



Executive

Kelly Hill and Beverley Bacon, co-founders of The Key Leadership discuss the launch of the Development Matters document and explore the term 'Executive Function'.

Last week, we saw the launch of the new Development Matters document, for use by early adopter schools in Sept 2020 and wider role out in Sept 2021. A new addition to the document is the term 'Executive Function'. This is firmly linked with self-regulation and described in the document as the child's ability to:

- Hold information in mind
- Focus their attention
- Regulate their behaviour
- Plan what to do next

Often it is presumed that these are skills children learn when they reach school age, however, children need to learn prerequisite skills in their early years in order to be able to develop the necessary competences for executive function.

Let's explore this further...

The skills required for Executive Function are essential for thinking through and completing given tasks. These competences allow children to solve problems, sustain their thinking and attention and become skilled in staying on task until completion. This may seem like a difficult string of tasks for a little one, but perhaps consider a young child learning to put on their socks. They firstly need to know that socks belong on their feet, have the focus to sit and reach out, bring their feet close enough to reach their little toes and attempt to get that sock on. They need to control their frustrations when it becomes difficult and have the skills to find an alternative method to try again. Or maybe they are creating a tower with wooden

blocks. The child needs to firstly know what they are attempting to create, have the focus to place one block on top of another, find pleasure in the tumbling of the blocks, rather than frustration, and think about what they can do to enable blocks to balance more easily.

Clearly, when broken down into these steps, executive function is not a new concept. In early years we often see children bring forward their ideas, focus their attention on those ideas, regulate their behaviour and keep on trying to reach their desired outcome. These skills are not new, but they are a necessary and important part of early development, required for almost every aspect in life.

Fast forward a few years and these executive functioning skills are very much a requirement in our role as an early years leader. We need these skills to plan and organise our workload, manage our time, control our emotional responses, develop our higher order thinking, support the management of others and so much more in our day to day life.

Let's take each area of executive function, as described in the development matters and consider what we can do as leaders to improve these skills.

Hold information in mind

The amount of information an early years leader keeps in mind is extraordinary. From the name of a child's special pet, to the next available first aid training date, we know and hold a lot. Psychologists and neuroscientists refer to this information holding as our 'working memory'. Our 'working memory' is central to everything that we do; for

example, planning ahead and making quick decisions requires us to have the information we need already 'in mind', enabling us to draw on this information quickly and come to a conclusion. So how can we improve our working memory, enabling us to hold more information in mind? Visualisation is a great technique, whereby an image or visual representation is connected to the information, enabling the information to be recalled more easily. The use of mnemonics can very much help connect information; there will be a certain generation of leaders who will recall using the PILES mnemonic to remember the child developmental areas of Physical, Intellectual, Language, Emotional and Social.

However, we cannot remember everything, and it is necessary to have systems in place to allow information to be stored securely for when required. On any given day, we can be given information in various forms that we need to remember, action, process or communicate and it is important that we rely on systems rather than our memory for this. I have a particular dislike for post it notes or scraps of paper as they are so easily lost. A simple yet effective method is an internal communication book. Kept in a safe place in the office, this allows practitioners to share nuggets of information and pass on messages. I always recommend leaders keep a small pocketbook with them at all times to write down information they are given, as we all know how easily it is to forget things once we leave the room and get distracted by the next thing.

function

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Focus attention

How many times have you been talking to someone, but they are clearly thinking about something else? Or perhaps you're trying to submit the termly headcount but your mind is wandering onto other things? Being able to focus your attention on one task at a time is an important factor in achieving success. The first thing is to prioritise your to do list. What are the most important tasks that need to be actioned and who can action some of those tasks on your behalf? Once you have a priority list, start with the most important action, set a time frame for completion or action (a timer helps) and focus on that one task. Ask someone else to answer the phone for 30 mins, put a do not disturb sign on the office door and focus! Often just prioritising your workload, setting time frames and not allowing other distractions to creep in is all we need.

A 'brain dump' at the end of each day can also work well. Before you leave your setting at the end of your shift, write down everything you need to do and remember for the following day. This will enable you to switch off and focus on family and personal matters when you close the doors to your setting for the evening. Then when you arrive the next morning, prioritise these things and create your focussed plan for the day ahead. This doesn't always go to plan, but who doesn't just love ticking things off a list!

Regulate behaviour

Have you ever heard the Native American story called "The Two Wolves."? It begins with a man telling his grandson about a battle that often goes on inside people. He says, "My son, the fight is between two wolves. One is evil. It is angry, envious, jealous, sorrowful, regretful, greedy, arrogant, self-pitying, guilty, resentful, inferior, dishonest, proud, superior, and egotistical. The other is good. This wolf is joyful, peaceful,

loving, hopeful, serene, humble, kind, benevolent, empathetic, generous, truthful, compassionate, and faithful." His grandson thinks for a while, and then asks: "Which wolf wins, Grandfather?" The grandfather replies, "The one you feed."

Working with children and families can often be an emotive, frustrating, astonishing, wonderful experience – and that's just before breakfast. As a leader, we feel emotions, we worry, we get annoyed, get excited, however we also need to be able to regulate those behaviours. First and foremost, it is important to recognise our behaviour patterns and reflect on our triggers for certain behaviours. If we can recognise what pushes our buttons, we are more in control of our response and subsequent actions and can improve our behaviour going forward. 'Always moan up' is a mantra we often use. If you are frustrated, upset, angry or unable to control emotions, letting it all out to your room leader is unlikely to be the best move. Link up with another setting manager to air your woes, speak to your area manager or discuss in an online community like The Key Leadership.

Plan what to do next

Great practitioners will know the next steps of their key children and great leaders will know the next steps of their team. But what are your next steps? What are your plans, goals and future aspirations? Often, once the role of setting

manager is achieved, many great leaders find themselves stuck without a real plan for their growth. Think about your goals for the next 1,3 and 5 years. What do you want to learn, see, understand, achieve and experience? How are you going to get there and what support do you need to meet those goals? Write a plan or design a vision board for your future. Then get the support in place and make it happen! ■

● For more support in your leadership journey visit www.thekeyleadership.co.uk

