

## FLEXIBILITY

### *Interpersonal Characteristics Domain*

Flexibility is an essential trait for 4-H Volunteers and youth. Flexibility is the readiness and ability to change and adapt to different circumstances. A flexible person is ready and able to think on their feet, find solutions to problems, and don't get stuck in a rut of negative thinking when a situation changes. Being flexible can help you cope with change and new information and has been shown to have a positive link to youth's educational abilities, resiliency, ability to manage stress better, and improved creativity<sup>2</sup>. Ultimately, your ability to act flexibly is connected to your cognitive flexibility, which involves two skills<sup>1</sup>.

- **Flexible thinking**- your ability to think about a problem in a new way.
- **Set shifting**- your ability to let go of an old way of doing things to try a new way.

### Flexibility Practices

**Promote Flexible Thinking.** Lead the way by sharing how you practice flexibility and encouraging others on when and how they can be flexible.

**Share Your Practice.** Tell youth how you practice flexibility to help them see how they can do it. If you are flexible in planning a meeting or activity, share that with the youth when you start a meeting or activity.

**Encourage others.** Use words or phrases of encouragement to help youth during an active struggle with flexibility.

**Redirect.** Find ways to help youth overcome negativity to find a solution or a way to move forward.

**Practice Problem Solving.** During an actively inflexible situation, pausing what you are doing and rethinking your path ahead can be highly beneficial. This can be done individually or in a group setting but requires creative thinking and avoiding focusing on the negatives. In a group setting, it may require you to use encouragement and redirection to help others stay focused on developing solutions. Identify at least three keys, consider/discuss each (pros and cons), and make a democratic decision. Support the chosen solution and help the group move forward, but remember that if it doesn't work, that is okay, and you can always practice problem-solving again!

**Review and Relax the Rules.** Most 4-H programs are guided by rules and expectations designed to provide structure and consistency. Sometimes, inflexible thinkers need to be more flexible with the rules. To practice flexibility, you can review rules (individually or as a group) to identify where leniency can be allowed. This can significantly benefit youth as they learn boundaries and leadership skills. Be sure you have the authority to offer the leniency under consideration. You may need to check with your 4-H Professional to be sure.

**Be a Flexible Role Model.** You are a role model for youth in many ways, but being a flexible role model may be the best way to show youth how they can be flexible. Try to avoid focusing on the negative of any given situation. Find and try new solutions, and if things don't work out as planned, don't be discouraged; make a new plan and move forward! Your flexibility can improve relationships and have a positive impact on youth.

## Gauging Your Flexibility

To gauge or improve your flexibility, it is essential to do an honest inventory of your skills.

***You may be a little inflexible if you ever thought, said, or practiced things like:***

- “That’s not how we did it when I was in 4-H?”
- “Why do we have to change? We have done it this way for years!”
- Found yourself arguing against the same thing on multiple occasions or over time.

***You may be flexible if you ever practiced things like:***

- Came up with multiple solutions to a problem to determine the best course.
- Bent the rules without breaking policy or the law somewhat and reasonably for participant success.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Hurley, K. 2016. Flexible Thinking: How to Encourage Kids to Go with the Flow

<sup>2</sup>Sipl, A. (2021). 7 Cognitive Flexibility Strategies to Support Your Adolescent

*The original resource 4-H Interpersonal Characteristics: Flexibility (VRKC: Volunteer Research, Knowledge, & Competency Taxonomy) was developed by Celeste Carmichael and Kimberly Fleming.*

VRKC Fact Sheet Series provided by  
**Program Leaders Working Group: 4-H Volunteerism Committee**

**Author** (September 2022)  
Jamie Morris, University of Maryland

**Editor**  
Gemma Miner, University of California