

AN ARTICLE FROM  EDUCATION DIVE

Creating an arc of change

Why teaching Executive Function is fundamental to inspiring students to become good citizens



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The growing cultural division in our country is disheartening at best. Is there a role for educators? Can we actually inspire our students to build more unified classrooms, demonstrate more empathetic behaviors, and become engaged citizens working together to create more inclusive and positive communities? Yes! It all begins with creating reflective minds that know the secrets to learning how to learn, or in other words, it all begins with teaching our students Executive Function skills.

Learning *how* to learn requires strong Executive Function, the set of mental skills which allow students to effectively manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors so that they can achieve their goals by directing attention and effort. Teaching Executive Function helps our students learn how to calibrate their behavior and performance, adapt to social failures, formulate strategies to cooperate, and become good citizens for lifelong learning.

The benefits of teaching Executive Function skills in our schools are numerous and proven. Teaching Executive Function skills is the key to fostering respect, empathy, and mental flexibility, and can empower students with self-awareness as well as life skills to become more creative and empathetic problem solvers to bridge the cultural divide for the future.

How do we go about making influential changes in teaching and learning to prepare the developing mind to tackle daily problem solving that emphasizes effective learning, communication, and interpersonal skills? That would be helping students develop the insight into personal learning glitches and self-knowledge. We can facilitate such change by implementing Executive Function teaching programs that focus on helping students improve the following seven key aspects of Executive Function:

1. Focus:

Colloquially speaking, focus, or attention, is a notice taken of someone or something. Often “paying attention” is a readily available skill for interesting or important tasks, but it is more relevant and critical during boring or tedious tasks. Attention is the gateway to information processing so not all information makes it into the brain because humans have a limited capacity to attend to new incoming information. Hence, when we are barraged with an incessant amount of information, the brain has to employ a process of discernment to figure out what matters and what doesn't.

Educators can help improve focus in students by teaching them ways to sustain their mental effort, modify their learning environments, and intentionally ignore distractions. Like a muscle, this ability can be strengthened with systematic and targeted practice and metacognitive coaching regarding “why” and “how.” Teaching students strategies for improving focus helps them figure out effective ways to exercise self-control, handle distractions, and produce higher-quality work.

2. Working Memory:

Working Memory is a basic ability that we use in day-to-day life. It is commonly mistaken with our basic memory that we use to simply remember information. We use working memory to temporarily retain information while we make deductions, follow instructions, consider solutions, or compare points of views. Poor working memory can cause problems in holding on to a plan or keeping instructions in mind or even know what you are doing in a given moment. The good news is we can train our working memory by practicing. Just like in other activities, if the goal is to get better, hard work and practice are needed to have success.

In order to achieve a better working memory, one must practice tasks that take concentration and add distractors. The goal of training is to attain proficiency in following complex directions, tolerating distractions, maintaining a high level of accuracy, and finally, building mental stamina to withstand a cognitive burden. When done well, an enhanced working memory capacity can cast improvements into the broader landscape of one's cognitive ability.

3. Prospective Memory:

Prospective memory is the most important type of "everyday" memory. It is the ability to remember to remember to carry out intended actions in the future at specified times. Activities such as remembering to bring a book for someone later in the day, taking the trash out on Tuesdays, or packing sunscreen for a beach trip by Thursday night knowing you are flying on Friday all rely on prospective memory.

Teaching prospective memory skills helps students improve their remembering to remember skills by engaging in planning, organizing, and carrying out actions to achieve the next goal. The goal of training is to attain proficiency in creating future intentions, making specific plans, rehearsing steps as time progresses, and finally, executing on the intention at the right time without any prompt or help from others.

4. Organization and Planning:

Organization is the mental ability to see similarities and differences between connected information that carry deeper features. Organization allows you to detect patterns in disorganized information, categorize it to improve efficiency, and allows you to be flexible. Planning is simultaneously creating sequences of events that are put together by you to achieve goals in many multifaceted domains of life. This requires many complex abilities including conceiving goals, generating ideas that are relevant for “self,” and ignoring those ideas that are interesting, but not necessary for “now.”

The goal of training organization and planning skills is to attain proficiency in connecting goals and plans with actions and outcomes. Teaching organization and planning helps students pursue current as well as future goals by categorizing information, organizing steps, and following through with a plan.

5. Problem Solving:

Problem solving entails resolving conflicts or circumventing problematic situations by identifying the cause and effect and its impact on long-term outcomes. Teaching problem solving strategies helps students come up with more than one way to meet expectations, adapt to changes, and solve problems. By including opportunities to practice a dry run to see if a plan works, and exposing students to intentional roadblocks, students then have the opportunities to shift to plan B when plan A doesn't work.

6. Mental Flexibility:

Mental flexibility is thinking about information from not only the perspective of ‘self’, but also that of the ‘other. Furthermore, through the perspective taking process students exercise their mental flexibility to consider more than one point of view, which plays a huge role in their compassion and social empathy. Teaching strategies to increase mental flexibility skills helps students switch their mindset, see things from many points of view, and change their approach readily while moving ahead calmly. Mental Flexibility training plays a critical role in helping students modify strategies and skillfully pursue self-advocacy.

7. Self-Awareness:

Self-Awareness refers to the insight into one’s own social-emotional and cognitive abilities related to thinking and decision making, the nature of personal flaws and short-comings, and typical responses and attitudes towards outside help. Teaching self-awareness helps students identify personal strengths and challenges; assess, process, and predict their own performance; and finally, evaluate the relationship between knowing and doing. Ultimately, self-awareness builds a bridge towards self-optimization.

21st century education means keeping Executive Function in the center of teaching and learning. Self-sufficient students are engaged, self-directed, and motivated to make strides while keeping the context and the community where they thrive in mind. Proficient Executive Function skills allow students to create an arc of change by effectively managing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to achieve personal and collective goals. These prepared students automatically develop empathy and interpersonal awareness, concerns for goals bigger than themselves, and a desire to create inclusive communities where all voices can be equally heard.



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About the Author:

Sucheta Kamath is a speech-language pathologist, TEDx speaker, graduate of Leadership Atlanta, and an entrepreneur whose new software ExQ® just launched in the Ed-Tech space. ExQ®, is a patented research-informed system designed to enhance Executive Function through game-based personalized training. The exclusive ExQ curriculum prompts thinking to ignite processes essential for academic, emotional, and social well-being. Through the strengthening of Executive Functioning, ExQ develops skills core to your student's success in academics, in sports, in the arts, and in relationships. Sucheta's program of interactive games teaches students to learn HOW to learn, empowering the whole child to achieve their maximum potential in school, at home, and in life, and do it with all they've got.

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