

Research Guide

College and Career Competency: *Adaptability*

Definition:

Adaptability is the capacity to adjust one's thoughts and behaviors in order to effectively respond to uncertainty, new information, or changed circumstances (Martin et al., 2013). Adaptability encompasses cognitive, behavioral, and emotional adjustments (Martin et al., 2015). As a disposition and skill, adaptability is essential to an individual's psychological health, social success, and academic and workplace achievement. Individuals who are adaptable exhibit key behaviors like thinking and acting effectively under pressure, and adjusting timelines, results, and expectations appropriately when needs change (National Institutes for Health, n.d.).

Essential Components for Students:

1. Incorporate new information into your current mindset.
2. Act effectively in response to uncertainty, new information, or changed circumstances.

Research:

- Adaptability has been found to predict students' positive academic and nonacademic outcomes (Martin et al., 2013). Academic outcomes include motivation and engagement; non-academic outcomes include self-esteem and life satisfaction. For example, students who can adjust their thinking, behavior, and emotions in response to uncertainty have been found to be more ambitious in their future plans, participate in class more, and enjoy school (Martin et al., 2013). Adaptability and **self-regulation** work together to produce these positive academic outcomes (Martin et al., 2013). **Self-regulation** is important for ongoing direction and control, while adaptability is important when the student faces new demands and tasks.
- Adaptability helps individuals work through adversity. A longitudinal study by Martin et al. (2015) shows that high school students who demonstrate adaptability have a decreased likelihood of failure compared to students who lack adaptability. This is because adaptable students are better able to exercise control over their environment and resources and thereby avoid dynamics that can lead to failure, like anxiety, uncertainty, and procrastination.
- Adaptability makes a difference in the quality of an individual's personal and professional life. A recent study by Konstam et al. (2015) shows that the well-being of unemployed, emerging adults (aged 21 to 29) is significantly impacted by their ability to adapt. Specifically, the ability to adapt was expressed by making their own decisions, being confident in performing tasks efficiently, thinking about the future, and exploring surroundings (Konstam et al., 2015). According to a study by Kashdan and Rottenberg (2010), psychological flexibility is essential to maintaining positive psychological health. Psychological flexibility encompasses a number of processes, such as adapting to changing demands in a situation or shifting perspective. Indeed, Kashdan and Rottenberg's (2010) research on adaptability leads them to conclude that "a healthy person is someone who can manage themselves in the uncertain, unpredictable world around them, where novelty and change are the norm rather than the exception" (p. 21).

- Adaptability is a crucial part of **problem solving**, collaboration, and a range of other workplace skills, thus leading many employers to seek out employees who exhibit the ability and willingness to adapt. Research demonstrates that adaptability is also essential to an individual's career achievement and longevity (van Dam et al., 2015). Other research, including work by Levin (2015), stresses the importance of cultivating adaptability among students to prepare them to enter the workforce and thrive in tomorrow's dynamic workplace. Levin (2015) adds that teaching students to be adaptable helps to ensure America's future economic productivity.
- The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2012) identifies adaptability as an important dispositional trait and skill set for individual performance in school and the workplace. Indeed, research by the CCSSO indicates that adaptability has a notable influence on K–12 and career success. The CCSSO (2012) maintains that educators should “Introduce, define, and reward exemplary dispositions and behavior [including adaptability] early and often. Doing so builds and solidifies a foundation for learning skills and acquiring knowledge” (p. 4).
- The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21, 2015) has identified adaptability as one of the outcomes of its Framework for 21st Century Learning. Situated under the Life and Career Skills component of the framework, P21 connects flexibility and adaptability to **initiative** and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility. P21's outline of the behaviors associated with adaptability can serve as a useful set of guidelines or goals for teaching adaptability to students at all levels. See [the outline](#).

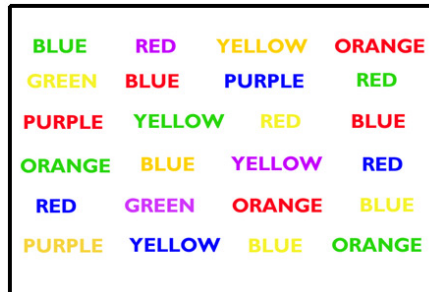
Assessments:

Please note that the assessments listed here reflect what is currently being used in multiple disciplines to measure adaptability. Not all of these measures will be easily used in classroom settings or by classroom teachers. However, the general knowledge that these measurements exist and the ability to review particular items from these assessments is valuable.

- The Adaptability Scale (Martin et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2013) can be administered by teachers to adolescents. It consists of nine items that are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include: “I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations to assist me in a new situation” and “To assist me in a new situation, I am able to change the way I do things.” The complete scale can be found in Martin et al. (2013).
- The Career Adapt-Abilities Scale USA (CAAS) can be administered to adolescents (Porfeli & Savickas, 2012). It contains 24 items divided into four subscales that measure abilities supporting adaptability: concern, control, **curiosity**, and confidence. Respondents are asked to rate how strongly they have developed the related skills, ranging from 1 (*not strong*) to 5 (*strongest*). Sample questions include: “Thinking about what my future will be like” (concern); “Making decisions by myself” (control); “Exploring my surroundings” (curiosity); “Taking care to do things well” (confidence). See Savickas and Porfeli (2012) for a sample questionnaire.
- The Child and Adolescent Wellness Scale (CAWS) is a 150-item survey designed to measure various domains of subjective well-being for students in grades 6–12 (Copeland et al., 2010, as cited in Simmons & Lehmann, 2013). The survey uses a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (*not like me*) to 4 (*very much like me*) and includes an adaptability subscale that measures ability to navigate difficult situations and preparation for change (Weller-Clarke, 2006). The CAWS can be obtained by contacting one of the authors, Ellis P. Copeland, directly by email: ecopeland@thechicagoschool.edu.
- Medford High School (2013) offers educators a rubric to assess student flexibility and adaptability. The rubric focuses on four cognitive and behavioral outcomes: explore and

experiment, work effectively in a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities, view failure as an opportunity to learn, and collaborative skills. The [complete rubric](#) is available.

- A fun way to exercise mental flexibility is to name the color that the words below are written in as quickly as you can (Michelon, 2011). For example, for the first word, “blue,” the correct answer is green. The goal of the exercise is to improve the speed of correct answers.



Instructional Practices:

- In an interview with the Independent Education Union of Australia (de Boehmler, 2014), Andrew Martin identifies a number of practical ways for educators to introduce adaptability or teach it in the classroom. Among his suggestions, Martin notes that teachers can encourage students to adopt flexible mindsets by asking them to put aside aspects of change that are out of their control and instead focus on those areas they can control, such as their outlook on the situation and strategy for dealing with it. Martin’s [complete interview](#) is available.
- Dr. James Wellborn (2014), a clinical psychologist who works with adolescents and their families, suggests a number of techniques that help teens become more flexible and adaptable. These include:
 - Do a “what if” exercise where a situation is presented (e.g., a flat tire) and the teen needs to imagine dealing with a change of plans.
 - Once plans are in place for a task or assignment, allow someone else to change them. Discuss the importance of coping with changes like that in the context of adaptability.
 - Change a common routine, for example, having the teen use the non-dominant hand for certain tasks, like opening a door or turning pages of a book.
- One approach that teachers can take to helping their students adapt to change is to create a dynamic environment within the classroom (Nichols, 2015). For example, have students complete a task (e.g., a story, a paper, a drawing) that someone else started.
- Psychotherapist Cindy Jett (2016) provides eight strategies for teaching children how to adapt. Among the strategies she outlines in her article, Jett suggests helping children work through worst-case scenarios and leading them to envision positive outcomes. See Jett’s [complete article](#).
- The Ohio National Guard Family Support and Warrior Readiness Program (2003) provides a guide to help teens in military families cope when a family member is deployed. The guide includes activities on adaptability. One exercise, called “But We Always Do It This Way” (p. 24), has the teen role-play a teacher whose vice-principal, counselor, and custodian all have the flu. The teen needs to adjust and reprioritize in order to make sure their “students” have a good day. Download [the guide](#).
- Improvisation, which is typically associated with performance arts, can be incorporated into the classroom to help teach students mental flexibility (Flanagan, 2015). Here are some examples of exercises that can be adapted to different subjects:

- One-Word Story, where students create a story one word at a time. Students can do this in a circle or by being called upon by the teacher. A variation is to have the teacher “conduct” the story by pointing to different students who talk as long as the teacher points at them. When the teacher points to a different student, that student has to take over the story.
- Living Wax Museum, where a student researches a historical figure and then acts the part of that person, improvising answers to questions from students and the teacher.
- To help students develop cognitive flexibility, have them retell a story or event from the standpoint of a different character, for example, Paul Revere’s horse (Willis, 2016). A variation would be to have students create alternative narratives for historical outcomes given a different set of assumptions, for example assuming the U.S. did not enter WWII.
- Students can learn to adjust their thinking by [engaging in a debate](#), where both sides of an issue need to be researched and argued (Education World, n.d.). Ideas include assigning topics about WWII to a small group of students to debate—for example, “Hiroshima: Was It Necessary?” The students research the topic and then argue both pro and con.

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Appendix A: Child and Adolescent Wellness Scale sample items

SAMPLE ITEMS FROM THE CHILD AND ADOLESCENT WELLNESS SCALE

Dear Student: Please complete the items below to the best of your ability. Please complete all items, based on the *ONE* response that best describes *how you see yourself today*. Circle *ONLY ONE* of the four possible responses for each item.

	1	2	3	4
	Strongly Disagree/Not Like Me	Disagree/Unlike Me	Agree/Like Me	Strongly Agree/Very Much Like me
Adaptability (15 items total)				
I am prepared for change				
I try to find new ways of looking at things				
I need to be perfect*				
Conscientiousness (17 items total)				
I am dependable				
The choices I make are thoughtful ones				
I blame other people for my problems*				
Empathy (12 items total)				
I enjoy differences in people				
I often fail to listen well*				
I can see things through other people's eyes				
Mindfulness (13 items total)				
I know what I am good at and not good at				
I am aware of how I make other people feel				
I lack confidence in my abilities*				
Self-efficacy (16 items total)				
I take pride in my accomplishments				
On difficult tasks, I give up*				
I am confident and self-assured				
Connectedness (15 items total)				
I am cared for and loved				
I get plenty of support from friends and the community				
I don't like to volunteer to help others*				
Emotional self-regulation (17 items total)				
I feel in control of my emotions				
I acknowledge my anger but don't express it with hostility				
I get upset when others don't see things my way*				
Initiative (13 items total)				
I am not engaged in life*				
I set challenging goals				
Other people value my ideas				
Optimism (17 items total)				
My problems seem to never end*				
I have positive expectations of others				
I keep on trying as I know I will get there				
Social competence (16 items total)				
I am not comfortable sharing my feelings*				
Listening is a very important skill				
I enjoy participating in activities with others				

*Reverse score.

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(from C. Simmons & P. Lehmann, *Tools for Strengths-Based Assessment and Evaluation*)