Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children & Adolescents

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OR

How to improve executive functions, develop behavioral regulation skills, and facilitate better metacognitive skills in difficult kids.
Children and adolescents who are unable to:

- defer gratification
- persists in inflexibility in the face of motivation -
  - both intrinsic and extrinsic
- will also melt down in face of strong, patent consequences)
Unable to:

- modulate or regulate emotions once critical point has been reached
Unable to:

- problem solve or think creatively when frustrated
  - concrete, rigid, back and white
Characteristics often associated with other disorders such as...

- ADHD,
- Anxiety,
- Difficult Temperament,
- Tourette's,
- Depression,
- language difficulties,
- PDD,
- Autism,
- Asperger's,
- NVLD,
- ‘Sensory Integration Dysfunction’
Other characteristics...

• child may have specific hot-button issues
• the way clothing looks or feels, food tastes/smells
Other characteristics...

• being tired or hungry exacerbates irritability beyond what would be expected for others
Other characteristics

• inflexibility may have out-of-the-blue quality
These are not

- kids who are purposefully manipulative
- antisocial personalities
These are

• kids with neurological/neurochemical impairments

• impairments that make normal modulation and regulation of emotion and subsequent behavior impossible - often despite medications
Executive Dysfunction

- Behavioral Regulation
  - inhibition,
  - emotional regulation,
  - cognitive shifting

- Metacognitive Skills
  - initiation,
  - planning,
  - organizing,
  - attention & working memory
  - self-monitoring
Typical consequence-reward systems do not work

• too late in the chain of behaviors
• assumes child needs motivation and structure
Motivation likely not an issue

- kids know who’s boss
- know the consequences
- want to please
Lack of Developmental Skills

flexibility and frustration tolerance are critical developmental skills
Beyond Terrible Two’s

some kids do not develop as they move beyond the (“Terrible”) Two’s

• they demonstrate sudden, prolonged outbursts,
• physical and verbal aggression to (seemingly) trivial stimuli
What to do: Strategies
Ross Greene's stages*

descriptive (not diagnostic)

- vapor lock
- crossroads
- meltdown
- mental debris
Vapor Lock

- a.k.a. brain lock
- several stages of early warning signs
- onset of cognitive shutdown, narrowing of focus
parents’ last chance to respond in a manner that facilitates:

• communication and resolution OR
• further deterioration
Meltdown

- outrageous, explosive behavior
- child is incoherent and irrational
- learning cannot take place in this phase
- still possibility of rational, coherent thought
Mental Debris

- the abusive and horrible words that flow during meltdown
- mental garbage
- incoherent
Two Tracks to Treatment:

I. creating better general environments

II. direct training to improve skills
Track I: The general environment

“User Friendly”

- understand child’s unique difficulties
- identify specific factors that fuel inflexibility-explosiveness
Understanding helps maintain coherence

- recognizing that this is not a willful, manipulative tactic is an important first step
- demonstrate understanding of how debilitating it is for her/him
Anticipate frustrating situations

- be more careful and judicious about frustrating situations we choose or allow for her/him
Eliminate unnecessary, unimportant frustrations

- adult concerns about being ‘too easy’, fostering dependence, being a ‘push-over’
- eliminate unnecessary roadblocks, known flash points
- most kids know who is in charge but unable to respond due to competing neurophysiological processes
Reduce overall level of known frustrating experiences

Such as:
changes in routine
homework
demands for independence
Prioritize goals

• pick the most important task needs, learning situations
• choose your battles
How about you?

- reducing adult level of frustration is critical
- parents and teachers need to take care of themselves and demonstrate coherent problem solving
Keeping the student/child coherent

• so he/she can think rationally
• allows for appropriate responses and thinking through situation
Repeat: Much of this requires *Anticipation*

a user-friendly environment is one in which the adults have identified

*in advance*

specific frustrating situations that lead to inflexible-explosive situations
Read the signs, take quick action

- words, tones, body language, specific circumstances are signals
  - of early vapor lock
- start with empathy and gentle persuasion
- distractions
Distractions

- should be enjoyable and require minimal brain-power
  - humor
  - magic cream
- these are short-term ‘de-icers’
  - keep child from going into further vapor lock
- remember - you can return to what you were doing (and often SHOULD signal: ‘let’s come back to this later’)

DMS/Maerlender, 2000
Downshift

• gradually change agendas, expectations, cognitive demands
  • ‘rather than do all those problems right now, how about we …’
Recognize incoherent behavior for what it is

- incoherent behavior
- don’t interpret beyond recognizing the child’s status (vapor lock, melt down)
Self-Awareness

• adults must learn how to recognize how they fuel inflexible-explosive behaviors
  • ignoring warning signs
  • demonstrating short-fuse behavior
  • being stressed
Use accurate, common language to describe aspects

- using consistent terms for stages and behaviors will facilitate communication and
- later processing
Track II: Learning Frustration Tolerance is a Skill

Within a more ‘user-friendly’ environment, specific skills for enhancing frustration tolerance can now be -

• taught,
• modeled and
• reinforced
Priorities

• step back for a moment
• parents with inflexible-explosive kids often do NOT have the luxury of thinking about their priorities for their kids
  • i.e., independence, social, athletic, smart, popular, their own person, ‘just like me’
Survival

Parent’s with inflexible-explosive kids priorities:

- reduce the number of meltdowns
- help child maintain coherence in midst of frustration
- prevent vapor lock
- restore coherence during meltdowns
Inappropriate Behaviors

are usually high stress for parent/teacher who now anticipates trouble ("how am I going to stop Johnnie from doing that?.....")
Step 1: Choosing Battles

- parenting/teaching inflex.-explosive kids requires constant decision:

  "Is this behavior important enough to risk a meltdown?"
In short -

• reducing frequency of meltdowns starts with choosing among priorities and needs.
• short-term avoidance can be important for long-term success.
• *This is about preventing a runaway train.*
How to choose?

- Greene’s simple approach to prioritizing behaviors
- Using baskets A, B, & C
Basket A

- Non-negotiable items
  - not many
  - recall that #1 priority is to reduce overall number of meltdowns
- Safety (management)
  - still utilizing least intense, antagonistic, restrictive methods
Basket A items must

- be behaviors important enough to induce or endure a meltdown over
- be behaviors the child can demonstrate appropriate (within the range of improvement)
- be things parent/teacher is willing and able to enforce
Basket B

• high priorities
• but not willing to induce endure meltdowns over
• the most important basket
Goal of Basket B

- identifying behaviors that require new skills for handling better
  - hanging in in the midst of frustration
  - taking another’s perspective
  - generating alternative solutions
  - thinking things through
- showing child that you are able to help him/her learn these things
What to do when a Basket B behavior happens...

in a word:

COMPROMISE
Compromise

- each side gives up demands or makes concessions
- the pathway to staying coherent
- persistence is NOT compromise
Compromise is

• ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL SKILLS TO TEACH (explaining, model, practice, feedback)
• inflexible-explosive kids usually not good at it
• adults might need some help here too
The art of compromising

• help child re-state the problem
• does solution make everyone a little happy?
  • might need skills in how to ask
And if no compromise is possible

- it might move to Basket C
- remember goal of reducing meltdowns
Basket C

- very full
- behaviors to forget about...for now
- help achieve the goal of reducing global frustration level
Who decides?

- what behaviors go into what baskets
- parent
- school team
- responsible adult
Details that might require additional thought/planning

- communication patterns
- identifying specific situations
- social skills
- siblings
- grandparents
Specific Situations and Factors

- When deciding if a situation, factor or behavior needs planned intervention, consider:
  - importance levels - high priority?
If High Priority:

- Can child master demands immediately?
- If not, can she/he with help?
Letting go...for now

- Assumption: all kids WANT to be independent, functional and productive
- making decisions about importance levels demonstrates adult prioritization skills
3 levels of importance

1. not important
2. important but not capable or possible to address
3. important and capable with extra help
Specific Skills for Dealing with Frustration

- or developing skills for the important but not yet capable
  - recognizing it
  - expressing it
  - thinking through (problem solving, negotiation)
Recognizing it...

- often very hard to do
- if set up properly, the user-friendly environment is already working on early warning signs
- personalize for child
  - thoughts
  - feelings
  - sensations
  - predicting the future
Expression

- establishing a consistent language has already been started
- personalize
  - rating scales with anchors
    - 1 to 10
  - colors and emotions
  - key words/secret codes
Thinking through

- establish a consistent structure
  - e.g., what is the problem?
  - what do you want?
  - what does other want?
  - list 2 ‘solutions’
  - does each get a little of what they want (if appropriate)?
  - say it to someone
  - try it
  - review it with <name of person>
In the School and Classroom*

- General ideas still apply
- Adopt a problem solving approach
- often these children are less explosive in school

*See Asperger’s Syndrome, and NVLD: Academic Function and School-Based Interventions
Some General Principles

- Consistency and regularity
- Structure (be the frontal lobes)
- Reduce goals, objectives
Consistency

- work to develop consistency with parents around:
  - specific language usage
  - identification of behaviors and strategies
- Make school day as predictable as possible
Words, words, words

- adapt consistent language for elements of behavior
- tie-in with home for maximum consistency
- include in notebook
- everyone child comes in contact with
IEP’s

- Prioritize objectives and goals
- Cut by 50% or more
- Use the basket approach
Why is school different than home?

- several theories
  - more structure
  - chance of embarrassment
  - hold together at school then blow at home
  - benefits of meds at school wear off at home
Make school ‘User-Friendly’

• adults must understand child’s unique difficulties
  • as a team, review all cases that fall into the category of inflexible-explosive
    • do NOT focus on diagnoses
  • obtain inservice training to help staff understand these kids
In-service trainings

• should include year-long follow-up for fine-tuning and specific case implementations

• one-shot trainings have limited effect
User friendly schools

• reduce over-all demands for flexibility and frustration tolerance
• team must review importance levels
  • what is needed, what is child capable of
• prioritize
• Repeat: the reality of IEP’s
Identify situations and triggers -

- in advance
- establish a notebook of important information:
  - known triggers
  - baskets and behaviors
  - procedures for handling stages (who as well as what)
Front-line teachers need to be able to read warning signals and take immediate action

- real training
- one role of the aide
- use consultant, behavior specialist, counselor psychologist to review
Attitude and interpretations

• incoherent behavior is incoherent behavior
  • not oppositionality, poor parenting, psychosis, etc.
What’s my line?

- teachers need to have a forum for being able to honestly and non-judgmentally recognize their role that fuels inflexible-explosive behavior
  - this is often a personal style issue
Fair does not mean equal

- students actually understand this
- no-one is ‘getting away’ with anything
- everyone gets the help they need
  - other students can often be most helpful
  - but not their defined role
Alienation and deviance

- once a pattern of alienation and deviant behavior has been established it is difficult to stop

- the milieu maintains the behavior
Consider a change in venue

- other placement where a new start can be made
- can return when healing has occurred, kids have developed, enough time has passed
Thank You.
This presentation is posted as

“Infexible and Explosive Children” at:
www.dartmouthpsychiatry.org

Go to:
“Health Information”
References

