



Unstuck and on Target

SUPPORTING THE SKILLS BEHIND SUCCESS: EXECUTIVE
FUNCTIONING ESSENTIALS FOR COLLEGE PROFESSIONALS

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Conflicts of Interest

1

Royalties

I receive royalties on sales of Unstuck and On Target manuals/kits and BRIEF manuals/forms

2

Funding

- Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI): AD-1304-7379; DI-2019C2-17605
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): R01 MH110512, R01MH124772-01, K23MH115100, 1K23MH110612-01, 1R44MH109193-01, 1R34MH083053-01A2, K23MH115100, R01MH137179-01, K23MH136346
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- The Robert and Judith Atlas Foundation



Learning Objectives

- Define executive functioning and understand how executive functioning challenges can impact college student learning, engagement, and academic success.
- Recognize common executive functioning barriers experienced by neurodivergent students, including autistic students, in higher education settings.
- Apply practical, evidence-based strategies to support students' planning, organization, focus, self-monitoring, and follow-through in the college environment.



Overview

GOAL



Increase your understanding of executive function intervention

WHY



Executive Functions (EF) are important and teachable

PLAN



1. **UNDERSTAND:** Recognize specific EF challenges
2. **SUPPORT** Identify key EF supports
3. **TEACH:** Model and practice self-regulation

CHECK



Did we get through all the slides?

Are you still awake?



Overview • Goal

GOAL



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1. **UNDERSTAND:** Recognize specific EF challenges
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Overview • Why

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Executive Functions (EF) are important and teachable

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Executive Functions (EF) are important

Executive Dysfunction = “*The curious dissociation between knowing & doing*”

EF PROBLEMS RELATE TO:

- Social skills
- Mental Health
- Family stress
- Adaptive behavior
- School learning & achievement **more strongly than IQ**
- Adult Outcomes — Employment, quality of life, health

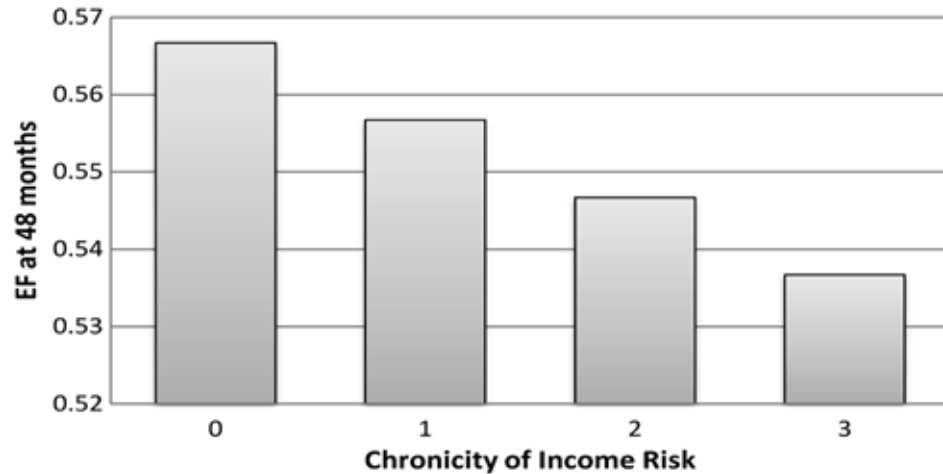


Executive Functions Are Teachable

NEURAL SUBSTRATE IS DISPERSED AND PLASTIC.

- EF arises from widely distributed networks throughout the brain with an extended developmental course
- EF not only changes over time, it relies on functional neural networks that develop in the context of experience

(Bernstein & Waber, 2007)

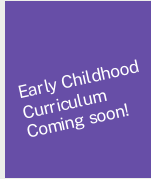


Raver et al., 2013



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Executive Functions Are Teachable: Unstuck Trials



Brandt, et al.,
In Press



Cannon, et al.,
2021



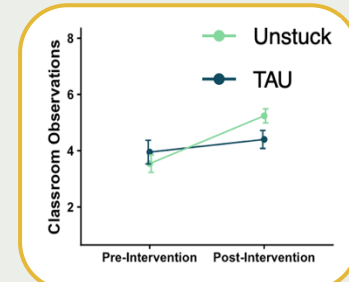
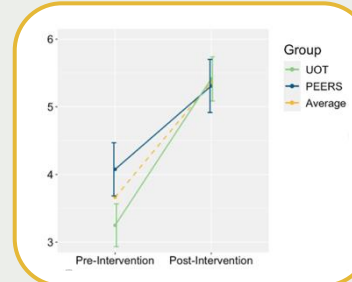
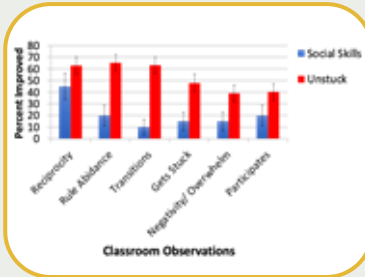
Strang, et al.,
2023



Pugliese et al.,
2026 (August)

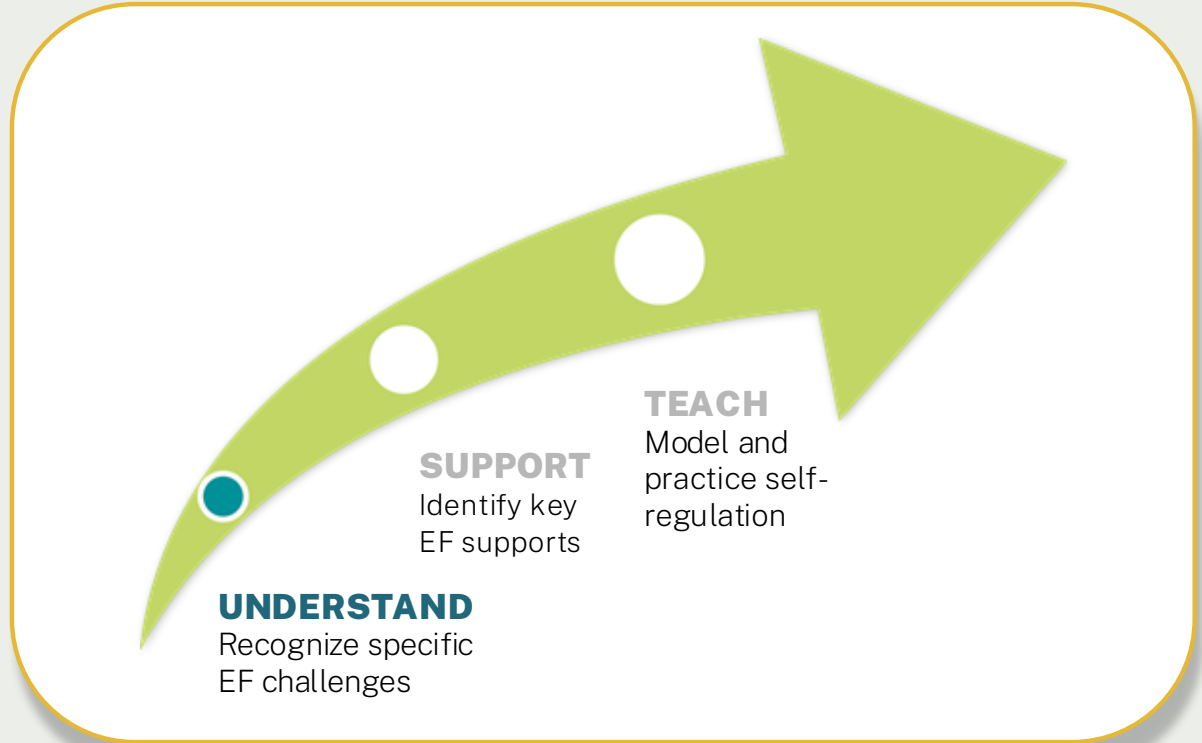
UNDERSTAND • SUPPORT • TEACH

Classroom Observations
(Unmasked)
Total improved
Cohen's $d = .40$

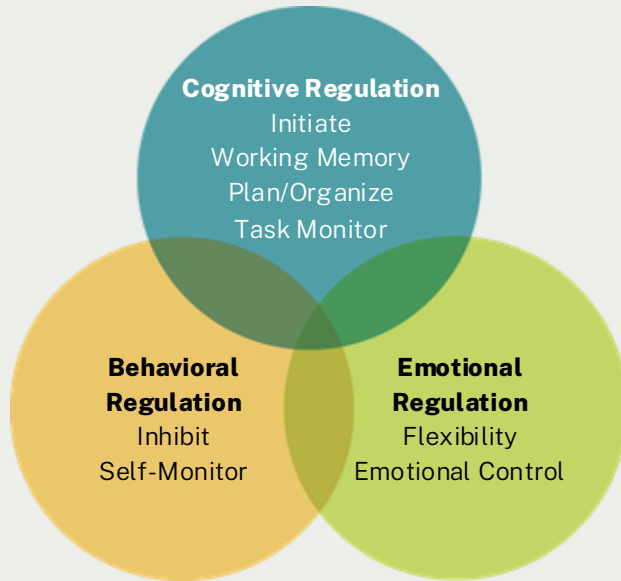


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Overview • Plan



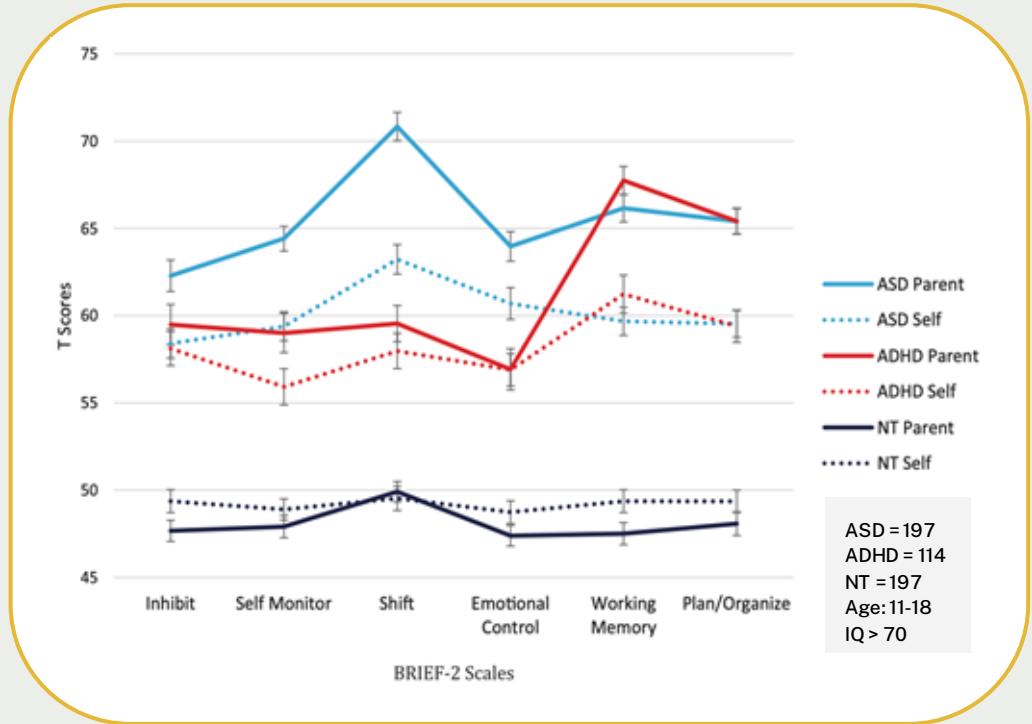
Understand: EF Profiles in Autism and ADHD



Gioia, et al., 2016; Miyake et al., 2000;
Friedman & Miyake, 2017



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Kenworthy et al., 2022

*“Asperger’s is like a vise on your brain.
And each unexpected event is like another
turn on the vise . . . it just keeps building until
you feel like you’re going to explode.
Sometimes when you explode, it comes out
the wrong way.”*

—A young student with ASD



Inflexibility Strengths



- Deep data set
- Persistence
- Reliability
- Loyalty
- Inflexibility is adaptive: It limits unexpected, overloading events.



Rey Osterrieth Complex Figure

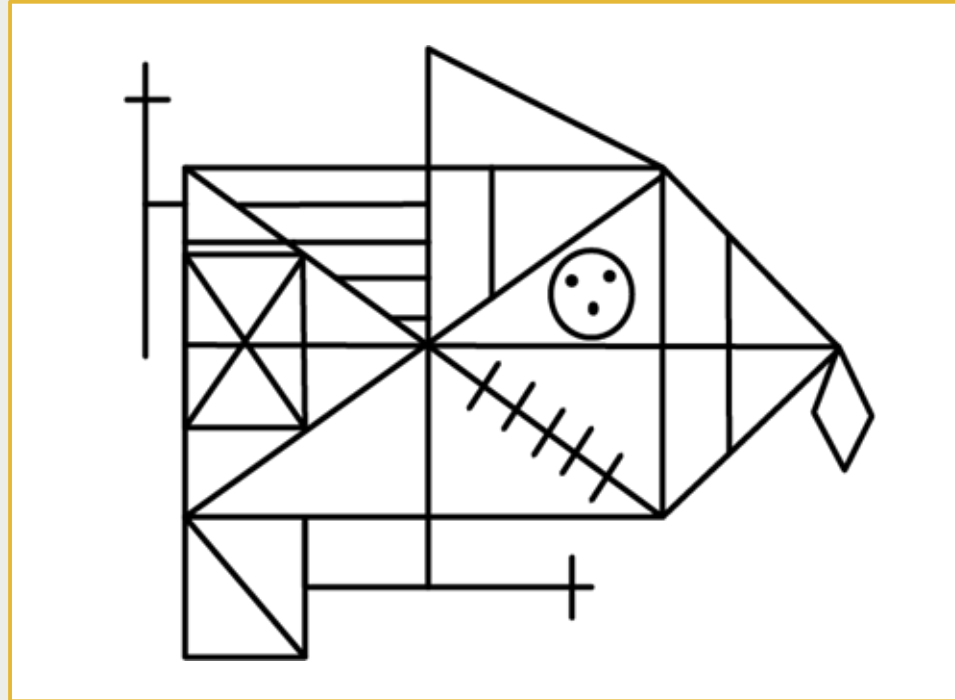
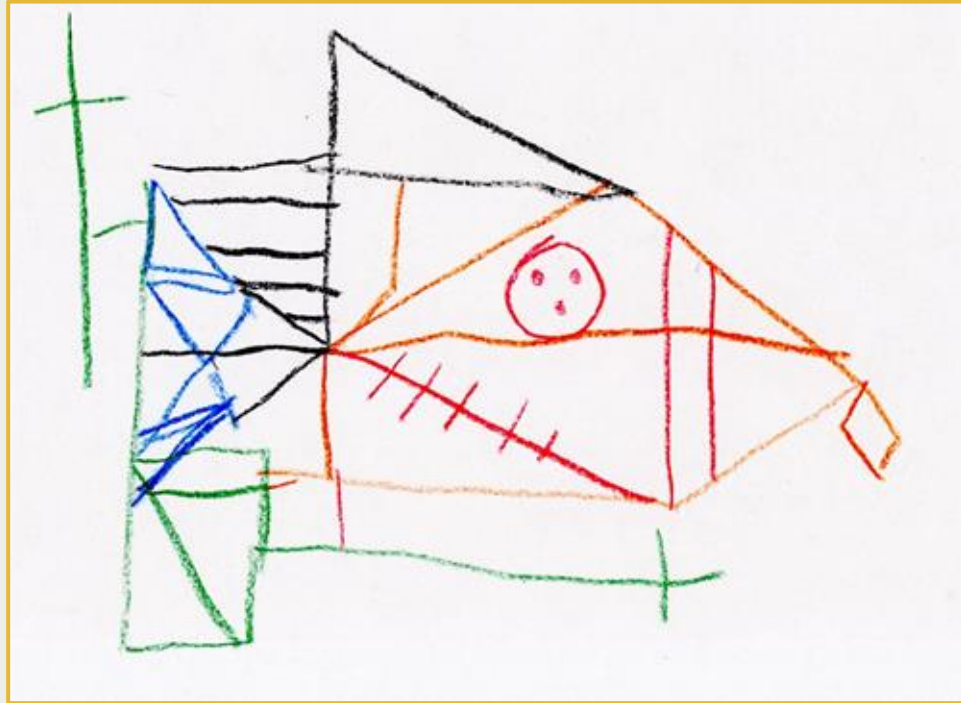
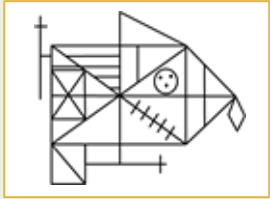


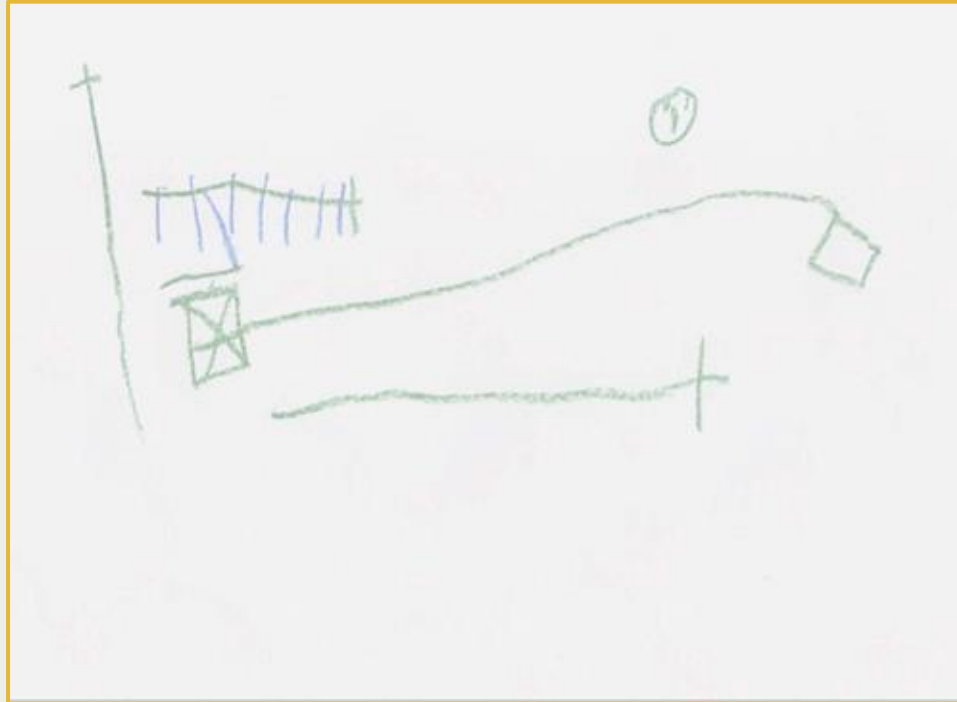
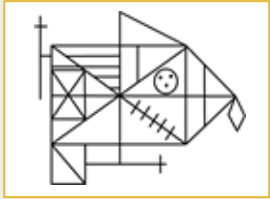
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Kenworthy et al., 2005; Kenworthy, 2011

Figure Drawn from Memory



Detail Processor Strengths

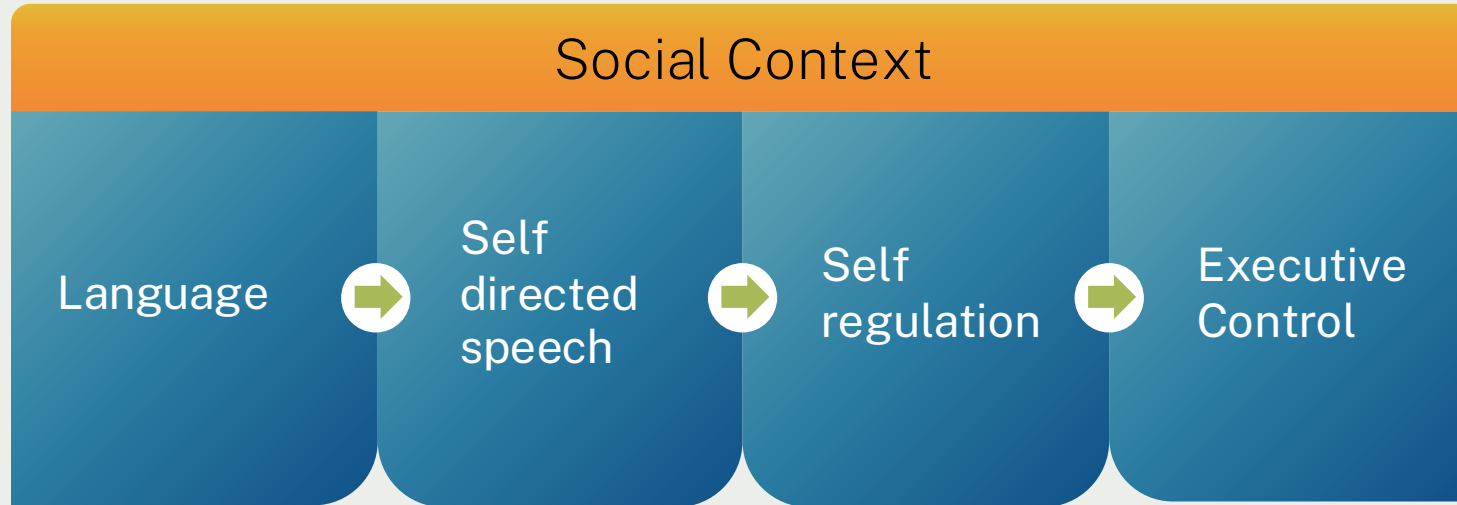
- Patience for details
- Respect, follow, use explicit rules
- Good with recipes, checklists and routines
- Powerful computer related thinking
- Good logical sequential reasoning
- Classification strengths
- Strengths in detection



The Importance of Inner Speech



Vygotsky
*Thinking
and Speech*
(1934)



(Luria, 1961; Wallace et al., 2009)



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Understand

*“Asperger’s is like a vise on your brain.
And each unexpected event is like another
turn on the vise . . . it just keeps building
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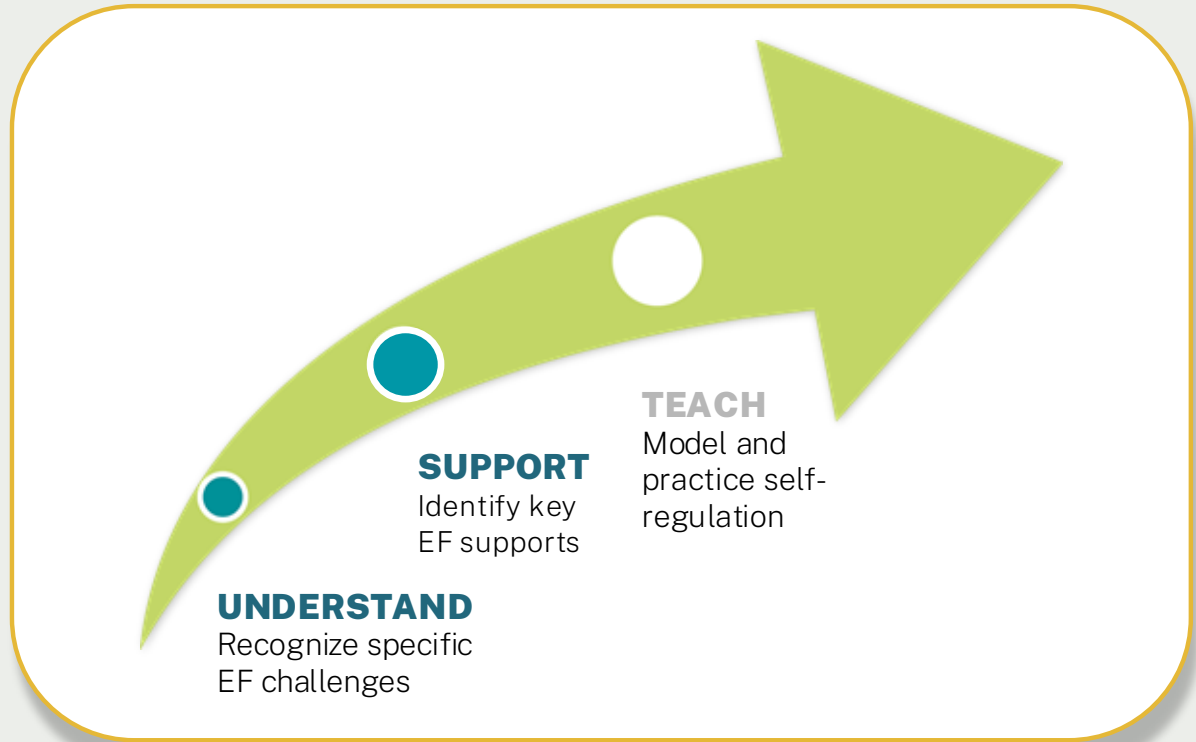
Looks Like Won’t...		Could be <i>Can’t</i> Yet
Oppositional, Stubborn	➤	Flexibility
Can do it if he wants to	➤	Goal setting/Planning
Procrastinator	➤	Goal setting/Planning
Won’t put good ideas on paper	➤	Organization
Sloppy, erratic	➤	Self monitoring
Spacey, doesn’t listen	➤	Working Memory

Personal communication; Bernstein, 2000; Greene, 1998; Kuncie & Mesibov, 1991



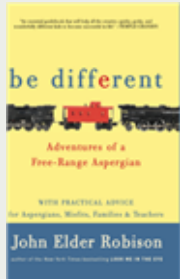
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Overview • Plan



Support: Why support before you teach?

Access is a civil right.

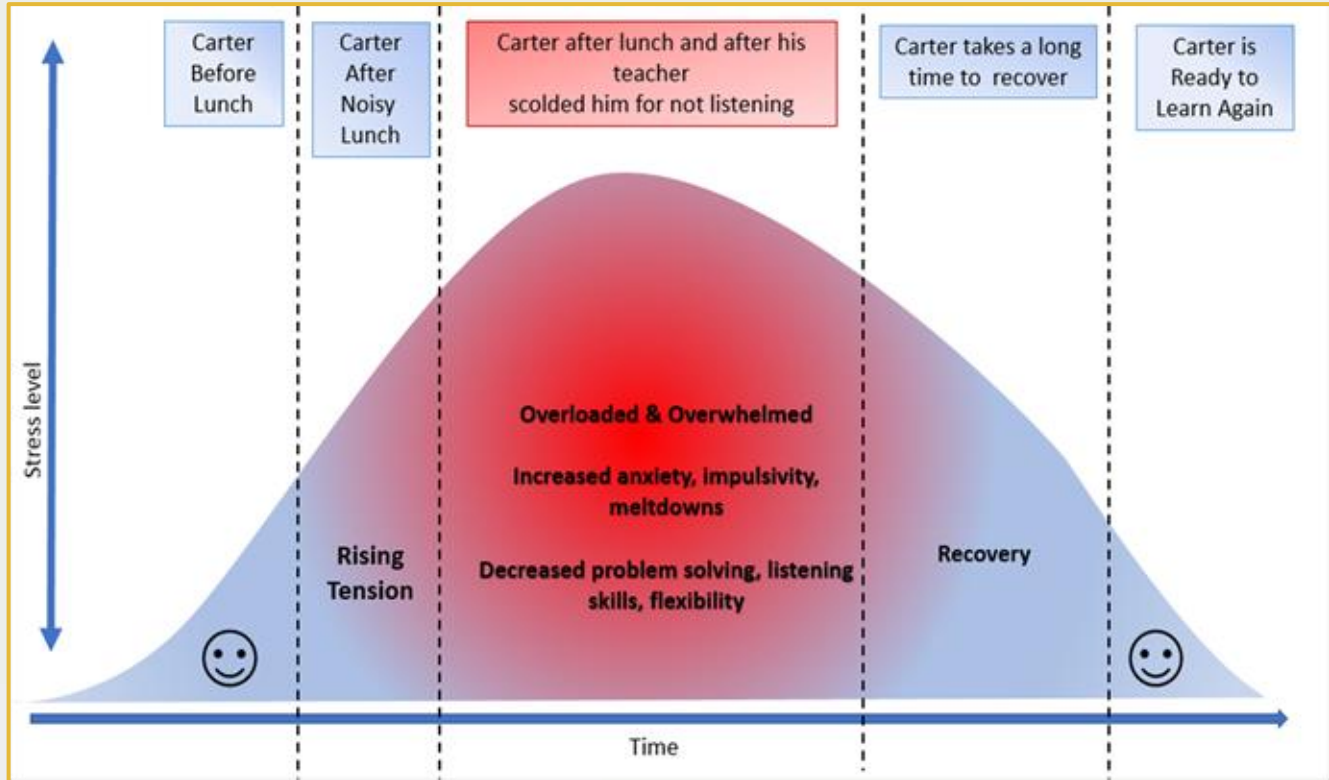


Overwhelmed people can't learn.

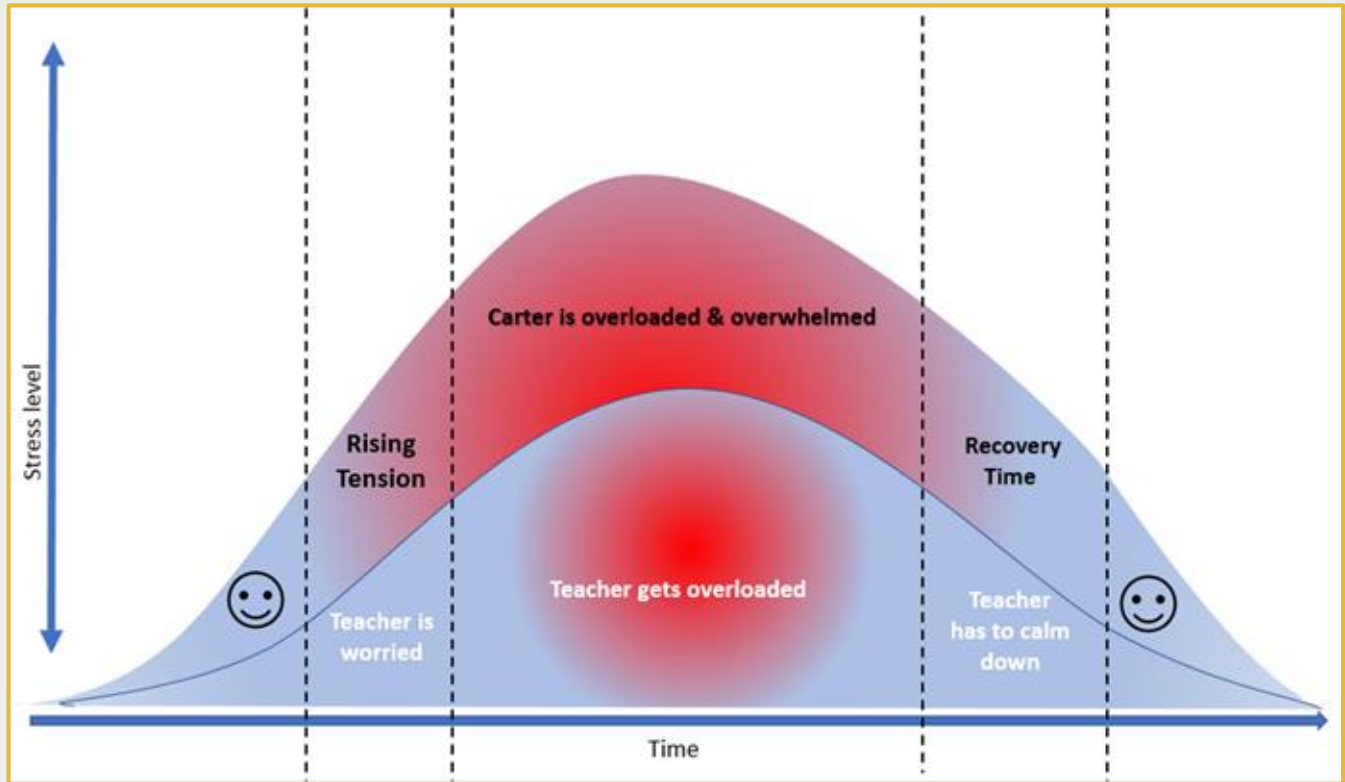
1. Keep It Positive
2. Predictability and structure
3. Break It Down and Make Big Picture Explicit
4. Talk Less, Write More



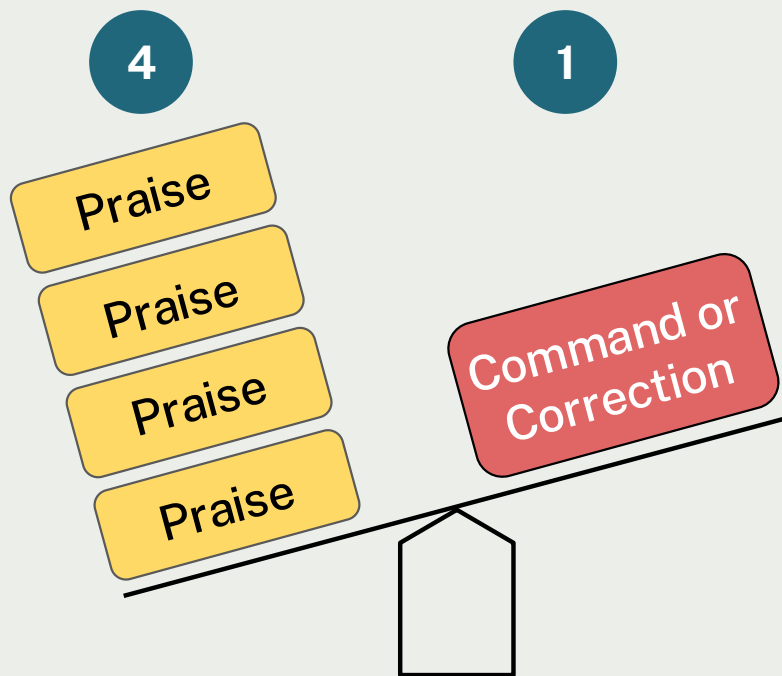
Support: Overwhelmed people can't learn



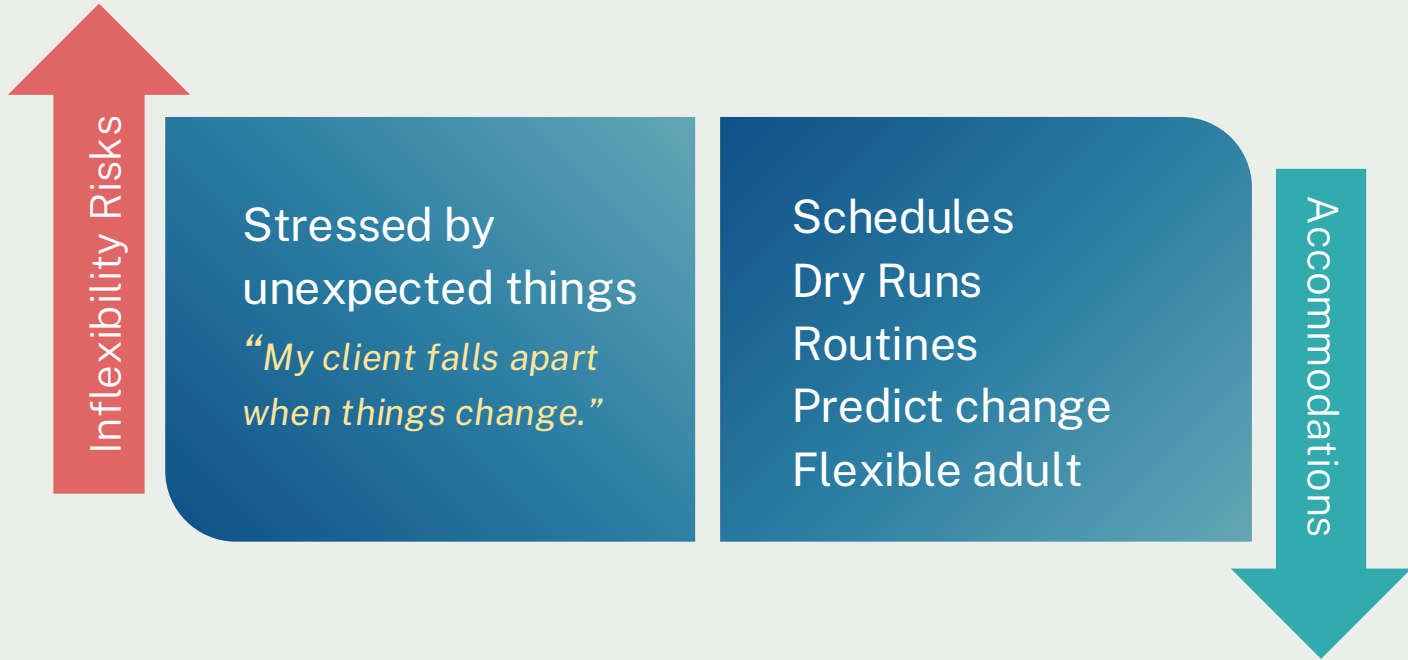
Overwhelm is contagious



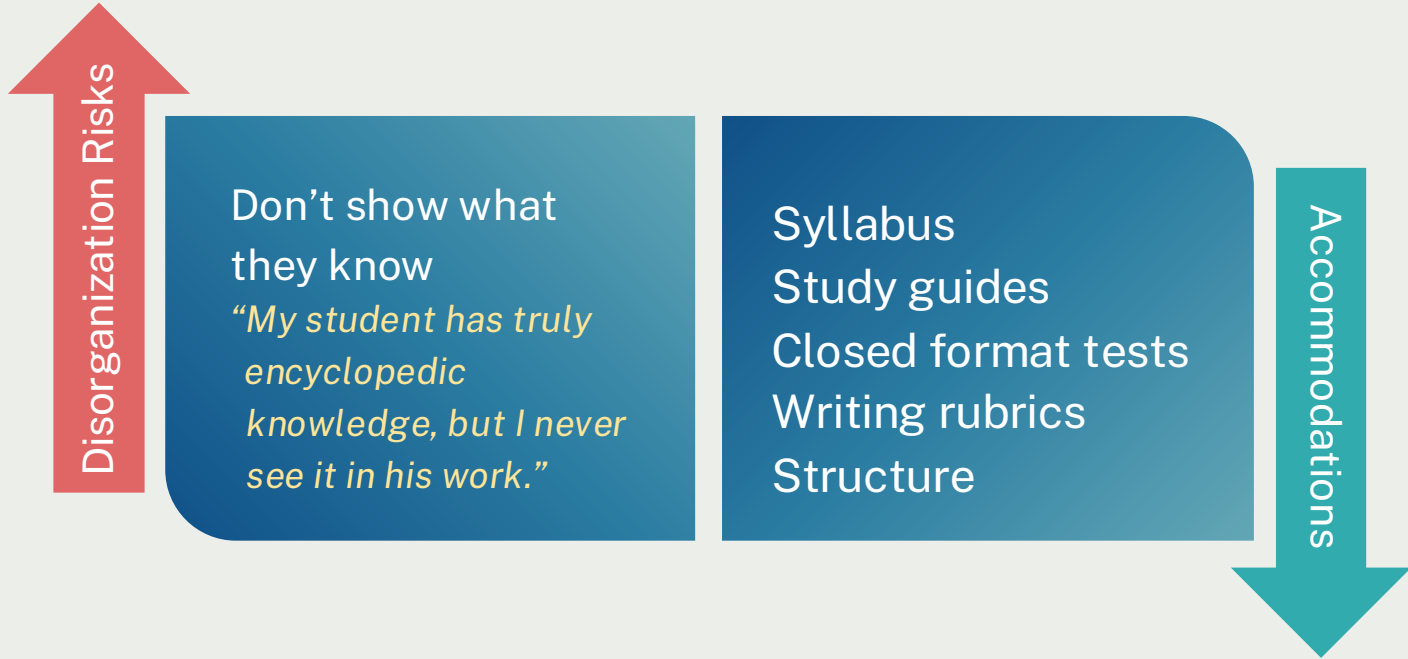
Keep It Positive



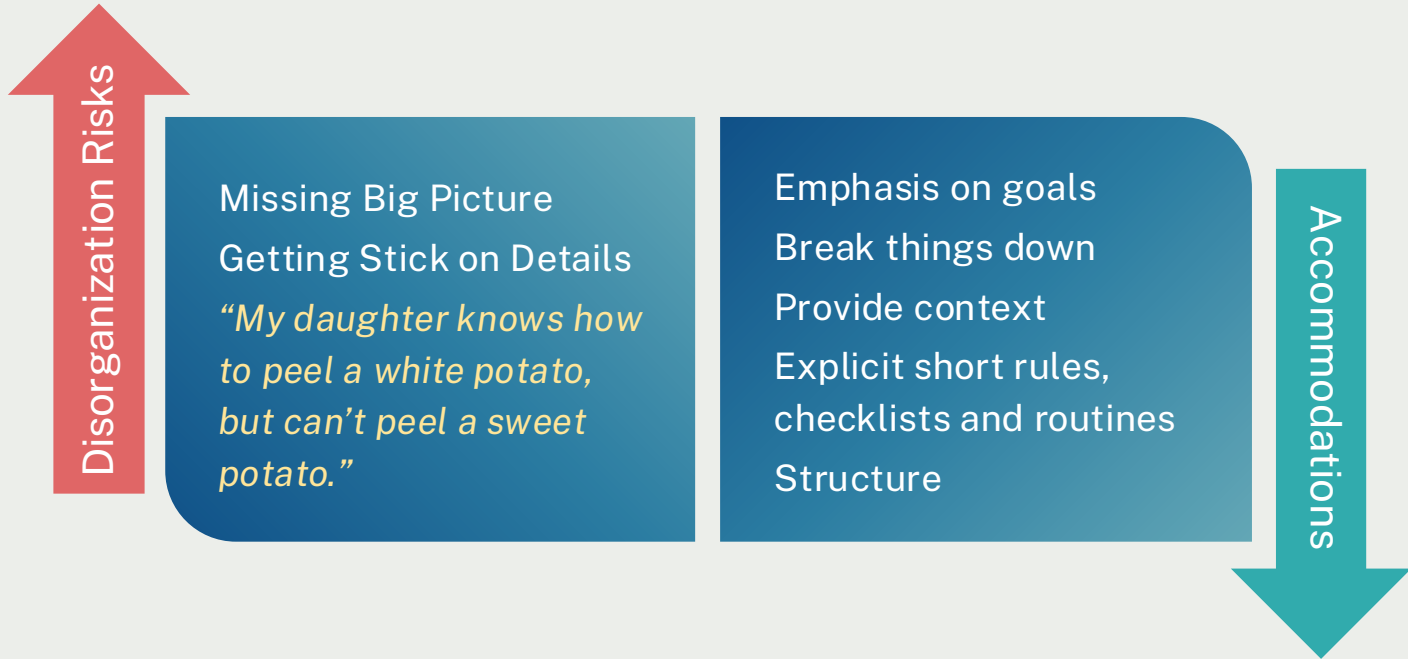
Inflexibility Risks and Supports



Disorganization Risks and Supports



Disorganization Risks and Supports



Break It Down and Talk Less

Kami uses the When to Compromise Strategy: Book Report

Panel 1 (ADVOCATE): Kami: How about I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings? It's amazing!

Panel 2 (ADVOCATE): John: Eh . . . never heard of it. What about a classic like Frankenstein?

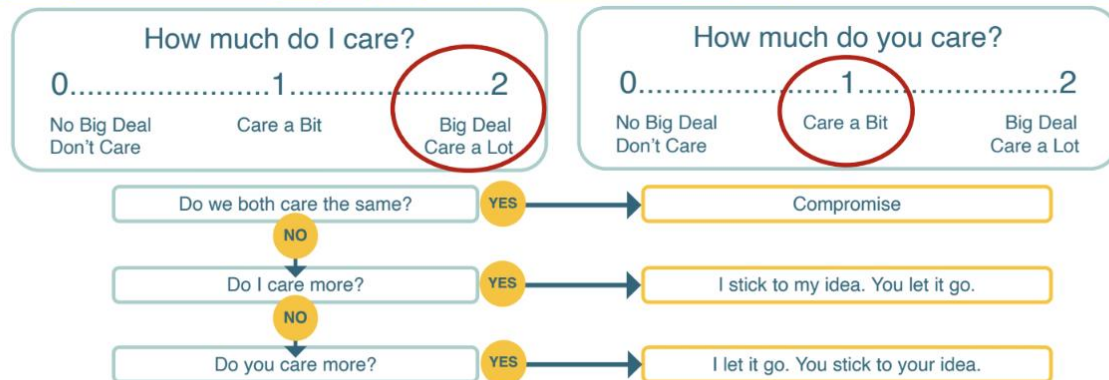
Panel 3 (ASK): On a scale of 0 to 2, where 2 means you care a lot about your choice, I'm a 2. What's your rating for Frankenstein?

Panel 4 (CHECK): I've never read Frankenstein . . . so I'm more like a 1.

Panel 5 (CHECK): Can we go with my book, then?

Panel 6 (CHECK): Yeah, I can live with that.

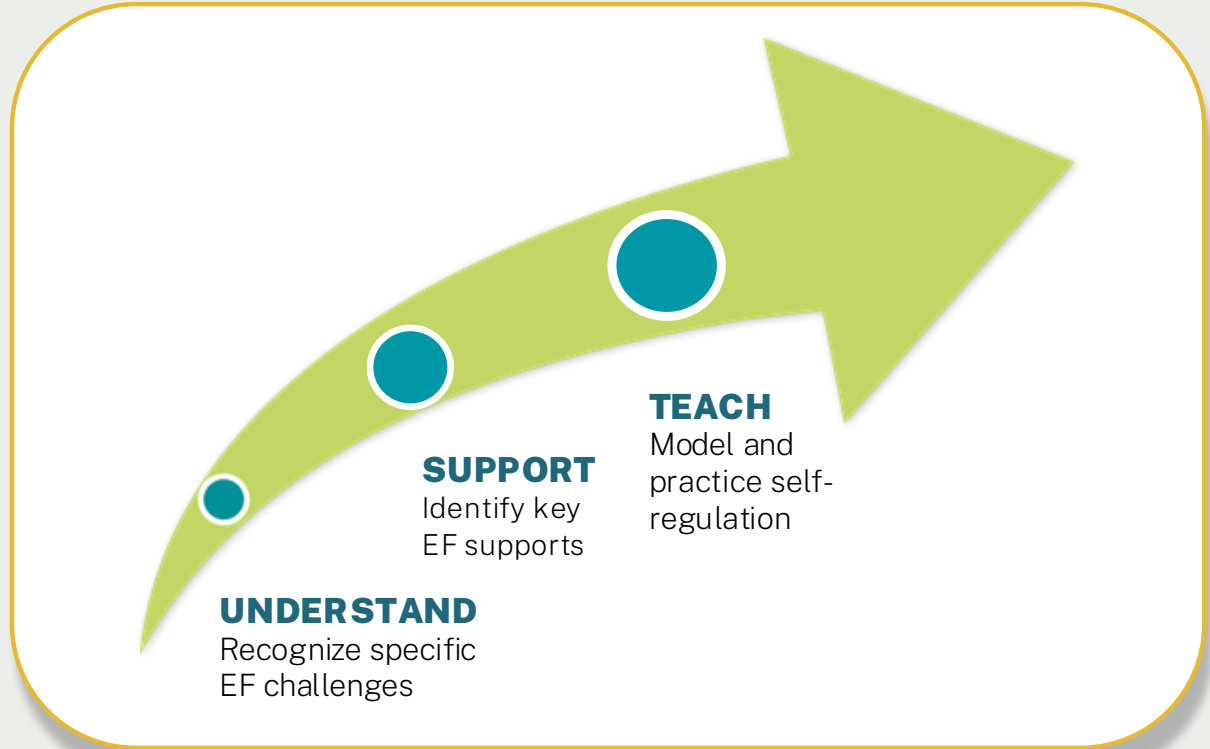
The big-picture goal was to choose a book, so Kami stuck to her idea and checked to make sure it was okay. They got a good grade, and John liked the book!



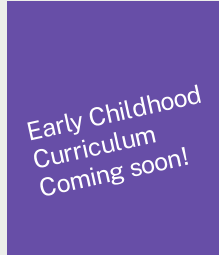
UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Unstuck and On Target! Ages 14–22: An Executive Function Curriculum to Support Self-Determination, Flexibility, Planning, and Organization by Cara E. Pugliese, Lauren Kenworthy, Monica Adler Werner, Katie C. Alexander, Lynn Cannon, John F. Strang, and Laura Gutermuth Anthony. Copyright © 2026 by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved.

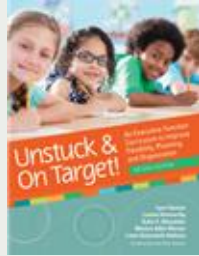
Overview • Plan



Teach: Unstuck Curricula • Early Learners Through Adults



Brandt, et al.,
In Press



Cannon, et al.,
2021



Strang, et al.,
2023



Pugliese et al,
2026 (August)

UNDERSTAND • SUPPORT • TEACH

- Small Group, Tier 2, ~20 sessions, Flexible!
- Strengths-Based, Neurodiversity Affirming
- Collaborative Development & Instruction
- Emotion recognition and coping
- Common self-regulatory language
- Emphasis on fun, salience, praise!

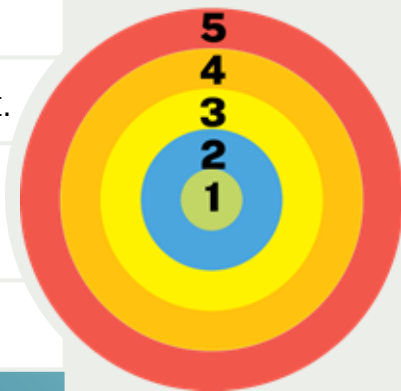


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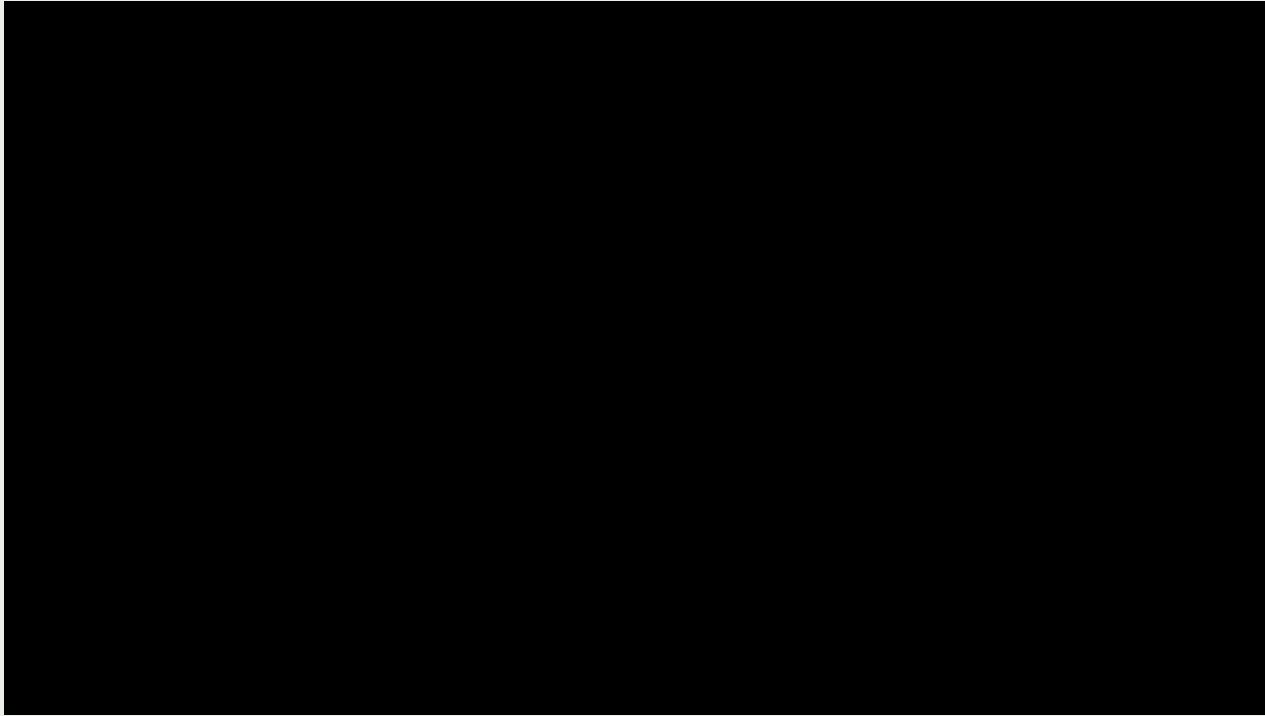
Teach: Self Regulatory Shared Vocabulary

Flexible	Great job being flexible
Unstuck	I'm getting stuck on_____, how can I get unstuck?
Compromise	Let's compromise so we both get some of what we want.
Plan A/Plan B	What is our Plan A? What is our Plan B?
Big Deal/Little Deal	How can we make this big deal into a little deal?
Goal - Why - Plan - Do -Check	

Ylvisaker, 1998; Ylvisaker et al, 2003, Ylvisaker et al, 2006



Father models Unstuck Vocabulary



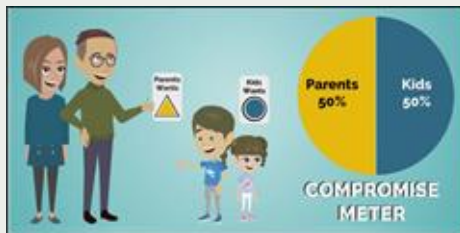
15 free videos in English or Spanish

>34,000 views



The duration is perfect. They were great quick hits.

The videos made me feel less alone... and hopeful.



[The videos] really helped me understand it's not defiance but more of EF. Taking a different approach instead of arguing makes things so much better.

Smith et al., 2024



UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET



Unstuck: 14-22 Curriculum

Unit 1: Understanding Your Thinking Style & Getting What You Need

1. Flexible Thinking Gets You More Power	2. Why Unstuck Works: Understanding Executive Functions	3. Self Advocacy: Getting What You Need to Reach Goals	4. Managing Mismatches	5. Neurodiversity Makes the World Better
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Skills Learning & Practice

Unit 2: Tools to Keep You On Target

6. Big Picture Goals	7. Life Pie: Time Management	8-9. Flexible Thoughts & Feelings	10-11. How to Be Motivated & Make Your Own Plans	12. Reminder Systems
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Unit 3: Tools for Working With Others

13. Relationship Builders	14. How to Compromise	15. When to Compromise
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Units 4-5: Planning Your Goal & Putting Your Plan Into Action

16. Setting Your Own Goals	17. Planning: the Big Picture & Important Details	18. Planning Dangers	19. Making Your Plan A & Trying it Out	20-22. Checking & Making Plan B/C/D
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Independent Goal

Unit 6: Celebrating Your Learning

23. Planning Your Graduation Celebration	24. Planning Your Graduation Presentation	25. Graduation
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UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Shared Vocabulary for 14-22 year olds

Goal What and Why? → **Plan** How do we do it? → **Do** Try it! → **Check** How did it go?

Flexible/ Stuck

- This was not easy. You were **flexible** and stuck with it.
- Thanks for being **flexible** by <label teen's action>.
- Are you feeling **stuck** right now? Can I help you think of a way to get **unstuck**?
- How can I get **unstuck**?
- I can be **flexible**.

Plan A/ Plan B

- If **Plan A** doesn't work, we'll try a **Plan B**.
- What's your **Plan A**? <PAUSE> Do you have a **Plan B**, in case you need it?
- Way to use a **Plan B**.
- I'm feeling **stuck**. Can you help me come up with a **Plan B**?

Self- Advocacy

- How can you **advocate** for yourself to help you reach this goal?
- Great job **advocating** to let me know what you needed.
- This is hard. I need to make a **plan** to get help.

Compromise

- Let's figure out a **compromise** that lets both of us get some of what we want. What do you think?
- How important is this to you? A little or a lot? Do we need to **compromise**?
- This isn't a **big deal** to me – I can **let it go**.
- This is a **big deal** to me – if it's a **big deal** to you, too, we need a compromise.

Flexible Thoughts & Coping with Stress

- I get that you're upset. I hate when that happens to me. <PAUSE> Can we at least get something good out of this if we make a **Plan B**?
- That is really frustrating. I'd feel the same way. <PAUSE> What is the **big picture** here? Is there a way to **be flexible** to get what you want?
- I can be **flexible**, keep an open mind, and give it a try.

Goal, Plan, Check

- Is this something you want to make into a **goal**? Why is it important to you?
- **What is your goal here**? Do you want to make a **plan** to work towards it?
- I am setting a **goal** of going to bed by 10 pm. **Why**? I need to get more sleep to feel good.
- Should we **check the plan**? How did this work out last time?
- Great to see you **planning** the steps for how to solve that problem.
- This is a big project. Let's make a **plan** for how to break it down day by day.



UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Understand

Know Your Brain!



Feelings

- Managing Stress and Overwhelm
- Staying Flexible

Executive Functions Regulate Your...

Thinking

- Planning
- Organizing Things or Ideas
- Getting Started
- Remembering Instructions

Actions

- Checking Your Work
- Checking in With Others
- Thinking Before You Act

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☒ 3 | ☒ 4 | ☐ 5 | ☐ 6

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12

Won'ts Keep you Stuck: Name calling and labeling get you off target and make you feel bad

Feelings

- Stressed and overwhelmed
- Stuck on one way of doing something
- I don't like when things change

Stubborn, Argumentative

Shut down, Not Engaged

Thinking

- Start assignments late/miss deadlines
- Disorganized ideas or essays
- Hard time starting homework
- Forget what I'm supposed to do

Lazy, Unmotivated

Procrastinator

Actions

- Hard to check in with others
- Don't check my work
- Start something without a plan

Careless, Sloppy

Selfish, Self-Centered

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☒ 3 | ☒ 4 | ☒ 5 | ☐ 6

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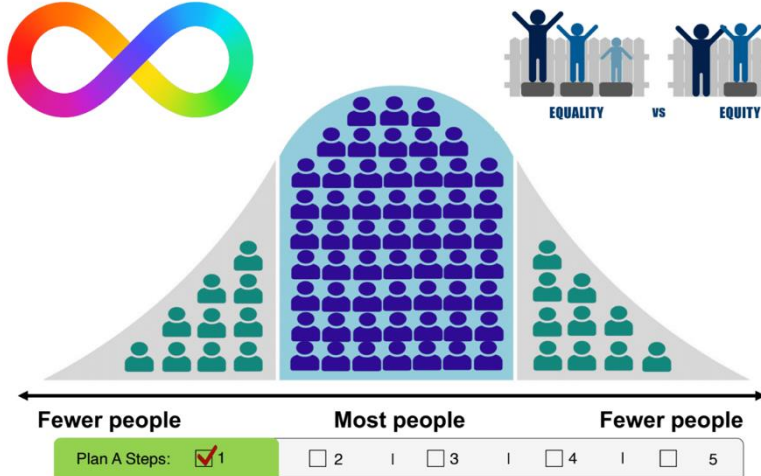
15



UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Support: Neurodiversity Lens

The World is Built for the Majority . . .
But is This Fair?



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5

Thinking Styles: Takes Both Big-Picture and Detail-Oriented Thinking

Situation	Big-Picture Strengths	Detail-Oriented Strengths
Group project 	- Brainstorm new ideas and solutions to problems. - Make sure the idea the group comes up with is consistent with the assignment. - Set goals for the group to complete in each week of the project.	- Create a checklist to stay on task. - Check the rubric to be sure the group completes all components of the assignment. - Find supporting facts and research.
Movie with friends 	- Make the decision to see a movie and suggest it to friends. - Figure out the type of movie to see based on your friends' preferences.	- Figure out the best day to see the movie. - Research the movie times and locations.

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☒ 3 | ☒ 4 | ☐ 5 | ☐ 6

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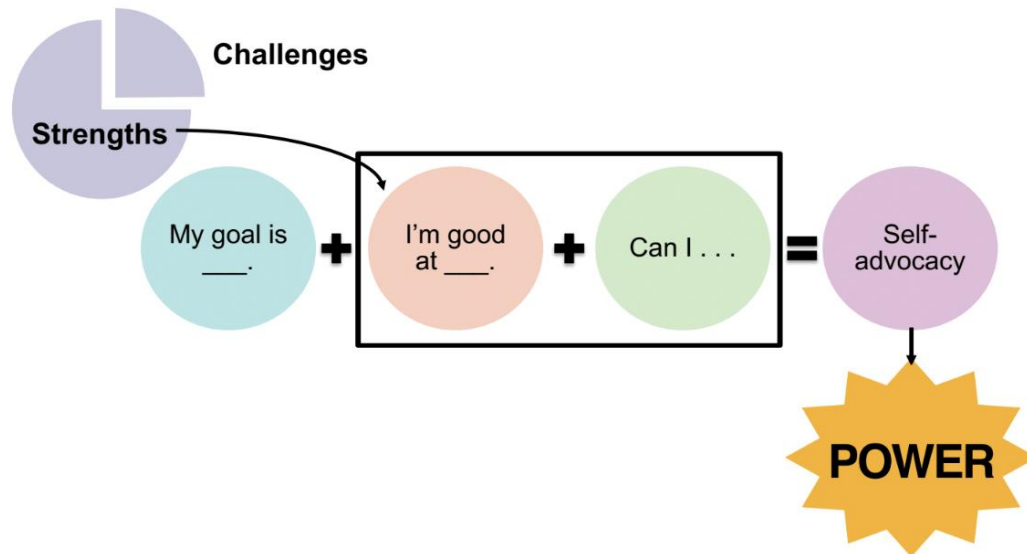
11



UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Support: Self- Advocacy

Know Yourself! Advocate for Your Strengths!



UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Plan A Steps:



1

|



2

|



3

|



4

|



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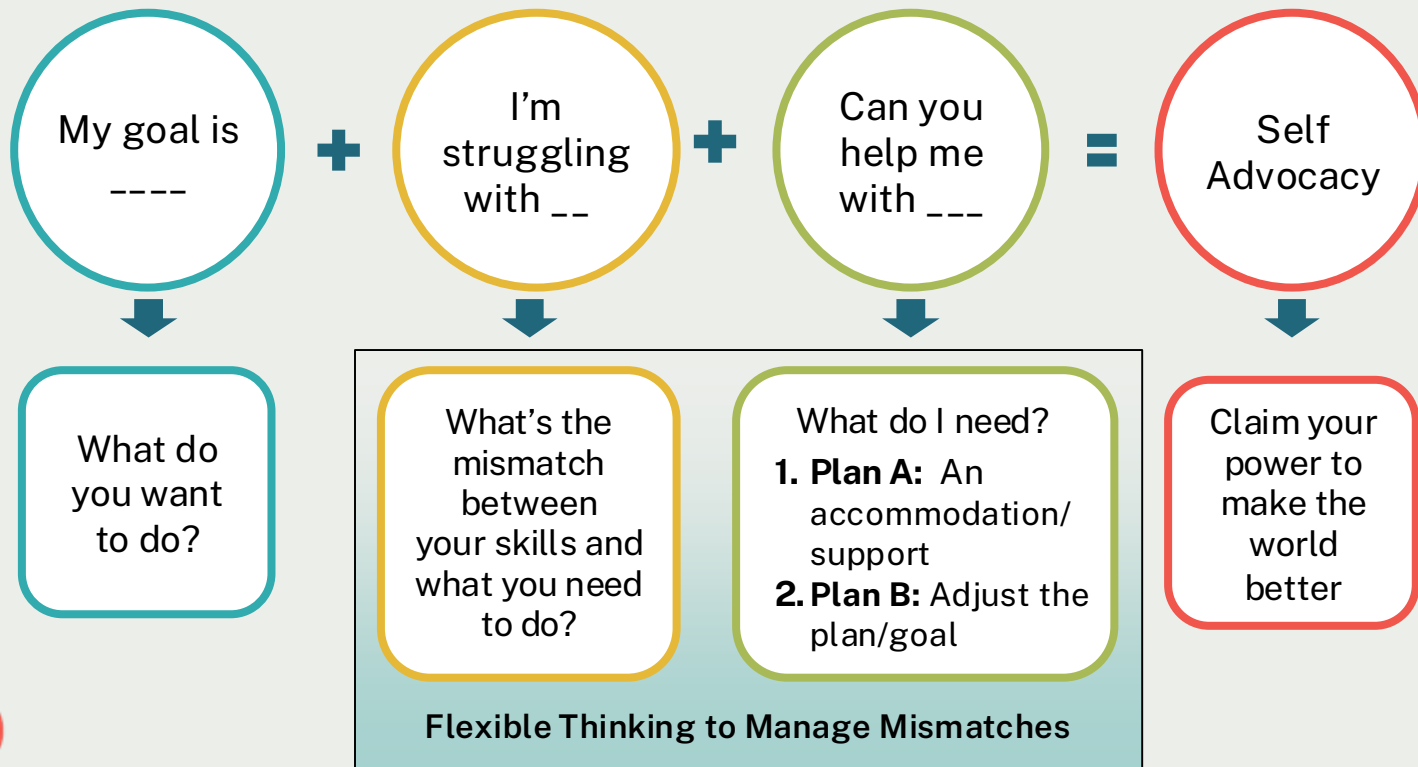
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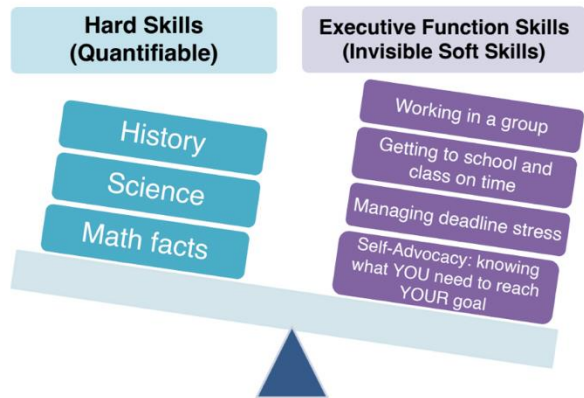
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Self-Advocacy Formula: Self Advocate to Get What You Need



Teach

What Else Do You Need to Learn? (The hidden executive function curriculum)



Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☒ 3 | ☒ 4 | ☐ 5 | ☐ 6

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11



UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Turning **Can't** Yets into **Cans**: *Unstuck and On Target!* Gives You Strategies



Feelings

- Stressed and overwhelmed
- Stuck on one way of doing something
- I don't like when things change

Flexible Thoughts and Feelings

Plan A/Plan B

Thinking

- Start assignments late/miss deadlines
- Disorganized ideas or essays
- Hard time starting homework
- Forget what I'm supposed to do

Power Plan: Goal-Why-Plan-Do-Check

Motivation and Reminder Systems

Actions

- Hard to check in with others
- Don't check my work
- Start something without a plan

Relationship Builders Compromise Self-Advocacy

Planning Dangers

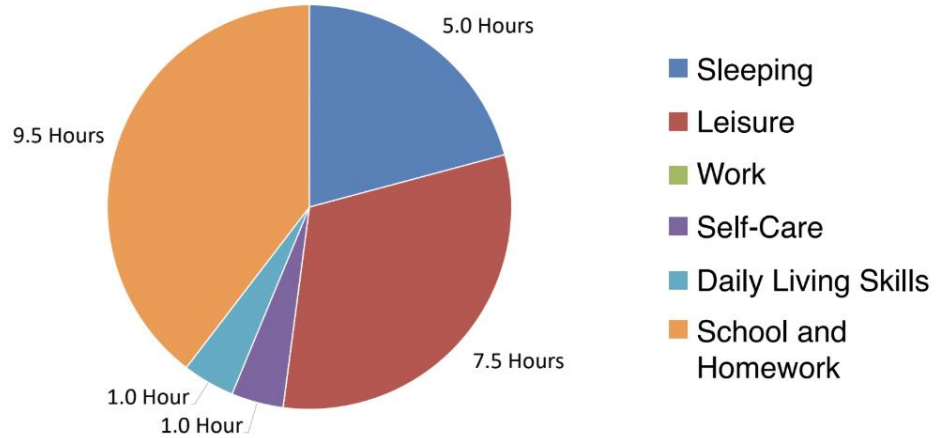
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17

Managing time

Danger Pie or Balanced Pie?



Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☒ 3 | ☐ 4 | ☐ 5

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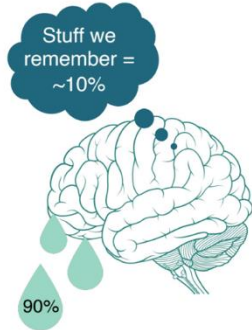


UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

Remembering Things

Brain Solutions

Brains are amazing but
a bit leaky.



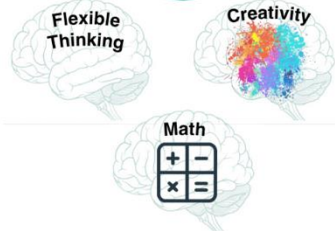
AND

**Reminder strategies help us
support our brains!**

Use reminders to remember stuff
we need to do

So the brain has more power

for other stuff like:



Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☐ 3 | ☐ 4 | ☐ 5 | ☐ 6 | ☐ 7

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11

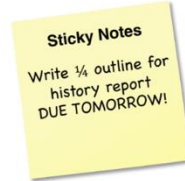
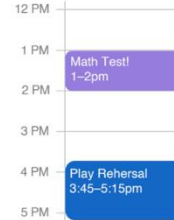
Reminder Strategies: What Works for You?

Event color ☒ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Notifications minutes

Add a notification

WED
21



Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 | ☒ 2 | ☒ 3 | ☐ 4 | ☐ 5 | ☐ 6 | ☐ 7

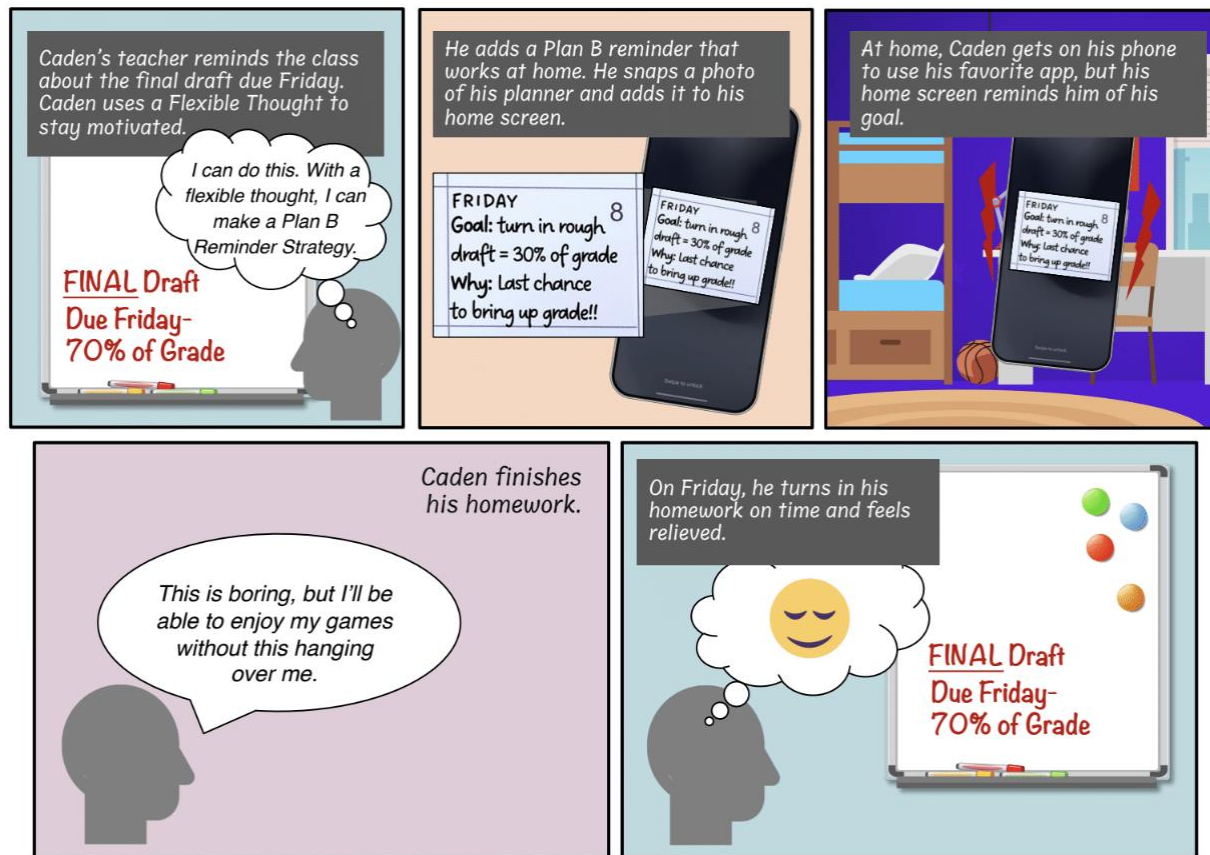
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14



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Why use reminder strategies



Flexible Thoughts and Feelings

Flexible Thinking Challenge



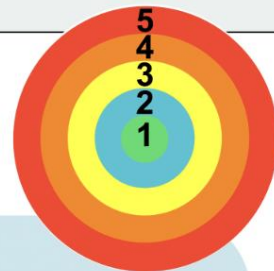
Plan A Steps: ☒ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

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Are You Stressed or Overwhelmed?



Use a Flexible Thought

Rule #1: Make it more realistic.

Rule #2: Make it more helpful.

- This is hard, but I can make a plan to get help,
- It is normal for Plan As to fail, I just need a Plan B,
- I can try things a different way and see how it goes,
- Mistakes help me learn and improve,
- I can be flexible, keep an open mind, and give it a try,

**Flexible Thoughts give you options.
Stuck Thoughts are dead ends!**

Trigger a Flexible Feeling

- Do some deep breathing.
- Think about a place or thing that makes you happy.
- Take a quick break.
- Do a calming repetitive action: twirl a pencil or use a fidget.
- Eat a mint or chew gum.
- Get a drink of water.
- Help someone else.

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19

Practice Scenarios



Stuck and Flexible Feelings

Situation: A student worked really hard on a project and has to present it to his class.

Stuck Feeling: Anxious, butterflies in stomach, pounding heart

Stuck Action: Runs out of the room and hides in the bathroom

Big-Picture Outcome:

- **For Student:** Gets an F
- **For Others:** Teacher thinks he didn't do his presentation

Coping strategy

I sung my favorite video game theme song in my head and doodled on my paper.

Flexible Feeling: Smaller butterflies, calm enough to start presentation

Flexible Action: Gives all of the presentation

Big-Picture Outcome:

- **For Student:** Gets a good grade and feels proud
- **For Others:** Builds relationship with teacher; showed their hard work

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1

| ☒ 2

☐ 3

| ☐ 4

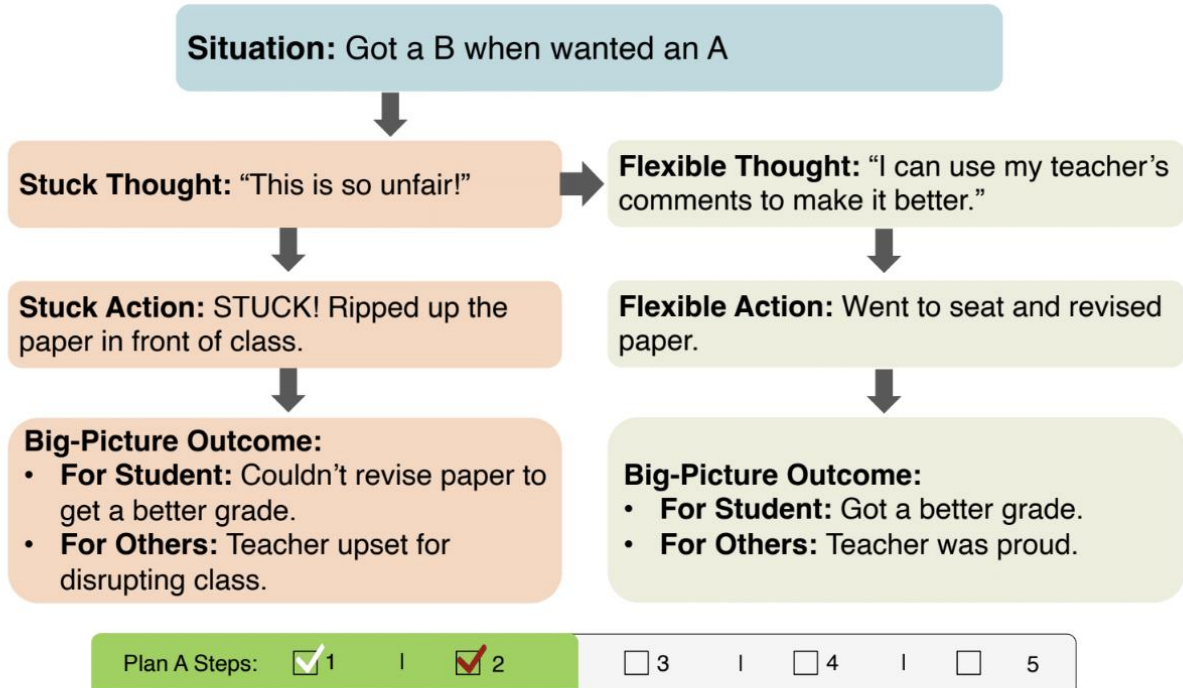
| ☐ 5

| ☐ 6

| ☐ 7

Practice Scenarios

Changing a Stuck Thought to a Flexible Thought Leads to Better Outcomes



Setting Goals and Planning to Achieve Goals

Check the Oregon State Highway Division's Plan for Dangers!

GOAL: Dispose of a 45-foot, 8-ton whale that washed up on the beach.

WHY: If left there, it would become a health and safety hazard.

PLAN A STEPS:

- ☐ 1. Explode the whale into tiny pieces using dynamite.
- ☐ 2. Rely on seagulls and other scavengers to take care of any small pieces.

Plan B? If any large chunks remain, explode them with another round of dynamite.

CHECK:

Did we reach the goal? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you learn something that will help you make progress? ☐ Yes ☐ No

What could go wrong? Any Planning Dangers?

Now let's see what happens...

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1

|

☒ 2

☐ 3

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☐ 4

|

☐ 5

|

☐ 6



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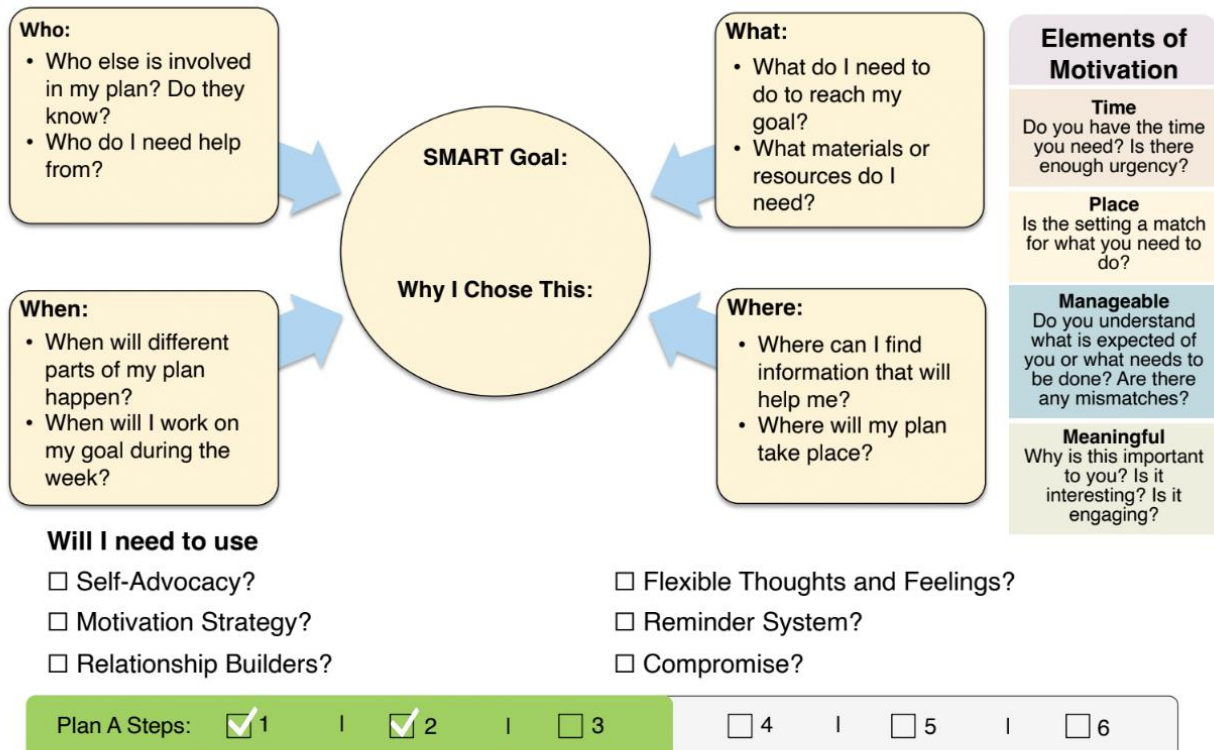
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Setting Goals and Planning to Achieve Goals



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How to Plan



Planning Practice

Overcoming Planning Dangers

p. x



Planning Danger	Planning Strategy
Missing the Big Picture	☐ Write goal down and post it somewhere visible. ☐ Set a timer and check your progress.
Jumping in Without a Plan	☐ Create a SMART goal and use the How to Plan and Power Plan visuals. ☐ Get feedback on your plan.
Forgetting to Work on the Goal	☐ Check Your Reminder System. ☐ Rearrange Life Pie to work on goal. ☐ Limit distractions.
Running Out of Motivation	☐ Remind yourself WHY you want to do this. ☐ Break down goal into smaller goals. ☐ Use motivation hacks and rewards.
Getting Overwhelmed	☐ Get unstuck with Flexible Thoughts. ☐ Add a coping strategy. ☐ Talk to someone about it.

Plan A Steps:



|



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Motivation

Elements of Motivation

Time

Do you have the time you need? Is it

Place

Is the setting a match for what

Manageable

Do you understand what is expected or what needs to be done? Are the

Meaningful

Why is this important to you? Is it inter

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1

☐ 2

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p. x



Question 8	Executive Function Action
Remember our motivation strategies? When our motivation is low, it can be hard to get stuff done.	Write your motivation strategies next to the activities to help increase motivation.
Time	☐ Create deadlines and in-between deadlines when helpful. ☐ Create accountability. You can use the Self-Advocacy Formula to ask people to check in with you; make appointments with teachers. ☐ Use a timer to keep you on target. ☐ Do you accurately estimate how long things take? If you tend to underestimate, double your time estimate. If you tend to overestimate, remember to use extra time wisely, like double-checking your work.
Place	☐ Match your task setting to your needs. ☐ Do your work in a new place. ☐ Is the activity level around you helpful, or are there too many distractions? ☐ Can you work with a friend or classmate to keep each other on task? In a library or study room? Self-advocacy could help with this. ☐ Make sure the task is NOT competing with a more interesting activity in the setting.
Manageable	☐ If it's a big task, break it down into smaller, easy-to-complete tasks, adding breaks as needed. ☐ Seek clarification when the directions or prompts are not a match for your thinking style or you're having trouble understanding. ☐ If you need help figuring out how to manage the task, self-advocate to get help creating a better match between the tasks and your skills (like figuring out where to start). ☐ Use materials that support you and help you get stuff done.
Meaningful	☐ Ask about your WHY? ☐ Is the task boring? Try a new way to learn (e.g., flash card games). ☐ Do the task in a new way that's interesting to you. ☐ Create a reward system for yourself.

Plan A Steps: ☒ 1

| ☒ 2

| ☐ 3

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Overview

GOAL



Increase your understanding of executive function intervention

WHY



Executive Functions (EF) are important and teachable

PLAN



1. **UNDERSTAND:** Recognize specific EF challenges
2. **ACCOMMODATE:** Identify key EF supports
3. **TEACH:** Model and practice self-regulation

CHECK



Did we get through all the slides?

Are you still awake?



Deliver Unstuck in College!

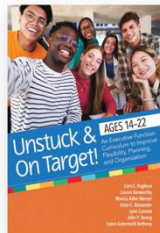
- Integrated into classroom
- 1:1 in academic, disability, MH counseling
- Workshop formats
- Noncredit curriculum

Unstuck 14-22 Resources

- Unstuckandontarget.com
 - Manual August 2026
 - Training with CEUs Now



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Unstuck

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Learn how to implement *Unstuck and on Target, Ages 14-22* with this asynchronous online teacher (or other professional) training. Continuing education credits for educators.

Purchase CEU Version

Purchase non-CEU Version

Unstuck Resources for All Settings



WEBSITE



UnstuckandOntarget.com

The skills that *Unstuck* teaches students are incredibly valuable. This curriculum works well with the school-wide behavior model.



HOME



You know it's working when your child tells you that you are stuck...and you are!



Unstuck has changed the way our family interacts.



GROUPS



The shared language was a real facilitator.



I am definitely planning on bringing this to my new school and sharing it with the staff there.



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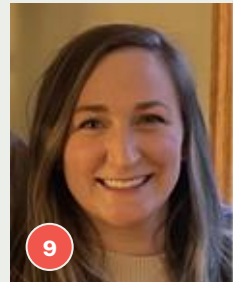
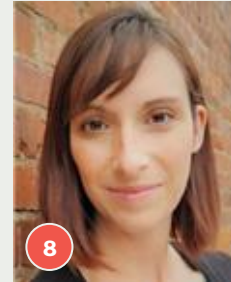
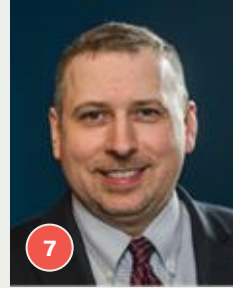
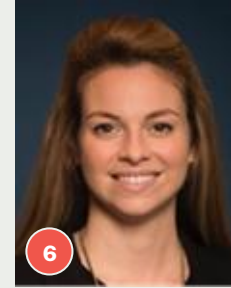
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Unstuck Development Team

1. **Katie C. Alexander**, Occupational Therapist
2. **Laura Anthony**, Psychologist
3. **Lynn Cannon**, Special Education Teacher
4. **Monica Werner**, School Administrator, Counselor
5. **Lauren Kenworthy**, Neuropsychologist
6. **Cara Pugliese**, Psychologist
7. **John Strang**, Neuropsychologist
8. **Allison Ratto**, Psychologist
9. **Abby Brandt**, SLP



Do you identify as autistic or think you might be?



Researchers are trying to improve autism diagnosis for teens and adults.

You might be able to join if:

- You are between ages 16-39
- You are autistic or think you might be

If you join, you will complete 1-2 visits in person or online.

You can receive:

- Up to \$300 for your time
- Evaluation for an autism diagnosis and a report at no cost to you

For more information:
ace-missed.org



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