

## 5 Tips for Teaching Flexible Thinking by Kari Dunn Buron

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Children with autism are often frustrated with changes in their daily schedule, or the unexpected actions of another person. Parents and teachers often find themselves responding to the behavioral outcome of the stress and anxiety involved with this “inflexible thinking”, rather than teaching flexible thinking in a systematic way.

#1. The first step in teaching this skill is to realize that your child might not understand why the world works the way it does; why people make the decisions they do; or why routines are sometimes disrupted by necessary changes. Your child might depend on some sense of predictability in order to be relaxed in different environments, and unexpected change might cause him significant stress.

#2. Try using a calendar to teach “tolerance for change” in a very concrete, highly systematic way. Make sure your calendar has room to write information on each day. Make note of birthdays and family or community events on the calendar, and then teach your child to “check” the calendar every morning to see what is happening and to check for any changes. If a parent travels, you can mark out of town trips so that your child clearly sees when

someone is leaving and returning. If your child asks perseverative questions about when a particular event will happen (Halloween, vacation, trip to Disney, etc.) refer him to the calendar to find his answer.

#3. A “change board” can be used alone or in conjunction with your calendar. The classic change board is a white wipe off board hung in the kitchen. The board is always blank unless something is different about the daily schedule (a Dr. appointment, a visitor, or something like the monthly disaster signal). You will need to teach your child to look at the change board every day to check for changes. Make this a habit.

Once or twice a week, try creating a simple change (not too drastic or emotionally upsetting - something like shopping on a different day or going to visit someone after school) so that your child gradually becomes used to seeing a change posted on the change board. Then if your family has a last minute crisis that leads to an unexpected change in routine, you can write the change on the change board and prompt your child to check it. Changes might still be unpleasant but by using a system to introduce change, you can take “the edge off” and make the change easier to tolerate.

#4. Teach your child a calming routine. An example might be taking two deep breaths, rubbing hands together, closing her eyes and then taking two more deep breaths. Practice this routine several times every day. Make a habit of doing the routine prior to events that are predictably difficult for your child to tolerate (like checking the calendar or the change board).

#5. Once your child understands the routine of checking the calendar and change board in your kitchen, try developing a portable warning system. For example, write the changes on the calendar on your phone and make it a habit to check the calendar prior to each daily transition. Have a portable white board in your car to warn your child of any last minute changes while you are out.

Remember that all of this involves a *learning style*. It is not a character flaw or manipulative behavior so much as a response to lacking skills. Teaching your child how to handle emotions when things get too confusing or frustrating

is one of the most important things you can do as a parent or teacher. Learning to think flexibly is an important part of learning to regulate one's own emotions and responding to the world in a positive way.

**Resources:**

Buron, Kari Dunn. 2013. *When My Worries Get Too Big!* Second Edition. AAPC.

Buron, Kari Dunn. 2012. *Adalyn's Clare*. Autism Asperger Publishing Co. (AAPC).

Goleman, Daniel. 2011. *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*. More Than Sound LLC. Digital Edition.

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**Author Bio:**

Kari Dunn Buron taught in the K-12 public school system with students on the autism spectrum for 30+ years and was a founding member of the MN Autism Project. She developed an Autism Spectrum Disorders Certificate program for educators at Hamline University in St. Paul, MN and is on the Advisory Board for the Autism Society of Trinidad and Tobago; Life College in MN and the Autism Society of MN. In 2003, Kari received a Self-designed Fellowship that allowed her to spend a year interviewing and working internationally with a number of scientists and researchers in the area of Neuroscience, Social Cognition, Education and Autism with a focus on challenging behaviors. Kari has presented her work both nationally and internationally and in 2012, she was inducted into the Illinois State University Department of Education Hall of Fame.

Kari is the co-author of *The Incredible 5-Point Scale (Revised Edition)* and *Social Behavior and Self-Management*. She is the author of *When My Worries Get Too Big (Revised Edition and winner of the 2013 Mom's Choice Award)*, *A 5 Could Make Me Lose Control*, and *A 5 is Against the Law!* (2008 ASA literary award winner). Kari is the co-editor of a textbook for educators titled *Learners on the Autism Spectrum: Preparing Highly Qualified Educators* (2009 ASA

literary award winner) and author of the Social Times Curriculum. Kari's books can be found on the Autism Asperger Publishing Company website: [www.aapcpublishing.net](http://www.aapcpublishing.net).