

the inflexible parent

By Rose Stanley*

Could you be an inflexible parent? How could you tell if you were? Routine and order is not such a bad thing, is it?

What would you say the goal of every parent in an ideal world be? I will suggest that we would all want to raise our children as good citizens, and as independent individuals who can be accountable and responsible in the world they live in. If you agree with this, read on!

In order to become independent, accountable and responsible, children will need to learn to adapt. As we are all aware, children are small sponges, soaking up everything, observing our actions and our reactions. Therefore, if they see us becoming anxious or irritated whenever there is a change in our plans, how comfortable will adapting to their own circumstances be for them? Now, there are times where we all become anxious and irritated, and that is part of life. However, if this is a common reaction for us, then we will be role-modelling that to our kids.

What is an inflexible parent?

- They are overly precious about their family's routines and way of doing things, believing them to be the first priority in every situation.
- They can find it difficult to adapt to change in circumstances. An inflexible parent's stress levels can become very high if the ground shifts beneath them and they cannot think outside the square of 'what should happen'.
- They don't take different circumstances into context and consider all of the contributing factors. For example, a flexible parent might think: "Normally this would be Sam's naptime, but because Aunty is visiting and we haven't seen her in a long time, we will let him stay up. Tomorrow we can get him back into bed at the proper time."
- They can be driven by fear of the 'what-if'. "What if I let go of routines a little, will I create a mutinous atmosphere? Will I ever be able to gain control again?"

What would the repercussions be for a child being brought up by an inflexible parent?

- They could become insecure.
- They could look more to others to tell them what to do.
- They could struggle with changing scenarios (like their parents), but it may be more magnified.
- They could have a real fear of the unknown.
- They could lack the joy of spontaneity. For example, a child being babysat by another family member who decides to change the normal bedtime routine, unintentionally throwing the child into an anxious state. "But at bedtime, Mum always"
- It could stunt their ability to think 'outside the box'. If there is always only one right or acceptable answer, then why bother to consider anything else?

What can we keep in mind so that we don't become inflexible parents?

Prize-winning science writer Roger Lewin states, "Too often we give children answers to remember rather than problems to solve."

Yet Lewin brings up an important point: there is often more than one way to attack a task.

What happens when you are not there, when your child has the opportunity to test their independence levels, their mastery of skills, or their own reactions to an emotionally-charged situation? If they are always being told how to act/react, it could be scary! Scary for your child who may hesitate to act on their own, or alternatively, scary for others when your child makes a judgement or decision based on what they themselves have seen being modelled and it does not fit!

There are practical situations in which it is appropriate and necessary to be decisive and stick to the plan. The trick is to listen to your child, to observe what is going on and to identify when you might be in a situation which requires some freedom of normal routines/constraints. Then ask yourself a couple of questions:

1. Am I being unreasonable here?
2. Am I being ruled by my own emotions? (e.g. frustration, fear, discomfort, stress, tiredness)
3. Could a little flexibility benefit my child/others in this situation?

Come up with some negotiation rights to back up your change of plans if this helps. "Okay, you can stay at the park for another 10 minutes, however when I say it's time to go, I want you to get into the car without complaining and asking for more time."

The dictionary definition of flexibility is 'the quality of bending easily without breaking'. This is really the key point; bending the rules in a specific situation, having weighed up the pro's and con's is very different to breaking the rules. Breaking suggests permanency, a no-turning-back decision, whereas bending indicates the ability to flex back the other way, enabling the parent to find their firm ground again. Let's not live in dread of creating dissension within the ranks. Instead, let's realise that there is joy and relief in releasing our grip on the reins every now and then. I think our kids might love us for it!

Under-5s

You have an agreement with your 4-year-old that when they get home from kindy, they put their lunchbox on the bench to be washed, and hang their bag up on the hook. You have a surprise visit from the grandparents and your child is so excited to see them that the bag gets thrown to one side. They are distracted and out of their normal routine for the rest of the afternoon, enjoying the time together. Do not make an issue of it in front of the visitors, just ask your child to put their lunchbox and bag away before dinner.

5- to 8-year-olds

You have a family agreement that on week nights, once homework is done and if behaviour has been good, the children can watch an hour of TV. Your two children love to watch together, but your daughter has been naughty. Your son is asking if you will allow them to still watch together. Do you punish both of them by saying no? You could still let them both

watch TV because you don't want your son to be disappointed, but your daughter needs to make it up to you in some other way, e.g. do extra chores, or go to bed half an hour earlier for a night or two.

8- to 12-year-olds

Your 11-year-old son has a friend over to play. They are having fun. Your rule is that sleepovers are organised in advance, but your son has come running up to you and asked for his friend to stay the night. You could ask yourself: what is happening tonight and the following day for your family? Would it matter if his friend stayed overnight? And how has your son approached this situation (e.g. with pressure and whining, or respectfully)?

Once you have made an exception, be careful to revert back to the original agreement the next time, so that your children don't presume that they can always try to bend the rules. Then they can appreciate that whilst you can be flexible, you are not a pushover.



*Rose has worked in schools for the past 8 years caring for children, firstly as a Student Support worker and most recently as a tutor through the Lifewalk Trust. She has just published three books to aid children with emotional literacy.