

34th Annual Learning Symposium

Breakout Session: Unlocking Potential:

Exploring Executive Function's Link to Belonging:

Presented by: Toni Schexnyder, M.Ed., Associate Dean of College Counseling at
The Winston School San Antonio



Executive function skills are critical for success, but have you ever wondered how these skills impact our sense of belonging and connection? In this session, we will delve into the multifaceted roles executive functioning skills play in our daily lives and explore practical strategies to enhance belonging and empower individuals to unlock their potential. Whether you're an educator, a parent, or someone interested in strengthening your own skills, this session will provide valuable insights on creating environments where everyone can thrive.

Presentation Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

- Participants will develop an understanding of executive functioning and how to identify strengths and weaknesses in this skillset.
- Participants will explore the connection between executive functioning and belonging.
- Participants will discover practical strategies for supporting individuals who struggle with various aspects of executive functioning.

Bio of presenter:

Toni Schexnyder attended Texas State University, where she earned a B.A. in English and an M.Ed. in Secondary Education. Toni is the Associate Dean of College Counseling and an Executive Function Coach at The Winston School San Antonio. In her seven years at Winston, she has found a passion for helping parents and other educators prepare their neurodiverse students for postsecondary success. Toni presents on a variety of topics, including executive function, both locally and nationally, co-authored "Preparing Neurodiverse Students for College and Career Success," for the Spring 2023 issue of LINK for Counselors, and is the Committee Chair of New Member Outreach for the NACAC Learning Differences Special Interest Group.

Unlocking Potential: Exploring Executive Function's Link to Belonging

Toni Schexnyder, M.Ed.
Associate Dean of College Counseling
ADHD/Executive Function Coach



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What is Executive Function?

"Executive Functions" are the cognitive skills we all need to learn, work, complete tasks, adapt to change, and manage our emotions.

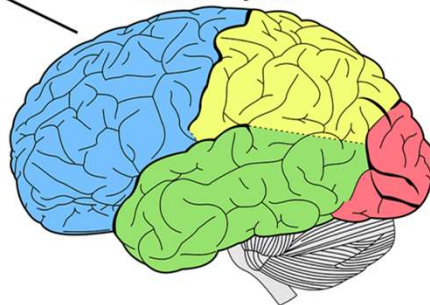
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Executive Functioning - DA

- Planning
- Problem Solving
- Motivation
- Judgement
- Decision Making
- Impulse Control
- Social Behavior
- Personality
- Memory
- Learning
- Reward
- Attention

Function: "Action"

Mental & Physical



DID YOU KNOW?

- The prefrontal cortex of those who are neurodiverse develops more slowly than in those who are neurotypical.
- A neurodiverse individual's "default mode network" (DMN) is unusually active while completing high-focus tasks, which can impact their ability to concentrate.

(Child Mind Institute, 2023)

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Executive Function & Belonging

Struggling with what *seems* to come naturally to their peers can cause our students to feel different and isolated. This is particularly significant for neurodiverse individuals who may already grapple with self-confidence issues.

Supporting students who face difficulties with executive functioning by helping them develop effective strategies can enhance their sense of belonging and help them build the confidence essential for their success.

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“Extended” Executive Function Vocabulary

- **Brain Fog:** feelings of mental fatigue, forgetfulness, a “dream-like or trance-like” state, trouble absorbing or recalling information - can be brought on by excessive cognitive effort ([Everyday Health](#), 2023)
- **Executive Function Paralysis (or “ADHD Freeze”):** when a person who struggles with executive function becomes overwhelmed by their environment, task list, emotions, etc. and “freezes,” unable to decide the best way to move forward ([add.org](#), 2022)
- **Hyperfocus:** complete absorption in a task, to a point where a person appears to ignore or completely “tune out” everything else ([NCBI](#), 2019)
- **Neurodivergent:** a non-medical term that describes people whose brains develop or work differently for some reason - typically those diagnosed with neurological conditions (dyslexia, ADHD, autism, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, etc.) ([Cleveland Clinic](#), 2022)
- **Neurotypical:** a non-medical term used to describe people whose brain functions, ways of processing information and behaviours are seen to be standard ([The Brain Charity](#), 2022)
- **Object Constancy:** the ability to maintain a bond with something/someone, even when distance or conflicts intrude ([Kruse](#), 2021)
- **Overstimulation/Sensory Overload:** emotional or physical dysregulation caused by overwhelming/intense emotions, impulsivity, sensory input, etc. ([ADDitude](#), 2023)
- **Time-Blindness:** the inability to recognize when or how much time as passed or to estimate how long something will take ([Cleveland Clinic](#), 2023)
- **“Wait Mode”:** the inability to start a task when there is a scheduled event, appointment, or task later in the day ([Resiliency Mental Health](#), 2023)

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Fiction or Fact?

FICTION:

- “They’re just lazy.”
- “They just don’t care.”
- “They just need to grow up.”
- “Executive function struggles aren’t real.”
- “They just need to work harder.”
- “They’re just making excuses.”
- Kids will “outgrow” executive function issues.
- Those who struggle with executive function will always be “bad at (insert skill here).”

FACT:

- The behaviors seen as “lazy” or “uncaring” are often signs that the individual is struggling with in one or more areas of executive functioning.
- Executive function deficits cannot be “fixed” or “outgrown,” but the right strategies can help strengthen these skills.
 - Executive function strengths can be used to “support” the weaker skills.
- While “Executive Function Disorder” is not a diagnosis in the DSM-5, “Impaired Executive Functioning” is included in the ICD-11 ([International Classification of Diseases - 11th Edition](#)).

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Fiction or Fact?: Habits

“It takes 21 days to build a habit.”

FALSE

Reality: Neurotypical people thoroughly build habits after about 66 days, on average (Lally, 2009) and it can take longer for neurodiverse individuals.

Reality: Some neurodiverse individuals need to use strategies or “hacks” to build habits, even for “easy” to remember tasks like brushing their teeth, drinking water, charging their phone, etc.

Reality: Finding strategies that work can help decrease stress and embarrassment while increasing independence and self-confidence.

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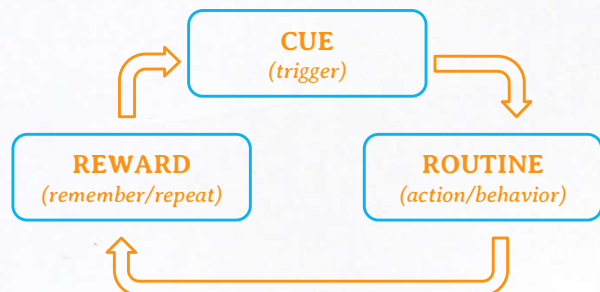
Habit Stacking

“Habit Stacking” is a strategy in which established habits are used to “cue” the new task. Linking new tasks to a cycle that is already built into the brain increases the likelihood of successful habit formation.” (Clear, Atomic Habits)

FORMULA: “After/before (current habit), I will (new habit).”

Examples:

- “After I eat breakfast, I will brush my teeth.”
- “After I get in bed, I will set my alarm.”
- “Before I do my homework, I will feed the dog.”
- “Before I brush my teeth, I will lay out clothes for tomorrow.”



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Strengthening Executive Function Skills

Tips, Tricks, & Resources



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Self-Monitoring, Emotional Control, & Response Inhibition

Common Struggles

- Shouting out/talking out of turn
- Making jokes at inappropriate times
- Resolving disputes physically
- “Overreacting” to things
- Becoming easily overwhelmed
- Taking a long time to calm down after becoming upset
- Inability to recognize how their behavior impacts others
- Lying or “stretching the truth”
- Oversharing/sharing inappropriate information
- Engaging in “high-risk” activities
- Suddenly changing plans

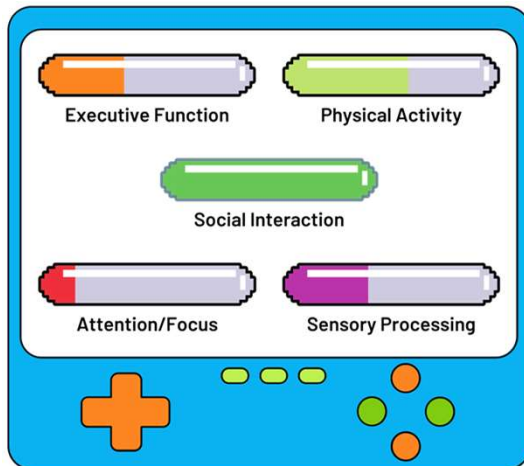
Strategies

- Guidance on labeling feelings and associating them with appropriate expressions/behaviors
- Immediate feedback
 - Implement consequences and reward success
- Self-regulation exercises:
 - “**Stop, Think, Do**” - **stop** before acting, **think** about the consequences or how others will be affected, **do** the action if it is appropriate and will not hurt others
 - “**THINK Before Speaking**”: Is it true? Is it honest? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? Is it kind?
- Calming/stress management techniques
 - Breath work, brain breaks, stretching, etc.
- Technology to help assess tone, judge the meaning of a message, or find the appropriate wording
 - [Goblin Tools](#) (website & app)

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Monitoring & Managing Energy

"Neurodivergent Character Stats"



- Everyone starts with a certain number of points in each "character stat" category that daily tasks, interactions, and sensory inputs deplete.
- The starting stats for each day can vary based on many factors like quality of sleep, physical health, mood, etc.
- For neurodivergent people, completing tasks, interacting with friends/family, focusing on school/work, and processing sensory information typically deplete more points than for those who are neurotypical.
- When all points are depleted, overexertion begins, eventually resulting in an energy "crash" or "hitting a wall."

Based on "ADHD Spoon Theory" (ADDitude, 2023)
Adapted by Toni Schexnyder, M.Ed.

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Flexible Thinking

Common Struggles

- Adjusting and adapt to change
- Difficulty with transitions when switching tasks
- Experiencing anxiety when faced with changes to routine
- Trying to police the behaviors of others
- Getting frustrated when something is not moving at the "right" pace for them
- Answering "open-ended" questions or questions with no right or wrong answers
- Picky eating
- Watching "comfort shows" repeatedly
- Frustration or anger when they don't get their way

Strategies

- Discuss the difference between small adjustments and "big deal" changes to identify times when flexibility is essential and more easily managed
- Give a "heads up" prior to big changes in routine
- Occasionally work in unpredictable activities in positive ways
- Provide examples of answers for a similar type of "open-ended" or "free-thinking" questions
- Practice and rehearse:
 - Walk through scenarios to identify when flexibility is needed or when rigidity is appropriate and practice ways to be adjust to change.
 - [Flexible Thinking Scenario Cards](#)

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Working Memory, Planning, & Prioritization

Common Struggles

- Losing things frequently
- Difficulty following multi-step instructions
- “Big-picture” thinking - struggling with small details
- Difficulty identifying tasks that need to be completed
- Uncertainty of where to begin when starting tasks
- Difficulty estimating how long it will take to complete tasks
- Leaving tasks incomplete due to missed steps
- Losing train of thought frequently
- Trouble finding the right words/explaining thought process clearly

Strategies

- Provide instructions in various ways (written/verbal)
- Ask for instructions to be restated to check for understanding
- **Chore charts**
- **Calendar/agenda**
 - **Using Google Calendar with Google Tasks** is a great way to create a digital planner
 - Google Calendar syncs across devices (Chromebook, phone, etc.)
- **Technology to build routine and stay on track (TimeTune)**
 - Also helps develop “time estimation” skills

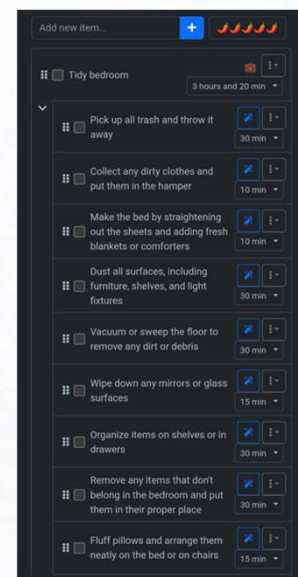
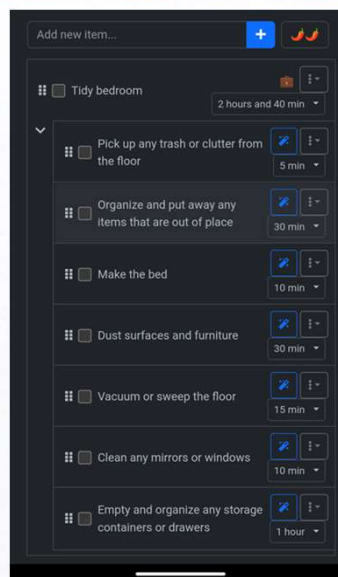
Apps with auditory reminders are a great option for those who struggle with time-blindness and object constancy!

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To-Do Lists and Priority Charts

- **Priority Chart (Print)**
- **Priority Chart (Digital)**
- **Project Planner**
- **Daily Schedule Sheet**
- **Passion Planner (free resources)**
- **Goblin Tools**
 - Customizable AI generated to-do lists
 - Great for those who struggle with identifying and completing each step of a task

Using priority charts and to-do lists along with a calendar or planner can help ensure that tasks are completed and deadlines are met.



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Task Initiation, Persistence, & Time Management

Common Struggles

- Appearing to lack motivation
- Frequent procrastination
- Avoids difficult tasks by completing easier ones
- Starting on tasks then losing steam/quitting
- Losing track of time - "time-blindness"
- Rushing to finish tasks
- Misses deadlines often
- Frequently late
- Gets bored/distracted while completing tasks
- Quits or gives up when tasks are difficult
- Spending too much time on one task - "hyperfocus"
- Frequently leaves tasks unfinished

Strategies

- **Make it New:** complete the task in a new way or in a new place
- **Make it Fun:** make completing the task a game or challenge, dance while cleaning, etc.
- **Rewards:** offer rewards or delayed gratification (tokens, tv, video games, hobbies)
- **Invite a Friend (Body-Doubling):**
 - "Co-working" can create a sense of accountability, even if the partner is working on a different task.
 - Ensure that the partner is not distracting.
- **Timers:**
 - **Pomodoro timers** are an effective way to avoid hyperfocus and to stay on task
 - **Customizable Timer** (w/music)

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Creating the Ideal Workspace at Home

Consistency is key!

- Dedicate a space specifically for homework.
 - Plenty of work surface
 - Good light
 - Limited distractions
 - Sitting up straight
- Avoid beds and couches as our brains are conditioned to associate them with sleeping and lounging.

Mrs. Schexnyder's Favorite Productivity Hack:

Keep school/work clothes and shoes on to stay in "work mode" and boost motivation!



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Creating the Ideal Workspace in Your Classroom

- “Maximalist” decor or clutter can distract students, especially younger students or those who are neurodiverse
- Provide flexible seating and arrangements that encourage both independent and collaborative work
- Keeping your room cool will help avoid sleepiness
- Have tools and resources readily available to all students
- Increase writing spaces - whiteboards, chalkboards, etc. are great for interactive lessons
- For a student-centered classroom, reduce your “teaching footprint”

We may have to work with what we are given, but there are ways to set up your classroom to fit different learning styles (moveable desks/chairs, pillows, etc. without breaking the bank.



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Organization

Common Struggles

- “Backpack of Doom”
- Difficulty finding things amongst the clutter
- Frequently loses school assignments
- Messy spaces (room, workspace, house, etc.)



Strategies

- Binders with dividers/pockets for each class
- Backpacks with plenty of pockets
- Locker/cubby organizers
- Dedicate a small amount of time each day to tidying up, throwing away trash, etc.

**Let's ASSESS
THE MESS!**



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Executive Function Friendly Organization

- Object constancy issues = “Out of sight, out of mind”
- Those who struggle with object constancy can feel the need to keep everything they deem important in sight, resulting in what looks/feels like needless clutter
- Clutter in Motion vs. Clutter in Stasis:
 - **In Motion:** things that were recently used or are likely to be used again soon
 - **In Stasis:** things that are not being used and do not have a place or have not been put away (these are at risk of becoming “part of the scenery”)
- Organizational systems should be based on strengths, struggles, and routines
- Systems don't have to be “normal” as long as they work
 - Open bins vs. drawers
 - Baskets where clutter tends to accumulate
 - Perishables placed in refrigerator where they will be seen
 - Most-used tools/resources at eye level
 - Labels for important items/bins



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Things to Consider

- Executive function strategies are not “one size fits all.”
 - They should be selected and adjusted based on individual needs.
- The only way to know if a strategy works is to try it.
 - Give it time - If it doesn't work after a couple of weeks, make adjustments or try something new.
- “Failing forward”: using what was learned from not succeeding to help inform decisions for the next attempt
 - Failing might be scary and uncomfortable, but doing so, in a safe environment with a strong support team, might uncover information that can aid in finding the right strategies for success.
- Discomfort can be a catalyst for growth.
 - Regularly “saving” a child from discomfort before they have a chance to learn from their mistakes, can result in “learned helplessness” - the inability find solutions for difficult situations, even when the resolution is accessible.

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Helpful Links



[Resources](#)



[Amazon List](#)



Scan for access
to this
slideshow!

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Questions?

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