

Cognitive flexibility: the value of stretching our brains

Lunch & Learn for JICS Parents with Dr. Trina Epstein

May 29, 2026



Disclaimer

Talking in general
terms

In the context of this
kind of presentation,
cannot provide specific
guidance for your
particular
children/circumstances

Plan

1. What is cognitive flexibility & why is it important?
2. What have the children been learning about it?
3. How can you, as parents, approach inflexibility?
4. How can you encourage flexibility practice at home?



What is cognitive flexibility?

- ▶ Considered to be one of the components of executive functioning (EF)
- ▶ Also seen as connected to self-regulation
- ▶ It's a **cognitive** skill
- ▶ Being able to adapt one's thinking & behaviour
 - ▶ In the lab, often measured in context of set switching/task switching
- ▶ Seeing many sides of an idea/situation

Let's be flexible!

Name/write: animal, colour, food. Start with “A”, and keep going through the alphabet, alternating categories.

E.g.: ant, blue, carrot, dog...

Why is cognitive flexibility important?

- ▶ Cognitive flexibility has been associated with the following outcomes:
 1. Better academic abilities (e.g., reading, writing, math)
 2. Resilience to negative life events & stress
 3. Higher creativity
 4. Better interpersonal communication skills
 5. Better quality of life
- ▶ Despite consensus about the benefits of cognitive flexibility, it has not yet been well-studied or even defined in the literature in a consistent way

Ways cognitive flexibility manifests

- ▶ Being able to appreciate multiple perspectives (and let go of your own)
- ▶ Seeing a problem from different angles; being a divergent thinker
 - ▶ Academic problems
 - ▶ Interpersonal problems
 - ▶ Intrapersonal problems (i.e., unsticking yourself)
- ▶ Handling changes in schedule/routine
- ▶ Willingness to try new things (activities, foods, etc.)
- ▶ Shifting easily from one activity to another (e.g., playtime to dinner time) or one setting to another (e.g., coming in from being outside)
- ▶ Persisting even when something is hard (growth mindset)

The background features a complex, abstract design of overlapping, semi-transparent blue triangles and polygons. The colors range from light sky blue to deep navy blue. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall composition is modern and clean.

What have the children been learning?

Sharing vocabulary



- ▶ Stretchy vs Stuck
- ▶ Flexible vs Inflexible
- ▶ “Bubble gum” brain vs “Brick” brain
- ▶ “Elastic brain” vs “Rock” brain

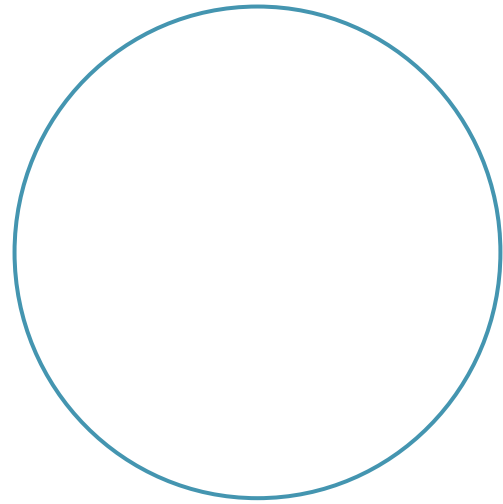
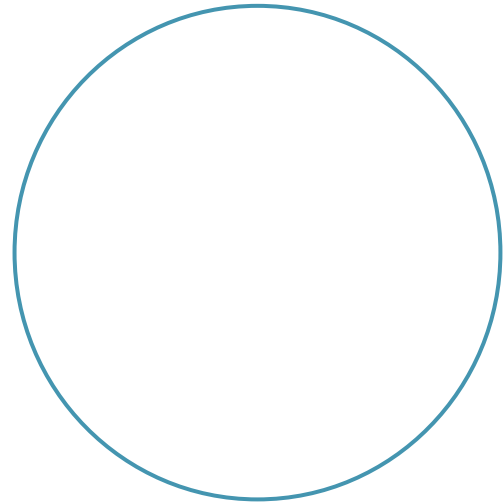
Practicing seeing things differently (literally): optical illusions

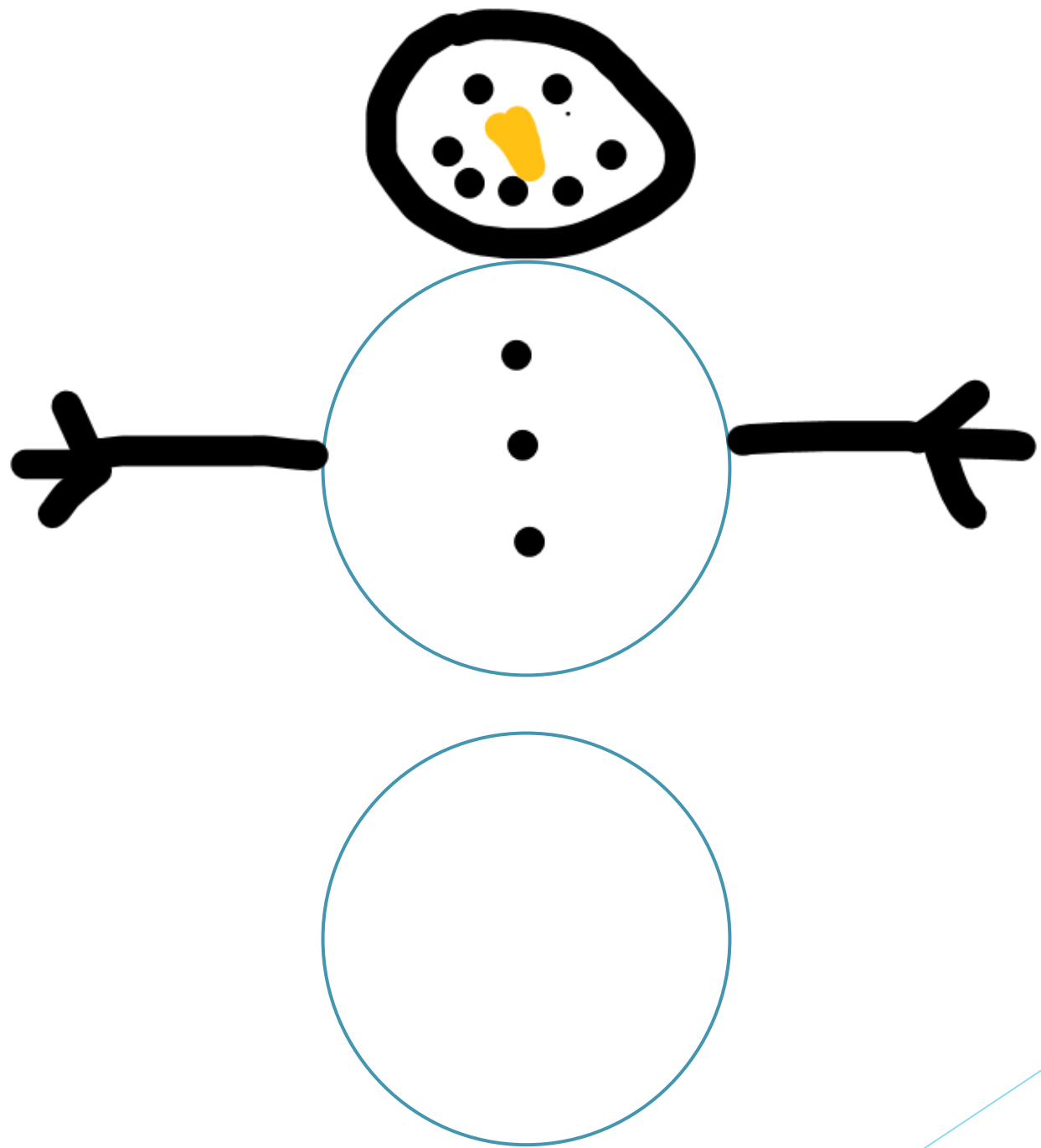


Practicing seeing things differently



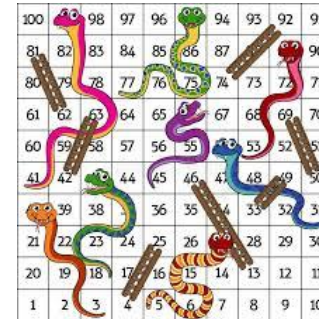
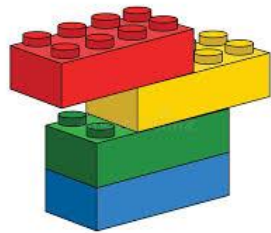
- ▶ Functional fixedness
- ▶ Passing objects (changing them)
- ▶ Having them do this in groups—building stories using objects in different ways
- ▶ Scribble drawing activity
- ▶ “Not a circle”





Practice *doing* things differently

- ▶ Freeze Dance
- ▶ Building with Lego
- ▶ Playing board games with changed rules



Practicing seeing things differently (interpersonally)

- ▶ Challenging students to recognize that they have agency to think about “stuck situations” differently
- ▶ Idea of thinking in an “about **others**” way VS in an “about **me**” way
- ▶ Considering the size of the problem
- ▶ Considering how people around you feel when you think flexibly

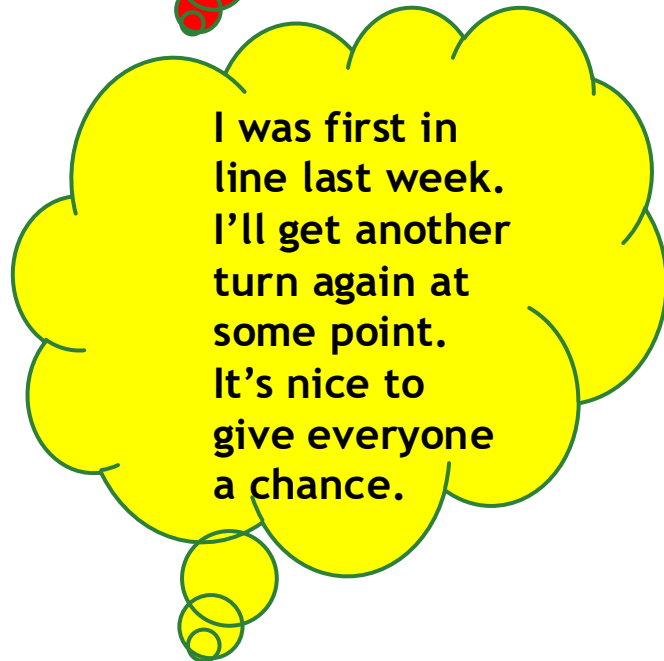


Thoughts & feelings travel together

▶ If you think:



▶ If you think



Being stretchy in social situations means:

- ▶ You understand that you have to think about what other people want or need.



- ▶ **SOMETIMES THIS IS DIFFERENT THAN WHAT YOU WANT**

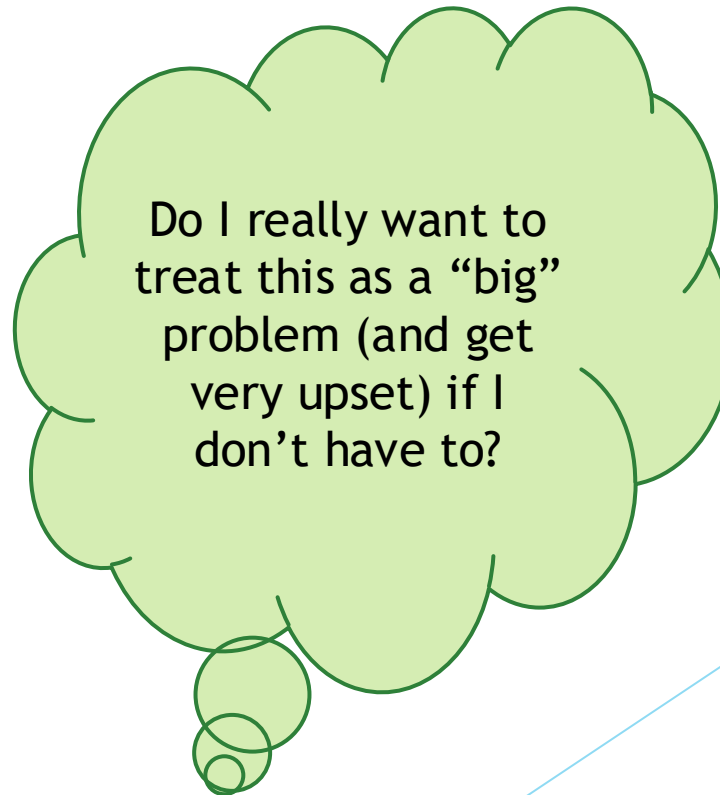
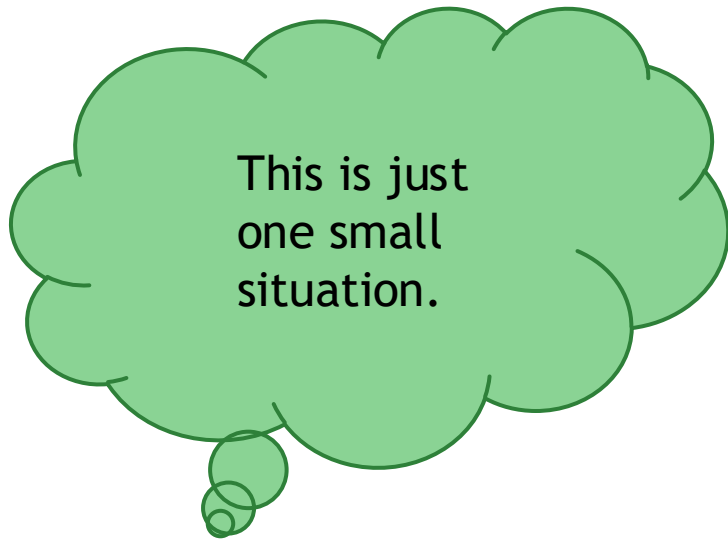
We can also stretch by considering the size of the problem:

- ▶ Big
 - ▶ Adults need to solve it
- ▶ Medium
 - ▶ Someone (often an adult) needs to help
- ▶ Small
 - ▶ You can solve the problem

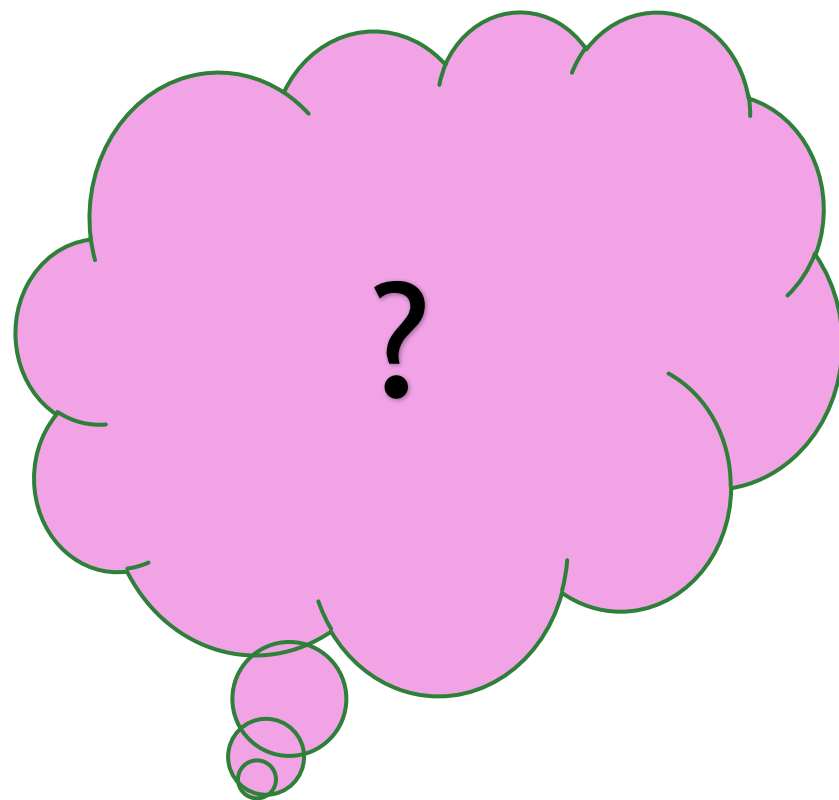


The problems we're thinking about today are “small” problems

- ▶ Some generally stretchy ways of thinking in these types of situations:



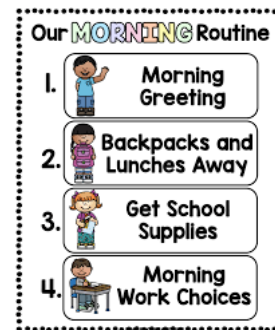
Create your own stretchy thought



When you're starting to feel stuck,
important questions to ask:



1. Am I thinking in a “*just me*” way (stuck) or in a “*thinking of everyone*” way (stretchy)?
2. Is this a big, medium or small problem?
3. Am I remembering the stretchy thought I wrote?



Discussions about routines

- ▶ We've talked about the importance of routines
- ▶ We've talked about the value of handling changes in school routines
 - ▶ Supply teachers
 - ▶ Assemblies
 - ▶ Field trips
- ▶ Encouraged teachers to use the language of "stretching your brains" when deviations happen in a typical school day
- ▶ Encouraged children to consider how they can "shake things up" outside of school:
 - ▶ Trying new foods
 - ▶ Playing new games

Grade 1: Perfectionism

- ▶ The power of “yet”/growth mindset
- ▶ Discussing how mistakes help your brain to form new connections
- ▶ Crumpled paper activity

Grade 6: What to do if inflexibility surfaces in middle school

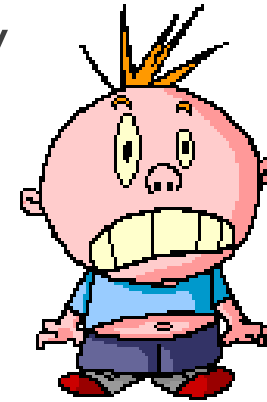
- ▶ Getting stuck academically
 - ▶ Recognizing you're stuck
 - ▶ Asking for help
 - ▶ Self-advocacy
- ▶ Getting stuck socially
 - ▶ Recognizing you're stuck
 - ▶ Problem-solving with peers
 - ▶ Shifting peer group
 - ▶ Asking for help (e.g., parents, teachers, etc.)

How to parent in moments of inflexibility

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep navy blue. These shapes are primarily located on the right side of the frame, creating a modern, layered effect against the white background.

Remember that flexibility is a *cognitive* skill

- ▶ This is in contrast to interpreting inflexibility *behaviourally*
- ▶ “Children do well if they can”
- ▶ Greene’s CPS model (Collaborative & Proactive Solutions)
 - ▶ www.livesinthebalance.org
 - ▶ *The Explosive Child*
 - ▶ *The Kids Who Aren’t OK*
- ▶ Lead with empathy and curiosity

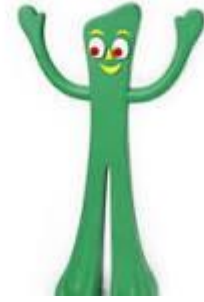


Timing is key

- ▶ Don't try to solve the underlying problem *while* your child is dysregulated
- ▶ Trying to convince them this is a “small” deal *in the moment* likely won't land (and could be perceived by them as insensitive)
- ▶ Trying to remind them to use their “thinking of others” approach also likely won't register in the midst of dysregulation
- ▶ Shifting thinking in the context of dysregulation is unlikely to work
- ▶ Think of it as their brain is *offline*
- ▶ Encouraging breaks to self-regulate
- ▶ It's key to then return to the issue and problem-solve



Modeling flexibility



- ▶ You can model flexibility in how you approach them when they're stuck
- ▶ Make sure you're regulated (or model taking space if you're not)
- ▶ You can model the power of “yet” by highlighting how you're persisting with something hard. Let your child see you struggle!
- ▶ You can share age-appropriate examples of brain-stretching from your own life/work/relationships
- ▶ Look for examples of flexibility in literature, movies, shows. Find examples of *inflexibility* and ask your child what the characters could do differently

Asking for their help



- ▶ You can even pull for their help as situations arise
 - ▶ “Oh well, this road is blocked. What route should we take?”
 - ▶ “I was going to make lasagna tonight but I see we don’t have noodles. Let’s think about what we can make instead with the same ingredients”
 - ▶ “Can you help me think of different gift ideas for Grandma?”

Practical ways to practice stretching

- ▶ Play the “not a stick” game
- ▶ Generating as many words as possible with a particular letter (then changing the letter) or as many objects in a category (then changing the category)
- ▶ Building stories one sentence at a time as a family
- ▶ Playing games with different rules
- ▶ Sitting in different seats (dinner table, car, etc.)
- ▶ Rotate who in the family decides on:
 - ▶ Meal
 - ▶ Activity
 - ▶ Movie
- ▶ Branching out with food: trying new restaurants, new types of cuisine
- ▶ Getting dressed in a different order/wearing different clothes

Practice shaking up routines in fun ways

- ▶ “Let’s stay in PJs all day!”
- ▶ Having a “special” snack/meal in the middle of the week randomly
- ▶ Adding a “special” activity (e.g., baking, board games, an outing) to a typical day
- ▶ Walking a different route to a common place
- ▶ Doing a weekend routine in a different order

Be intentional—reference the brain stretching!

And in the
spirit of
flexibility...
...what else?





Questions?