


# Lizard Brain, Wizard Brain:

Evidence-Based Strategies to Manage EF & Emotional  
Dysregulation in Children

By Sucheta Kamath,  
MA, MA, CCC-SLP, BC-ANCDS  
09/02/2021




## Lizard Brain, Wizard Brain:

Evidence-Based Strategies  
to Manage EF & Emotional  
Dysregulation in Children

Presented by  
Sucheta Kamath, Founder, ExQ®

September 2, 2021

Download the Handout: [exqknow.how/MSHA](https://exqknow.how/MSHA)



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## Speaker Disclosure

Financial: Sucheta Kamath has received financial compensation for this presentation. She is the Founder/Owner of the private practice Cerebral Matters where she sees clients. And finally, as the CEO of ExQ software Executive Function curriculum Sucheta benefits from its sales.


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## Cerebral Matters®

Private practice in Atlanta




ExQ® is personalized digital curriculum for middle and high school students that directly builds Executive Function skills through games, error analysis and metacognitive lessons.

Learn more about ExQ:  
[ExQInfiniteKnowHow.com](https://ExQInfiniteKnowHow.com)



Full PreFrontal: Exposing the Mysteries of Executive Function is a podcast hosted by Sucheta Kamath.

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## Full PreFrontal Podcast Recommendations

 <p>Dr. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang</p>	 <p>Pedro A. Noguera, Ph.D.</p>	 <p>Dr. Roy Baumeister</p>
 <p>Dr. Linda Graham</p>	 <p>Dr. Hal Hershfield</p>	 <p>Professor Adele Diamond</p>

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## Introduction to Executive Function

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Goals For Self  
(Enlightened Self-Interest Goals)

## What is Executive Function?

Executive Function is a set of mental skills that help manage thoughts, emotions, and actions to achieve *self-set* goals

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Executive Function helps to appropriately adjust one's thoughts, emotions, and actions in accordance with the changing environment and challenging times

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**Executive Function:**  
Cognitive processes that enable individuals to engage in goal-directed problem-solving behaviors

- Council for Exceptional Children, 2011

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**Executive Function:**  
One of a number of overlapping constructs

Self-Control

**COGNITIVE CONTROL**


**Self-Regulation**

Effortful Control    Fluid Reasoning

Executive Attention



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9



**To Meet Self-Set Goals**

- Manage one's OWN thoughts
- Manage one's OWN feelings
- Manage one's OWN behaviors

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Failed Decision-making

Failed Goal-attainment



**Cognitive & Emotion Regulation is needed when we:**

- Fail to make good decisions
- Fail to do what you decide to do
- Fail to get the results we desire


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**In summary:**

Executive Dysfunction is having GOALS, but not having the cognitive or emotional bandwidth to modulate behaviors or actions through the passage of time to meet those self-set goals.

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### Learning Pause

Feel free to send your reflections to [Sucheta@exqinfiniteknowhow.com](mailto:Sucheta@exqinfiniteknowhow.com)

What ideas are squaring with you?

What ideas are still circling in your head?

What would you like take with you into your practice?

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## The Lizard Brain & Wizard Brain

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### Brain & Emotions





“Brain is dynamic, plastic, experience-dependent, social and affective organ.”

- Neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino Yang (2016)

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### Primary Job of the Brain

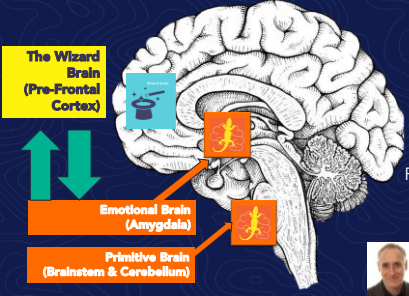
Let's Watch



- Be alert and be on the lookout for danger
- Appraise
- Weigh options
- Respond
- Survive

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### Self-Regulation Top-Down & Bottom-Up




According to Clancy Blair (2016), self-regulation includes both top-down AND bottom-up processes whereas Executive Function includes only top-down regulatory processes

Blair, Clancy (2016). The development of executive functions and self-regulation. Third Edition. A bidirectional psychological model. In: Wills, Stephen J. (Eds.) Handbook of self-regulation: Research, theory and applications. Guilford Press, New York, 417-439.

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### PFC as the Brain's Air-Traffic Controller



Orchestrating behaviors and actions in accordance with the environment and social context to bring coherence and meaning

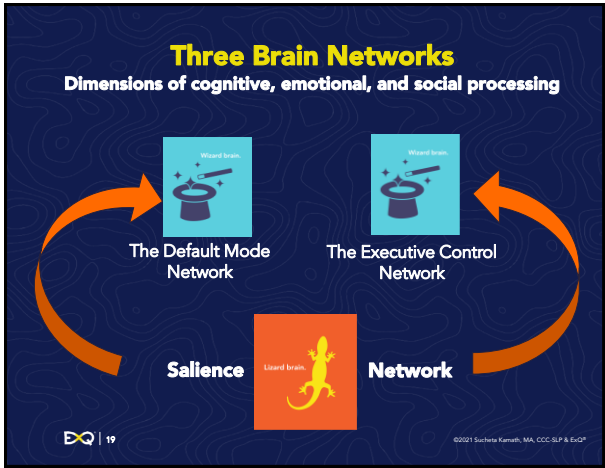
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**The Default Mode Network or the Task Negative Network (TNN)**

- The mind-wandering state
- From non-linear thinking leads to creativity and problem-solving
- Self-referencing components
- Gets activated during tasks that involve internally directed, interpretive, and reflective thoughts

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**Mind-wandering makes it hard to pay attention**

5.15ft  
12ft

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**The Executive Control Network or the Task Positive Network (TPN)**

- Ignoring extraneous irrelevant information
- Maintain focus and ignore distractions
- Regulating emotions
- Control impulses and maintain goals
- Suppresses brain activity that conflicts with current goals

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**The Executive Control Network or the Task Positive Network (TPN)**

**PUSH**  
IF THAT DOESN'T WORK  
**PULL**  
IF THAT DOESN'T WORK EITHER  
THAT'S BECAUSE WE'RE CLOSED

Most needed in situations involving:

- Planning and Decision-Making
- Error Detection
- Generating novel responses &
- Overriding habitual (overlearned) response

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**Gross Architecture of the Human Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)**

Reflecting on one's own or others' mental states (RPFC)  
Performing two or more tasks together (VLPFC)  
Episodic memory retrieval (DLPFC)

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### The Switch



#### The Saliency Network

- Facilitates switching between inwardly focused and meaning-oriented mindsets and those outwardly focused, task-oriented Executive Control Network
- Weights emotional relevance, perceived importance, and urgency of information
- Evaluates external environmental signals and internal bodily signals (e.g., hunger or anxiety)

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### Executive Function is Not Contended During Everyday Activities or Routines

Clarity

Certainty

Smooth sailing

Calm seas

Anticipated shift


Routine

Predictability

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### Neural Cement vs. Neural Swamp




#### When the Lizard Brain hijacks responding to stress

- Neural Cement = Response is characterized by too much rigidity and enforced structure
- Neural Swamp = Response is characterized by chaos, distractions and instability
- Under these circumstances, experiences do not add to the meaning-making process nor does any new learning stick

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### In summary:


Executive Function is never activated during routine or emotionally neutral tasks. Affective or non-affective conditions such as abstract problem solving engage the brain's EF skills

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### Learning Pause


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### Metamorphosis of the Brain HOT & COOL EF

#### Lizard Brain





#### Wizard Brain



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Three Potential Barriers to Executive Function Regulation

1

Hot vs. Cool Executive Function

2

Failure in considering others' perspective / a Cognitive Load

3

Affective Coloring

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Hot and Cool Executive Function

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Everyday Life is Rarely Emotionally Neutral  
This is True of Children & Adults



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Requires Effortful Control  
Hot & Cool EF Distinction



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Cool Executive Function



- Low-stakes situations
- No roadblocks in accomplishing the goals
- No conflict between the self and the other

Research by Phil Zeman & Stephanie Carlson

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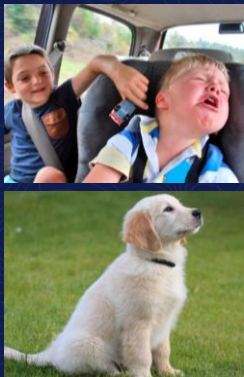
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Hot Executive Function

- High-stakes situations
- Multiple roadblocks in accomplishing the goals and
- Anticipated or ongoing conflict between the self and the other

Research by Phil Zelazo & Stephanie Carlson

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Let's Watch



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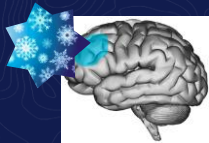
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Distinct Neurological Substrates of  
Hot & Cool EF



Cool EF  
= Dorso-Lateral  
Prefrontal Cortex



Biederman (2010) and Garon et al. (2008)

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Instantaneous Switch  
From Cool EF to Hot EF



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Instantaneous Switch  
From Cool EF to Hot EF

- Immediate dysregulation or even a meltdown
- Self-referential stance and tunnel vision
- Lack of situational understanding or socially tempered response
- No adaptive resilience

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Unpredictability, Change,  
Setback, and Loss Induces:

- Tunnel vision
- Risk aversion
- Rush to judgement
- Block in thinking critically

Three Potential Barriers to Executive  
Function Regulation

- 1

Hot vs. Cool Executive Function
- 2

Failure in considering others' perspective / a Cognitive Load
- 3

Affective Coloring

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"Knowing" vs. "doing"  
Making a wise choice – for self



Traditional marshmallow test with a twist

- Delayed gratification paradigm
- 3 vs. 4-year-olds
- Self vs. the other condition ("What should Angela do?")
- Better decision for the other (Cool EF) & poor decision for self (Hot EF)

Prentice, A., & Zelazo, P. D. (2009)

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Using WM to weigh options  
Self vs. the Other



Philip D. Zelazo, PhD on Oct 05, 2016

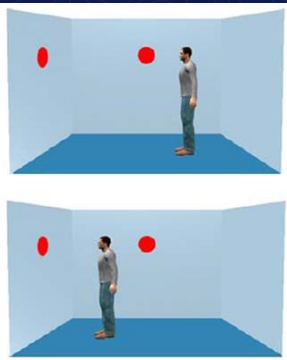
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Point of View  
Task and  
Cognitive Load

- Simpson et al JEP 2010



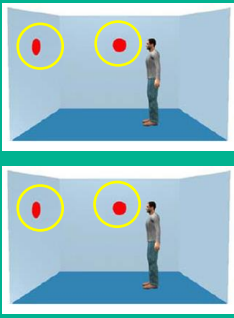
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What the Avatar  
sees and what  
you see, is the  
**SAME**  
= NO DELAY

Point of View Task  
Condition 1



- Simpson et al JEP 2010

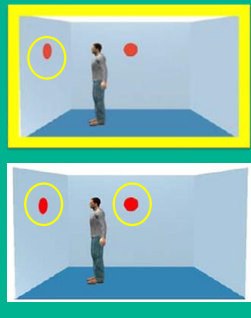
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What the Avatar  
sees and what  
you see, is the  
**DIFFERENT**  
= DELAY

Point of View Task  
Condition 2



- Simpson et al JEP 2010

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**Impact:**  
Taking the perspective of the OTHER, requires time

**Congruous**

How many dots does the **AVATAR** see?

Two

**Incongruous**

How many dots do **YOU** see?

One

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**Three Potential Barriers to Executive Function Regulation**

- 1 Hot vs. Cool Executive Function
- 2 Failure in considering others' perspective / a Cognitive Load
- 3 Affective Coloring

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**Affective Coloring**  
The Concept of Stickiness



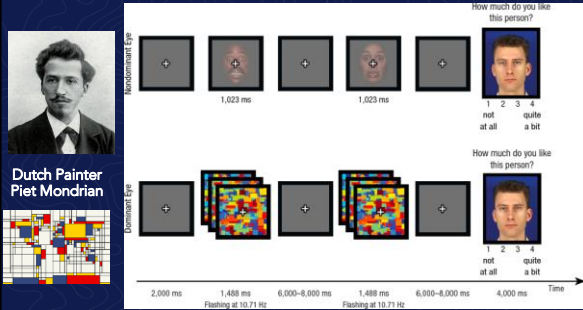
- Our self-referential inner narrative is made of a constellation of thoughts which has a quality of stickiness to it
- Our affect bleeds through from one situation to another
- When our awareness is somewhere else, stickiness worsens
- Stickiness is the antithesis of resilience

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**Study: By experimentally disrupting awareness, researchers show increase in stickiness**



Dutch Painter Piet Mondrian

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**Executive Function is the most Relevant and Evident:**

**Uncertainty**

**Ambiguity** **Small wrench**

**Stress & Anxiety**

**Unanticipated roadblocks**

**Burnout** **Unpredictability**

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Homer: Just give me my gun!

Wiseguy: Sorry, the law requires a five day waiting period. We've got to run a background check.


Homer: Five days? But I'm mad now! Oh, I'd kill you if I had my gun.

John Swartzwelder, The Simpsons, "The Cartridge Family" (1997).

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In summary:

Switching from hot EF to cool EF with awareness, affective flexibility, and effortful control leads to successful regulation of feelings, behavior, and social competence leading to the minimizing of problematic outcomes.


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Learning Pause


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Ways to Improve  
Executive Function

**Evidence-Based  
Cognitive &  
Affective Training**

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Effortful Control  
Mindful Awareness  
Executive Function



**M-E-T-A®  
STRATEGIES**

An Established Therapeutic Process  
That Systematically Promotes  
Executive Function

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Uncertainty


Ambiguity

Change


Roadblocks

Loss

**A  
D  
A  
P  
T**



Executive Function breakdown is evident during the failure to adapt, pivot, or think on one's feet to achieve goals in order to move forward

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**M-E-T-A®  
Strategies**

Sucheta's M-E-T-A® (Mindful Examination of Thinking and Awareness) approach entails:

- Frequent pausing
- Mindful awareness-orientation
- Error analysis
- Guided self-reflection
- The Gestalt Thinking
- Written and video journaling



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My Grandma's idea - Color coordinated Easter egg hunt. You can only collect your color of egg. Stops one kid from getting all the eggs!

### The Founding M-E-T-A® Principle 1:

If it is YOUR idea, YOUR Executive Function will improve and not your clients! Transfer the baton from you to your client!



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### The Founding M-E-T-A® Principle 2:

During your sessions, model ways to expand the 'spaces' inbetween, slow your pace, pause before responding, and tone down your voice.

*"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."*

-Viktor Frankl

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### The Founding M-E-T-A® Principle 3:

In order to compensate for motivational challenges, teach clients to *cooperate, conform, and comply*:

- Conform to rules
- Stick to plans
- Keep promises
- Abide by standards or ideals set by others

Self-Regulation and the Executive Function The Self as Controlling Agent  
ROY F. BAUMEISTER, BRANDON J. SCHMEICHEL & KATHLEEN D. VOHS

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### The Founding M-E-T-A® Principle 4:

Make emotional management the centerfold of intervention:

- All emotional management is pain management
- Skill development requires painful acknowledgement of deficits and weakness
- Functional retraining means discovery of unattainable goals

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### The Founding M-E-T-A® Principle 5:

The best outcome for our clients is them discovering the secret to resilience:

- Enhance their self-awareness regarding how and why they and others respond as they do
- Help clients connect and build compassionate and productive social support
- Finally, without self-care you can not be the helper you need to be

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### In summary:

Executive Function bridges past experiences with present goals and future-plans through processes such as attention, organization, problem-solving, mental flexibility and strategic thinking to help manage work, relationships, change, challenge, and loss - in life

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refresh know how



**M-E-T-A®  
STRATEGIES**

**Management of  
Hot Executive Function**

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**Expanding the  
Personal Affective  
Bandwidth**

- Calm self down, reframe relationship with worry and anxiety
- Reduce judgement, edge, and incessant self-serving thoughts
- Reprogram the inner voice
- Check cognitive distortions and blind spots

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**HOT EF - Therapeutic Goals**

- Promote the mastery of self-calming techniques
- Build experience in reframing skills and offer self-soothing choices
- Help master emotions in uncertain times
- Help reduce procrastination
- Teach collaboration and gratitude skills

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**Full PreFrontal Podcast Recommendations**



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**Self-Calming Techniques  
Teach Breath Control  
Strategies**

- Breath control is a physical skill, accessible to students who would have difficulty understanding more verbal-abstract instruction
- Breath control – the most portable self-calming skill
- Provide breathing buddies to kids

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**Self-Calming Techniques  
Five Life-Saving Breaths**

- Rainbow Breath
- Dandelion Breath
- Counting Breath
- Gentle Belly Breath
- Balloon Breath

Watch the Video of Mariam Gates reading to kids

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**Self-Calming Techniques**  
**Mindfulness in Everyday Life**

- Engage in Mindfulness practices during the session
- Play Mindful Games/Activity cards
- Two be Kind & Positive for All
- Set the clients up with home practice

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**Build Experience Reframing Skills**  
**Experience Reframing**


Giving kids and adults the opportunity to express their social-emotional experiences with a new framework:

- Concrete for children
- More abstract for adults

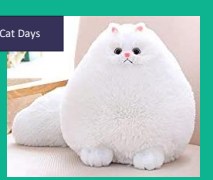
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**Build Experience Reframing Skills**

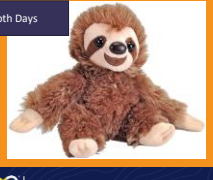
Teddy Bear Days



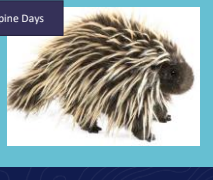
Kitty Cat Days



Sloth Days

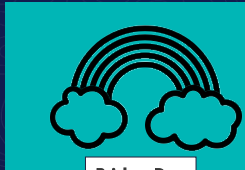


Porcupine Days




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**Build Experience Reframing Skills**




Rainbow Days



Cloudy Days




Rainy Days



Stormy Days

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**Self-Soothing Choices**  
**Tools for Choice Making to Transfer Agency**

- Choice wheel
- Set up self-soothing stations
- Calm corners

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**Self-Soothing Choices**

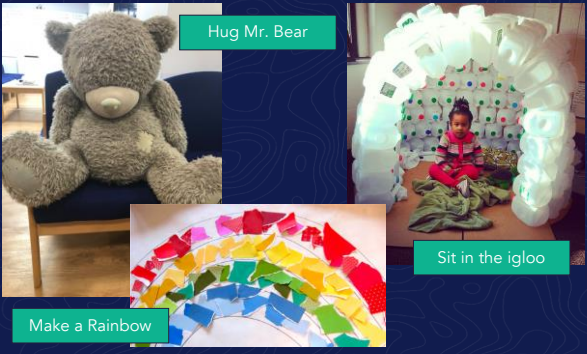
**I can Cool off by...**

- Making a rainbow
- Hugging Mr. Bear
- Asking for a hug
- Listening to Music
- Squeezing my hands
- Walking Away
- Taking 5 deep breaths
- Sitting in the igloo

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Self-soothing Stations



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Self-Distancing Practice:  
Emotional Reset



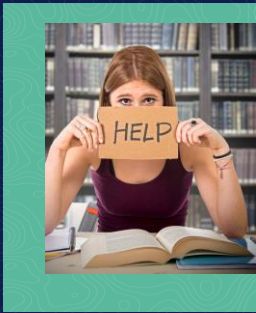
- Observe yourself from a distance
- Ask “what would Batman do?”

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Receiving vs. Offering Help  
Shades of Self-Advocacy



- Paraphrasing the expectations
- Asking for clarification
- Speaking on behalf of yourself
- Standing up for yourself
- Looking out for yourself

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Getting into Others’ Head

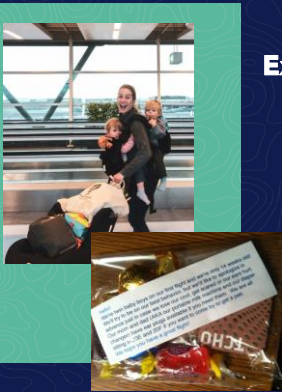


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Perspective Taking  
Exploring Self-Advocacy



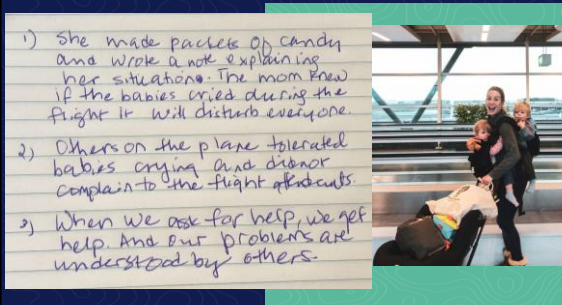
- How did this mom of twins help herself?
- How did she get help from others?
- Why is it important to get help from others?

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Exploring Self-Advocacy




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Receiving vs. Offering Help  
"How have you helped today?"



Did you offer help?

Did you ask for help?

Did you accept help?

Did you politely decline help so you could try it yourself?


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Enhance Situational Understanding

Situational Analysis:

- What's the context?
- Who are these characters?
- What's the intention?
- Where's the breakdown?
- How do we know?



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Deciphering situational nuances



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In summary:

Emotions are signals warning us about threats and discomfort heading our way and begs to change the course of action. A strong reflective stance is the mark of a mature Wizard Brain, and a thoughtful response can be cultivated with practice.

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What would you like take with you into your practice?

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EXQ

Excelling in the field

M-E-T-A®  
STRATEGIES

Management of  
Cool Executive Function

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### Full PreFrontal Podcast Recommendations

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PODCAST  
EPISODE  
**154**

Ethan Kross, Ph.D.  
Mental Chatter

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PODCAST  
EPISODE  
**153**

Kristin Neff, PhD  
Self-Compassion: The Science  
of Being Nice to Yourself

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PODCAST  
EPISODE  
**151**

Sara W. Lazar, PhD  
Meditation on the Brain: Neuroscience  
of Turning Down and Turning Out

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**77**

Dr. Mark Bertin  
From Flux to Flow

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**75**

Judy Willis, M.D.  
Why is There No Glitter  
on the Floor?

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**156**

Dr. Eve-Marie Blouin-Hudon  
Empathic Concern for the  
Future-Self

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### COOL EF - Therapeutic Goals

- Teach how to set and reach goals
- Facilitate effective performance assessment
- Improve metacognitive skills
- Promote a mastery of ways to sustain effort over a period of time
- Build error analysis skills to be willing to persist in the face of failure

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*My goal for you:*

- Help you with getting organized
- Get a job
- Have a better relationship with parents

*Your goal for your Future-Self:*

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

### Goal-Directed Persistence

Actions That Serve the Future Self

- Teach the Three-step process
  - P = Plan
  - D = Do
  - F = Finish
- Switch from clinician-set to self-set goals
- Help set 1-2 Stress Goals by figuring out priorities during stress

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### Multi-faceted Goals

- Helping clients think big and long-term
- Help them see the interdependence of each facet and how some are more active while others are less
- On a weekly basis all facets must be addressed

#### Multi-faceted Life Big-Picture Goals for Self (for next 6 months)

Client Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Plan: \_\_\_\_\_

Professional Goals	Personal & Social-Emotional Development Goals
Statement of Purpose: _____	Statement of Purpose: _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____

Interpersonal Goals	Executive Function Goals
Statement of Purpose: _____	Statement of Purpose: _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____
GO _____	GO _____

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### Effective Self-Assessment (Children)

Levels of Expertise:

I am a **Jogger**

I am a **Skateboarder**


I am a **Driver**

I am a **Pilot**

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### Example: Self-Assessment (Middle school)

In Math, I am a **Skateboarder**

I can do this...

\_\_\_\_\_

I cannot do this...

\_\_\_\_\_

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Effective Self-Assessment  
(Adults)

Levels of Expertise:

I am a **Novice**  
I am an **Apprentice**  
I am a **Practitioner**  
I am an **Expert**




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Organization & Planning

How many sentences can you  
make with these words?  
**book fun a good reading is**




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**book fun a good reading is**

Reading a good book is fun.  
Reading a fun book is good.  
A good reading book is fun.  
A fun reading book is good.  
A good book reading is fun.  
A fun book reading is good.

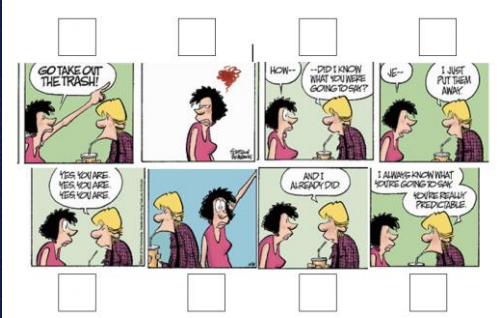



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Sequencing & Visual Reasoning






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Problem Solving:  
The Process

- Establish the scene, topic, or theme
- Identify the contradiction
- Think about the interplay between the elements (people or objects or storyline)
- Match the phrase that best captures this interplay

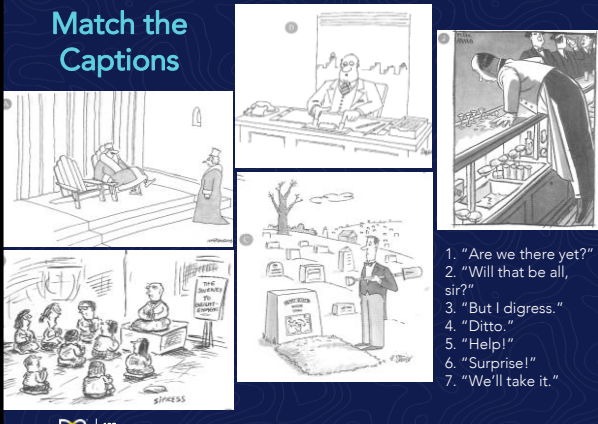


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Match the Captions



1. "Are we there yet?"  
2. "Will that be all, sir?"  
3. "But I digress."  
4. "Ditto."  
5. "Help!"  
6. "Surprise!"  
7. "We'll take it."



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DASH  
EROI  
EEP  
RTYN  
FLAW

### How to solve a problem

- Determine the goal
- Assess level of difficulty (combination of complexity and skill)
- Figure out the parts/step
- Execute & then Evaluate

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DASH  
EROI  
EEP  
RTYN  
FLAW

DASH  
EROI  
EEP  
RTYN  
FLAW

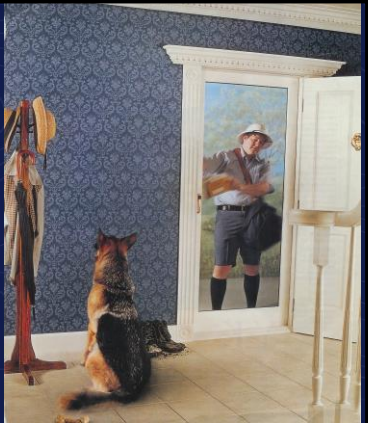
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### Figuring out the Intent

- What's this ad about?
- How do we know?
- Who's the target audience?



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### Creating a Narrative

- What's the background?
- Why?
- What's the big-picture?



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### In summary:

The best way to help clients build their Wizard Brain is to teach them how to **integrate Self-Calming techniques with Self-Management principles.**

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### Learning Pause

Feel free to send your reflections to [Sucheta@exqinfiniteknowhow.com](mailto:Sucheta@exqinfiniteknowhow.com)

What ideas are squaring with you?

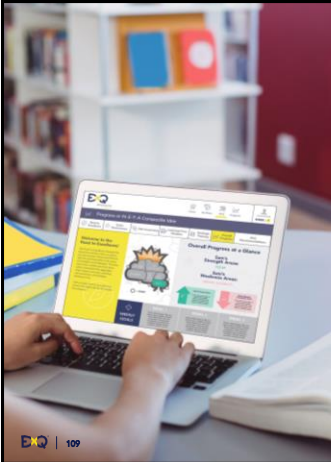
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### What is ExQ®?

ExQ® is a **patented** technology curriculum designed to directly teach Middle and High School students Executive Function skills through games, error analysis, virtual coaching, and metacognitive reflection.

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