

## Strategies to Support Executive Function in Autistic Students: Flexibility



In the U.S., approximately 2% of youth have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Mental health challenges, including those related to executive functioning, are more common among autistic youth. This infographic focuses on strategies to support **flexibility** — which is a component of executive function — to promote friendships, independence, & wellbeing.

**When supporting autistic students with executive function challenges, it is important to *teach new skills* while also creating an environment that *supports neurodiverse learning styles*.<sup>1</sup>**

Flexibility is the ability to shift one's attention, ideas, & opinions to adapt to what is going on in the environment.<sup>2,3</sup> Supporting flexibility means teaching students how to navigate situations that differ from their expectations.

This may include teaching concepts such as:

### **Plan A & Plan B:**

Help students practice making alternative plans in the event that it is not possible to do what they had their mind set on.

### **Compromise:**

Have students practice finding middle ground across situations or beliefs that are less important to the student as well as situations that carry more weight.

### **Expect the Unexpected:**

Have students brainstorm common unexpected situations and ways that they can cope when these situations disrupt their plans or routines.<sup>4</sup>

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When teaching flexibility, it is important to balance helping students recognize where flexibility might be necessary to achieve a goal & when it is important to hold onto firm beliefs. For example, it is important to consider the following:



**When is being flexible *too flexible*?**  
By encouraging students to be too flexible, we can put them at risk of others taking advantage of them.



**When asking students to practice compromising, we are not asking them to change their beliefs. Instead, we are asking them to consider alternative perspectives.**



**Not all situations require compromise. It is also important for students to be able to advocate for themselves & stand their ground.**



**School environments are often rigid. Thus, it is important to consider ways to make the school environment more flexible to meet the needs of autistic students.**

**View the Southeast MHTTC webinar "*Evidence-based approaches to support the executive functioning of autistic students*" here: [bit.ly/3pLl6lw](https://bit.ly/3pLl6lw)**

**View the Southeast MHTTC report "*Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to Support the Mental Health of Autistic Students: An Overview*" here: [bit.ly/44zuGgR](https://bit.ly/44zuGgR)**

**View the Southeast MHTTC infographic series "*Strategies to Support Executive Function in Autistic Students*" here: [bit.ly/43FUUNr](https://bit.ly/43FUUNr)**

### References

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