

# Executive Function: A New Frontier for Workforce and Other Programs that aim to Build Adult Capabilities

Case Management vs Coaching; Use of Incentives;  
Accountability and Outcomes

# Purpose

- \* To inform about executive functioning (EF) and its role/importance/impact on life-long learning
- \* To prevent or remove any stigma that may be attached to EF
- \* To learn how to prevent pathologizing EF
- \* To discuss in depth the benefits of EF
- \* To discuss opportunities to apply this knowledge to involve families
- \* To discuss and explore ways that EF can be used and re-design and simplify programs
- \* To do hands-on, interactive exercises to improve our own understanding of EF and lifelong learning.

# Objectives:

- \* At the end of this presentation, the attendee will be able to:
- \* Describe EF and its role in life-long learning.
- \* Describe ways in which EF is relevant and important to all, and is not limited to specific group seen as deficient in EF
- \* Describe ways to prevent “pathologizing” EF
- \* Name three ways to apply EF principles to improve the work environment for others and clients
- \* Describe how WFS plans to incorporate elements of EF into program design.
- \* Describe a counselor’s role in supporting the dream.

# Covered Today

- \* Why is this important?
- \* What is Executive Functioning?
- \* Executive Function Deficit Causes and its Impact
- \* Life Long Learning is an Opportunity
- \* Emerging Service Strategies and Interventions

# Theory of Change Video

[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/theory\\_of\\_change/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/theory_of_change/)

(Frontiers of Innovation, 2014)

# FOI: 3 Focus Areas

- \* **Protection and enrichment for young children require capacity-building for adults**
- \* **Improved executive function and self-regulation skills of the parents lead to better parenting skills while also enhancing employability and economic stability**
- \* **Strong neighborhoods reduce the burdens of adversity**

# Why is this important?

Each person has their own powers

A healthy economy built for long term sustainability

Requires skilled workers and healthy communities

Children are our future - we can break the cycle of poverty

Investment in communities of color to bring everyone to an equal starting platform

A healthy economy built for long term sustainability

Children raised in economically stable households have better health, better school results, more long term job prospects

Know and be considered on how different communities react to Executive Function, really talk from perspective of power from within and ability to learn

# Today's Challenges for low-income families

Power of federal minimum wage is eroded, cuts to public benefits

More than 1 out of 5 children live in poverty

Shift from industrial to a knowledge based economy

Jobs require post secondary education

Low income families faced with caring for the children, attending schools and securing employment

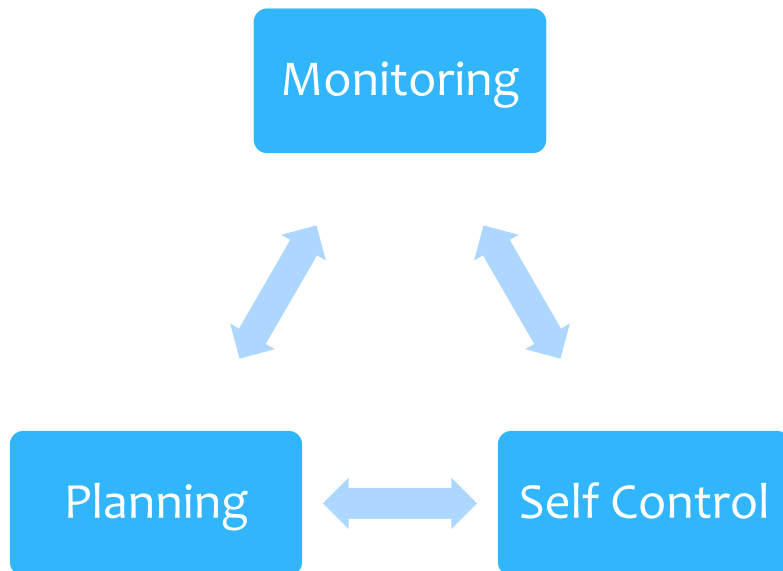


# What is Executive Functioning

- \* An umbrella term for the management of cognitive processes
- \* The prefrontal areas and frontal lobe are necessary for carrying out these functions
- \* In order for functions such as working memory, flexibility, problem solving, reasoning, and planning to stay, practice is required as it has to move from frontal lobe deeper into the brain and become a norm

# What is Executive Functioning?

“Executive Functions underlie complex behaviors such as making decisions to attain pre-determined goals, applying past learning to novel contexts, regulating behavior, solving novel problems, interacting in social environments, and orienting to the future”. (Carlock, 2011)



- **Goal Directed Behaviors**
- **Organizational Abilities**
- **Time Management Activities**
- Strategic, Purposeful, Analytic and Critical Thinking
- **Problem Solving**
- **Decision Making**

(<http://understandingexecutivefunctioning.blogspot.com/p/what-are-executive-functions.html>)

# What is Executive Functioning?

## Self Control



Thoughts



Feelings



Behavior

### EXAMPLES

Not getting distracted from a goal

Not making an impulse purchase

Not getting angry

# What is Executive Functioning?

## Monitoring



Thoughts, feelings, behavior



Performance, progress



Surroundings, context



Others' behavior

## EXAMPLES

How well am I doing?

Is my behavior appropriate in this setting?

What is she thinking?

# What is Executive Functioning?

## Planning



Setting appropriate deadlines & reminders



Identifying obstacles and possible solutions



Identifying long-term goals



Specifying steps needed to achieve goals

## EXAMPLES

Drafting a household budget

Identifying steps needed to prepare a job application

Making arrangements for child care

# What Causes EF Deficits?

## Toxic Stress

### **Positive**

Brief increases in heart rate,  
mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

### **Tolerable**

Serious, temporary stress responses,  
buffered by supportive relationships.

### **Toxic**

Prolonged activation of stress response systems  
in the absence of protective relationships.

# EF Deficit Causes



Exposure to Toxins



Trauma



Persistent Poverty



Social Bias



Poor Nutrition



Prenatal Drug Use



Low Social Status



High levels of Stress



# Impact of EF Deficits

- \* I have trouble making decisions or deciding what I want to do
- \* I have difficulty thinking ahead and planning for the future
- \* I find it difficult to keep my mind on something and am easily distracted
- \* I act without thinking, doing the first thing that comes to mind
- \* I lose my temper at the slightest thing
- \* I am unaware of/unconcerned about how others feel about my behavior
- \* I have difficulty realizing the extent of my problems



# What Does Impacted EF Look Like in our Programs?

**DISRESPECTFUL**

**DON'T CARE**

**DISTRACTED** APATHETIC

**UNMOTIVATED**

**STRESSED** IMPATIENT **ANGRY**

UNFOCUSED FORGETFUL **DISINTERESTED**

**SHORT-FUSED** WILLFUL NON-COMPLIANCE

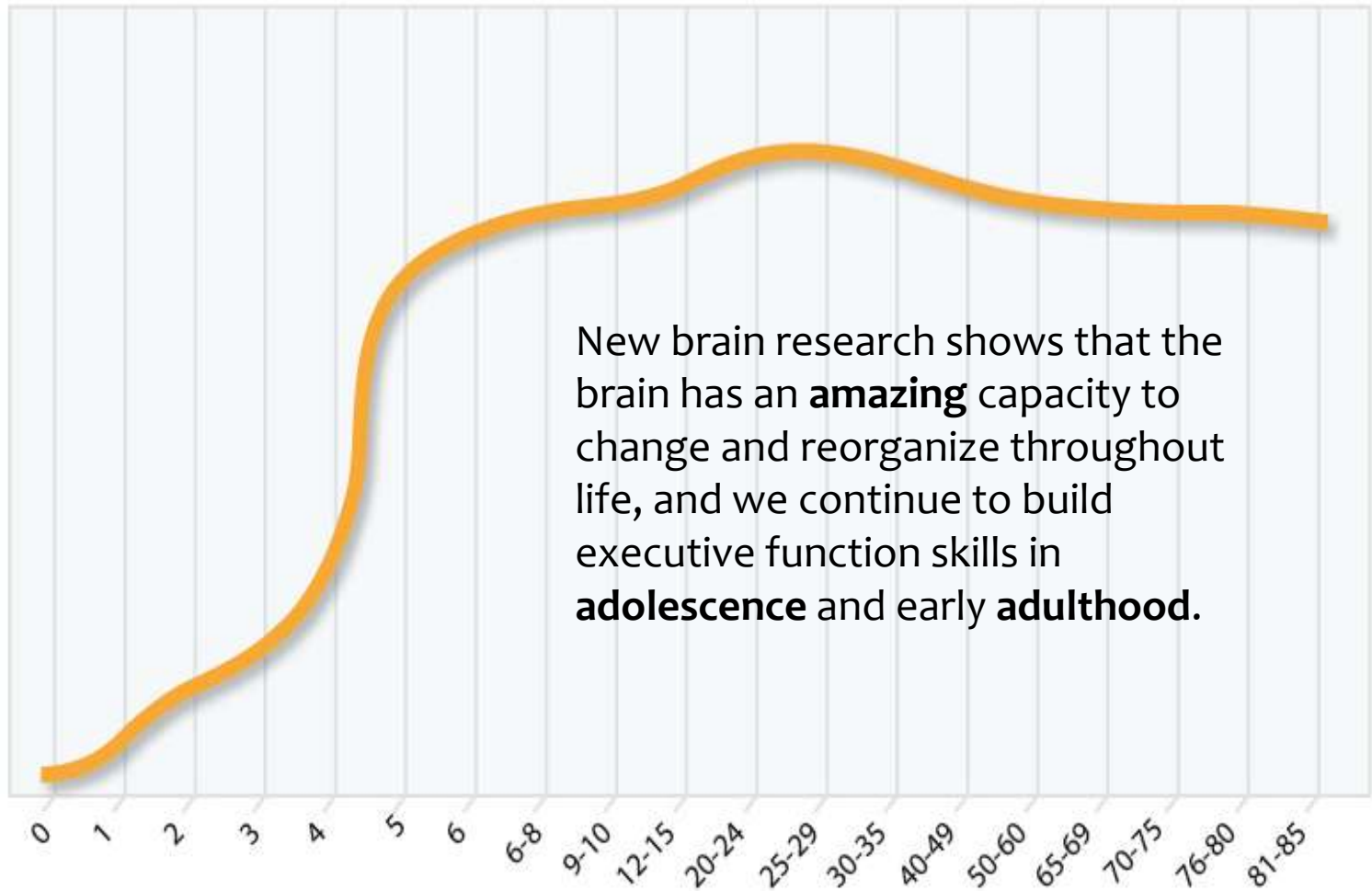
**FAILURE TO PARTICIPATE**

INCOMPLETE PAPERWORK



There is hope!  
Life long learning  
is possible.

Executive Function Skill Proficiency

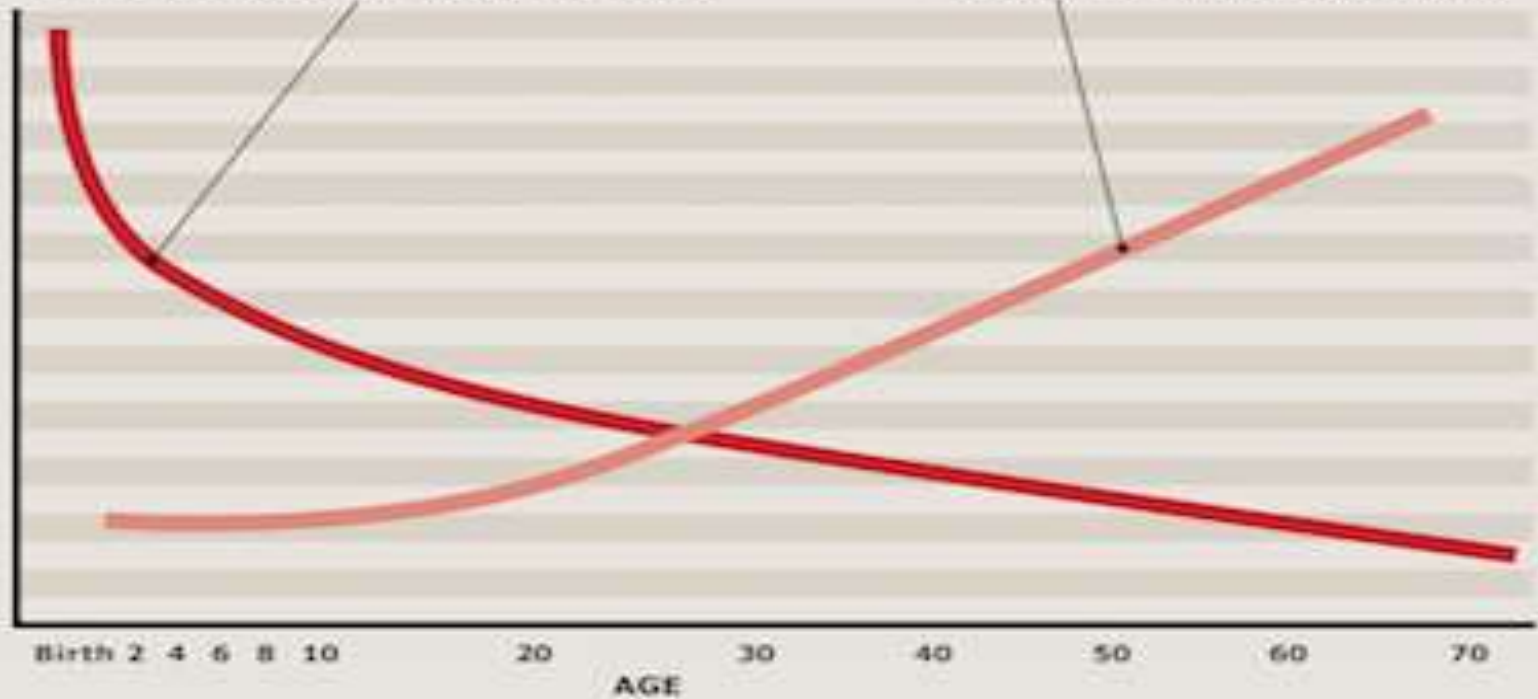


New brain research shows that the brain has an **amazing** capacity to change and reorganize throughout life, and we continue to build executive function skills in **adolescence** and early **adulthood**.

Age

**The Brain's Ability to Change  
in Response to Experiences**

**Amount of Effort  
Such Change Requires**



(Frontiers of Innovation, 2014)

# Executive Functioning and Adulthood

Age of 20-  
29  
Executive  
Function  
Skills are at  
their peak

Major changes occur in  
the brain in adulthood

Constant training of our  
own brain is important to  
stay on task

Allows  
people to  
participate  
in some of  
the most  
challenging  
mental  
tasks

# What Does Research Tell Us? One Example

“In a randomized control study of mothers in a welfare-to-work program, participants with internal loci of control performed significantly better than those with external loci of control, even when controlling for IQ scores and other factors (Leininger & Kalis, 2008). A feeling of control over one’s life was more important than any other factor, including prior educational attainment, in determining how successful low-income women were in adult education programs. Locus of control has great power to explain differential life outcomes and is directly related to EF development. In programs designed to transform participants’ lives applying curriculum and pedagogy that develop EF skills will play a central role in a successful theory of change.” (Carlock, 2011)

# EF Informed Strategies



# EF Informed Strategies

## Program Access

- Streamline procedures
- Recertification, eligibility maintenance simplified
- Resume services easily
- Funding streams, program silos eliminated, bundled

## Agency, Engagement, Follow Through

- Encourage development of self awareness
- Encourage informed actions based on stated preferences and beliefs
- Self-empowerment programming with clearly articulated goals, coaching
- Frameworks that concurrently array and help individuals understand choices
- Incentives that reward increased agency, self-efficacy and investment

## Rules and Tools

- Multimodal means of communication
- Simplified steps, avoid jargon
- Consistent communication across all levels of program
- Ramifications/Benefits of program participation clearly delineated
- Environment where communication is delivered is important



# EF Informed Strategies

## Promote Goal Attainment

- SMART goals
- Frequent goals reviews
- Ramifications of not meeting goals clearly defined
- Incentive models carefully aligned to targeted population
- “Plan B” included


## Coaching

- Developing and practicing new routines of thought and behavior
- Concrete program opportunities to practice new skills
- Reinforce “pause and reflect”, “plan b”, reframing negative self-assessment
- Find approaches that allow participants to ignore competing stimuli
- Multimedia and interactive interventions
- Environmental conditions
- Social “leveraging” networks

(Babcock, 2014)

## Health-related Approaches


- Promote good access to primary medical, mental health and dental care
- Opportunities to reduce stress
- Physical exercise
- Self-care



Executive Functions Skills Map for Job Search  
( give hand out and discuss)

Adult Executive Skills Definitions and Examples ( give hand out and discuss)

Have everyone do the assessment ( based on their environment of employment) and discuss



## Key points about children and adults:

- Earlier experiences affect lifelong health and learning
  - Healthy development requires protection and enrichment
  - Protection and enrichment for young adult require capacity building for adults
  - Improved parenting skills also enhance employability and economic stability
  - Strong neighborhoods reduce the burdens of adversity
- 
- Remember that “ If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” Albert Einstein
- 
- Winning Strategy:  
“ I have not failed. I have just found ten thousand ways that won’t work” Thomas Edison

## Ramsey County MFIP/DWP EF Informed programming

- Changing of words: family vs. participant, power vs. empowering, believe that everyone can parent and we need to offer support
- Changing from direct approach to coaching approach
- Offering a specific training on life long learning and executive function to all staff
- Soliciting coaching and investing in developing coaching skills within staff
- Creating an opportunity for staff to be a “ match maker” between a participant (family) and employment opportunities
- Investing in education
- Creating employment plans based on one’s dream
- Counseling after coaching based on one’s ideas
- Hearing and listening to families
- Making employment and employment retention along with education key outcomes
- Minimizing WPR, maximizing self support index
- Thinking about a two generational approach

## **Ramsey County MFIP/DWP EF Informed Programming:**

- Incentives - flexible support services policy
- Investment into employment - employment retention and support for employment
- Evidence based, research driven - find what works, evaluate and design program based on results
- Create own bridge for the families (an assessment that is Ramsey County specific) using some of the EM principles - families will self assess
- Simplify overviews
- Think about individual time with the families, determining the best way to provide services
- Direct EF educated and research driven practices to all of the programs ( future)
- Determine what is our niche
- Families are in the center

**LIFE LONG LEARNING MATTERS**

# Resources

<http://www.liveworkthrive.org/>

[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/activities/frontiers\\_of\\_innovation/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/activities/frontiers_of_innovation/)

<http://www.buildingbetterprograms.org/>



Resources:

Richard Guare, Consultant

Donna Pavetti, Center On Budget and Policy Priorities

Jack Shankoff, MD, Center on the Developing Child Harvard University

Elizabeth Babcock, MCRP,Phd, Crittenton Women's Union

Silvia Budge, University of California at Berkley

# Strike a Pose

- \* Exercise or yoga are techniques for strengthening EF skills. Participating in exercise creates a mind body connection, reduces stress, boosts self-confidence and fosters a deep sense of mindfulness





**Sanskrit Name:** Tadasana or Samasthiti

**English Translation:** Mountain Pose or Equal Standing Pose

Stand with your feet together, legs active, and arms by your sides.

Bring your awareness inward, to create an intention for your practice or to make a dedication. Stay for five breaths.



**Sanskrit Name:** Utkatasana

**English Translation:** Fierce Pose Also Called: Chair Pose

Stand with your feet together in earlier Mountain Pose. Bend your knees and lower your hips as you raise your arms overhead.

Focus on sitting back onto your heels. Tuck your tailbone in and engage your abs, keeping your spine straight. Relax the shoulders as you gaze up toward the ceiling. Stay like this for five breaths.