

Rigid Behavior

Is your child stubborn?



Is your child:

- Controlling?
- Resisting you being the boss?
- Acting inflexible, unyielding, and relentless?
- Refusing as you introduce a transition to a new activity?
- Playing alone without regard for other children?
- Ignoring other children's interests and perspectives?
- Insisting on having it her way?
- Taking a 'you can't tell me what to do' posture when setting up the schedule for the day?
- Throwing a fit if plans have to be changed?

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Some children are chronically inflexible. Any subtle change to the routine ends up in an earthquake-style meltdown. The child may tantrum because you forgot to pack something in his lunch. He may refuse to go to school because his favorite shirt is not clean, and he won't even think of wearing a different one. She may insist on you driving

a certain way home from school every day. He may incessantly nag you about the schedule for the day. Rigidity is a sign that your child has some lagging skills. Most research shows that kids should start outgrowing their rigidity once they are through their toddler years [2]. If your child's need to 'call the shots' is getting in the way of life and happiness, a concern worth addressing may be underneath these symptoms.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

Toddlers and preschool-aged kids tend to be a bit inflexible and this can be a normal part of development. It is time to be concerned when this rigidity continues on into the upper elementary grades or when it is causing extreme distress in your family. Listed below are some considerations if your child is rigid.

Goodness of fit: There may be a bit of a mismatch between the child's personality and the mom or dad's parenting style. Some children crave structure, predictability, and routine to feel safe and comfortable. If you are more of a spontaneous, 'go with the flow' type of person and your child is melting down when plans are changed, it might be important to consider structuring your child's world.

Need for structure: Setting up daily routines, schedules, and calendars that you actually follow, can go a long way to help your child's behavior. Give your child ample warning before you need to stop doing one activity and shift to another. If you try these strategies and your child's behavior continues to wreak havoc on your household, it may be time to consider other potential reasons for these challenges.

Giftedness: Some children who are gifted can be rigid. This is generally due to the fact that intensity is the key feature of giftedness. They get stuck on certain ideas and cannot tolerate the notion that it may not be possible to carry out their plans on a particular day.

Anxiety: Another possibility is related to *Generalized Anxiety*, which can also lead children to be very rigid in their choices and to resist change. Being in control can reduce anxiety because the world is made more predictable.

ADHD: Other underlying problems here may be rigidity associated with ADHD, autism, a mood disorder, or a behavior disorder. Many children with *ADHD* are inflexible; they may exhibit extreme responses if they do not get their way. ADHD often involves poor executive functioning skills, including the ability to 'shift' from one activity to another.

Autism: A child with a diagnosis of *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)* is very rigid because he or she would like the world to move in a predictable fashion [1]. Being in control is safe and makes it easier for the child to understand what is going on in the world. Children with autism have difficulty taking other people's perspectives and understanding other people's thoughts, emotions and experiences. Often, this difficulty leads to rigidity.

Rigid interest in repetitive play could also be an issue in ASD. These behaviors could be so enjoyable that they become patterns or habits. It is important to note that repetitive play is also a part of childhood and development; it all depends on the degree.

A child who is constantly scripting movies, for example, and is rarely able to engage in a back and forth conversation, is demonstrating significant symptoms. A child who sometimes quotes the *Frozen* movie, in context, and is happy to explain the quote to you is not demonstrating a concerning behavior.

Emotional problems: Other things to consider include *mood and depressive challenges*. Children who are naturally irritable and discontented are often rigid.

Behavior problems: Children with *Behavior Disorders* may be rigid because they have a developed pattern of refusals and defiance.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD IS RIGID

An important consideration for families who have chronically inflexible children is parenting style. Often, children who are easily frustrated and lose their temper a lot are challenging to parent. You might catch yourself saying, “It shouldn’t have to be this hard. Why does everything have to be a battle?”

A great resource for learning to ‘pick your battles’ is offered by Ross Greene in the [Explosive Child](#) [2]. He teaches you how to be a ‘basket case’, which means that you put all of your priorities into three baskets.

Basket A is a small basket for non-negotiables.

Basket B is for issues that are important but for which you would be willing to negotiate with your child. In this case, you would be modeling, for your child, a rational and calm decision-making approach that results in a win-win solution.

Basket C is the ‘forget-a-bout-it’ basket.

This approach is referred to as *downshifting*, which means that the parent demonstrates for the child how to calm down and think rationally about what to do. A great children's book that demonstrates the power of downshifting is offered in [Llama Llama, Mad at Mama](#) [5]. The mother in the story shows how a parent can meet a child’s needs while simultaneously holding the child accountable for improved behavior.

The little llama is out shopping, quite unwillingly, with his mother at the ‘shoparama.’ The little llama proceeds to throw a fit, hurling all of the groceries around the store and making a huge mess. The mother llama takes the time to understand how her little llama feels. She shows empathy and then expects the child to clean up his mess and to help her finish the shopping. This story is an excellent example of using supportive strategies to increase your child’s flexibility and behavioral compliance [5].

It is important to consider the degree of symptoms. If rigidity and [inflexibility](#), [tantrums](#), or [focus on objects rather than people](#) are significant concerns, it will be important to have a *comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation* in order to assess Autism Spectrum symptoms as well as language, cognition, attention, and emotions.

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [General anxiety](#): rigid behavior may result from anxiety because being in control increases the unpredictability of a situation [3]
- [Social skills challenges \(Socializing\)](#): rigid behavior may result from social challenges because not knowing how to interact with others or to read others can make social situations hard. If a child is having trouble taking other's perspectives, he may not care about making others happy and may stick with his own rigid preference
- [Emotional challenges \(Feeling\)](#): rigid behavior may result from being irritable, sad or depressed. Children who have been traumatized can be rigid as a means to have some control in life or an outlet for pent up anger

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area **may** have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does **not** serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Anxiety Disorders](#): children with anxiety may be rigid because a sense of control can relieve anxiety. Children who are not sure what will happen or how to handle a social context may feel less anxious if allowed to do things their own way
- [Autism Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\)](#): children with ASD may be rigid because they perseverate (hyperfocus) and have challenges shifting activities. They may prefer to do things their own way as it is predictable and gives them what they want; they may not consider other's perspectives or be willing to try their ideas [1]
- [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\), Combined or Hyperactive Impulsive Type](#): children with ADHD may be rigid because they may get distracted and miss social cues. They can appear bossy because they do not focus on other's perspectives. Children with ADHD also show the following symptoms: challenges in sustaining attention, distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity
- [Gifted](#): many gifted children have a tendency to be very intense and insist on doing things their own way. They may struggle to work in groups because they think their own ideas are the best and will not listen to peers
- [Trauma and Attachment Disorders](#): children with a trauma history may be rigid because life has been scary and unpredictable so they seek control

- [Bipolar Disorder](#): children with bipolar disorder may be rigid because they seek control due to feelings of worthlessness and sadness. They will also show the following symptoms: irritability that is pervasive and alternates with periods of elevated mood, pressured speech and goal-directed activity [6]
- [Behavior Disorders](#): children with behavior disorders are likely to have some rigidity due to the perceived need or 'right' to have one's own way. Behavior Disorders include Intermittent Explosive Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, and Conduct Disorder

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child *consult 'live'* with a psychologist
- [Psychotherapist or Play Therapist](#): to treat emotional symptoms that arise and help with social skills training and organization
- [ABA Therapist](#): to assess and treat behavior; may conduct a functional analysis and develop a behavior plan that can guide treatment
- [Psychologist or Neuropsychologist](#): to consider a full assessment and to consider symptoms in mental health and/or behavioral context
- [Psychiatrist](#): to prescribe and manage psychotropic medication

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- [Roberts, BASC-3, Clinical Interview, RCMAS, CDI-2, Human Figure Drawing, PTSD Scale, Rorschach, Brief Projective Measures](#): emotional assessment (Neuropsychological or psychological evaluation)
- [WISC-V](#): cognitive assessment (Psychological or School Psychological evaluation)
- [TOL-2, CTMT, WCST, TOVA](#): attention and executive functioning assessment (Neuropsychological evaluation)
- [ADOS-2](#): Social assessment for concerns indicating an autism diagnosis should be considered

LEARN MORE

[1] Kroncke, Anna P., & Willard, Marcy & Huckabee, Helena (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings*. Springer, San Francisco.

Springer: <http://www.springer.com/us/book/9783319255026>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Psychological/dp/3319255029/>

[2] Greene, Ross W. (2001). *The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Explosive-Child-Understanding-Frustrated-Chronically/dp/0060931027/>

Ebook: <https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062339799/the-explosive-child>

[3] Huebner, Dawn (2005). *What to do when you worry too much: A kid's guide to overcoming anxiety.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/What-When-You-Worry-Much/dp/1591473144/>

[4] Seigel, Daniel J. & Bryson, Tina Payne (2014). *No drama-discipline: The whole-brain way to calm the chaos and nurture your child's developing mind.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/No-Drama-Discipline-Whole-Brain-Nurture-Developing/dp/0345548043?ie=UTF8&hvadid=4162156440&hvbm=be&hvdev=c&hvqmt=e>

[5] Dewdney, A (2007). *Llama Llama Mad at Mama.*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Llama-Mad-at-Mama-ebook/dp/B00AEDDP00?ie=UTF8&*Version*=1&*entries*=0#navbar

[6] Papolos, Demetri & Papolos, Janice (2002). *The Bipolar Child: The definitive and reassuring guide to childhood's most understood disorder.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Bipolar-Child-Definitive-Reassuring-Misunderstood/dp/0767928601/>

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How-to-deal-with-a-stubborn-child

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