

Executive Functioning Skills....

Important for all areas of learning throughout life.

When we talk about children being ready for formal learning the teaching at Kindy is to strengthen their Executive Functioning Skills so children can read, write and do mathematics. Think about all the skills you require to write....to sit still, to place your body in a 'writing posture', remember how to hold a pencil, listen for instructions, remember instructions, remain focused on the task, form the letter shapes, remember order for letters to go in to create a word, leave spaces between words, etc.....These skills are also essential for social/emotional development.

"As essential as they are, we aren't born with the skills that enable us to control impulses, make plans and stay focused. We are born with the potential to develop these capacities" To delve more deeply – Executive Functioning Skills consist of Working Memory Inhibitory control and Cognitive or Mental Flexibility

Working Memory – this encapsulates the ability to hold and manipulate information for use in our everyday lives. It is short term memory storage of information such as procedures to complete a small task, remember a list of things to do, hold numbers to dial on a phone, recall what is read, rules of a game etc.

Inhibitory Control – this refers to the skill of being able to control impulses, resist distractions and temptations, to think before we act, control impulses in order to focus, pay attention, choose appropriate actions.

Cognitive Flexibility – This supports the ability to easily and quickly shift thinking to adapt to changes demands or perspectives. "Rigidity" of thinking is not an asset unlike being focused and persistent. When new information, new routines, new perspectives, new ways of doing things CF allows us to adjust, experiment, 'think outside the box', see exceptions to rules.

All of these grow with development and scaffolding. (eg. You would not expect a 2 year old to be fully competent in remembering all the steps to dress self as opposed to the expectations for a 4 year old)

"Contrary to popular belief, learning to control impulses, pay attention and retain information actively in one's memory does not happen automatically as children mature, and young children who have problems with these skills will not necessarily outgrow them. The evidence is clear that by 12 months of age, a child experiences are helping to lay the foundations for the ongoing development of EF skills."

'Children's social play is believed to be an important practice ground for the development of EF skills. '

Children in their play test ideas, make plans, remember roles, communicate with peers, draw on knowledge, need to control impulsivity, turn take, be flexible when new players enter or ideas change, scaffold information and ideas.. and so on.

What you can do at home to support development in this area?

Infants and toddlers contrary to some thinking do not learn these skills from other infants/toddlers. They require adult/child relationships that guide EF skill development before expecting a child to do it all on their own (remember the comparison between the capabilities of a 2 year old and a 4 year old to dress themselves)

- Have your children be responsible and independent in tasks..initially have a small number of steps increasing to develop their ability to retain more and more amounts of information and to recall it and apply it. Scaffold this, model it, reinforce and praise. Perhaps give cues or prompts rather than taking over the task to 'get it done'.
- Support children to think first then act. Statements like 'What do you think will happen if...?' "Can you think about that first?" "Count to 5" "take 3 big breaths" "Say excuse me then wait" and other strategies to help with waiting and exercising control of self.

- Change storylines in books, change the way a game is played or the rules, ask what if, pose a problem to everyday routines (all the plates are dirty what will we do for dinner?), add nonsense/different words to rhymes and songs..... AND most of all engage in pretend play where you act as if it is real. "I would like to come to your shop but my dog is sick" "The fairies left a note saying they cannot come out as their wings will get wet with the rain" "I only have one rolling pin but we need lots of biscuits" "Oh my baby can't climb the stairs as she has a broken leg"

"Providing the support that children need to build these skills at home, in child care and preschool programs and in other settings they experience regularly is one of society's most important responsibilities"

(Reference - Building the Brain's 'Air Traffic Control' System : How early experiences shape the development of Executive Function. Centre on the Developing child Harvard University. Working Paper 11)

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