

The *Inflexible* Explosive Child

Jane Rekas, LCSW

Based on the book The Explosive Child, by Ross W. Greene Phd



<u>Various Diagnoses</u>	<u>Common Characteristics</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oppositional Defiant Disorder • ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) • Mood Disorders (Bipolar and Depression) • Tourette's Disorder • Anxiety Disorders (including Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) • Language-processing impairments • Sensory Integration Dysfunction • Nonverbal Learning Disability • Reactive Attachment Disorder • Asperger's, Autism, PDD • Difficult Temperament 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Difficulty managing and controlling emotions associated with frustration, difficulty thinking through ways of resolving frustrating situations, resulting in cognitive debilitation in which child has difficulty staying calm and problem-solving 2. Extremely low frustration threshold 3. Extremely low tolerance for frustration 4. Remarkably limited capacity for flexibility and adaptability; the child often seems unable to shift gears (or shift from their own agenda) in response to commands or a change in plans. 5. Tendency to think in a concrete, rigid, black-and-white manner. 6. The persistence of inflexibility and poor response to frustration despite a high level of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. 7. Explosive episodes have an out of the blue quality. 8. The child may have one or several issues about which he or she is especially inflexible (such as sensory issues). 9. The child's inflexibility and difficulty responding to frustration may be fueled by behaviors commonly associated with other disorders. 10. While other children are apt to become more irritable when tired or hungry, inflexible-explosive children may completely fall apart.

It is important to understand and *empathize* with the emotional experience underneath these traits and behaviors and to have useful strategies to cope.

Children do well if they can. They don't choose to be explosive and non-compliant. Rather they have a delay in developing skills critical to being flexible and tolerating frustration or difficulty applying these skills.

The Inflexible-Explosive Episode

In the early phase of an inflexible-explosive episode, the child is presented with an environmental demand to shift gears and experiences the natural frustration associated with doing so.



Environmental demand to shift gears ☹ natural frustration

Because the child has deficits in the domain of flexibility and frustration tolerance, he has trouble tolerating the frustration and responding adaptively to the demand. He is likely to display warning signs that he is stuck. The trouble is he is likely to tell you in a way that is offensive. This early phase is called *vapor lock* or *brain lock*.

Environmental demand to shift gears ☹ natural frustration ☹ inflexibility, low frustration tolerance ☹ offensive signs of being stuck **vapor lock**

Now you've moved to the second phase of an inflexible-explosive episode: the crossroads phase. This is the parent's chance to respond to their child's frustration in a manner that facilitates either:

1) communication, collaborative problem-solving, and resolution, or	2) further deterioration
---	--------------------------

Environmental demand to shift gears ☹ natural frustration ☹ inflexibility, low frustration tolerance ☹ offensive signs of being stuck *vapor lock* ☹ inflexibility met with flexibility ☹ **resolution**

A deteriorating inflexible-explosive child is neither a pretty sight nor a pleasant experience. If the child deteriorates past the point of rescue, he'll become completely overwhelmed by frustration and lose his capacity for coherent, rational thought. At that point, the final phase of the episode has been reached: *meltdown*.

Environmental demand to shift gears ☹ natural frustration ☹ inflexibility, low frustration tolerance ☹ offensive signs of being stuck *vapor lock* ☹ inflexibility met with inflexibility ☹ further deterioration, loss of rational thought ☹ **meltdown**

Little or no learning can occur during the meltdown. After the dust settles, the child usually starts thinking clearly again and is sorry for what they did and said.

How you interpret your child's inflexible-explosive behavior and the language you use to describe it will directly influence the strategies you use to help your child change this behavior.

Pathways to Inflexibility-Explosiveness

1. **Difficult Temperament:** *the natural inborn style of behavior of each individual... not produced by the environment.* The Difficult Child, Dr. Stanley Turecki
~evident in infancy
2. **ADHD & Executive Functions:** includes cognitive skills such as *shifting cognitive set* (the ability to shift efficiently from mind-set to another), *organization and planning* (organizing a coherent plan of action to deal with a problem or frustration), *working memory* (performing multiple thinking tasks simultaneously), and *separation of affect* (the ability to separate your emotional response to a problem from the thinking you need to perform to solve the problem).
3. **Social Skill Deficits:** Helping the Child Who Doesn't Fit In and Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success by Drs. Stephen Nowicki and Marhsall Duke
4. **Language-processing impairments:** difficulties with understanding wide array of language, categorizing and storing current and previous experiences (in language), thinking things through (in language), or expressing themselves (via language).
5. **Mood Disorders** (Bipolar and Depression): chronic state of irritability, agitation, volatility and mood instability.
6. **Anxiety Disorders** (including Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder): children explode when anxious as they become unable to think clearly.
7. **Nonverbal Learning Disability:** poor math skills, lower reading comprehension, poor non-verbal memory and visual perception.
8. Sensory Integration Dysfunction



Truth about Consequences

Basic **Behavior Modification** doesn't work with Inflexible-Explosive children.

"Motivational strategies don't make the impossible possible; they only make the possible more possible.

For consequences to achieve it's desired effect – that is, for a consequence to make it less likely that a child will explode the next time he's frustrated – you have to have faith that the consequence you administered on the back end the last time (i.e., following the last explosion) is going to be accessible and meaningful to the child on the front end the next time he becomes frustrated.

If the child becomes cognitively debilitated in the midst of frustration, he may have enormous difficulty recalling or fully appreciating how much he disliked the consequences you applied the last time (or even the last 50 times) he behaved inappropriately in the midst of frustration."

Strategies suggested by this approach:

1. User-Friendlier Environment
2. Baskets Approach
3. Brain Chemistry

4. Road Maps to Skill Development



User-Friendlier Environment

“By demonstrating to your child that you understand how debilitated he becomes in situations requiring flexibility and a tolerance for frustration, you’ll help him maintain coherence in the midst of these situations so he can think through and discuss potential solutions.



When children are stuck in the red haze of inflexibility and frustration, they respond a lot better if they perceive adults as potential helpers, rather than enemies.

inflexibility + inflexibility = meltdown

The failure to achieve a full understanding of a child’s difficulties lies at the core of many counterproductive interventions.

In a user-friendlier environment...

- ...parenting goals must be judiciously prioritized, with an emphasis on reducing the overall demands for flexibility and frustration tolerance being place on the inflexible-explosive child.
- ...adults try to identify – in advance – specific situations which that may routinely lead to inflexible, explosive episodes.
- ...adults “read” the warning signals and take quick action when these signals are present.
- ...adults can interpret incoherent behaviors for what they really are: incoherent behaviors.
- ...adults try to use a more accurate “common language” to describe various aspects of the child’s inflexibility-explosiveness.
- ...should help you respond to your child before he’s at his worst, rather than when or after he’s at his worst.
- ...you have a clear understanding of what is fueling your child’s difficulties.

Baskets Approach

In this framework, there are three goals critical to helping your child:

- A. Maintaining adults as authority figures.
- B. Teaching your child the skills of flexibility and frustration tolerance.
- C. Being cognizant of your child's limitations.



<p>Basket A</p>	<p>Those important behaviors that <u>are</u> worth inducing and enduring a meltdown over.</p> <p>Basket A helps us achieve goal A.</p> <p>“As a rule of thumb, the instant you say “No,” “You must,” or “You can’t” to your child, you’re in Basket A.</p> <p>Safety is always in Basket A: unsafe behaviors are not negotiable.</p> <p>Your child must be capable of exhibiting the desired behavior on a fairly consistent basis.</p> <p>You must be willing and able to enforce your wishes.</p> <p>Most children already know you are the authority, but when they are in vapor lock, they have trouble acting on this knowledge.</p>
<p>Basket B</p>	<p>Those behaviors that are important but <u>aren’t</u> worth inducing or enduring a meltdown over.</p> <p>Basket B helps achieve goal B.</p> <p>Basket B is the Roadmap basket. This is where you help your child develop more skills.</p> <p>Communicate. Problem-solve. Work it out.</p> <p>This where with empathy you invite your child to help you reduce these behaviors.</p>
<p>Basket C</p>	<p>Those behaviors that are unimportant, that aren’t even worth saying anything about anymore, because they are off the radar screen (UFO’s).</p> <p>Basket C helps achieve Goal C.</p> <p>Behaviors that once seemed high priority but have been downgraded considerably. You’re going to forget about them, <i>at least for now</i>.</p>

	You don't even mention these b Examples: food choices, wheth
--	---

Your Baskets Worksheet:

Basket A	Those important behaviors th and enduring a meltdown ove safety related.
Basket B	Those behaviors that are important but <u>aren't</u> worth inducing or enduring a meltdown over.
Basket C	Those behaviors that are unimportant, that aren't even worth saying anything about anymore, because they are off the radar screen (UFO's).





Some Basket Patterns:

1. Putting a behavior in Basket A that has no business being in Basket A. *Start to really look at what you're fighting over. It has to be really serious to be in Basket A.*
2. Overdoing Basket C: *On the other hand, if you let go of too much, you're not working with your child to increase their skills.*
3. Neglecting Basket B: *You may get good at picking your battles, but you still need to work with your child.*
4. Believing a child is suddenly capable of working things out just because you're willing to do so
5. Acting like you're in Basket A when you really meant to be in Basket B or C
6. Using Basket B as a last resort: *suggesting to work things out when it may be too late, because a meltdown is already on its way.*
7. The unilateral solution: *offering a suggestion that the child did not participate in.*



Brain Chemistry

Some kids need medication before the strategies outlined in this approach will work.

- Inattention and Cognitive Inefficiency
- Hyperactivity and Poor Impulse Control
- Irritable, Agitated, Dysphoric Mood
- Extreme Mood Instability
- Anxiety and Obsessiveness

Straight Talk About Psychiatric Medication for Kids, Dr. Tim Wilens



Road Maps to Skill Development

A **Roadmap** is a mental script to help a child think more clearly and stay calm enough to avoid a meltdown. Roadmaps require advance planning... and must be simple enough to follow.

Skill Deficits

Some kids lack the skills to...

- _____
Recognize when they are frustrated, hungry or tired
 - _____
Have an adequate vocabulary to express their frustration
 - _____
Have adequate language skills to describe their frustration
-

Some children interpret events around them in an inaccurate and distorted fashion, and this can greatly impede the process of collaborative problem-solving.

Give your child feedback: “You’re starting to look frustrated (hungry, tired), is there something I can help you with?”

Give them the words: teach basic feeling words (happy, sad, frustrated, and later confused, disappointed, excited, bored and annoyed).

Give frequent cue for using feeling words: ask the child to tell you when they’ve had different feelings during the day.

Give them words and phrases to express more detail:

“I’m very sad right now.” “I’m angry with you.” “That’s bothering me.” “I don’t know how to do that” “I don’t know what to do.” “I’m scared.” “I don’t feel right.” “I need a break.” “I can’t talk about that right now.” “I need some help.”

“Slow down, I can’t keep track.”

Website

Dr. Ross Greene has a website, Center for Collaborative Problem-Solving, at <http://www.explosivechild.com>.

