

Addressing preschoolers' behavioural
problems

Handling Rigidity

Helping Children Broaden Life Experiences

Clinical Psychology Unit

Central Psychological Support Service

(Pre-school Service)

Handling Rigidity

Has your child ever thrown a tantrum over wanting new toys, eating ice-cream, staying in the playground or refusing to finish their homework?

These temper tantrums are commonly seen among children, and they are not considered a problem if parents are able to manage their children appropriately. However, if parents habitually give in to their children's tantrums, over time, children will learn that screaming and throwing a fit can get them what they want, and they will become increasingly disruptive.

If you are currently facing this problem, it might be a matter of discipline.

Nevertheless, some children are more rigid and resistant to changes.

Some insisted more on how things should be done and some preferred keeping sequences and procedures.

Here are some examples :

The child is only willing to poop while standing & with a diaper

The child is only willing to walk a fixed route to school or back home

The child does not allow others to use the TV remote

The child listens to certain songs and watches certain videos repeatedly

The child refuses to eat vegetables, and only eats rice

If your child has similar behaviours, this is the booklet for you!

Is your child Rigid?

Rigid behaviours are often seen in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or autistic tendencies. While their reactions can be rather intense, it is difficult and frustrating for parents to handle.

The reasons behind these rigid behaviours are sometimes hard to understand...

However, there are methods to help these children change and grow.

The following parts will illustrate some strategies to handle rigid behaviours.

Understanding your child's difficulties

First of all, parents have to understand that:

Anxiety is the major and common emotional distress experienced by children with ASD

Due to their social and communication deficits, coupled with a lack of life experiences, children with ASD often have difficulty understanding things that are happening in the environment, which makes them easily anxious. However, their anxiety is sometimes misinterpreted as temper tantrums or defiant behaviours. If parents confront children's temper tantrums instead of comforting them, children's emotions will become even more out of control.

Remember that children need comfort and support the most when they experience anxiety and distress.

The function of rigidity is to gain “control”, & to maintain a “sense of security”

We are more willing to accept “changes” under stable conditions. When we face uncertainties, we are more likely to handle problems using our “old ways” or methods we are used to. For example, if you are punctual for work every morning when you take the 8:15am bus, you won’t choose another form of transportation or another route out of the blue.

Changing involves taking risks. Parents can try to understand and accept children’s anxiety which sometimes manifests as intense reactions. With parents’ patience and assistance, children can learn to cope.

The two main handling strategies

Avoidance will lead to bigger problems in the future. Sometimes, parents give in to children's demands to avoid triggering their temper outbursts. Yet, when children lack opportunities to gain new experiences, it becomes harder for them to handle changes. As a result, their rigidity worsens, forming a vicious cycle. Therefore, parents have to encourage their children to accept changes.

The keys in handling rigid behaviours

- 1. Broaden children's life experiences**
- 2. Comfort children's anxiety and distress**

To Broaden children's life experiences

- Let them know about the changes in advance
- Start with small steps & progress gradually

To Soothe children's emotional distress

- Allow them to carry out their rigid behaviours after each attempt at something new

The followings are some case examples...

Example 1: Your child insists on taking a fixed route back home

If your child is only willing to take the same route back home, you can make some small changes before allowing the child to take that fixed route again...

1. Set small and gradual goals

Walk 10 more steps (across a road)

Walk 20 more steps (to a nearby staircase)

Walk 30 more steps (to a nearby shopping mall)...

And eventually, take an entirely new route back home

Start with small steps, progress gradually

2. Prepare your child in advance

Provide clear instructions in advance:

“First we will cross the road, and walk along that side back home”, and guide your child to achieve the first goal.

3. Be determined in broadening the child’s life experiences.

Be prepared for your child’s resistance and tantrums. Be patient and understanding towards your child. Hold on until the goal is achieved.

4. Allow rigid behaviours to soothe child's emotions

After the goal is achieved, return to the starting point and allow your child to take the fixed route back home.

5. Repeat the above steps in the following days. When your child has adapted to the changes, progress to the next goal.

Things to bear in mind

Is the goal too difficult?

- The first goal should be a small and easy attempt. Remember that it is difficult for a rigid child to take a different route back home on the first try.

Did you ask for more than what you set in advance?

- When your child finished the goal you originally set, did you introduce extra demands and ask him/her to walk further? If so, you would risk breaking the trust between you and the child, and the child might not cooperate in the future.
- Be patient and don't push too hard.

Have you prepared to face embarrassment when your child throws a tantrum?

- You can focus on breathing. Look at your watch and tell yourself: "It will be over in 10 minutes, I can wait further."
- Remember that the stares you get from passerby will soon be gone, and that helping your child learn and accept changes at a young age is more important.

Example 2 : Your child refuses to eat vegetables

If your child does not eat vegetables and only eats rice, try to make some changes before allowing your child to eat the bowl of rice...

1. Set small and gradual goals

1 piece of diced vegetable; 2 pieces of diced vegetable;
half a spoonful; one spoonful; one small plateful...
Start with small portions, increase gradually.

2. Prepare your child in advance

Provide clear instructions in advance:

“You have to eat one piece of diced vegetable first, then you can have your rice.”

3. Be determined in broadening the child’s life experiences

Be prepared for your child’s resistance and tempers. Be patient and understanding towards your child. Hold on until the goal is achieved.

4. Allow rigid behaviours to soothe child's emotions

After the child has eaten the vegetable as instructed, allow him/her to eat the rice he enjoys.

5. Allow the child to experience the consequences of being uncooperative

If the child refuses to eat the vegetable, do not allow him/her to eat rice.

6. Repeat the above steps in the following days. When your child has adapted to the changes, progress to the next goal.

Things to bear in mind

What type of vegetables should I start with?

- Stick with the same type of vegetables for the training. When the child has accepted it, you may move on to a new type.
- Chinese cabbage (Choy Sum) is a good choice because it is available in all 4 seasons.
- Minimize other changes. For example, if a dish has a specific colour, flavour and smell, when you change the colour, try to keep the same flavour and smell. Provide the same utensils when eating.

Is it necessary to train the child to eat celery or eggplant?

- You do not need to change every rigid behaviour. Parents sometimes should learn to accept the child's preferences. Besides, parents should avoid requesting too many changes at a time and should prioritize which behaviours to train first.

Example 3 : Your child does not allow others to turn on/off the TV

If the child does not allow others to turn on/off the TV, before simply allowing the child to press the remote control, try changing the child...

1. Set small and gradual goals

Allow others to press the on/off button first, then instruct the child to wait for 10 seconds; wait for 20 seconds; wait for 1 minute; wait for 3 minutes; after tidying up the table; after taking a bath.

Start with shorter time periods, increase gradually.

2. Prepare your child in advance

Provide clear instructions in advance: "You have to wait for 10 seconds first, then you can turn on/off the TV."

3. Be determined in broadening the child's life experiences

Be prepared for your child's resistance and tempers. Be patient and understanding towards your child. Hold on until the goal is achieved.

4. Allow rigid behaviours to soothe child's emotions

After the child has waited the time period set previously, allow the child to turn on/off the TV

5. Repeat the above steps in the following days. When your child has adapted to the changes, progress to the next goal.

Things to bear in mind

How should we prepare the child in advance?

- There can be many ways to prepare the child in advance. E.g., use a timer, look at the clock or finish an activity first.
- You can make a pact with the child so that the child is in charge of turning on/off the TV before dinner while parents are in charge after dinner; or the child is in charge on some weekdays while parents are in charge on the other days.
- You can also limit the number of times the child can turn on/off the TV, for example, 3 times, and after that, the child would have to wait until after dinner or the next day for another chance of doing it again.
- You can use a timetable or a chart to let the child know about the goals, because visual cues are clearer and more effective than verbal reminders.

How to use a timer wisely?

- When you are using a timer for the first time, remember to associate it with positive experiences. E.g., tell your child, "You can have your ice-cream when the timer beeps". The child's acceptance towards parents' instructions will increase when the child has accepted the use of timers to complete those instructions.

Example 4: Your child is only willing to poop while standing & with a diaper

You can allow your child to poop into a diaper while standing, but each time you can try to make small changes...

1. Set small and gradual goals

Allow the child to poop with a diaper while sitting on a bedpan; poop with a looser diaper on a bedpan; poop into the bedpan without a diaper; poop in the toilet without a diaper.

Start with easier steps, progress gradually.

2. Prepare your child in advance

Provide clear instructions in advance: "You have to sit on the bedpan with a diaper for 15 minutes, and you cannot leave during this time period."

3. Be determined in broadening the child's life experiences

Be prepared for your child's resistance and tempers. Be patient and understanding towards your child. Hold on until the time is up or until the child has successfully pooped.

4. Allow rigid behaviours to soothe child's emotions

If the child still cannot poop after sitting for 15 minutes, allow your child to use a standing position to poop into the diaper.

5. Repeat the above steps for two weeks. When your child has successfully reached the goals set and can poop for several days, start the next goal.

Things to bear in mind

What does it mean to “be determined”?

- If you set a goal to try for 2 weeks, you have to persist for 2 weeks and cannot give up
- If you instruct the child to sit for 15 minutes, then you have to wait patiently for 15 minutes and cannot give up during that period.
- Nevertheless, when the condition has no improvement after persisting for certain period of time (e.g., 1 or 2 weeks), you can stop the training for now. Take a rest and resume the training afterwards. Set a clear goal & plan for yourself, otherwise you would be inclined to give up once the child shows resistance.
- Sometimes, TIMING matters. Perhaps if you stop the training for a while and try again later, you might be more likely to succeed.

Example 5: Your child only listens to the same songs and watches the same video clips repeatedly

Imagine the following scenario:

The child listened to the 7th track of the CD repeatedly. The mother did not want him to be “addicted” to that song, so she turned off the CD player. Subsequently, the child threw a huge temper tantrum. To soothe the child, the mother tried to distract him with his favourite cookies. Unfortunately, the child continued to cry. The mother started to become angry and shouted at him to be quiet. He did not stop crying but even become more agitated. The mother gave him a towel to wipe his tears, but the child snatched the towel and threw it on the ground forcefully.....

Things to bear in mind

Did the mother remember what the primary reason for the conflict with the child was?

- Let us think back on the multiple points of conflict in the scenario: throwing a towel – refusing to wipe his face – crying and throwing a tantrum – refusing cookies – insisting on playing the 7th track of the CD. So which should be the mother's point of intervention? Should she ask the child to pick it up
- When children throw temper tantrums, parents often become overwhelmed. As the conflict escalates, they even forget what the original problem was. At anytime, parents should calm down and recall the primary reason for conflict with the child, and put all efforts into resolving that conflict. In this example, the mother should tackle the child's repetitive listening to the 7th track.

Did the mother do anything to broaden the child's life experiences?

- No, she simply refused the child's request. Change is not possible when adults focus solely on stopping undesirable behaviours and do not teach the child desirable behaviours. The situation would only reach a deadlock.
- An alternate handling to this situation: tell the child, "You have to first listen to other songs. Let's start from the 6th track". Only when the child has more exposures and experiences with the other songs, he would have a chance of accepting more songs and less hang on to the same one.

Was it effective to distract the child using cookies?

- It is not a good method. First, what you used to distract the child might not be appealing to the child. Even if you successfully captured the child's attention, the child's core deficit, his rigidity and limited interests, were not addressed. Distraction is only one of the avoidance strategies.
- One of ways to soothe the child is to allow the child to perform his rigid behaviours. Therefore, the mother could tell the child "After

you finished listening to the 6th track, you can listen to the 7th track again”.

Summary

The principles of handling rigid behaviours are as follows:

- 1. Try to understand the child's needs: Anxiety and distress is often hidden behind rigid behaviours.**
- 2. The first principle of handling rigidity: To help the child make new attempts and broaden his/her life experiences through "Prepare the child in advance, and start with small and gradual goals".**
- 3. The second principle of handling rigidity: Allow the child to perform his/her rigid behaviours after every new attempt, to soothe his/her anxiety and distress**
- 4. Start with smaller goals that are likely attainable. Any small changes made are still good changes.**
- 5. Keep your word. You have to value the trusting relationship you have with the child.**
- 6. When you first use a timer, try using it on positive experiences. This can help the child be more accepting towards the use of a timer.**
- 7. Maintain your perseverance and take a rest only after you succeed, or until the previously set time frame.**
- 8. Be calm and focus your attention on the primary point of conflict.**

Lastly, rigid behaviours usually would be reduced with the child's improvement in communication and cognitive abilities

Dear Parents,

Go for it!

Hope that the advice in this booklet can help you better handle your child's rigidity.

Nevertheless, children's behaviours are influenced by different factors. If you need further advice and support, you can contact the responsible clinical psychologist through Integrated Programme teachers of your child's school.