



THE ARCHETYPE APPROACH / CASE STUDY LIBRARY

AA-CS-019

Structure Before Flexibility

How Playful Variation Helped a Child Loosen Rigid Routines

CASE TYPE	Order, Flexibility & Emotional Regulation
AGE / CONTEXT	Early years child - exact age not retained in the surviving case note
DATE RANGE	Earlier practice period - exact dates not retained
PRACTICE SITE	Children of Towan Kindergarten
PRACTITIONER	Oliver Riddett

EMERGING AA PRINCIPLE

Flexibility is easier to develop when structure is respected first and loosened through safe, playful variation.

OBSERVE

What is happening?

RECOGNISE

What pattern is this?

BALANCE

What is missing?

INTEGRATE

What has emerged?

Observe -> Recognise -> Balance -> Integrate

What was happening?

The pattern as it first appeared



INITIAL PRESENTATION

A child showed a strong need for structure and predictability. Uncertainty could produce marked distress, while familiar routines and clear order appeared to provide containment. The pattern became most visible when plans changed or events unfolded differently from what the child expected.

RECURRING PATTERNS

- Distress during unpredictability
- Rigidity around routine
- Attempts to regain control through structure
- Emotional collapse during change
- Greater difficulty when expectations shifted suddenly
- Improvement when flexibility was introduced playfully

OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOURS

The child could become emotionally overwhelmed when routines changed or when events felt unpredictable. Control through structure appeared to function as a way of restoring safety rather than simply as a preference for rules.

CONTEXTS AND TRIGGERS

- Unexpected changes
- Altered routines
- Loss of a known sequence
- Situations requiring spontaneous adaptation
- Uncertainty without enough preparation

WHAT WAS THE CHILD SHOWING US?

The child appeared to need dependable structure before uncertainty could feel tolerable. Rigidity was carrying a regulating function.

What pattern emerged?

Seeing beneath the behaviour



PRIMARY PATTERN

Planner

SUPPORTING PATTERN

Explorer under-accessed during uncertainty

BRIDGING FUNCTION

Planner / Explorer Order Axis - predictability widening into safe experimentation

SHADOW / IMBALANCE PRESENTATION

Planner qualities - sequence, routine, foresight and dependable structure - had become rigid enough that change could trigger distress or collapse. The issue was not structure itself. The imbalance appeared when structure became the only safe way to proceed.

POSSIBLE UNDERLYING NEEDS

- Predictability
- Preparation for change
- A dependable adult response
- Small experiences of uncertainty that remained emotionally safe
- Permission to explore without losing all structure
- Playful rather than confrontational flexibility

DEVELOPMENTAL UNDERSTANDING

The child's control through structure made more sense when seen as an attempt to maintain safety. Directly removing routines risked increasing dysregulation; the developmental task was to widen tolerance without stripping away the child's organising strength.

PERCEPTION SHIFT

The key perception shift was from 'This child is too rigid' to 'This child is using order to stay regulated and needs help discovering that change can also be safe.'

What was introduced?

Keeping the strength - widening access



ADULT APPROACH

- Respect the child's need for predictable structure.
- Prepare changes rather than springing them unnecessarily.
- Introduce small variations through humour, play and shared exploration.
- Keep adult responses calm when the child struggles with change.
- Treat flexibility as a developmental capacity to scaffold, not a demand to comply.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND PLAY ADJUSTMENTS

- Reliable routines as a secure base
- Small playful changes within familiar experiences
- Choice within structure
- Open-ended activities where the outcome could vary safely
- Opportunities to experiment without competitive or performance pressure

BALANCING RELATIONSHIP

Planner -> Explorer

Playful flexibility allowed uncertainty to arrive in smaller, safer doses. The child did not have to abandon order in order to explore; order became the base from which exploration could begin.

BALANCING SEQUENCE

Know -> Prepare -> Vary -> Explore

The aim was not to remove routine. It was to make routine flexible enough that change no longer had to feel like collapse.

What became newly available?

Growth without losing the original strength



OBSERVABLE CHANGE

The surviving practice note records improvement when playful flexibility was introduced. The child's response to change became less dependent on rigid control, suggesting that safe variation was widening access to Explorer qualities without removing the regulating value of Planner structure.

WHAT BECAME VISIBLE

- Greater tolerance of variation within familiar experiences
- More room for play when plans changed
- Reduced need for structure to remain completely fixed
- A wider range of responses to uncertainty
- Planner strengths retained while Explorer access increased

WHAT EMERGED OVER TIME?

The important shift was not from routine to no routine. It was from brittle structure toward living structure - predictable enough to feel safe, but flexible enough to move with reality.

INTEGRATION

Order remained a strength, while curiosity and flexibility became more available alongside it.



Structure Before Flexibility

Children who rely heavily on routine may not need adults to dismantle structure. They may need enough reliable structure to feel safe, followed by carefully introduced experiences of variation. Flexibility can grow from security rather than from pressure.

AA SNAPSHOT

PRIMARY PATTERN

Planner

AXIS OF BALANCE

Planner / Explorer - Order

BALANCING STRATEGY

Predictability plus playful variation

CASE CATEGORY

Order, Flexibility & Regulation

BALANCING CAPACITY

Explorer

MAIN PRESENTATION

Distress, rigidity and control during unpredictability

OUTCOME THEME

Greater flexibility without removing structure

SOURCE QUALITY

Concise longitudinal practice note

CLOSING REFLECTION

“Structure can be a root, not a cage. Once the child feels held, curiosity has somewhere safe to grow.”

AA TAGS

Planner

Explorer

Order Axis

Routine

Predictability

Flexibility

Emotional Regulation

Control Through Structure

Playful Variation

Uncertainty

AA EVIDENCE THEMES

- Rigidity can serve a regulating function
- Predictability can create safety for exploration
- Playful flexibility may widen tolerance of change
- Planner strength need not be removed to develop Explorer access
- Balance rather than correction

AA DEVELOPMENTAL REFLECTION | EVIDENCE STRENGTH: 3.5 / 5

This is a stronger case than AA-CS-018 because the surviving note includes both the presentation and the direction of change: distress around unpredictability, rigid routine and control through structure improved through playful flexibility. It still lacks dated incident-level observations, so the claim should remain proportionate. Recovering two concrete before-and-after examples would likely move this into the strongest tier of the library.