6 Keys to Developing Executive Function Skills: Building on Strengths for Independence at School and at Home

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TERRITORIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
6 Keys

1. Know Your Strengths
2. Co-Regulation
3. Emotional Regulation
4. Physical Regulation
5. Environment
6. Understand, Model & Teach EF Skills

WHY ARE EXECUTIVE SKILLS IMPORTANT?

- Metacognition
- Task Initiation
- Sustained attention
- Goal-directed persistence
- Planning/organizing
- Organization
- Time management
- Working memory
- Response inhibition
- Emotional control
- Flexibility
- Stress Tolerance

STALLED or STUCK

- Metacognition - thinking about your thinking, monitoring progress
- Task Initiation - getting started
- Sustained Attention - focusing and staying focused on a task
- Goal-Directed Persistence - working toward a goal, working around obstacles
Know Your Strengths

Informal Executive Skills Questionnaires

How would you describe your...

- Personality Strengths
- Executive Skills Strengths
- Parenting Strengths
- Energy and Resilience
How would you describe your child's/student's...

- Personality Strengths
- Executive Skills Strengths
- Learning Strengths
- Emotional Strengths
- Energy and Resilience

What is regulation?
Regulation is…

*Regulation* is when your thoughts, feelings, energy and actions work together to keep you safe and connected.

Sometimes we can do this ourselves; sometimes we need help.

- Palmer & Principe, 2023

When we are regulated, we can take care of ourselves and others in our community.

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Co-regulation is…

*Co-Regulation* is when another person uses their thoughts, feelings, energy, and actions to help someone feel safe and connected.

- Palmer & Principe, 2023

When we are regulated, we can help others to regulate.

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Self-regulation is…

*Self-Regulation* is when you use your thoughts, feelings, energy, and actions to stay safe and connected on your own.

- Palmer & Principe, 2023

We can learn to use tools and strategies to regulate.

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The three most important aspects of learning - attention, focus and memory - are all controlled by our emotions, not cognition.

- Marc Brackett, Ph.D.
  Professor, Researcher and Author

Emotional Regulation

- Plan and prepare for dysregulation
- Regulate yourself first
- Understand your child’s/student’s nervous system
- Check your expectations
- Check in with your child’s/student’s state of regulation
- “Be there and hold space” when they are dysregulated
- Strengthen your connection (relationship) when they are regulated
Emotional Regulation Involves Executive Skills:

- Response Inhibition
- Emotional Control
- Flexibility
- Stress Tolerance

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR EMOTIONAL REGULATION

- Physical Safety
- Connections/Relationships
- Felt Safety
- Co-Regulation
- Predictability
- Sense of Agency

PHYSICAL SAFETY

At Home
- Caregiver supervision
- Co-regulation
- Clear rules & expectations for safety
- Communication between caregivers
- Bully proofing/SEL
- Online Safety
  - https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent/view/online-safety

At School
- Inside/Outside caregiver supervision
- Co-regulation
- Clear rules & expectations for safety
- Staff communication
- Bully prevention programs/SEL
- Digital Citizenship
  - https://www.commonsense.org/learning/digital-citizenship

At Home
- Family:
  - Values & Rules
  - Consequences
  - Teach Emotional Reg.
  - Repair Plans
- Proactive Design:
  - Family Activity Planning & Transitions
  - Rituals & Routines
  - Visuals
  - Communication

At School
- Community:
  - Norms & Rules
  - Consequences
  - Teach Emotional Reg.
  - Repair Plans
- Proactive Design:
  - Schedule Design & Transitions
  - Rituals & Routines
  - Visuals
  - Communication

Fair is not Equal

Can’t not Won’t
**Response Inhibition**
- Emotional Control
- Flexibility
- Stress Tolerance

**Metacognition**
- Aware of the state of their emotions
- Aware of their nervous system

**Working Memory**
- Prioritizing
- Planning
- Goal-Directed
- Persistence

In the moment, they:
- Assess the situation
- Take other perspectives
- Delay reactions
Co-regulation

Repair Plans

APOLOGY (repairs relationships)
- stress tolerance
- emotional control
- working memory
- metacognition
- flexibility
- response inhibition
- sustained attention
- goal-directed persistence

RESTITUTION (makes other person feel better)
- stress tolerance
- emotional control
- working memory
- metacognition
- flexibility
- response inhibition
- sustained attention
- goal-directed persistence
- planning/prioritizing
- organization
- task initiation

“Feeling empathy for someone means ….creating a customized space in one’s own inner world to host the world of the other.”
- from The Role of Executive Functions in the Development of Empathy
Supporting Transitions

We can…

- Make them predictable
- Make the transition “expected”
- Give them a 5-minute warning
- Give them extra time to transition
- Manage our own frustration and anxiety so that we can stick to the plan and co-regulate as needed.

“Staying a Beat Ahead” (Sarah Ward’s Working Clock)


RITUALS & ROUTINES

**At Home**

- Religious Activities
- Greetings between family members (wink, handshake, lunchbox notes, etc.)
- Actions at the start/end of the day (walk dog)
- Special Dinners, Birthdays & Celebrations
- Graduations, Weddings, Funerals, Ceremonies
- Inside Jokes, Nicknames, Family Expressions
- Mindfulness & Visualization
- Family Movie/Game Night
- Family Trips/Vacations

**At School**

- Patriotic Activities
- Greetings
- Morning/Closing
- Mindfulness & Visualization
- Daily Dedication
- Weekly Events - Movie Fridays (not connected to rewards)
- Annual Events (Egg Drop)
RITUALS & ROUTINES

At Home

END OF DAY ROUTINES:
• Chores
• Dinner
• Exercise or activity
• Homework
• Prepare for tomorrow
• "Down time" before bed
• Sleep hygiene
• Bedtime

At School

END OF DAY ROUTINES:
• Closing Circle/Meeting
• Homework/Agenda
• Clean up
• Pack up
• Line up
• Dismissal
• Goodbye

VISUALS

At Home & At School

• Family Activity Planning
• Transitions
• Rituals & Routines
• Visuals
• Communication

VISUALS

At Home & At School

• Visuals
• For everyone
• Consistent
• Images
• Photos
• Sticky notes
• Checklists
• Sketches
• Objects
• Calendars, planners
• Phones (alarms, reminders)
• Other tech

Kristin Wiens, “Visuals” northstarpaths.com

"Decriminalizing Supports" - Shelley Moore

Decriminalizing Supports - Shelley Moore
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jas7Rd6uJIM
HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

- Family Activity Planning
- Transitions
- Rituals & Routines
- Visuals
- Communication

At Home

- Schedule Design & Transitions
- Rituals & Routines
- Visuals
- Communication

At School

- Family Activity Planning
- Transitions
- Rituals & Routines
- Visuals
- Communication

- Schedule Design & Transitions
- Rituals & Routines
- Visuals
- Communication

SENSE OF AGENCY

- Voice
  - Norms
  - Collaboration
  - Student surveys
  - Family meetings
  - Letter writing
  - Open communication
- Autonomy
  - Choice/Options
  - Goal-setting
  - Learner-driven eval.

At Home & At School

- Student-centered learning
  - Inquiry
  - Interviews
  - Problem-Solving Protocols
  - SEL
  - Growth mindset
  - Include them in the purpose
- Praise & Trust
  - Ask questions instead of correcting

Physical Regulation
PHYSICAL REGULATION

Moving Toward Self-Regulation

How does your body feel?

What do you need to do?

Two-Step Reset

1. ACTIVITY

2. MOVEMENT

CONNECT or RECONNECT

ACTIVITY
**Environmental Areas**

- Work
- Play
- Common Areas
- Personal Areas
- Storage
- Transitions
- Pathways

**Add Visuals**

- Reminders
- Calendars
- Schedules
- Task strips
- Photos or images
- Labels
- Colour cues

**Reduce or Adjust**

- Sensory distractions
- Visual stimulation
- Lighting
- Noise/Sound

**Social Interactions**

- Co-reg availability
- Body doubling as needed
- Not distracting
- Time on own
- Time to connect with others

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**EF Skills: Understand, Model & Teach**

- Smart But Scattered
- Smart But Scattered - Teens
- CASEL
- Mindful Educators (Mindful Schools)
- Learn about Poly Vagal Theory
- The Regulated Classroom
- Smiling Mind

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**Learning Executive Skills**

For Adults Learning:
- Smart But Scattered
- Smart But Scattered - Teens
- CASEL
- Mindful Educators (Mindful Schools)
- Learn about Poly Vagal Theory
- The Regulated Classroom
- Smiling Mind

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LEARNING EXECUTIVE SKILLS

Lessons and Resources for Teaching
- "Efs 2 the Rescue" (lessons)
- Mindful Schools (10 free lessons for kids)
- "Executive Function Skills in the Classroom"
- The Regulated Classroom
- Smiling Mind
- Children’s Fiction Books
- Books for Teens

QUESTIONS?

Thank You!

Drop us a line. We’d love to hear from you!
Considering Executive Skills in the Classroom: Physical Classroom Set Up

Important things to consider universally (for all students) include:

- **Student Needs**
  - number of students
  - student age

- **Teacher Needs**
  - Where will your teacher desk go? Or will you have one?
  - If you have a teacher desk, which direction will it face? Why?
  - What kind of storage do you need for your materials?

- **Distractions**
  - Is your classroom next to the gym or the music room?
  - Is your classroom in a portable?
  - Do the windows face a playground or a parking lot?
  - Do parents wait outside of your classroom?

- **Learning Opportunities - Interactions and Skill Development**
  - What kinds of interactions do you want to encourage/discourage?
  - Which skills do you hope that your arrangement will foster?
  - How and when will you teach these skills?

- **Change - student needs evolve throughout the year.**
  - How will you change your physical space?
  - Will you invite student input?
    - Will you have a discussion?
    - Will you conduct a survey?
  - Will you change things based on your own decisions and knowledge of student needs?
    - Will you move the furniture after the students are gone? Or will you have the students move their desks and chairs?
  - Will it be random?
    - Will you have a lottery?

- **What other spaces will your students need?**
- **What else do you need to consider?**
Supporting Executive Skills

Important things to consider to support executive skills include:

- **Student materials**
  - Where will the student materials be?
  - How will they be organized?
  - How will they be distributed?
  - Where are planners/agendas kept? Where/When do they get handed in?

- **Organization**
  - Where does work get handed in?
  - Where will homework be posted?
  - How can you make the coat area efficient?
  - What happens when students are away?

- **Where is your clock?**
  - What kind of clock is it?
  - Do your students know how to tell time?
  - Does it have time markers on it? (See Sarah Ward)
  - Will you address Time Robbers? (See Sarah Ward again.)
  - Do you have a Time Timer? Is it for the whole class?

- **Where is your Shape of the Day going to be posted?**
  - Will it have visuals?

- **Where are the pathways?**
  - Are you in a portable? Does it have a washroom?

- **What else do you need to consider to support executive skills?**
Supporting Regulated Learning

Important things to consider to support regulated learning include:

- **Student seating**
  - What kinds of seating?
  - Are they assigned seating or do they have a choice?
  - What supports do they have for working in specific kinds of seating?

- **Student desks/tables**
  - What kinds of workspaces?
    - Are there spaces for group work?
    - Individual work?
  - Are workspaces assigned or do they have a choice?

- **Lighting**
  - What choices do you have for lighting? Are the classroom lights flexible?
  - Do you have alternate lighting (i.e., lamps, fairy lights)?
  - Will you invite student input or not?
    - Will you have a discussion?
    - Will you conduct a survey?
  - Will the lighting be changed?
    - Throughout the day?
    - In different seasons?
    - In response to activities?
    - If so, who decides on those changes?

- **Sound**
  - How do you control the sound/noise in your classroom? Outside your classroom?
  - How much control do your students have over the sound/noise they experience?
    - Are there workspaces where they can be louder if necessary?
      - Inside your classroom?
      - Outside your classroom?
  - What options are available to students who have difficulty with the volume?
    - Do they have headphones?
    - Do they have access to a quiet workspace inside your classroom? Outside your classroom?
    - Can students request changes to the classroom “noise” level?

- **Learning spaces inside and outside the classroom**
  - Designated areas for specific kinds of learning (i.e., lesson area, arts/project spaces, seasonal displays, conference area, writing table, hallways, book nook inside the classroom, library outside the classroom, outdoor learning spaces, etc.)

- **Partner and/or collaborate with other staff**
Supporting Regulated Energy

Important things to consider to support regulated energy include:

- **Student seating**
  - What kinds of seating?
  - Are they assigned seating or do they have a choice?
  - What supports do they have for working in specific kinds of seating?

- **Student desks/tables**
  - What kinds of workspaces?
    - Are there spaces for group work?
    - Individual work?
  - Are workspaces assigned or do they have a choice?

- **Sound**
  - How do you control the sound/noise in your classroom? Outside your classroom?
  - How much control do your students have over the sound/noise they experience?
    - Are there workspaces where they can be louder if necessary?
      - Inside your classroom?
      - Outside your classroom?
    - What options are available to students who have difficulty with the volume?
      - Do they have headphones?
      - Do they have access to a quiet workspace inside/outside your classroom?
      - Can students request changes to the classroom “noise” level?

- **Eating and drinking**
  - Are students allowed to eat and/or drink in your classroom outside of traditional times?
  - How do you manage this?
  - Where is food/drink stored?

- **Regulation & Break Spaces - inside and outside the classroom (Norms)**
  - Designated areas for regulation
  - What is the purpose of break or space?
    - Is it a brain break or body break or a combination?
    - Are they recharging, resetting, powering up or powering down?
    - Do they know?
  - When do they go? Who do they tell? Who do they go with?
  - What is their job/purpose when they are there?
  - What do they do? How long do they do it?
  - How do they return to class? What do they do when they return to class?

- **Partner and/or collaborate with other staff.**