

The Agile Mind of a Flexible Learner



By Sucheta Kamath, Founder & CEO, ExQ®
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“**W**hen the Texas Department of Criminal Justice sent Toni Morrison a letter of apology for banning her book *Paradise*, which they feared might incite prison riots, she hung it in her powder room to memorialize it. “History has always proved that books are the first place where battles are fought,” she said as she recalled the story. We are all familiar with the power of words, which can help someone transform their mind. Through the exposure, reading, growing, and self-exploration that happens with education, children can also learn to change their minds for the better, empowering them with a newfound freedom from self-limiting thoughts.

Mental agility and flexibility are the heart of effective problem solving. Let’s take the example of Laura, a junior in high school who decides to work on her AP Biology homework in the school library. Once she arrives, however, she realizes that her laptop is dead. Laura might find herself stumped by this unanticipated problem and simply leave or find something else to do. But, if Laura harnesses her mental flexibility, she can stay connected to her big-picture goal—to finish her biology homework—by coming up with a “Plan B,” such as asking another student in the library to borrow their charger or using a library computer. By brainstorming alternative solutions, the result of using her mental agility, Laura can propel her learning forward despite facing a challenging situation.

When mental muscles fail to flex, kids become hard to console or impossible to redirect, hindering them from growing as independent learners. Stubborn, sulking, and stuck are common attitudes that educators and parents might see in students who struggle with mental flexibility, and if unmanaged, this can lead to full-on tantrums or meltdowns.

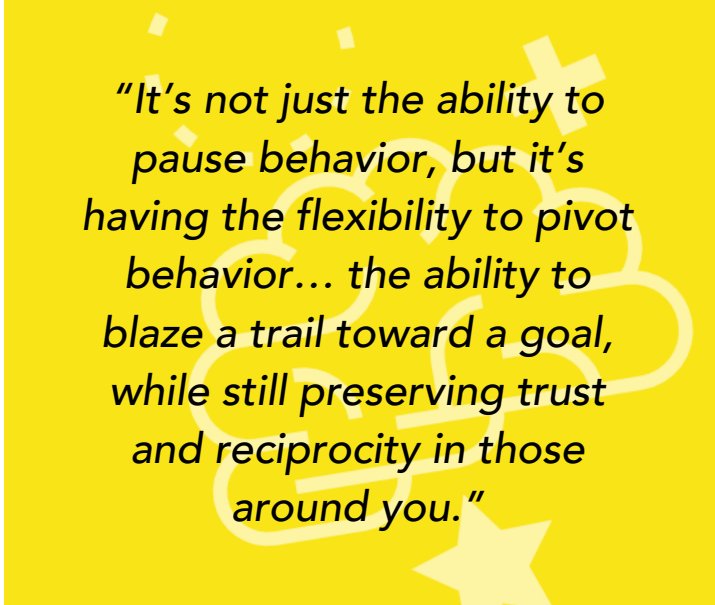
Executive Function and the Flexible Learner

Strong Executive Function skills are integral for kids to overcome small hiccups or big challenges while also remaining calm, engaged, and stress-free. For instance, kids engage their Executive Function when they intentionally pause to think, reflect, and then act, all of which are self-management skills critical to everyday life. Cognitive neuroscientist Adele Diamond describes cognitive flexibility, one of three primary abilities that make up Executive Function, as “the ability to refocus attention to relevant stimuli.” At its core, cognitive flexibility makes adjusting one’s thoughts, emotions, and actions possible when environments change rapidly and unpredictably.

The Benefits of Cognitive Flexibility

Through Executive Function training, students can gain innumerable benefits from cultivating strong mental flexibility, allowing them to pivot in small ways or pivot in big ways when necessary. For example, mental flexibility enables a student to quickly grab a new pencil and keep working when their favorite pencil breaks. Without such a small pivot, a student might get stuck looking for a sharpener, fiddling with the broken tip, or fussing over making it work, only to fall behind in their work.

In her book *Second Nature*, Erin Clabough says, "It's not just the ability to pause behavior, but it's having the flexibility to pivot behavior... the ability to blaze a trail toward a goal, while still preserving trust and reciprocity in those around you." Research affirms that high levels of mental flexibility directly correspond to well-developed reading abilities in childhood, greater capacity to cope with adverse life events, and higher levels of creativity in adulthood. On a broader scale, strong Executive Function skills and mental flexibility account for better quality of life over the entire life span.



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Five Ways to Help Students Flex their Mental Muscle: Tools to Get Unstuck

1. Practice hypothesizing

Though not often explicitly taught in school, educators must prepare students to build and use critical thinking skills for the purpose of personal problem solving. In order to do so, teachers may ask students to hypothesize alternative solutions in the face of a challenge.

For example, when a teacher assigns a project, they may incorporate hypothesizing into the planning process. To make this explicit, ask students to provide written responses to potential roadblocks they may face while working on the project later, such as not turning in an assignment on time. Students could fill in the blanks like so:

- What if ____ (e.g. "I forget to email my teacher")
- At the most ____ (e.g. "I will lose 20 points for not meeting the deadline)
- Worst case scenario ____ (e.g. "I can ask for extra credit work if the teacher won't accept late materials)

By imagining various ways a project can unfold, and especially ways it might go wrong, students can be taught to envision unfavorable outcomes before they actually happen so they can plan ahead and overcome future obstacles.

2. Become willing to change your mind and change yourself

To meet everyday implicit and explicit expectations that teachers and parents have of students, students need to be willing to change their habits and attitudes. However, this willingness is dependent upon their ability to listen to feedback about what they need to change. By first asking students if they are *ready* to receive feedback, and by discussing reasons why they are, or are not ready, adults can ensure a higher level of openness to change. The second part of this process requires coaching to help them make their own discoveries about what they want to change in themselves.

Take the example of the comedian Steve Martin, who wrote and acted in a movie that did not do well when it first appeared in theaters. Martin noticed that another movie released at the same time was doing far better than his, so he decided to go watch it. He noticed that the audience for the other movie laughed far less frequently but ultimately enjoyed it more because of its cohesive plotline. Martin changed his mind about comedy and incorporated elements of that style into his future movies, and he became a huge success. Rather than closing himself off because of his shortcomings, he opened up his mind to new ideas and the potential to becoming a better writer and actor.

3. Redirect emotions

When faced with a challenge or obstacle, students who are able to distinguish between a "big deal" versus a "little deal" are much more equipped to stay on course because they can control their emotions.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes went to visit him. Witnessing FDR's social-emotional intelligence, Holmes is known to have remarked, "Second rate intellect but first-rate temperament."

Educators can help students develop this same “first-rate temperament” by teaching them to engage in self-calming techniques, such as practicing slow breathing or taking a pause in the midst of a crisis. By channeling flexibility, students can keep a clear mind and hold their emotions at bay in even the toughest of situations.

4. Build a healthy relationship with failure

At the age of 31, Abraham Lincoln’s life did not resemble success. He had been defeated in multiple political races for Congress and had broken off his engagement to Mary Todd. But finally, Lincoln ran for President as a “dark horse” candidate and, against the odds, he won. Lincoln’s story serves as the epitome of resilience. He had an intimate relationship with failure, but that did not deter him from pressing forward. By cultivating the mindset that failure is not a setback, not a failing of character, students can achieve the courage that is essential to continued growth.

5. Shake up your routine

The final step to building mental flexibility is to challenge the norm. For many students, routines offer safety, consistency, and respite from the stress and anxiety of everyday unknowns. But often, teachers and parents intentionally eliminate choice-making and predictability by creating structure, disallowing students to get stuck in their ways. By making small changes to common routines, students become more adaptable and can apply this mindset to novel situations that might present as more challenging. In this way, flexibility itself becomes routine.

Educators can facilitate change in many ways, such as instructing students to discover an unusual spot to complete their next homework assignment or by designing classroom activities that require them to adjust to new rules implemented just for that day.

One of my students recently posted this on their social media, "Woke up at 6:20. Oatmeal exploded in microwave. Started hailing as I walked to the bus. Bus was late, then went off route so I had to take a Lyft. Got to school with five minutes to spare. Classes don't start until tomorrow."

Now that’s a morning full of challenges, not to mention one with failures and routines that were disrupted! Many students would struggle in the face of so many setbacks, but a student equipped with mental agility and flexibility will pick themselves up and learn

from their mistakes. With the right mindset, they'll realize one unexpected benefit, one extra day of summer.

Incorporating Executive Function Training with well thought-out programming components is likely to cultivate strong mental flexibility, build resilience and shape your students' sense of independence.



Sucheta Kamath
Founder & CEO, ExQ®

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About the Author:

Sucheta Kamath is a speech-language pathologist, TEDx speaker, graduate of Leadership Atlanta, and an entrepreneur whose new software ExQ® just launched in the Ed-Tech space. ExQ, is a patented research-informed system designed to enhance Executive Function through game-based personalized training. The exclusive ExQ curriculum prompts thinking to ignite processes essential for academic, emotional, and social well-being. Through the strengthening of Executive Functioning, ExQ develops skills core to your student's success in academics, in sports, in the arts, and in relationships. Sucheta's program of interactive games teaches students to learn HOW to learn, empowering the whole child to achieve their maximum potential in school, at home, and in life, and do it with all they've got.

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