X's birthday and it finally gets here and it is horrible and X's birthday is tomorrow. This feels like a really big problem. I need to turn this into a smaller problem. I need to be flexible. Can you help me?'

DISASTER 3: Desired item is not available at supermarket. Demonstrate flexible thinking and say:

'I know this feels like a big problem but I think there is a way to turn it into a smaller problem by choosing your second most favourite main course and a special dessert. We can also make a plan to come back and look for your favourite on another day.'

TWO THINGS:

You might want to think about a small big problem ie. something that is open to flexible thinking, to try this approach on AND think of the 'script', what you are going to say, BEFOREHAND. Oh, and a third thing, keep going with it. It's something new and it will take time.

Note how in each example, a bridge is built - you express frustration and disappointment. Here you are modelling how to do this without the 'meltdown' that often follows the encounter with a problem for children and young people on the spectrum. Note too how you are thinking out loud; you are making explicit how you do flexible thinking.

It is so important to establish flexible thinking before we start to talk about going back to school. School represents stress. It can be unpredictable and incomprehensible. Add to this the Coronavirus and the challenge of social distancing and we have a major problem. So, softly, softly, build up flexible thinking, invite your child to join you in devising Plan B. Introduce the idea of MISSION POSSIBLE.

Below, I have included some example plans which are already filled in to help you; there is one that worked well and one not so well. This is just to flag up that you may not experience success all the time and that is normal. It is an example of how to learn from less than successful attempts at flexible thinking. I have also included a template which you can use and fill out for your child.

Example Plan 1 – Worked not so well

MISSION POSSIBLE		
GOAL	To get ready in the morning and on my way to school on time	
PLANS	<p>PLAN A</p> <p>What is my plan for my mission?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The night before, I will: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Choose my outfit (including my underwear, socks and shoes) and set it on my desk b. Plan breakfast with my dad and write down the menu c. Check my backpack to make sure everything is in it and set it by the door d. Put my comics by my chair in case I have time to read 2. I think I can finish my morning routine in 45 minutes (eg. eat breakfast, brush my teeth, wash my face and hands and get dressed). 3. I will use my morning routine checklist 4. I will plan for an extra 15 minutes just in case something doesn't go the way I had hoped 5. If I've finished my morning routine by 7:50, I can read comics until the bus arrives 6. Grab my backpack when I leave the house 	<p>PLAN B</p> <p>What is an alternative plan?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If I get stuck, my Mum can help me use my routine checklist 2. My Mum will let me know how much time I have left before the bus arrives

TEMPLATE

MISSION POSSIBLE																
GOAL																
PLANS	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">PLAN A</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">PLAN B</td> </tr> </table>	PLAN A	PLAN B													
PLAN A	PLAN B															
DO	<p>Which plan did I use to complete my mission?</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">Plan A</td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">Plan B</td> <td style="width: 33%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">Other (explain)</td> </tr> </table>	Plan A	Plan B	Other (explain)												
Plan A	Plan B	Other (explain)														
CHECK	<p>Did I accomplish my goal? YES NO</p> <p>How did it all go?</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">1</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">2</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">3</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">4</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">5</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">weak</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center; padding: 5px;">strong</td> </tr> </table> <p>What could I have done more flexibly?</p> <p>How strong was my flexibility?</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">1</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">2</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">3</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">4</td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">5</td> </tr> </table> <p>How can I make this stronger?</p> <p>Why was it a 5?</p>	1	2	3	4	5	weak				strong	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5												
weak				strong												
1	2	3	4	5												

CONVERSATION ABOUT GOING BACK TO SCHOOL:

'Going back to school is a no choice situation and I bet you wish you had a choice.'

Start with this. It creates a bridge and your child then knows you get it.

'I bet you wish you had a choice. You are enjoying being at home and we are having a great time. Going back to school means an end to this. That feels like a big problem. I am going to miss you and you are going to have to go to a place where you are often anxious and which can be confusing. AND there is the worry of the Coronavirus. After all, stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives - that's what we have been told to do, right? Em, feels like a big problem.'

Here you are capturing what it must mean to a young person with ASC. You might want to invite them to add to this.

So, now we have established why this is a problem go on to say:

'This feels like a really big problem and I am feeling stuck so we need to think about how we shrink this big problem into something smaller that we can manage.'

If you get really overwhelming reactions at this point, say:

'This feels like a really big problem and I can tell that it is making you have some really huge feelings. Let's do something to calm down...' (when calm is restored - and that might take a long time) try again.

'So, we have a no choice situation and it is a big problem and we need to be problem shrinkers. Let's make a plan for how we can sort this out and face it together.'

Now you will need the template for planning and I have outlined steps towards going back to school. You may need to go back as well as forwards with this. I have tried to build in an increase of challenge gradually but your child may not follow this sequentially and that is okay and to be expected.

List of steps:

- Look at the school website
- Find school bag and other equipment
- Speak to teacher via phone or zoom
- When taking exercise, go near school
- Now go past school
- Now stop at school gate
- Now, but only with agreement of school, go to door
- Have a zoom tour of school
- Join in a zoom lesson from school
- Join in a zoom lesson from school with other children present
- Go to school for one lesson (favourite)
- Go to school for one hour
- Go to school for a morning etc.

I am sure you get the picture. You know your child so you gauge the pace and watch out for signs of anxiety etc. Use the template of the plan for each step. Re-do steps and embed steps. Do one step over and over until stamina is built up. LISTEN, problem shrink, make sense of responses, add steps that make sense to you.

Charlotte Reeve - Educational Psychologist

Birmingham Educational Psychology Service

Reference

Kenworthy, L., Anthony, L., Alexander, K., Werner, M., Cannon, L. & Greenman, L. (2014). *Solving Executive Function Challenges: Simple Ways to Get Kids with Autism Unstuck and on Target.*, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

Making a positive difference every day to people's lives