

Flexibility

by Tanya O'Rourke

Our kids want to succeed in school, and we have the opportunity as parents to help *all* of our kiddos with this, especially those that may be struggling with their executive functioning skills (skills that help us get things done, like time management, planning and organization, the ability to switch our focus, remember details) and emotional regulation (the ability to respond to ongoing demands with a range of socially acceptable emotions, holding our stuff together so to speak, what I'm not doing when I reprimand my kids at an inappropriate volume and then worry that the windows are open and the neighbors can hear me 😊).

These are things that we can teach our kids, by helping them figure out how they learn best and by teaching some of the most essential building blocks of character education, executive functioning and emotional regulation; like flexibility. Without flexibility it is difficult for even the most gifted student to succeed. In fact, we often see some of the most gifted students struggle with flexibility the most, because if things have not been hard for them up to a certain point in their academic journey, then they have not had to rely on flexibility as a key skill. At some point, however, when things inevitably become difficult, when they feel challenged to the point of frustration, they need us to give them a way to cope. They need us to give them a new path to victory, and in that moment when things get hard flexibility is the skill that will move any student from stuck to success.

As parents, we want to raise flexible learners for the same reasons we want to raise empathetic learners - they have better academic success. An added benefit is that our long days are made a lot easier and end up holding more room for fun. Because let's face it, you're not hearing yourself say things like "Gosh I just love how inflexible my two year old is," or "I'm just so relieved that you're finally behaving as rigidly as possible" and "Gosh darnit Target, why do you make it so very easy to return things, can't you be less flexible?!"

Our flexible learners are less impulsive and can manage intense emotions, they more easily negotiate with others and are better problem solvers in both social and academic scenarios. They work very well independently and in groups and they are very good at making everyday transitions and can readily adapt to unexpected changes to the day's schedule.

Inflexible kiddos are those that are more likely to struggle with school and social anxiety, separation anxiety, sleep problems, moodiness, they are more likely to be clingy and have difficulty making and maintaining friendships. These are also kiddos that have difficulty embracing a growth mindset when it comes to their learning and are more likely to give up in the face of adversity and have trouble "thinking outside the box."

Practicing flexibility, however, can be a gateway for less organized and more impulsive students to master executive functioning and improve their academic performance. Flexibility is a learned skill. So how do we create a new and interesting opportunities for our children to actually practice flexibility? We do so in the same comprehensive ways that we have looked to promote things like empathy, persistence, and resilience. We lead by example 😊.

Modeling

One of the most obvious ways we chose to embrace character education is by talking about it. By naming these skills when we see them, or better yet, when we or our kids are doing them, is incredibly powerful. "You know what, I'm running about 10 minutes late this morning and I really appreciate your

flexibility on that.” Or better yet “I am trying to be very patient and flexible with you right now. We are running late this morning and you still need to finish your breakfast and brush your teeth.” “I’m going to ask for your flexibility right now because it turns out that we are going to have to flip flop our entire afternoon schedule,” or maybe you model flexibility by encouraging choice making “I know that you want to go this birthday party *and* have a sleep over at Grandma’s but we can’t do both. Which one would you like to do?” By the way, if Grandma has a pantry stocked full of cookies and is likely to let you order a movie in, I think the choice is obvious.

Or you might have the opportunity to overhear your children getting along! Please for the love of everything take time to point that out! “I really love what I’m hearing right now. I’m hearing lots of great ideas and lots of flexibility in the sharing of ideas and opinions, I just love how you guys are compromising right now.”

Or maybe you might need to take 2 minutes to quickly connect with your child at the supermarket, or at a sporting event when you can see that s/he is struggling with something socially, that you’ve assessed is not urgent “I can see that something is upsetting to you but I appreciate that you can be flexible and try to focus on what we’re doing right now, I like that you’re holding it together, and then we can carve out the time later for you to share with me what’s going on.”

Emotional Regulation

This last example is particularly important because it gets to the heart of one of the most overwhelming and challenging parts of teaching flexibility and that’s emotional regulation. Without emotional regulation we couldn’t be high functioning adults and without the opportunity to build these skills at an early age, our kiddos will consequently struggle with almost everything else if they haven’t learned how to master impulse control, compartmentalize stress and remain calm in difficult situations. Students who struggle with emotional regulation are disruptive, impulsive, have difficulty getting along with their classmates and find less academic success because of all of the above.

Helping our kids learn self and emotional regulation is one of the most important things we can do for them. It’s not necessarily something that our children are born with, it needs to be taught, and acquiring and modeling emotional regulation ourselves is one of the most effective ways to teach it to our children. Now, I say this to you as a parent, who has a tendency to be a yeller. I had first generation immigrant parents on both sides and yelling was, well, parenting. Not all the time for sure, we had a lot of laughs, a lot of love, and a *little bit* of yelling, usually followed by more love and laughter. So, yelling, could have easily become habit for me. It’s what I know. But as I’ve grown as a parent I have learned how to pause and ask better questions or make better suggestions, in replace of, what often ends up being, useless commands. So instead of “don’t be rude” I might say “you don’t seem to be yourself, what’s going on with you?” or “I know that you don’t usually speak like that to me so I’m going to give you another chance to try that again.” Truth be told sometimes I’m exhausted and barely verbal and all I can muster is “stop!” It’s just that *overall*, this is less effective.

I’m also working on embracing failure. I’m a little bit of a Type A overachiever and in this day of benchmarks and constant testing, it’s completely challenging not to get caught up in the standards race. School can be a tough place and I’m trying to do my best as a parent to make intentional room for mistakes and failure at home. My husband has always been an articulate advocate of “failure being the best place to learn,” and while I agree with him in front of the kids, I usually follow that up with a hushed “yes, of course it is, we love you no matter what. . . but also please keep studying.” I’m working on it!

Facing mistakes and failure can bring out “big” feelings and proactively teaching appropriate ways to express those feelings in a constructive and healthy way is incredibly important in creating healthy school climate, but it takes work at home too.

We can actively embrace these strategies and skills by promoting a Growth Mindset with our kids. Teachers are doing this in their classrooms because the evidence is on their side, it’s evidence that tells

us that when we teach our students to have a willingness to persevere, their long term academic success improves.

These are a few helpful tips to helping students manage their feelings in the classroom, and they can just as successfully be used at home. You can find more information on these ideas [here](#)

1. Explain Why Feelings are Useful
2. Create and Action Plan
3. Validate Feelings
4. Co-Regulate

Language

Also, the words that we choose to use and the way that we choose to use them, are some of the most powerful tools we have, and we know that it comes with a great responsibility. By embracing positive and proactive language around skills, like flexibility, we create safe spaces where our kids feel enabled and empowered to take the kinds of risks that can bring them to the next level of social and academic success.

Furthermore, the benefits of using less restrictive language, providing more wait time for answers (I especially love this one and can personally speak to its success), offering fewer parent dispensed conclusions and asking broader questions makes parenting and teaching so exciting and they are all explored [here](#) in a beautifully engaging piece by Judy Willis, MD on Edutopia. Also included in this piece are some fabulous hands on activity ideas that I have shared with teachers. Here, she talks about creating a classroom that embraces and builds cognitive flexibility through divergent thinking exercises and transfer opportunities. Parents can definitely do this at home. Such great stuff!

Executive Functioning

When we help our kids learn how to manage their time and “chunk” up their work we increase their chances of feeling successful. When they can have that outcome, even just one time, they are more likely to be willing to try it again. They are more willing embrace new ways of doing things if they are rewarded with a sense of accomplishment. As parents we can help them, turn “Mountains into a series of Molehills.” (I am shamelessly stealing this one from [here](#) because I love this!) - Students who feel empowered to be flexible are often the ones that have achieved mastery or near mastery of their executive functioning skills. Because they are organized and have a good sense of time-management they feel comfortable with being flexible and the inherent risk of the unknown or change that being flexible can bring. A student who is overwhelmed by their workload or a project of any scale is one that has a difficult time even getting started. Like most of us, when we feel that we have too much work to get done it is difficult to imagine how any of it will get done at all. This basically describes my experience as a parent, for the first week back to school, each and every year, for the last 10 years 😊.

When a teacher allows for flexible seating arrangements, or, spontaneously decides to take their science lesson outside, and parents continue to intentionally embrace positive and proactive growth mindset language and a safe space for failure at home, promoting and supporting flexibility with our kiddos should bring us daily reward. It is important for us to model it, to allow our kids to actively practice it, and to let our children know that it is valued at East Ridge. To whichever degree you feel comfortable embracing flexibility plan for the return on investment to be awesome!

Book Recommendations for Flexibility

More than One Way to Be Okay by Ronit Gross

Moondance by Frank Asch

Mr. Magnolia by Quentin Blake

Three Cheers for Errol! By Babette Cole

The Short Tree and the Bird that Could Not Sing by Dennis Foon

Peter and the Wolf by Selina Hastings

Stay Fang by Barbara Shook Hazen

Bailey Goes Camping by Kevin Henke

Chester's Way by Kevin Henke

Alfie Gets in First by Shirley Hughes

The Doorbell Rang by Pat Hutchins

Swimmy by Leo Lionni

Tillie and the Wall by Leo Lionni

The Name of the Tree by Celia Barker

Henry's Moon by Geoffrey Moss

Regina's Big Mistake by Marissa Moss