



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

Building Executive Function Skills in Children and Adults

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QUESTIONS FROM MAY 20, 2013 FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

- Q:** Can children in stressful home situations, especially those early beginnings that might be less than optimal, and stressful for children, can they recover and be successful later in life? Is the power of early intervention here working in executive functioning?
- A:** I think that's one of the great things about this concept and this topic in general. There are a lot of things that we can do. It's about the plasticity of the brain. Of course, learning these skills early on in the right environment is what we would like for all children, but we also know that with targeted intervention later on, children's executive function skills can improve with some specific activities and skill building—and in a relatively short period of time. That learning tends to then seep into other parts of their life. The same thing is true of adults. There's a lot of research that's going on about executive function development in adults and job skills. When we really intervene and concentrate, and provide some tasks and techniques for people to engage in, and then improve that skill development, we see that [adults] also tend to generalize that improvement in other areas of their life. So, basic organization, initiation of plans, following through, being flexible with everyday life—those are things we can strengthen. For children in particular, given the fact that they're learning and developing so quickly, there are so many things that we can do to support them, regardless of their environment.
- Q:** I've heard Sue Bredekamp define one aspect of executive functioning, that being the inhibitory control of: Stop doing something you want to keep doing and then start doing something you don't want to do as much. That describes school for a lot of kids, right? Stop playing out on recess and then come in and sit down at circle time might be, for some children, just the optimal demonstration of inhibitory control. And so I'm thinking about teacher/child interactions that would support that. Let me describe some things and see if you think, as an expert around executive functioning, if these are things that would probably help. When teachers give the behavioral expectations in advance of an activity so that children have an idea of what it exactly is that they need to inhibit and also exhibit, so start doing—as well as a teacher that is making sure to attend to children when they are demonstrating that inhibitory control—so, attending to children and thanking them, or even just saying, "Joan has a quiet hand up so I'm going to give her a chance to talk to the puppet" or whatever it might be. Are these examples of things that teachers could do in classrooms that would be both helping scaffold inhibitory control but also reinforce that?

- A:** Absolutely. One of the things that teachers can use, of course, are the examples that happen right before them. And when that's called out in a positive way, such as the quiet hand, that really does provide a model for children who might be struggling with that. But it also doesn't call out the child who might be having some challenges, because we certainly don't want to create an environment of shame in any way because that tends to have children withdraw and then not be able to practice those skills. But the clear expectations are so important for everything that you do, and basic attachment, and creating a safe place. The more that the teachers can truly know and observe each child, the better they are to be able to, 1) set up that learning in environment in a way that meets the needs of all children and specific children who might be struggling, and then, 2) know who those other helpers might be in the classroom that they can call upon and that peers can do a lot of support of each other.
- Q:** Let me give another example and see if this is on track with thinking about supporting children's both working memory and mental flexibility, which is when a teacher is making explicit, perhaps, some connections or integrating some prior learning. A child is playing with playdough of a variety of colors and the teacher says, "I see you have red and blue. Do you think you can make purple? Do you remember last week when you were mixing colors of paints and you mixed those two colors and made purple? What do you think?" That kind of integration of things that they have learned before and now can apply in a new situation—am I on track there?
- A:** Absolutely. I think that any time a teacher takes the opportunity to build connections, they're pulling on that working memory skill and also showing children that that learning can be applied in different situations. One of the things that we want children to learn, in terms of their cognitive flexibility, is there are different ways to arrive at something. You can apply concepts that you learn to different places. The playdough example is a good one. You're tapping on that working memory, but also providing another context in which that information can be used.
- Q:** That's great. I think that probably some people listening are recognizing things that we also find in the CLASS™ observation instrument. It seems like there are some things in there around teacher/child interactions that really are working to help strengthen these executive functioning skills for young children—whether that be things around the behavioral expectations, monitoring and attending to children's positive behaviors, but also in the concept development range in terms of really helping children make connections and integrating prior learning. Also, integrating some real-life examples sounds like things that we can do to strengthen those executive functioning skills. This is a fun question: could you repeat what your favorite children's book was and why that was so.
- A:** I don't think I've ever been asked that question. It's *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox. I love that book just because I think it's so touching. It's just about the raw emotion and sincerity of children in connection with adults, so that's why I love it. It gets me teary-eyed.



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