

UNDERSTANDING RIGIDITY: WHEN SAMENESS FEELS SAFE

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What Is Rigidity?

Parents often describe their child as stubborn, uncooperative, or refusing to listen.

But what looks like defiance is often something deeper — rigidity.

Rigidity means having a strong need for sameness, structure, and predictability.

It can appear as difficulty shifting between activities, thoughts, or emotions, and it often causes distress when something unexpected happens.

For many children — especially those who are neurodivergent, rigidity is not misbehaviour. It's a form of protection.

It's how they create safety in a world that often feels unpredictable, confusing, or overwhelming.

“When a child resists change, they are not rejecting you. They are trying to hold onto what feels safe.”

How Rigidity Looks in Everyday Life

Rigidity can show up in small, consistent ways. You might notice your child:

- Insists on doing things in a specific order (“I always use the blue cup.”)
- Becomes upset or refuses when routines or plans change
- Repeats the same play pattern or talks about one topic constantly
- Has difficulty accepting alternative ideas or rules

- Gets “stuck” emotionally after disappointment or conflict
- Feels most comfortable when things stay familiar and predictable

These moments can feel frustrating for adults — but for a rigid child, it’s not about control; it’s about stability.

Two Types of Rigidity

Cognitive Rigidity (Thinking)

This is when a child struggles to shift perspectives, ideas, or problem-solving strategies.

They might insist there’s only one correct way to do something, or feel lost when plans change.

Example: “But that’s not how we played last time!”

Emotional Rigidity (Feeling)

This is when a child struggles to regulate emotions or move between emotional states.

They might stay upset long after the moment has passed, or find it hard to “reset” after disappointment.

Example: crying for a long time after losing a game, even after comfort.

Why Rigidity Happens

Rigidity isn’t “bad behaviour.” It’s a coping mechanism — a way to manage discomfort or uncertainty.

It often develops when a child:

- Feels anxious or overwhelmed
- Has sensory sensitivities
- Struggles to communicate their needs

- Needs more time to process changes or transitions

When the world feels unpredictable, sameness gives them a sense of control.

The goal isn't to remove rigidity. It's to understand it, and slowly build the safety needed for flexibility to grow.

“Before flexibility can flourish, safety must come first.”

How to Support a Rigid Child

1. Prepare for Change

Use visual schedules, timers, or countdowns before transitions.

2. Offer Predictable Choices

“Do you want to brush your teeth first, or put on pajamas first?”

3. Model Flexibility

Calmly show that change can be managed: “We’ll try it differently today.”

4. Validate Feelings

“I know it’s hard when plans change.”

5. Use Structure, Not Control

Predictable routines help children relax into safety instead of clinging to control.

Flexibility grows from safety, not pressure.

Reflection for Parents and Educators

Ask yourself:

- What might my child be trying to control and why?
- What part of their day feels unpredictable or stressful?
- How can I make small changes feel safe instead of sudden?
- When did I last notice a moment of flexibility and celebrate it?

Your calm presence teaches your child that change can be safe.

Every moment of co-regulation plants a seed of trust.

