



Rigidity in behavior: the good, the bad, & how to tell the difference

When most people think of rigidity, they imagine someone uptight, stubborn, and unable to change their ways. But the type of rigidity that's pertinent to understanding autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a little different. If you work with children or adults who have ASD—or suspect they may have it—you'll understand what I am talking about. Understanding how rigidity manifests in people with ASD is the first step toward helping them with it.

Because society generally has very strong opinions about what “normal behavior” is, people with ASD tend to prefer staying in their comfort zones and interacting with people with similar temperaments. This can lead to limited socialization and relationship formation. Suppose a person with ASD doesn't have the opportunity to learn about and meet different kinds of people. In that case, they may be less likely to develop the skills necessary to form and maintain relationships.

How can we as parents help our children develop flexibility?

Read on to learn more.

Behavioral rigidity vs. cognitive inflexibility

Rigidity in behavior is a lack of flexibility in a person's thoughts and approach to life. If a person with ASD is set in their ways, it isn't because they're stubborn. Instead, they view things a certain way and cannot change their perspective. This rigidity can be seen in a person's difficulty with change, inflexible thoughts, and tendency to maintain sameness in daily rituals. Although rigidity in behavior can be a symptom of other psychological disorders, it is a core symptom of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Behavioral rigidity and cognitive inflexibility are often assumed to be the same thing. However, it is not the case. Cognitive inflexibility means that the child struggles to change strategies during daily activities or adapt their perspective, especially during social interactions. This is often a result of rigidity in behavior because it affects the child's ability to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations.

The opposite of rigidity is flexibility. Flexibility allows children to move easily from one task to another, from one topic to another, and from one role to another.

Rigidity in thinking can prevent children from seeing other options and solutions to problems. They often see things as "either-or" (for example, something is either good or bad, right or wrong). They want concrete, black-and-white answers. Life's "gray areas" are incredibly uncomfortable.



What cognitive inflexibility in autism looks like

Cognitive inflexibility often leads to rigid thinking, but it is a separate symptom. While cognitive inflexibility refers to the inability to change one's thoughts in light of new information or grasp new concepts, rigid thinking is more specific to the approach to daily life. It can be seen in many ways in people with ASD.

Here's what that might look like:

- Children with ASD may use language inconsistently, making it challenging to communicate with them.
- People with ASD may struggle to maintain consistent social interactions.
- Generalized, concrete thinking – This can be seen in a child who doesn't understand that two pieces of bread can be used to make a sandwich even though they have seen it done countless times before.
- Inconsistency in comprehension – This can lead to a child with ASD misunderstanding or misinterpreting things that are said to them.



What rigid thinking in autism looks like

- If a person with ASD feels that something has gone wrong or they don't have enough information, they may respond by going into a meltdown. This can happen regardless of whether the person is 2 or 22 years old.
- A child with ASD may freak out that their toy car is missing even though it was taken by an adult for cleaning purposes.
- A person with ASD may have difficulty shifting from one activity to another or adjusting to a change in routine.
- Those with autism may have trouble taking other people's perspectives into account.



Why does my child insist that things are done a certain way?

According to the [DSM5](#), insistence on sameness, and highly restricted, fixated interests are a part of the diagnostic criteria for ASD.

The world is a noisy, overwhelming place for children with ASD. As a result, they may feel stressed or overwhelmed by their senses, and having a predictable environment is their safety net. However, when a child's rigid behavior interferes with their daily life, it may be time to intervene with ABA therapy. By identifying the root cause of your child's rigid behavior and changing how they process information, you can help them break out of their fixed mindset.

Rigidity and inflexibility can be problematic if they hinder the ability to lead a functional day-to-day life. Since the late 1990s, clinicians have been working to eliminate repetitive behaviors in people with autism. However, many are now questioning whether the behaviors need to be eliminated at all unless they cause harm to the autistic person or others. For example, suppose a behavior is causing anxiety or disruption in a person's life. In that case, a therapist may find ways to lessen that anxiety. Alternatively, they may suggest a different calming behavior that is less disruptive.

Children with ASD are taught strategies to delay engaging in certain behaviors that others may see as odd until they are in a safe and non-judgmental environment. However, perhaps society needs to change, not people with autism.

Everyone needs connection, including people with autism. Happy, healthy relationships are a great source of support and personal growth, but they are a 2-way street. This can make it difficult for neurotypical people to build meaningful relationships with those on the spectrum, as it can seem like it is all give and no take due to the rigidity of people with autism. In a healthy relationship, both parties must put in the effort and find ways to compromise and ensure their needs are met. The building blocks of a relationship, whether friendship or family, are ultimately the same.

COMMUNICATION

The fundamental building block that will always top every list is communication – a real challenge for people with autism. They process information differently and may have difficulty expressing themselves. The key to avoiding communication problems is recognizing that a person with autism may have a very different way of processing information than their friend or partner.

People with autism often have difficulty with the normal give and take of conversation. They may not know what to say when someone else is talking, or they may be unable to stop talking when others want them to be quiet.

EMPATHY

Empathy is essential in all types of relationships. Unfortunately, it can be difficult for a person with autism to show empathy or “put themselves in someone else’s shoes.” As a result, the people they share relationships with may feel that their needs are irrelevant, and it is all about keeping the other person happy. In a neurotypical relationship, these are recipes for disaster. Still, when autism is involved, the neurotypical party tends to be more accommodating. However, we are all human, and resentment can build over time.

HEALTHY COMPROMISE

Compromising means giving each other some room to be who you are and flexibility. People with autism may have particular ways of doing things, and the behavioral rigidity of a person on the spectrum can make it very challenging and frustrate the neurotypical person. They are always the one who needs to compromise.



How can ABA therapy help rigid behavior?

There are many accommodations that can help those on the autism spectrum learn to tolerate change. However, the child also needs to know how to handle situations that require flexibility. In this way, they can build their independence. ABA provides many strategies to teach flexibility and tolerance to change.

Intervening and treating autism rigidity must be done carefully. We want to help each child learn to adapt to an ever-changing world. The world is never constant, and there will be things outside of their control that they must learn to cope with.

Working out the root cause of your child's behavior can help you better understand how to manage it. For example, is the behavior sensory-related? Perhaps your child feels anxious when faced with new situations. If so, you may be able to help by managing sensory issues or anxiety, which could help reduce a behavior.

Flexibility is more of an abstract concept than other life skills, so it can be tougher to teach. So instead, our ABA therapy team focuses on stretching their tolerance to routine changes and providing consistent, positive reinforcement where we see it.



Social Thinking® methodology

Circle Care Services follows the methodologies developed by Michelle Garcia Winner. She developed her Social Thinking® Methodology to teach the underlying competencies of our everyday social skills through an evidence-based set of strategies.

Learners are not taught how to behave in specific situations. Instead, they're given strategies that encourage them to focus their social attention, interpret the social context, and problem-solve to figure out how to respond.

When students with ASD aren't taught strategies to manage their social challenges, they can experience frustration and anxiety. This can cause them to be misunderstood and mistreated by others. As a result, a child with ASD is more likely to be bullied or even kicked out of school.

According to Winner, stuck thinking is when we cannot change our actions or thoughts based on what's happening around us. For example, if we're stuck in our thinking, we might only see one way to solve a problem or follow one rule all the time, no matter the situation. Winner's strategies offer tools to break out of that stuck mindset and to think out of the box. They include listing as many options or alternatives as possible, considering all the factors that arise, and then deciding what to let go and what to move forward with. Not a bad strategy for any of us if you think about it. When you know that other options exist and that they are equally viable, it makes it easier to shift and adapt.

ABA therapy with heart, support, and guidance

Circle Care Services is an ABA therapy provider that supports children with autism and their families. Our qualified staff is ready to help your child develop social and behavioral skills, including finding ways to manage rigidity in behavior. Contact Circle Care today if these behaviors are starting to affect your child's quality of life. We offer free consultations, and we'd love to hear from you.

[Sign up](#) for our newsletter to find out more or receive more tips!

About the author

Rosie Neustadt Ms. Ed, BCBA, LBA oversees our team so every client gets the best care. As a former classroom teacher, mom of 7, and BCBA for over 13 years, Rosie's an expert on young learners and is passionate about making a difference. When she has a spare minute, you can find her reading a good book.