

Fostering Executive Function Development in Early Childhood

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Every Child Ready to Read and Supercharged Storytimes encouraged librarians to intentionally include literacy building activities with developmental tips for parents in their children's programming. Yet the development of executive function skills is as important as having strong early literacy skills by kindergarten entrance; both are essential ingredients for school and life.

Being able to look at one's actions, to evaluate, and use that information to plan involves cognitive flexibility. Remembering the plan when the same situation arises again uses working memory. Self-regulation means following the plan, which often involves thinking before acting and sometimes needing to restrain oneself. Together, cognitive flexibility, working memory, and self-regulation are the main components of executive function, and they are just as important as early literacy skills for predicting smooth and successful school experiences.¹ It is easy to add elements to storytimes and other programs that build executive function skills, and we encourage you to do so. An earlier column addressed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Early Childhood;² this column will expand upon that and provide more useful resources.

Mind in the Making

<https://www.mindinthemaking.org/>

Ellen Galinsky's *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* highlights several skills pivotal to achieving success in school and life:³ focus and self-control, perspective taking, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, taking on challenges, and self-directed engaged learning. Executive functions are central to each life skill and are needed for children and adults to successfully manage their attention, emotion, and behavior in pursuit of their goals. The MITM website has wonderful resources including free multilingual tips and activities for putting the science of children's learning into practice.

Skill-Building Book Tips (<https://www.mindinthemaking.org/book-tips>) describe activities tied to specific books adults can use with children while explaining which skills are being built.

Skill-Building Opportunities (<https://www.mindinthemaking.org/skill-building-opportunities>) offer strategies for coping with difficult moments (e.g., diaper changing, preschool aggression). Both sites are searchable by life skill and age with downloadable activity sheets in English and Spanish. MITM also helped develop *Vroom Tips* (<https://bit.ly/3g16koJ>), short videos that show adults how to turn everyday moments into learning moments. Activities can be printed or accessed via a variety of electronic means.

Brain-Building Powerhouses: How Museums and Libraries Can Strengthen Executive Function Life Skills

<https://bit.ly/3j4Yn2a>

Brain-Building Powerhouses: How Museums and Libraries Can Strengthen Executive Function Life Skills examines how libraries and museums are uniquely positioned to build executive function life skills, what they are doing to promote these skills, and calls for an expansion of this work. The report identifies and explains how asset based programming already in place around family engagement, early literacy, play, STEM/STEAM, technology, and community partnerships can be more intentionally designed to support brain development.

Center on the Developing Child

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University directed by Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff uses research, intervention strategies, and the science of early childhood to encourage development of effective policies and services focused on the earliest years. A free resource library includes guides for activities and games adults can use to support and strengthen children's executive function and self-regulation skills, briefs that explain why these skills are important, working papers, short videos, reports, interactive graphics, "TED-style talks," training modules, and more. https://youtu.be/efCq_vHUMqs

Cookie's Crumby Pictures (<https://bit.ly/2XpNTDS>) These five-minute Sesame Street segments were designed to model executive function skills. For instance, viewers watch Cookie Monster work through problems as characters in spoof movie previews such as *Furry Potter and the Goblet of Cookies*. Like the Motion Picture Association film rating system, every parody is rated, but it's for executive function skills like "TP: For Task Persistence" or "DG: For Delayed Gratification." The

Muppet Fandom Wiki (<https://bit.ly/3iFBYtz>) allows users to search trailers by content and rating.

Tools of the Mind

<https://toolsofthemind.org/>

Tools of the Mind is a research-based program for preschool and kindergarten children designed around self-regulation. Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, it places social interaction, language, and scaffolding at the forefront of cognitive development and highlights the importance of situations that allow children to regulate others and be regulated. Activities and processes designed to help children become intentional and reflective can be used across settings. "Play Plans", for example, allow preschool children to direct and monitor their play by drawing/writing about the dramatic play situation they want to engage in, the role they want to play, and the actions. For a snapshot of Tools of the Mind, listen to National Public Radio (NPR) (<https://n.pr/3xJvEFZ>) and read some commentary from Dr. Deborah Leong, one of the program's creators, and Dr. Adele Diamond, a neuroscientist who researches executive functions.

My Niche Academy

<https://my.nicheacademy.com/MGOL>

Dr. Betsy Diamant-Cohen's course, "Using Library Programs to Build Executive Function Skills with Mother Goose on the Loose," uses five online modules with self-reflection questions and quizzes to cover how executive functions relate to brain development, early relationships, school readiness, self-regulation, working memory, economics, mindfulness, and twenty-first century skills. Research is combined with practical examples about new ways to support the growth of executive function skills in babies and young children through library programs and activities. Video clips of related skill-building activities taking place during library programs are included. &

References

1. Paul L. Morgan et al., "Executive Function Deficits in Kindergarten Predict Repeated Academic Difficulties across Elementary School," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 46 (2019): 20–32, <https://www.researchgate.net/deref/https%3A%2F%2Fdoi.org%2F10.1016%2Fj.ecresq.2018.06.009>.
2. Shelby Deglan and Anthea Leung, "Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Early Childhood," *Children and Libraries* 19, no. 2 (2021): 25–27.
3. Ellen Galinsky, *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (NY: HarperStudio, 2010).