



Executive Function and Cognitive Flexibility: Strategies for Success

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Session Description

Why do so many students seem to struggle with executive function? Why do students get stuck and become anxious? How can teachers support students and each other to handle the executive function demands of school and everyday life? How do we empower every student to learn how to learn and to develop a more accurate self-understanding of their strengths and challenges?

Cognitive flexibility is a cornerstone of executive function and crucial to school and life success. This executive function process allows us to shift our mindset when life does not go the way we planned, when we face obstacles, and when we become stuck in the middle of a problem-solving situation. Cognitive flexibility allows us to take a step back, reflect on the situation, and consider a different plan of attack. In school, cognitive flexibility is essential across the grades and in all academic domains. From preschool on, students can learn to be more flexible in the way they approach tasks and social situations. The ability to shift approaches and to synthesize information in novel ways is essential for effective reading, writing, math problem-solving, note-taking, studying and test-taking. When students get stuck and their thinking becomes rigid, their ability to execute tasks decreases or comes to a halt. They may become rigid and may avoid or easily give up even on simple assignments. Their funnels get clogged.

In this session, participants will learn about the importance of cognitive flexibility and its critical role in school performance, growth mindsets, and reduced stress in school and life. Most importantly, we will focus on evidence-based strategies from the SMARTS executive function curriculum developed by Lynn Meltzer, PH.D. and ResearchILD, for promoting students' cognitive flexibility so that they learn to shift and think flexibly in academic and social situations.



Participants will:

- Understand essential components of executive function and how they impact students in school and at home
- Understand how cognitive flexibility is critical across the grades and academic domains
- Learn practical strategies for promoting self-awareness, cognitive flexibility, and academic success.

Further Readings:

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- Meltzer, L.J., Greschler, M., Kurkul, K., Stacey, W., Ross, E., & Snow, E. (2015). SMARTS Executive Function and Mentoring Program, www.smarts-ef.org.
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- Smith, B., & Griffin, L. M. (2020). *My day is ruined!: A story for teaching flexible thinking*. Boys Town Press.
- Willis, J. (2016, July 22). Building students' cognitive flexibility. Edutopia. Retrieved October 27, 2021, from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/building-students-cognitive-flexibility-judy-willis>.
- Winner, M. G., Croke, P., & Ebbler, J. (2020). *You are a social detective!: Explaining social thinking to kids*. Think Social Publishing.