

Inflexibility

Description of the problem

Students with TBI sometimes get “stuck” on an activity. They can have difficulty with new tasks or changes in the schedule, routines, activities or staff. A student may become overwhelmed or anxious when changes are made to familiar routines, activities or schedules, causing them to become inflexible. Students who experience this problem may have trouble making transitions during the school day (from lunch or gym back to classroom work), tolerating changes in schedules, adjusting to changes in staff, etc. In extreme cases, even seemingly simple transitions, such as from sitting to standing, can be difficult and cause stress.

Causes

Inflexibility is often associated with damage to the frontal lobes, the most common site of injury in TBI.

Solution

Help inflexible students make it through the day with minimal stress for everyone.

Strategies

- **Plan ahead**

When a student knows what to expect, they have less anxiety. This reduces the chance of the student becoming inflexible. If you know you need to change a routine, first tell the student what the change will be so he will know what to expect. Next, allow time to practice so there will be some familiarity with the new routine. It can also be helpful to teach the student some specific self-talk to use during the transition. For example, “This change is challenging, but it will be OK.”

Example: “Today will be the last day you work on your homework assignment before leaving class. Starting tomorrow, you will write the assignment down right before leaving class, and you will start it at home. Today we will practice by writing down the assignment and instructions about where to start when you get home. Then we will put everything away and take a break. After a few minutes, I will have you role play what you will do when you get home. This will be good practice for doing it on your own.”

- **Make associations**

Sometimes it can be helpful for the student to associate herself with a hero who is famously flexible.

Example: If your student likes soccer, you might point out a player who can play several positions or has often changed teams. Then you can encourage her to be like her model and be flexible.

Strategies continued

- **Use concrete organizers to display schedules**

Organizers can also help a student with accepting changes. Sometimes it helps to use picture schedules to outline the day's activities.

Example: A picture schedule might include photos of the bus, the student's homeroom, different classes the student has, the lunch room, the library or any other places the student goes or activities he or she completes each day. The pictures can be arranged in the order the student will visit each place or complete each activity throughout the day. When the schedule changes, change the order of the familiar pictures and verbally go over what to expect to help changes feel less threatening to the student.

- **Assure the students that some routines will stay the same.**

Often inflexible students use routines for comfort in a frightening world. When one routine needs to change, make sure that they understand that others will remain the same.

Example: "The routine for when you begin your homework assignment has changed, but the routine for doing it and turning it in is still the same."

Notes:

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