

***Supporting Executive  
Functioning in Young Children  
with Autism and Other  
Developmental Disabilities***

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Since the jobs that our preschoolers will do probably don't exist yet, our priority is to teach them the skills to adapt and inquire and question and cooperate...life skills. So much more useful than rigid concepts such as the alphabet.

**CAROLINE BELLOUSE**

**EVERYDAYPOWER**



# Today's Plan

Tantrums and Executive Function Skills

Language Modifications for Preschoolers

Core Executive Function Skills

Hands on Activities

Key Strategies for Success



I can go from  
Happy to Tantrum  
in .34 of a second,  
wanna watch?



somee cards  
user card



The number one emotional/behavioral concern in preschool is:

**DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR/TANTRUMS**



Waiting

Following directions

Coping with feelings

New things

**EXECUTIVE FUNCTION**

Using words when upset

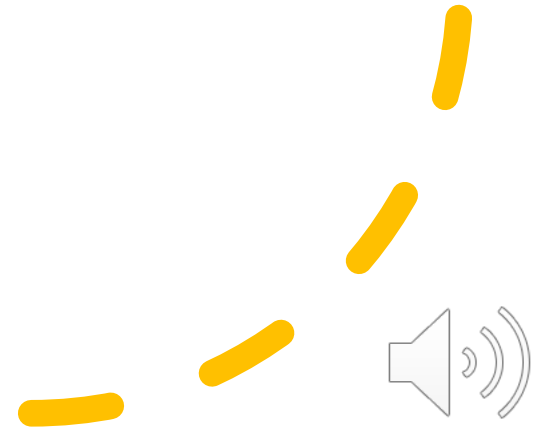
Handling changes

Getting along with others

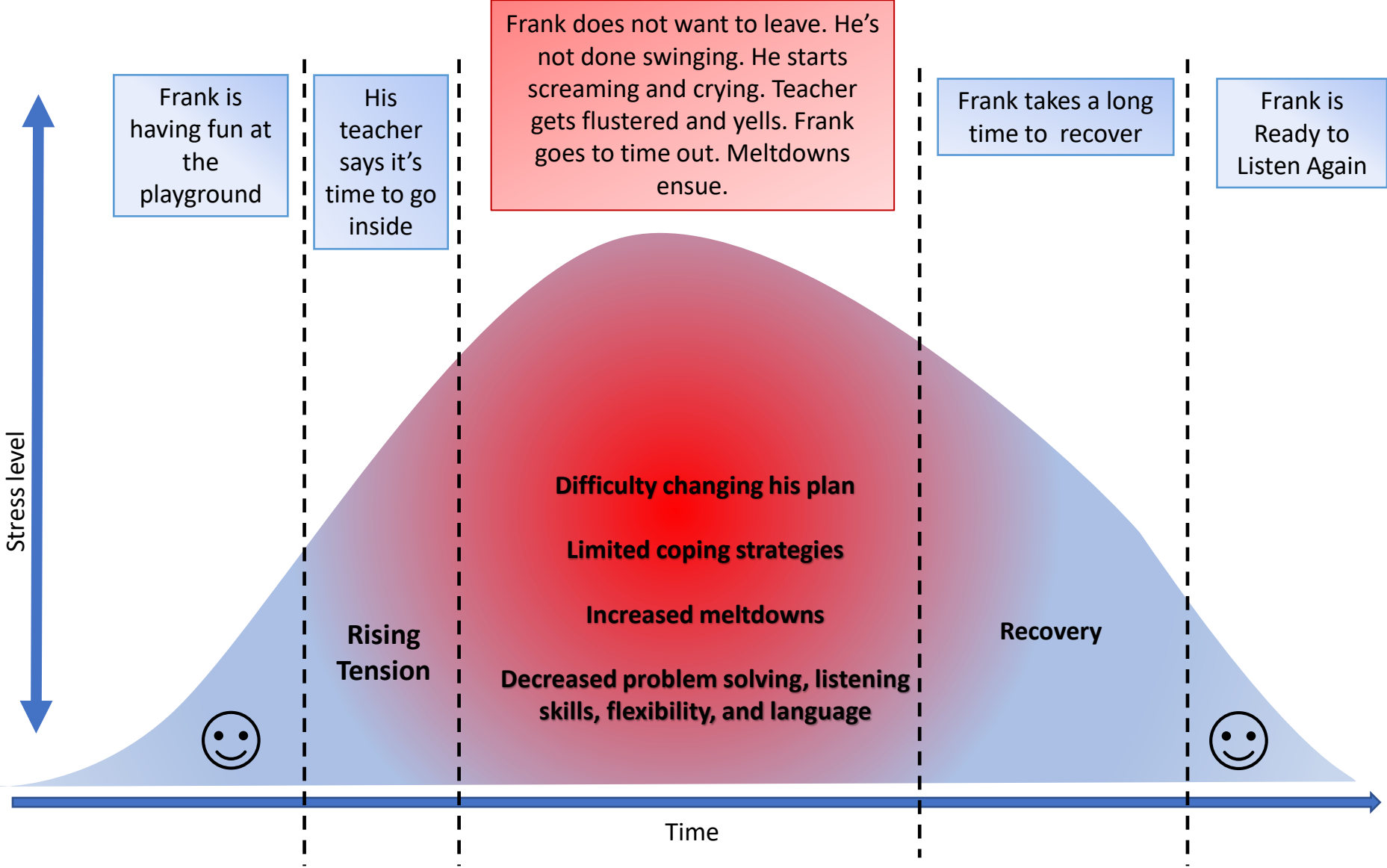


# Let's think about Frank

- Frank is an autistic 4-year-old
- He has flexible, sentence level language and can discuss removed contexts
- He loves the playground, particularly swinging. He enjoys counting his swings until he hits 100!

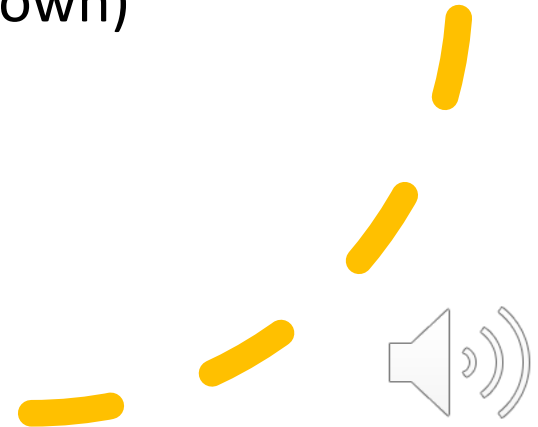


# Anatomy of a Tantrum



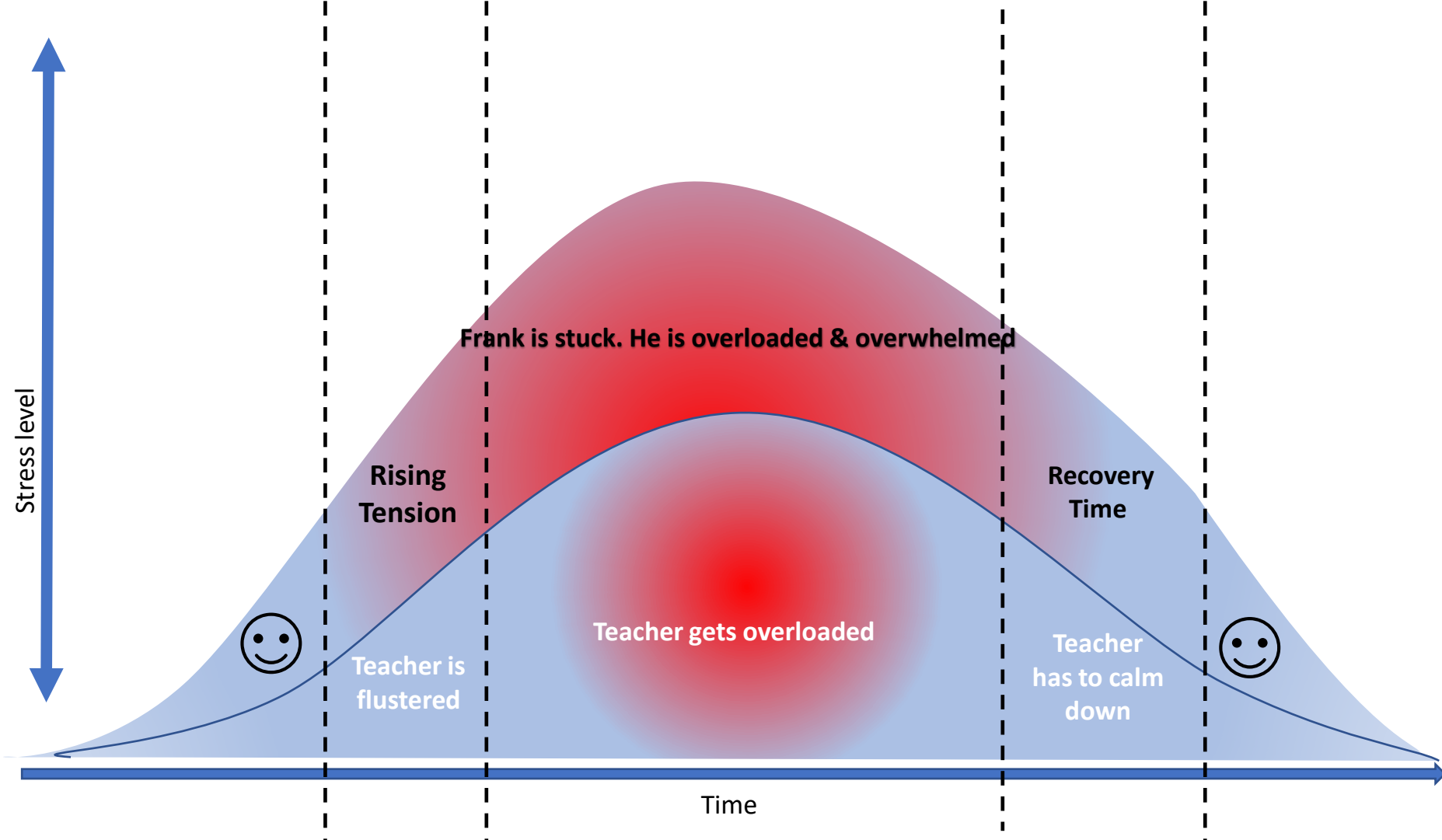
# What is Frank's tantrum telling us?

- He's having a hard time with:
  - Abrupt transitions
  - Lack of control/choice in the plan
  - Changing his plan (he was not done swinging!)
  - Flexible thinking
  - Using language when overloaded (Yelling/crying)
  - Coping skills (difficulties calming down)





# How is this affecting Frank's teacher?



# How can we help?



WHAT CAN FRANK'S TEACHER DO  
TO SUPPORT HIM?



WHAT SKILLS WILL HELP FRANK  
TRANSITION MORE SUCCESSFULLY?



# Limiting Language for Preschoolers

- Think about the last time you were upset or having big feelings?
- We struggle with this as adults with intact language systems
  - Harder for children
- Reduce language when kids are upset
- Language skills may “disappear” when kids are upset → Make it simple and predictable



# Core Executive Function Skills for Preschool

**Flexible Fun!**

**Coping Skills**

**Waiting**

**Flexible  
Thinking**

**Make a New  
Plan**

**Sharing &  
Taking Turns**



Tools and strategies for teaching executive function skills in preschoolers



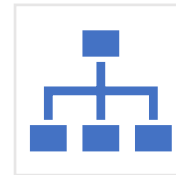
Introducing Visual Supports



Using Verbal Scripts



Harnessing Incidental Teaching



Modeling & Coaching

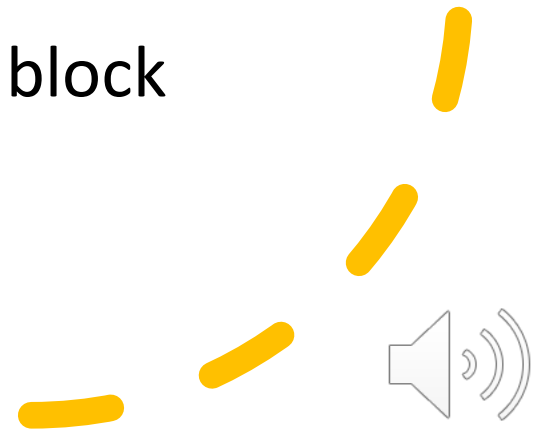


Facilitating Peer practice



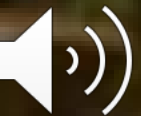
# Coping Skills

- We all can feel overwhelmed by our feelings
  - This happens more often for children
- We need to teach children the language that goes with their feelings
- Language for feelings = ability to express themselves → manage own behaviors → avoiding meltdowns
- "I'm feeling mad" vs. throwing a block



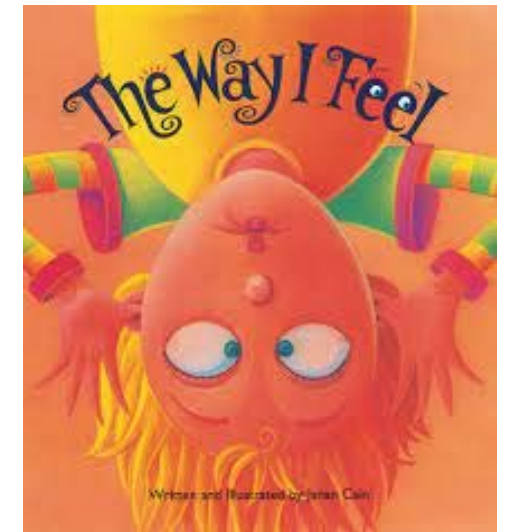
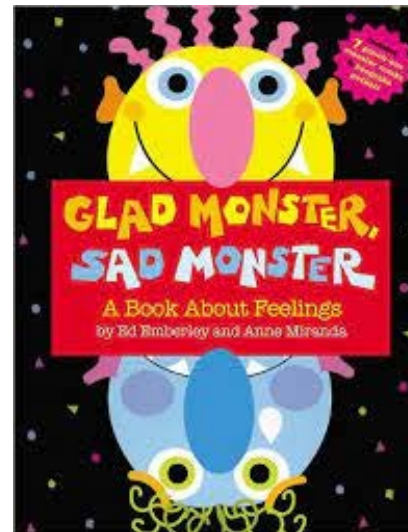
# Challenges in the Classroom

- Meltdowns and big feelings
- Crying, yelling, hitting, throwing, biting, eloping, breaking materials rather than using language
- Sometimes trigger is obvious and sometimes it is not



# How to target?

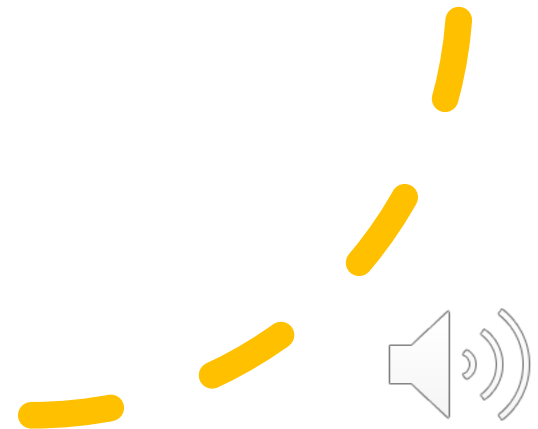
- Labeling feelings is the first step in problem solving!
  - Reading books
  - Identifying emotions and expanding emotional vocabulary
- Model key vocabulary
  - “I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_.”
  - “I can see you’re feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Visuals, visuals, visuals!
- Live life out loud!





# Waiting

- Waiting is a learned skill
- Children need to be taught HOW to wait
- Telling a child to “be patient” does not work
- Concrete “waiting skills” = self-regulation while waiting



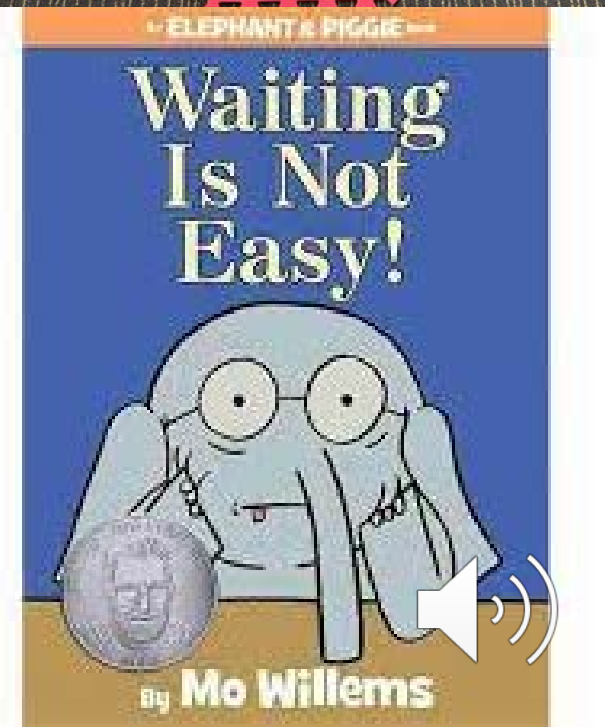
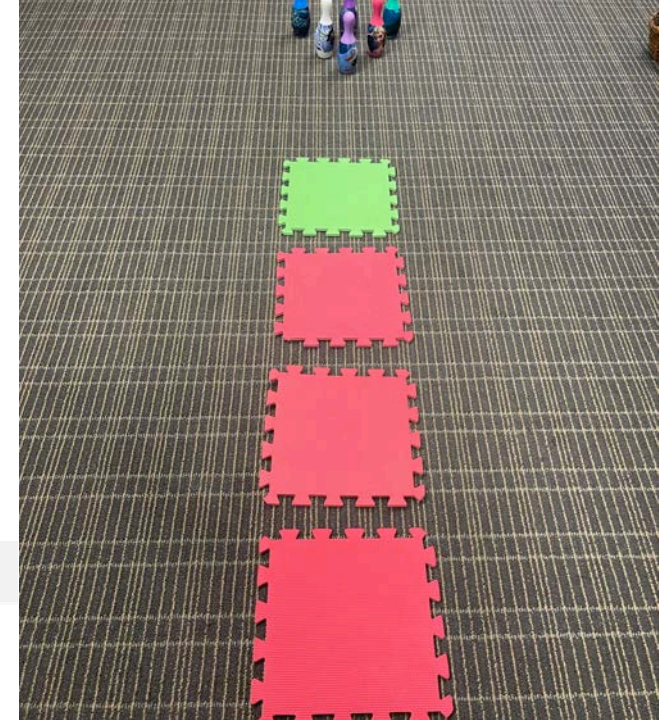
# Challenges in the Classroom

- Meltdowns in line at the water fountain
- Difficulties waiting for supplies to be passed out
- Waiting for turns on the playground
- Calling out in circle time
- Grabbing toys from peers



# How to target?

- Books
- Planned waiting
- Teach strategies
- Model key vocabulary
  - “Waiting can be hard. I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when I have to wait.”
  - “I know how to wait. I can \_\_\_\_\_ (count to 5, take a deep breath, give myself a hug, sing a little song quietly, play I Spy) while I wait.”
- Exciting hands-on activities to practice strategies
- Visuals, visuals, visuals!



# Waiting Skills in Action

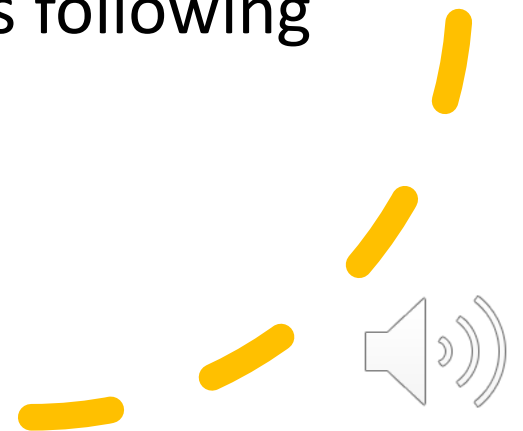


# Video Review



# Flexible Thinking

- When a plan doesn't work, children can feel disappointed, become **stuck**, and unable to think of a flexible way to problem solve
- Most effective way to help children learn to be flexible is to:
  - Model flexible thinking
  - Help children think of flexible options
  - Praise children for flexible choices
- Being flexible is **NOT** the same as following rules
- Flexible thinking = lots of fun!



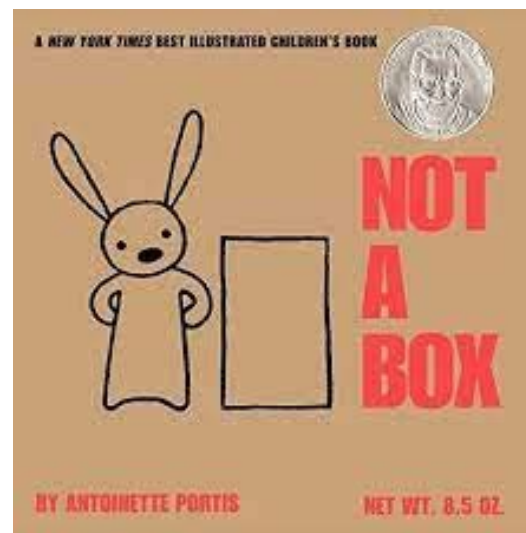
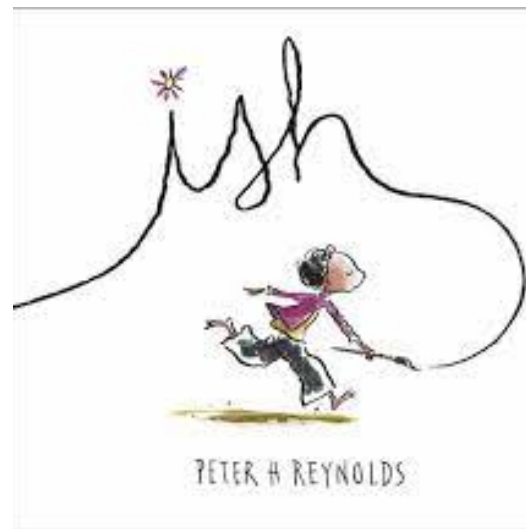
# Challenges in the Classroom

- Difficulty when the plan changes
  - Substitute teachers
  - Field trips
  - Spirit week
- Concreteness/literalness in play and in language
  - “it is NOT a cupcake”
- Getting **stuck**
- Difficulties with transitions (recess, lunch)



# How to target?

- Books
- Hands on activities (crafts, games)
- Model key vocabulary
  - “I can be a flexible thinker!”
  - “When we are flexible thinkers, we find new things we like.”
- Planned flexibility
- Praising flexible moments



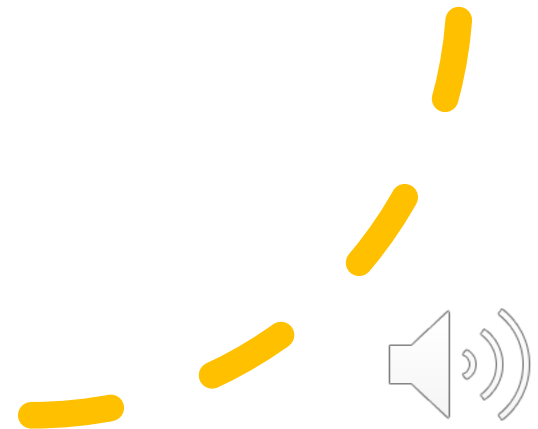
Today's Plan		
1	Catch up	
2	Book	
3	Bowling or bubbles	
4	Frank's choice 😊	





# Making New Plans

- When a first plan doesn't work, children can become stuck and disappointed
- Alternate plans help prevent disappointment



# Challenges in the Classroom

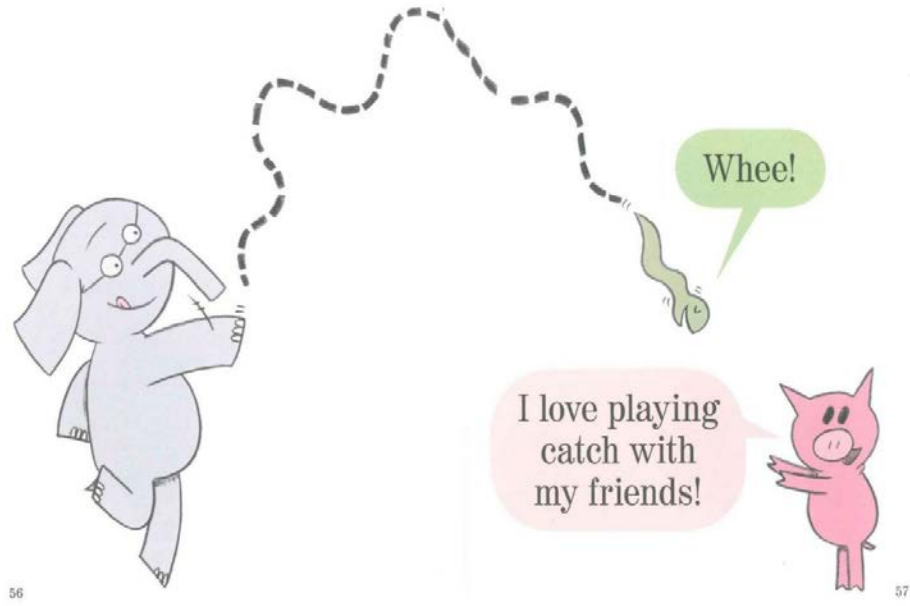
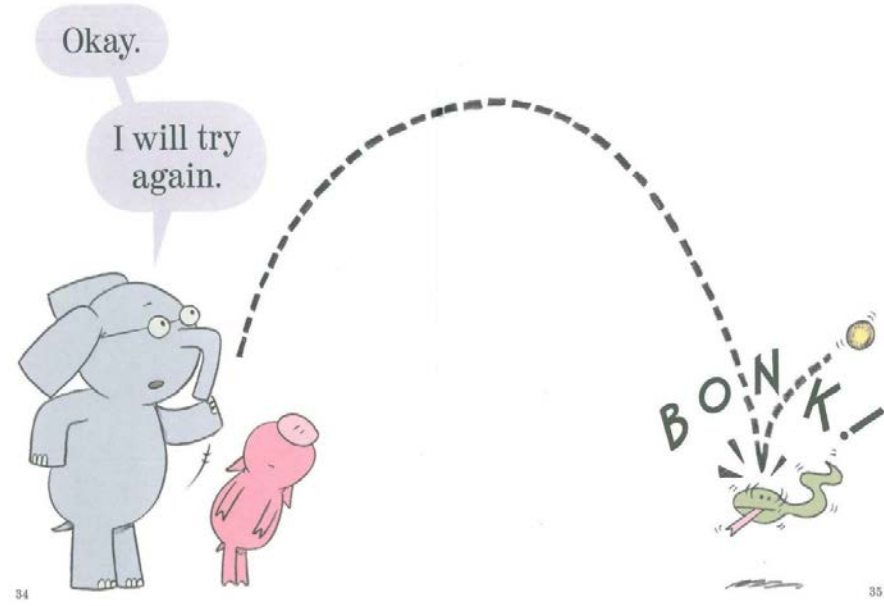
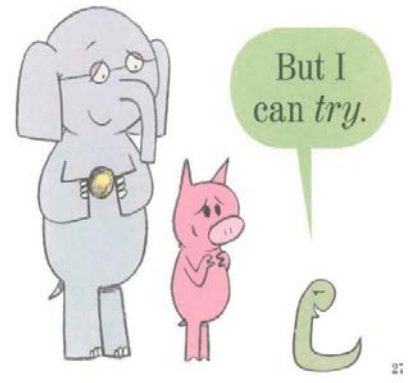
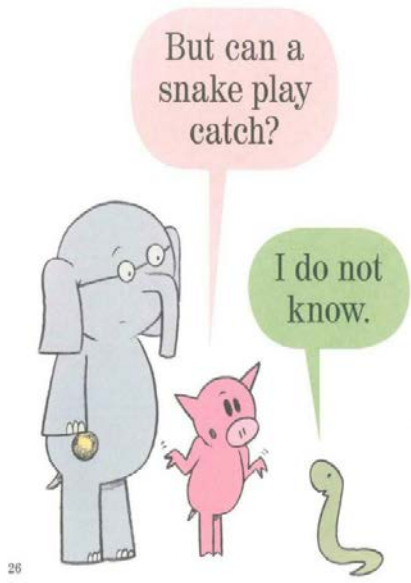
- Stuck on own plan in play
- When a plan doesn't work, get stuck and can't shift
- Plan to play on the swings but none available
- Meltdown when given *wrong* crayon
- Difficulty communicating plan to adults before meltdown



# How to target?

- Books
- Key vocabulary to model
  - “Sometimes my plans don’t work”
  - “My plan didn’t work. I’m disappointed. I need a new plan.”
- Sometimes we need to try lots of different plans to find one that works
- Planned sabotage





# Flexibility in Action



# Video Review



# Sharing & Taking Turns

- Problems sharing and taking turns are among the most common causes of disagreements between children
- Children often experience sharing and taking turns as having to give something up or lose control of something they really want
- Sharing & take turning = everyone gets a little bit of the thing that they want



# Challenges in the Classroom

- Difficulties giving up items
- Big behaviors around preferred objects
- Sharing items at centers
- Getting off the swings at recess
- Snatching preferred objects away from peers





# How to target?

- Books
- Supported practice with peers
  - Sharing: Arts/crafts with limited supplies
  - Turn taking: bowling, blocks, dress up
- Key vocabulary to model
  - “We can share or take turns”
  - “Our plan is to take turns. Noah will go first, and then Anna will go”
- Make a plan & use visuals!



# Key Strategies for Success

- Use visuals
- Praise flexibility
- Repetition
- Consistent, shared vocabulary
- Using music as a tool



Repetition  
Repetition  
Repetition  
Repetition



Help your child learn to  
wait calmly.



Count  
123



Being a **flexible thinker**  
helps us get "unstuck"  
when things don't go as  
planned.

**Instead of:** "Stop being so stubborn!  
It's time to go."

**Try:** Talking about getting  
**unstuck.**

“ I can see you're  
feeling stuck. Let's  
see if we can get  
unstuck together. ”

# Parent Materials

- MODELING is critical →  
Parents and teachers need  
to be flexible too!



# Let's Think About Frank

- What would help Frank (and his teacher) the next time they go to the playground?
  - A flexible plan for his turn (50 swings)
  - New plan in case swings are busy
  - Coping skills and waiting visual
  - Preparation for transitions (verbal reminders from his teacher)
  - Teacher modeling flexibility
  - Praising Frank's flexibility!



# Big Picture Goal

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- In teaching early executive function skills, our goal is to give kids the foundational skills they need to grow and develop
- We are not aiming for perfect skills in preschool!



Questions?

