

The best way to help our children to be psychologically flexible is to model it ourselves.

Being psychologically flexible is something that many adults struggle with. Yet it is something that is vital for resilience, and researchers have shown that it's not actually that hard to teach it to our children.

The best way to help our children to be psychologically flexible is to model it ourselves. When we set an example, they implicitly pick it up and connect with this "way of being". The onus, therefore, is on us to make sure we aren't too rigid in our responses to circumstances!

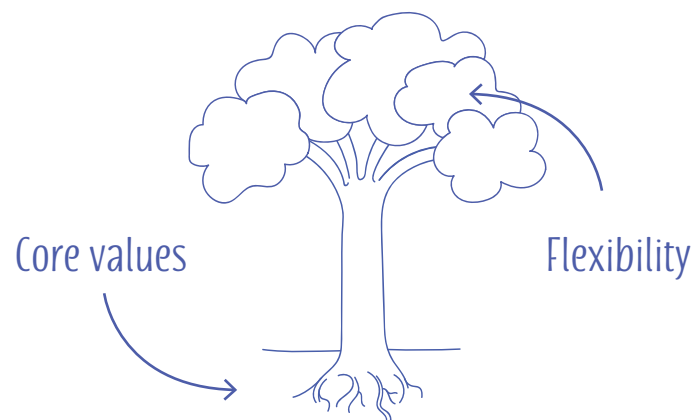
There are a few things that we can do to teach our children to be flexible in the face of frustration. Ideally, this teaching will occur in conversations at emotionally "cool" moments rather than during those emotionally "hot" moments.

1. Teach them to recognise that some situations require certain behaviour and others require something different. For example, teach them it's fine to shout in the playground, but shouting in the kitchen is not ok. Or that jumping on dad is fine in the lounge room but not appropriate while he is driving the car. Or that it's fine to be noisy and energetic at the family Christmas party, but a family funeral requires a different response. This helps them recognise that different rules apply in different situations, and flexibility is how we adapt.
2. Teach your child to pay attention to what really requires their focus in the moment. A child may want to play outside, but needs to recognise that finishing reading or piano practice or a chore is where their attention should be at this moment in time.

3. Teach your children to shift perspective. This is about helping our children move away from the natural tendency to see everything through their own eyes and the way it affects them, and instead see the world through others' eyes. Research indicates this is unlikely to happen in any meaningful and consistent way until around age 5, but it takes ongoing effort for us to help our children consider others' needs and perspectives. (Again, many adults struggle with this.) Psychological flexibility means we recognise our perspective and feelings are not the only way to see a situation.
4. Teach your children to think about values so they can balance competing desires and needs. This means that when they are tossing up between going to a sleepover with friends or attending a family function, they can choose what matters most based on their values, and not on the immediacy and expediency of the moment. This helps them be responsive in a values-based way, prioritising what matters most.

In short, psychological flexibility means separating ourselves from our own thoughts and emotions a bit more than we might typically do, and then choosing to act on longer-term values rather than short-term impulses, thoughts and feelings.

I think of psychological flexibility as being like a tree: our values (and our children's values) are deeply rooted and firm, but able to have branches swaying in the breeze, adapting flexibly to different situations based on personal needs and the needs of those around us.



ACTIVITY 1: A Flexibility Focus

Here are some strategies you can try out at home which will help your child to develop a flexibility focus:

1. Next time your child becomes emotional, spend time helping them be calm so they can create some distance between their feelings and the event that led to their emotions.
2. Get curious with them about why they want to hit their brother or whatever it might be. Say things like, "Hmmm, that's interesting." Ask "why" questions.
3. When your child is struggling, give them time to work through things. When they're calm, ask them what alternative choices they could make. Focus on how those choices line up with their values.

How did you go? Write about your experience here:

ACTIVITY 2: An Adult Addition

Next time your child frustrates you, pause and consider the situation. Get curious with yourself, and ask why you're getting so frustrated when it's not in line with your deepest values. Sure, you might value a clean home... but what is your deepest value? Is it cleanliness or compassion? Then ask yourself what other choices you could make. Be flexible about the situation, but stay connected to your values.

Chat with someone about how it feels to be flexible. Ask:

- Is it freeing? Or frustrating?
- How does being rigid about things feel in comparison?
- Can you act in line with your values and still get things done?

What have you learned?
