Getting started with Executive Functions

Transcription: Video 1

Interviewees

Professor Sara Baker
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Mitch Weathers
Author and CEO
Organized Binder

What are executive functions?

Sara

There are three main areas of executive functions that scientists have identified.
The first is holding things in our minds on a kind of mental sketchpad - that's called working memory.

The second is being agile and adaptable, able to change the way we think or do something when there are reasons to do so. And that's called switching or cognitive flexibility.

The third is holding back on something when it isn't appropriate.
Whether that is blurting out a comment that would be best left unsaid or eating the piece of cake when we are trying to make healthier choices.
This last one is called inhibition.

Mitch

Executive functions, they really are cognitive processes.
We can actually see and know the areas of the brain where they're happening.
But as educators, what we're really looking for is the manifestation of behaviours from those cognitive processes.

And so a more general definition of executive functioning skills are the mental processes that allow us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, juggle multiple tasks successfully.

Sara

Executive functions are, by definition, the skills that help us adapt to our context, rather than just doing whatever we have always done in the past. They are our superpowers that really shine when we are being our most mature, considerate selves.

Mitch

I actually like to use one word called “studentness”. And when we think about a young person, a student with this sense of “studentness”, it really is somebody who's embodying these executive functioning skills. They’ve become theirs - they’re transferable competencies, which means that they’ve had practice with a specific set of executive functioning skills over time, and that repetition over time allows them to make them their own and they can transfer or take them to other contexts.

Sara

Executive functions are skills that help us work towards goals, organise information, adapt to different situations, do our daily tasks and learn. And they give us agency so that we're not just using reflexes to respond to the things around us, but thinking about what is appropriate and what we really might want to achieve in a given situation, what the next steps might be, taking into account the fact that we live in a social world and that it is constantly changing.

Mitch

These are the skills and the habits that we use as adults in everyday life to be successful, both at work and in our personal lives