

# The Explosive Child

by Dr. Greene

The Northeast Foundation for Children

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## Seeing the "Inflexible-Explosive Child" in a New Light

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But once in a while, you may have the child who simply won't budge. We'll call this child Karen. When you tell Karen again to put away the art, her face gets red and contorted. She hurls the art materials against the floor, yells expletives, and kicks her chair.

There is clearly something different about the Karens in our classes. Ross Greene, a Harvard University clinical psychologist who has worked with such children for 20 years, calls them "inflexible-explosive" children. While all children get frustrated sometimes, inflexible-explosive children – boys and girls – get frustrated far more easily than others do. They blow up or melt down over seemingly trivial things. During one of their episodes, they are genuinely unable to control their thinking and behavior. It's as if their brain has entered an altered state.

The unpredictability, frequency and intensity of inflexible-explosive children's explosions often alienate their classmates and cause deep pain to themselves, their families, and the adults they work with. A large number of these children are diagnosed with conditions such as oppositional-defiant disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. But beyond knowing these labels, how do we help these children become more flexible and handle frustration more successfully?

"Unfortunately, there is no bible on how to deal with these children," says Greene. Experience has shown that standard behavior management strategies, such as using rewards and punishments, don't work very well to prevent or manage explosions in these children. The good news, says Greene, is that once we understand why these children behave as they do, new ideas for helping them may begin to emerge.

## **A lack of skills**

The most important thing to know about inflexible-explosive children is that they don't want to be inflexible or explosive, according to Greene. Their meltdowns aren't intentional or planned, not a way to manipulate adults, get attention, test limits or engage in a power struggle. Indeed, watch a child during a meltdown and you'll see how miserable he or she is feeling. No child would want to feel that way. Listen to the child afterwards, and you'll often hear how sorry he or she is for having lost control. So lack of motivation to behave is not the problem.

Rather, Greene has learned that these children "lose it" because they lack the thinking skills needed for coping with frustration – skills such as expressing needs and desires effectively, delaying gratification, shifting from one mindset to another, thinking through possible solutions, and moving beyond rigid, black-and-white thinking to seeing the grays in a given situation. "Just as some children lag in acquiring reading skills and other children do not develop great athletic skills, still others ... do not progress to the degree we would have hoped in the skills of flexibility and frustration tolerance," writes Greene in his book *The Explosive Child*.

What does this mean for teaching? Lots. If lack of motivation is not the problem, then attempts at motivating these children to control their tempers or punishing them for losing their tempers make no sense. If lack of skills *is* the problem, then we need to help create an environment that best allows children to catch up on these skills.

## **Increasing the odds of success**

To be sure, helping an inflexible-explosive child is not a matter of following a simple recipe. It takes careful observations and assessments of the child, tailoring of strategies to fit the child, skill and art on the part of the adults, and a lot of effort. Progress may sometimes be slow or uneven. But, in his talk at the Responsive Leadership Institute, Greene outlined several steps that can increase the odds of success when working with an inflexible-explosive child:

*Make sure all the adults who interact with the child work together.* A lot of adults can help the child manage frustration, but it only takes one adult to make the frustration worse. So it's important that teachers, other school staff, and parents all reach a common understanding of the child and agree on the same strategies to try.

*Reduce demands on the child's tolerance for frustration.* Choose your battles. Is it really important for the child to do *everything* you'd like him or her to do? Probably not, at least not yet. Demanding that the child rise to all your expectations now will only add to his or her frustration. Better to focus on one or two key issues at a time and let the others go for now. Some teachers and parents have found it helpful to prioritize using Greene's three-basket approach. It goes like this:

- **Basket A** – These are non-negotiable behaviors, things that are so important that the child must do them when you say to do them. Risk meltdowns for things in this basket only.
- **Basket B** – These are behaviors that you're willing to negotiate on. You're not willing to risk a meltdown for these, but they're important enough for the child to learn to handle eventually. Make a plan for working on these slowly with the child.

- Basket C – These are behaviors that, when you step back and look at the big picture, really aren't important for now. Drop these for the time being. Don't even mention them to the child.

### One educator's experience using the basket approach

*Get to know – in advance – which specific situations tend to frustrate the child and make some changes.* Does the child get upset every time he or she is asked to do written math problems? Does working in small groups tend to cause trouble? Does the child get upset when he or she has to do the same activity for longer than a few minutes? If these are basket B behaviors, can you alter the assignment or task in some way that reduces frustration for the child, yet still achieves the main purpose? Let's say you want your class to write a paragraph on the story they've just read. But you know that Tina has trouble writing paragraphs and usually ends up throwing her pencil and yelling, "Writing is stupid!" If the purpose of the assignment is to get the child to reflect on the story, a reasonable alteration for Tina may be to have her tell her reflections orally to you or another student, with you or the student writing them down. If the purpose of the assignment is to reflect on the story *and* practice writing, could Tina dictate her thoughts, write one sentence, then have the listener write down the rest?

*Learn to read the warning signs of a meltdown and take quick action to avert it.* Signs may include sudden crankiness, whining, loss of energy, a certain look in the eyes, a change in voice, words like "I'm bored," "I'm tired," or "I hate you!" Maybe you back off, give the child some time to chill. Maybe you distract the child, directing his or her attention to something less frustrating. Or you can feed the child some words to help him or her articulate what's so frustrating. You can also coach the child in remembering what to do when frustrated. There's no one way to head off a meltdown. The trick is to know the child, have a repertoire of responses, and rehearse them ahead of time – in your own head and, if appropriate, with the child.

### More on coaching

*See past what comes out of a child's mouth during a meltdown.* A lot of what a child says or screams in the grip of frustration is just "mental debris," says Greene. Taking the child's words personally, getting angry, or punishing him or her for offensive language will only further fuel the meltdown. Hard as it may be, the best thing to do is to read the child's behavior as a sign that his or her ability to think rationally is low or nonexistent. This is a time for keeping cool and helping the child find a way through his or her frustration.

### **An approach that opens doors**

If there's one thing to remember about inflexible-explosive children, it's that they would behave well if they knew how, Greene emphasizes. This new way of seeing things is exciting because it opens doors, says Ruth Charney, a co-founder of the Northeast Foundation for Children who has taught children and teachers for nearly 30 years. It lets us think past labels and try to understand what's going on in the child's head. It lets us ask what specific skills the child needs to have to behave a certain way, then think about how we can, in a nonjudgmental way, help the child learn and practice those skills one manageable step at a time. While the approach is far from a quick or guaranteed fix, it takes us in the right direction. Says Charney, "I've seen teachers energized where before they were demoralized."

## Using "Baskets": A School Counselor Comments

"The basket approach helps avoid so many complications," says Rebecca Winborn, a clinical social worker and a counselor at the Atrium School in Watertown, Massachusetts. Harvard University clinical psychologist Ross Greene, who has worked with inflexible-explosive children for 20 years, suggests this approach as a way to decide when to stand your ground with a child, when to negotiate, and when to let things go.

What should go into which basket depends on the child and other specifics of the situation. "What are the resources this child has to bring to this challenge? What are realistic expectations for this day, this moment?" These are the questions to ask when deciding what to put in which basket, says Winborn, who has used the approach with children at school as well as with her own son.

Safety issues, of course, go into basket A. For a young child, says Winborn, an example might be that the child holds your hand when crossing the street. No matter how hard he or she protests, you insist on holding hands. If the child has a meltdown, you both endure it because staying safe while crossing the street is so important.

Basket B is also for high priority behaviors, but ones that you judge to be negotiable and that you're willing to take some time to work on. Basket B is where the child learns the important skills of problem solving, often by compromising, according to Greene. Let's say David always wants to choose which game to play during recess. If he doesn't get to choose, he explodes. During a calm time, teachers can introduce David to the idea of compromise and help him use it: "How about you choose the game on Mondays and Wednesdays, and let others choose on the other days."

And basket C? That's for everything else – things to put aside completely for now. In some cases, basket C might include writing in cursive (in the scheme of things, delaying learning cursive may not be such a big deal), sitting still for 15 minutes (it's probably fine to let the child get up and move around after only 5 minutes), letting the child come to storytime with a doodle pad when the other children are asked to come empty-handed (explain to the class that Monica listens better when her hands are busy). Basket C should be very full, at least at first, says Greene. "Basket C helps us work toward the goal of reducing your child's global frustration..., which should pay dividends the next time he does become frustrated," he writes in *The Explosive Child*.

Does putting things in baskets mean you permanently excuse the child from certain important behaviors? Certainly not. You can and should increase expectations of the child as his or her skills for handling frustration increase. And, says Winborn, "It's not a matter of losing your sense of authority. It's helping children learn to make the decisions they need to make."

What about fairness? Is it fair to the other children that Tommy or Julie or Justin gets to do some things they don't get to do? "I've never seen children struggle with that. Adults struggle with that more," says Ruth Charney, a co-founder of the Northeast Foundation for Children with 30 years of teaching experience. Children are in fact very good at perceiving that different people have different needs and that "fair" means everyone gets what he or she needs. Fair means honoring

our differences. The great thing about having a basket B and C for inflexible-explosive children, says Winborn, is that "their rigidity is honored."

## Coaching at the Brink of Meltdown: Two Educators Reflect

There's a moment, when a child is teetering on the brink of meltdown, when teachers have a golden opportunity to teach frustration-coping skills through careful coaching.

Ruth Charney, a co-founder of the Northeast Foundation for Children and a teacher of nearly 30 years, says the keys to using this kind of coaching successfully are to use simple language, teach one clearly attainable skill at a time, give the child a clear action to take, and practice the action with him or her.

Charney talks about Sheila as an example. Asked to do something – tie her shoes, come indoors, or turn off the computer – Sheila would complain venomously before understanding what she was being asked to do or why. Her teachers realized that Sheila didn't know how to ask questions calmly and respectfully. So they provided her with language to use to respectfully request an explanation, namely, "Could you explain why I need to \_\_\_\_\_ (tie my shoes, come in, turn off the computer, etc.)?" They modeled the appropriate tone of voice. Then they practiced this with her during her calm times.

The teachers also knew that even with practice, Sheila would do it wrong sometimes. So they agreed that when Sheila slipped into verbal attacks when asked to do something, the teachers would say "Kachunk, rewind the tape," signaling to Sheila that she'd make a mistake and could try again. This was a quick, simple, nonjudgmental way to give her another chance to choose the effective way to handle the situation, says Charney. The method helped. "Ninety percent of the time she would speak more respectfully with adults," Charney says. "We worked on one skill. We changed that behavior." Then they could move on to her verbal skills with peers. "There were probably a hundred things she had to learn. But we worked on one at a time."

Rebecca Winborn, a clinical social worker and a counselor at the Atrium School in Watertown, Massachusetts, remembers working with Tim, an unusually bright kindergartner with strong verbal skills. Tim had a problem when anyone said he was wrong or made him feel less than the top kid around. Tim liked to play a certain card game with lots of complicated rules. When the other children challenged his understanding of the rules, he would break down into a long, intense tantrum. His teachers and other involved adults decided that it was important for him to be able to play the game without tantrums, which meant he had to learn to accept that the other children's understanding of the rules could be right and his could be wrong.

Tim's teachers learned to recognize his warning signs of meltdown. Just when things were getting tense during a game, they'd step in to help him deal with the moment. "It looks like this is difficult for you," they'd say. "Here are some choices you have. If you want to stay in the game, you'll need to understand that Andy knows the rules. Or you can leave the game." Sometimes Tim would choose to leave. Sometimes he'd choose to stay. Sometimes he'd have a tantrum, in which case he'd be removed from the game.

Over the course of the year, as Tim became more able to gauge his own frustration level and more aware of the cost of meltdowns, he was able to stay in the game more and more often. But it took the teachers stepping in and offering a roadmap for coping. "With caring coaching from parents and teachers, he was increasingly able to learn what the difficult situations were and what

to do," says Winborn. Certainly the goal is to teach children to see the roadmap on their own more often. But while they're learning, they need others to do this work for them, says Winborn.

Like all strategies to handle difficult behaviors in children, this approach isn't a guarantee. But it can help, and it's one for educators to add to their repertoire.

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### **An approach that opens doors**

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