

SMARTS: An Executive Function Training Curriculum For Middle and High School Students

by Mark Katz, PhD

CHILDREN WITH ADHD struggle throughout their academic years, probably more than ever in middle and high school when executive function skills are crucial. Now there's an online program designed to help teachers *and* students improve those critical skills.

SMARTS (Success, Motivation, Awareness, Resilience, Talents, Success) is a comprehensive, user-friendly curriculum for improving students' executive function processes. Teachers use lesson plans that focus on five key executive function processes: setting

goals, thinking flexibly, organizing, remembering, and self-monitoring. The curriculum is designed to help middle and high school students, with or without executive function challenges:

- understand their own learning profiles (*how* they learn)
- learn how to identify strategies that match up with those profiles
- learn how to apply these strategies to schoolwork and homework, and
- learn how these same strategies can help them overcome their challenges.

In a modified version, the program will soon include a peer mentoring/peer coaching component where students are trained on how to help fellow students to apply executive function strategies to their schoolwork and homework.

SMARTS is the flagship program of the Research Institute for Learning and Development (ResearchILD), a nonprofit organization in Lexington, Massachusetts whose mission is to transform the lives of students with learning and attentional differences by helping them learn *how* to learn. Founded by Drs. Lynn Meltzer and Bethany Roditi, ResearchILD and its sister organization, ILD, comprise the Institutes for Learning and Development.

A community of strategy users

Teachers and students quickly realize that SMARTS is more than just teaching executive function strategies. It's about creating a new community of strategy users where strategies are valued and commended throughout the day. Both students and teachers are actively involved in creating this new sense of community. Teachers give extra credit when they see students generalizing executive function strategies to new subject areas or completing homework assignments. Teachers also decorate classroom walls each week with visual

Inside SMARTS— More Than Just Lessons

SMARTS has six interconnected units, and each unit contains three to five lessons focused on its broader theme.

- UNIT 1:** Introduction to Executive Function Strategies
- UNIT 2:** Goal Setting
- UNIT 3:** Cognitive Flexibility/Flexible Thinking
- UNIT 4:** Organizing and Prioritizing Materials, Time and Ideas
- UNIT 5:** Remembering/Accessing Working Memory
- UNIT 6:** Self-Monitoring and Checking

Each of the six units begins with an overview that links specific lessons to the broader theme of executive function. Also in each unit is an introductory video that highlights the most important elements involved in teaching that unit. Individual lessons include simple instructions that provide key points to remember: how to prepare the lesson, and how to effectively guide students through each executive function strategy. Teachers are encouraged to introduce one new lesson per week, and to adapt those lessons to meet each student's needs. SMARTS also shows teachers how to help students practice strategies in different contexts and to reflect upon what they've learned.



displays of effective strategies in which students are engaged. Students share their favorite strategies with other students in class, coaching and mentoring one another.

Learning how to learn

To be metacognitively aware is to think about how we think and how we learn, according to Lynn Meltzer, PhD, cofounder and president of ResearchILD. The SMARTS curriculum is designed specifically to help students to do just that. "If we can promote metacognitive awareness in our students, we will have created life-long learners," says Meltzer. As students go through the SMARTS program, they're continually given metacognitive prompts to think about the strategy they're choosing and how it's working for them, and see if there might be another strategy that could work better.

The program's three assessment tools also cultivate metacognitive awareness. One survey has students assess motivation and effort, another asks teacher how they perceive student effort, and a third assesses the use of SMARTS' five key areas of executive functioning.

SMARTS is currently being pilot-tested in schools across the United States and should be available to all U.S. schools before June 2015. ResearchILD hopes to have the mentoring component completed in 2016. The cost of the program will be available before the release date. 🗨

A clinical and consulting psychologist, Mark Katz is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center located in San Diego. He is a contributing editor to Attention magazine and a member of its editorial advisory board, a former member of CHADD's professional advisory board, and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.

Still Want More?

Visit researchchild.org for more information about SMARTS. To view the introductory unit, email Jamie Cutler at jcutler@researchchild.org for instructions.

To learn more about ResearchILD's approach to improving executive function strategies, check out these three books:

- Lynn Meltzer, *Executive Function in Education: From Theory to Practice*. New York: Guilford Press, 2007.
- Lynn Meltzer, *Promoting Executive Function in the Classroom*. New York: Guilford Press, 2010.
- Lynn Meltzer, *MetaCog: Metacognitive Awareness Assessment System*, ResearchILD. 2014, revised edition.

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