



Adaptability: A key capacity whose time has come

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Responding to change, novelty, variability and uncertainty

In coming years, the world will undergo substantial change. To varying degrees, and in different ways, industry will be reshaped around environmental demands and pressures, medical advancements will extend the human life span, pharmaceutical developments will present new possibilities for human functioning, communications technology will be reshaped around enhanced speed and extreme bandwidth, high-level globalised computing networks will accelerate information generation and dissemination, and expansion of electronic databases and resources will transform education and learning. An individual's capacity to successfully respond to these contextual changes will be critical for their health and wellbeing.

Alongside these dramatic contextual shifts, throughout one's own life there will be significant personal change and transition. These include starting and finishing school, beginning post-school education and/or work, moving out of home, starting and changing jobs, marriage/partnership, child rearing/caregiving, and retiring from work.

Indeed, childhood is characterised by frequent states of change. For example, children will enter some form of preschool education or care, transition to school, adjust to new year-groups as they move through school, commence some form of extracurricular activity, encounter new school subjects and co-curricular activities, and probably change schools at some point in the journey. Every school day presents children with change, novelty, variability and uncertainty; each day, children will change tasks, encounter new topics, interact with different students, and experience new or changing teachers and lessons.

Overlaying and underpinning all this are the personal changes that take place through childhood and adolescence. These involve substantial cognitive, physical, emotional and social shifts that are part of the ordinary course of development.

Taking into account all these contextual and personal changes, Heraclitus summed it up well when observing that, "No person ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river, and it's not the same person."

To maintain optimal health and wellbeing through these ever-changing circumstances and conditions of childhood (and the world beyond it), a capacity to effectively respond to change, uncertainty, novelty and transition will be important. Adaptability has been identified as one such capacity (Martin, 2017).

Whereas much research and practical attention has been directed at understanding how children deal with adversity, relatively less has been directed to how children deal with the,

at times, changing, novel and uncertain situations that they face. Thus, alongside the ongoing need to attend to resilience (that is relevant to adversity), it is time for greater attention to adaptability. Philosophical consideration of change (and how we deal with it) is often linked to figures such as Lao Tzu and the Buddha. In recent years, adaptability has been an increasing focus of empirical psychological attention.

What is adaptability?

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines adaptability as "the capacity to make appropriate responses to changed or changing situations; the ability to modify or adjust one's behaviour in meeting different circumstances or different people" (VandenBos, 2015, p. 18). Our research group has extended this definition to include not only cognitive and behavioural regulation, but also emotional regulation in response to change, novelty, variability and uncertainty (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, & Liem, 2013). We refer to this as the 'tripartite' perspective on adaptability (Martin, 2017; Martin et al., 2013).

Cognitive regulation refers to one's ability to adjust thoughts and thinking to deal with changing, novel, variable, and uncertain situations. Behavioural regulation refers to one's ability to adjust the nature, level, and degree of behaviour or action to successfully navigate changing, novel, variable, and uncertain situations. Emotional regulation refers to one's ability to adjust usual or typical emotional responses to successfully interact with changing, novel, variable, and uncertain situations (Martin, 2017; Martin et al., 2013).

What have we found?

A good deal of our recent research has focused on adaptability. This program of study has developed and validated the Adaptability Scale (Martin et al., 2013), identified positive personal wellbeing consequences of adaptability (Martin et al., 2013), found differences in adaptability among at-risk student populations (Burns & Martin, 2014), demonstrated the positive link between adaptability, engagement, and achievement (Collie, Holliman, & Martin, 2016), identified the role of adaptability in reducing students' failure dynamics (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, Liem, & Collie, 2015), and showed how significant others' positive perceptions of children's adaptability can positively impact on these children's achievement outcomes (Collie & Martin, 2017a).

We have also conducted large-scale cross-national research identifying the academic yields of adaptability among children in the United States, the United Kingdom, and China (Martin, Yu, Ginns, & Papworth, 2016). Recent adaptability research has also

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extended to teachers in schools, showing that an autonomy-supportive workplace is associated with higher levels of teacher adaptability and that this is associated with teachers' wellbeing and student's academic outcomes (Collie & Martin, 2017b).

There is, therefore, a strong, emerging evidence-base supporting the importance of adaptability for children's academic and personal wellbeing. Also to note is that we have included measures of resilience in our research and shown that adaptability and resilience are correlated, but impact different wellbeing outcomes and in different ways (Martin et al., 2013).

Boosting adaptability

There are two ways we can help boost children's adaptability (also see Martin, 2014). The first is at a general level where children are taught about the cycle of adaptability and how this supports their responses to different circumstances. The second is at a more granular, situational level, where children are taught how to adjust specific cognition, behaviour, and emotion in the face of change, novelty, variability and uncertainty.

At the general level, it is important that children recognise the cycle of adaptability and to know their role in each part of the cycle. This might involve:

1. Teaching the child how to recognise change and uncertainty in life
2. Encouraging the child to adjust his or her thoughts, behaviour, and/or emotion (see granular level, below)
3. Pointing out the benefits of these adjustments in thought, action, and emotion
4. Helping the child continue to implement these adjustments as they navigate future change.

At the granular level, children are helped to understand the three dimensions where adjustments can be made—cognitive, behavioural, and emotional. They are then encouraged to identify specific ways they might adjust each of these three dimensions to assist them to successfully navigate new and unfamiliar situations that arise.



Adjustments to *thinking* include:

- thinking about a new or uncertain situation in a different way (e.g., encourage the child to think about the opportunities available in this new situation)
- adjusting assumptions or expectations during times of transition (e.g., encourage the child to see the positives in change, rather than seeing change as a 'bad' or undesirable thing).

Adjustments to *behaviour* include:

- seeking out new or more information, help, or resources to work through a new situation or activity (e.g., encourage the child to ask a teacher for some additional reading or websites for a new topic)
- taking a different course of action or developing a new schedule (e.g., showing the child how to reorganise their after-school routine following announcement of an unanticipated test or assignment).

Adjustments to *emotions* include:

- minimising disappointment, frustration, fear, or anger when circumstances change (e.g., helping the child minimise disappointment if a fun activity is cancelled)
- drawing on or maximising fun, enjoyment and curiosity when circumstances change (e.g., encouraging the child to focus on the stimulating and fun aspects of a new activity)
- minimising excitement in some situations (e.g., encouraging the child to keep a 'level head' if they are in a winning position in a task or event).

Children and the future of adaptability

In the past few decades substantial attention has rightly been dedicated to helping children navigate adversity, setback, and challenge in their lives. Much of this has focused on capacities such as resilience, coping, mental toughness, grit and the like. Far less attention has been directed to understanding how children respond and adjust to change, novelty, variability and uncertainty in their lives (which are different from adversity etc.). In today's rapidly changing world, successfully responding and adjusting to change will be vital for children to attain and sustain wellbeing through their lives. The capacity to successfully respond and adjust to change is referred to as 'adaptability'. Recent research has found that adaptability is significantly associated with personal and academic wellbeing. In addition, there are practical ideas on how to promote adaptability among children. While a focus on resilience is and will continue to be critical for wellbeing, at the same time it is vital that sufficient attention is also directed to adaptability—a key capacity whose time has come. ■

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A list of references can be accessed from the online version of this article (www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2017/december/martin).