

# INFLEXIBLE-EXPLOSIVE CHILDREN

Some children never seem to outgrow the terrible twos. Although they only appear happy and cooperative when they are getting their own way, they may actually have trouble thinking through problems and shifting gears from what they are doing to what others want them to do. This happens for a variety of physical reasons, including:

Physiology	Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The frontal (thinking) cortex does not receive enough stimulation from lower areas of the brain.</li> <li>Underactive frontal cortex cannot regulate incoming stimuli.</li> <li>Stimulation overload.</li> <li>Poor blood flow to the right brain, which manages cause-and-effect relationships, spatial perception, and decision making.</li> <li>Low levels of serotonin are unable to counterbalance neurotransmitters that respond to incoming stimuli and produce self-stimulation.</li> <li>Dysfunction in the left brain.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Hyperactivity</b> Self-stimulation through constant activity, thinking and talking, causing frequent reprimands. Difficulty tempering reactions to upsetting events.</p> <p><b>Attention deficits</b> “Ability” to attend to everything at once. Poor short-term memory, planning, anticipating, and difficulty separating thoughts from feelings. Trouble learning from mistakes. Trouble seeing the whole picture: poor spelling, thinking in black and white (You always, never . . .), difficulty understanding others, getting lost or losing things and adapting to unexpected situations.</p> <p><b>Depression, Aggression and OCD</b> Explosiveness or inflexibility about the way things look, feel, taste or smell, and about the order in which things are done.</p> <p><b>Learning disabilities</b> Trouble expressing thoughts and problem solving.</p>

## HELPING INFLEXIBLE-EXPLOSIVE CHILDREN

Discipline that stresses consistency, consequences and complimenting good behavior works well with children whose ability to focus, plan, anticipate, remember, and verbalize is maturing appropriately. Inflexible children with little frustration tolerance need a low-stress approach that teaches skills, prioritizes demands, and pre-empts explosions. This begins when caretakers examine their own behavior. Mark items that you need to concentrate on changing:

Self-examination.

- \_\_\_ Are you taking misbehavior personally? Saying children are willful implies that they are intentionally being uncooperative. It is more likely that their low frustration tolerance and difficulty shifting gears cause problems with anger than “willfulness.”
- \_\_\_ Do you, yourself, have problems with wanting things your way? Flexibility may be a genetic trait. Adults who can shift gears themselves will have an easier time finding a variety of responses to young people’s stubborn behavior. Even rigid adults are generally more flexible than problem children.
- \_\_\_ Do you have a realistic image of your children? Are you expecting them to do things that they currently can not consistently perform?

<sup>1</sup> Fully described in *The Explosive Child* by Ross Green, Ph.D. (New York: HarperCollins, 1998)

### **Prevent problems.**

Develop strategies for difficult times: Use deadlines that carry weight. Children are far more likely to pick up their things before they can watch TV than prior to leaving for school. Give ample time to switch gears! Negotiate a starting time and then act—Pick up the telephone extension, turn off the TV, or take away a toy.

Teach skills: Ask yourself, “Why is this hard for my child?” “What is getting in his way?” “How can I help?” Break large tasks into small ones. Assist or monitor task completion—“What do you need to do next?”

Gently point out flaws in beliefs and behaviors—“I know you think I’m always mad but I was really pleased when you . . . .” “When you . . . I feel . . . and don’t want to . . . .”

### **Prioritize struggles.**

Nonnegotiable issues include safety, school, and basic responsibilities. Ask your-self, “Is this issue important enough for a power struggle? Is my child capable of performing what I’m asking consistently? Do I have control over the behavior?” Saving your authority for essential issues will actually give you more credibility.

Negotiable issues are not important enough for a major power struggle but are still a high priority. Reaching a compromise is not giving in. It teaches children to see others’ views, generate solutions, and think things through. Both the parent and child state, “I want . . . because . . . .”; repeat each other’s position; and generate mutually satisfying solutions. Differences diminish when people turn resentments into requests.

Unimportant issues are not worth power struggles or negotiation. They include behaviors parents don’t like but are not eminently harmful—ice cream for breakfast, appearance, and beliefs. As children learn skills, more items can be negotiated.

### **Pre-empt explosions.**

Empathize: Understand what is upsetting children and show it. Label and rate feelings—“How disappointed, frustrated, or annoyed are you?” Use numerical or color codes. Zero or green means calm and ten or red means boiling mad.

Use descriptive language: Say, “You’re having trouble seeing options right now,” rather than, “You’re being stubborn.” Be careful of sarcasm, assuming, mind reading, predicting catastrophes, and getting off track. Model self-control.

Think things through: Instead of trying to convince children to see your point, first consider what they want and the logical extension of their desires—“That might be a good idea. Show me how you would do that. What will happen after you . . . ?”

Distract: Tell a joke or take a break in the early stages of frustration—“Why don’t you talk to your friend or shoot some baskets while I think about this.” Encouraging children to do something they enjoy breaks the tension and helps them think clearly.

Downshift: Do a little bit of what the child wants and gradually switch over to your agenda—“I’d like my beeper back as soon as you finish pressing that button.” “You can find a toy to carry with you in the store, but we’ll return it before we check out.”

### **Restore coherence when children lose control.**

Stop negotiating when it is deadlocked. People cannot think during angry outbursts. Take a break and don’t pursue children who run to their rooms and slam doors.

Do not personalize cursing or back talk. Later, you can ask children to express what they said appropriately before they become involved in a desired activity.