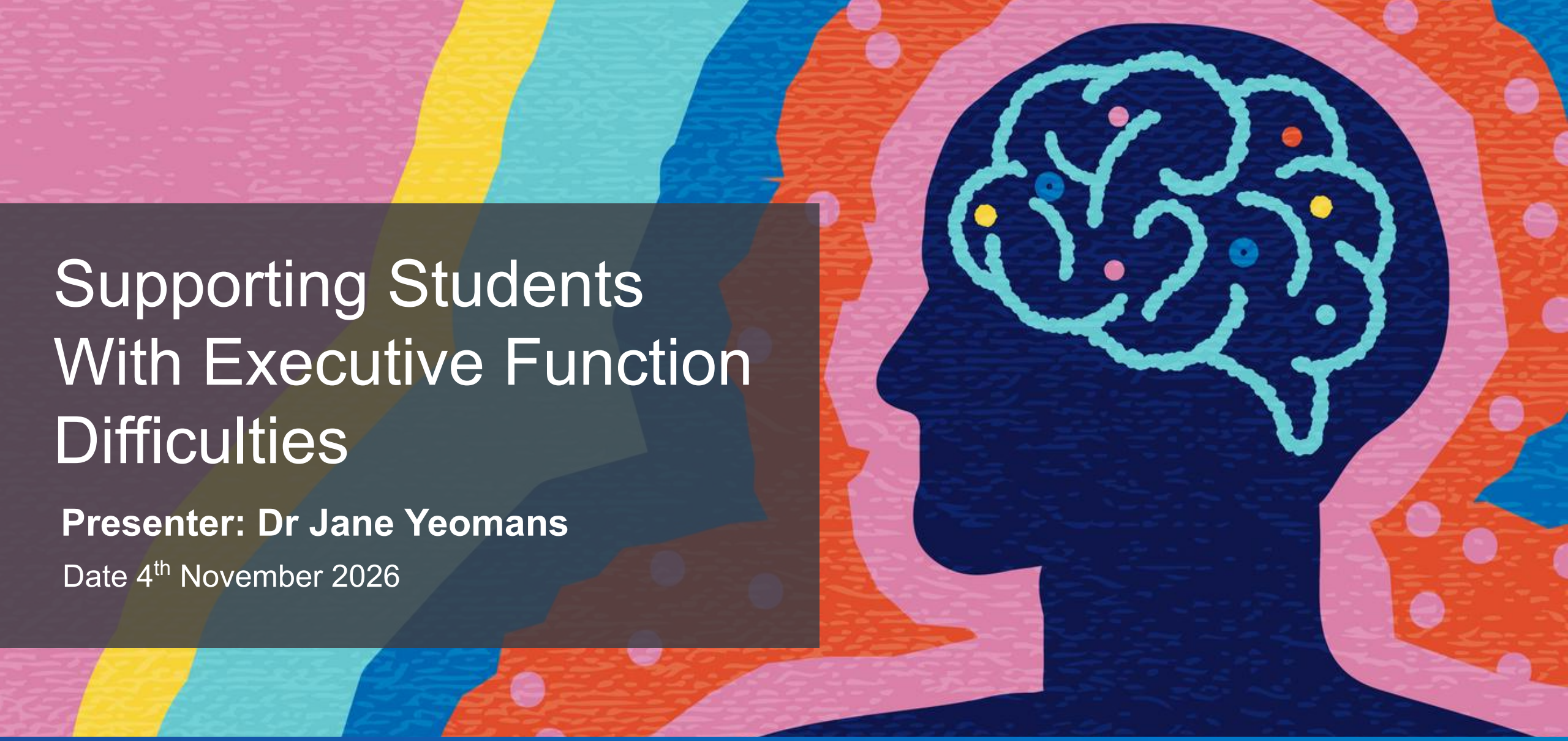


Supporting Students With Executive Function Difficulties

Presenter: Dr Jane Yeomans

Date 4th November 2026

real training™

Webinar overview and aims

The overall aim is to give an overview of EF as a starting point for attendees' further study. The webinar will cover:

- Key elements of EF
- EF and the brain
- Identifying EF difficulties
- Supporting EF

Defining executive function

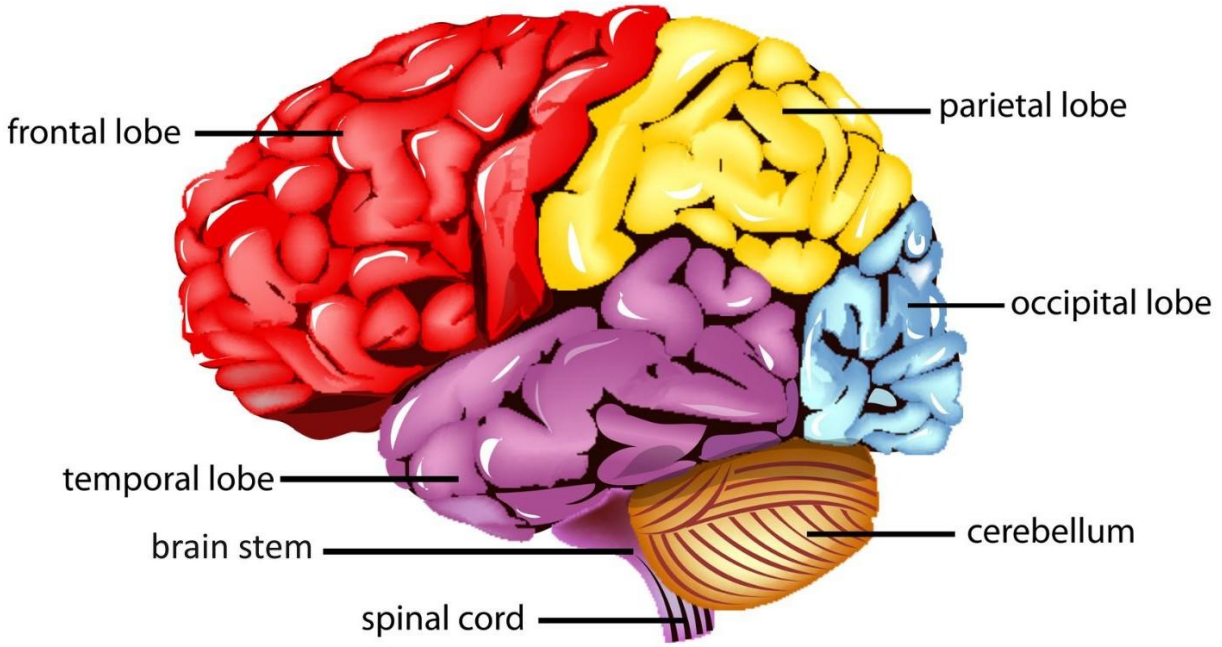
- There is no one agreed definition
- There is agreement about three key areas of EF:
  - Self-regulation
  - Working memory
  - Cognitive flexibility
- EF is sometimes divided into two areas: hot and cold EFs

Executive function is like……

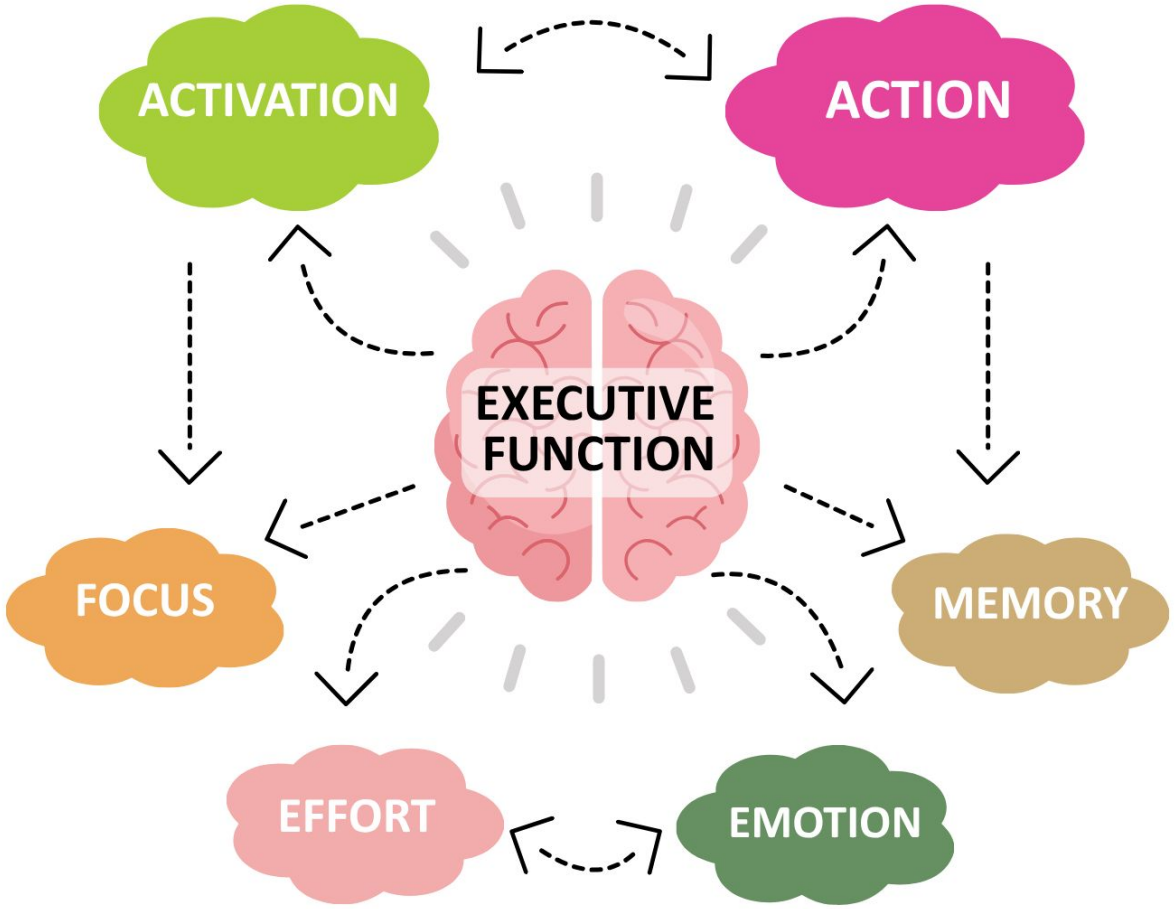


EF and the brain

- Neurological - not solely in the frontal lobe
- Prefrontal cortex involved; this continues to develop into 20s
- Integration of a number of areas of the brain



Importance of EF



Executive functions help with…

- starting tasks
- paying attention
- persevering
- remembering
- planning
- organisation
- time management

Development of EF

- Inhibitory control is a foundation and emerges early in life
- Working memory also emerges early
- Switching between tasks develops later
- Cognitive flexibility apparent during pre-school years and over time develops in complexity
- Nature and nurture should be considered

The impact of poor EF

- Using working memory
- Selecting attention, filtering distractions
- Inhibitory control
- Flexibility
- Organising and planning
- Self-monitoring
- Self-regulation

Cumulative impact of poor EF

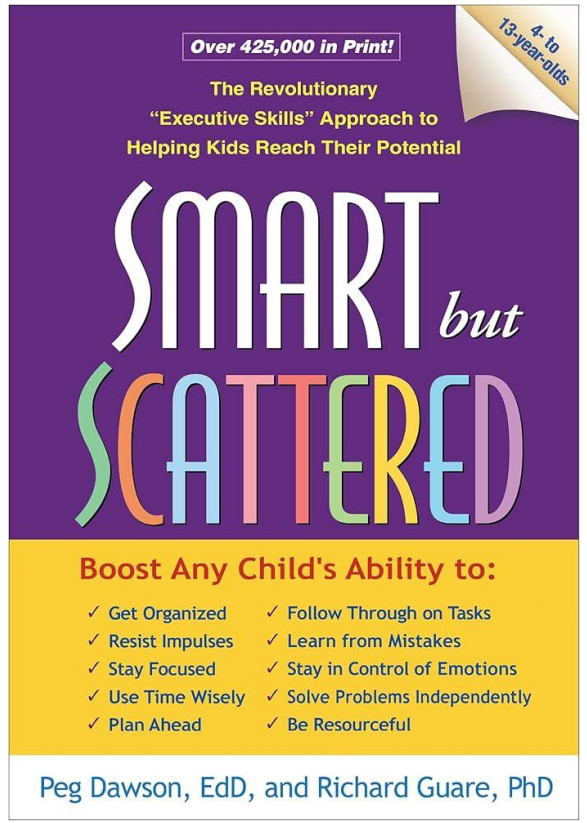
- Correlation between a student's use of executive function strategies and school performance (Meltzer, 2004).
- Self-perceptions will frame a young person's willingness to work hard and use strategies.
- **Self-concept** and **self-efficacy** = **effort and performance** for those with learning difficulties.

Using the EF ‘lens’

- Reframe pupil difficulties
- Broadening out from a purely neurological view: within child vs impact of environment
- How might a pupil we describe as being ‘immature’ be viewed through an EF lens?

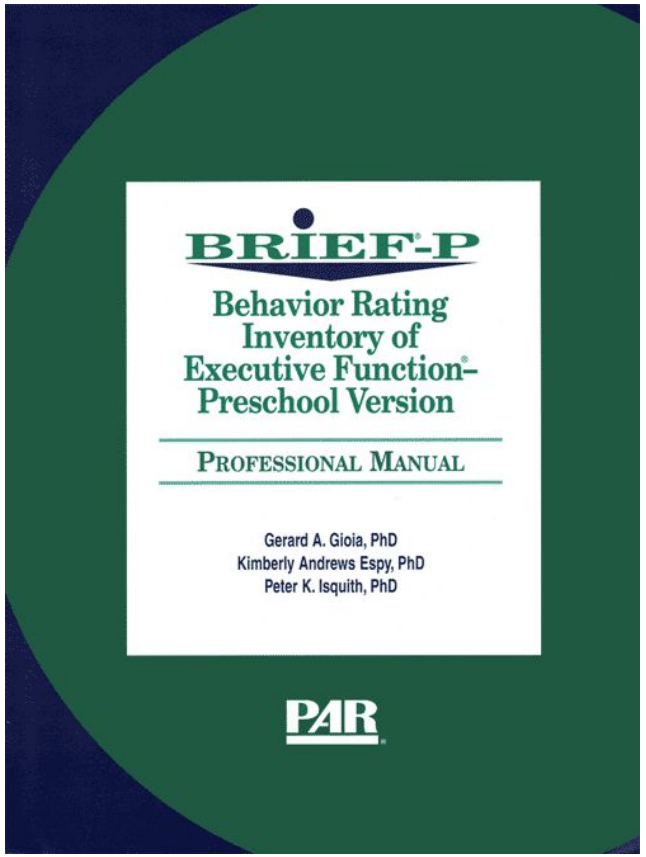
Identifying EF

- Poor memory
- Disorganised
- Off topic
- Can’t seem to put the brakes on
- Poor task focus
- Important to rule out other underlying difficulties especially ACEs/DLD
- Some neurodiverse conditions are associated with EF difficulties



Norm referenced measures







From assessment to intervention

- If we accept that EF is open to change then we can plan and deliver interventions
- The interrelated nature of EF can make it difficult to single out specific areas
- Focussing on these will help to work on the foundations for learning which in turn support curriculum access (and thus support progress in basic skills such as literacy and numeracy)
- It is important to look at transfer and generalisation

EF: Supporting organisation



Task board

Adjust time demands

Chunking tasks

Colour-code books and equipment

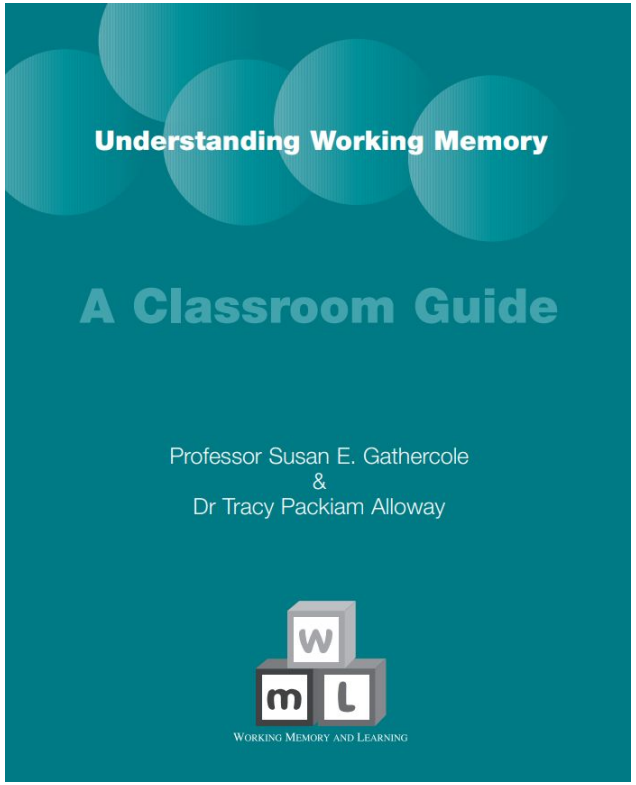
Model planning and goal setting

Use visual means of planning

Extra organisational time

EF: Supporting working memory

- WM can be difficult to improve but it can be supported
- Think about reducing the memory load
- Concurrent processing places demands on WM
- Classroom tools can support WM
- Support pupils to use strategies such as rehearsal, chunking, asking for help



See link here

EF: Supporting emotional regulation

The overall aim is to **prevent** pupils from becoming dysregulated

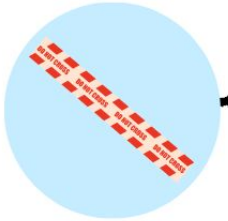
Minimise/reduce distractions



Use emotion coaching approaches

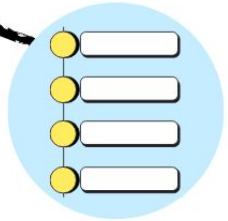


Clear boundaries and expectations



Emotional regulation skills

Task boards or lists to encourage systematic working (rather than an impulsive approach)



Teach strategies to use before responding (such as counting to 5/10 etc.)



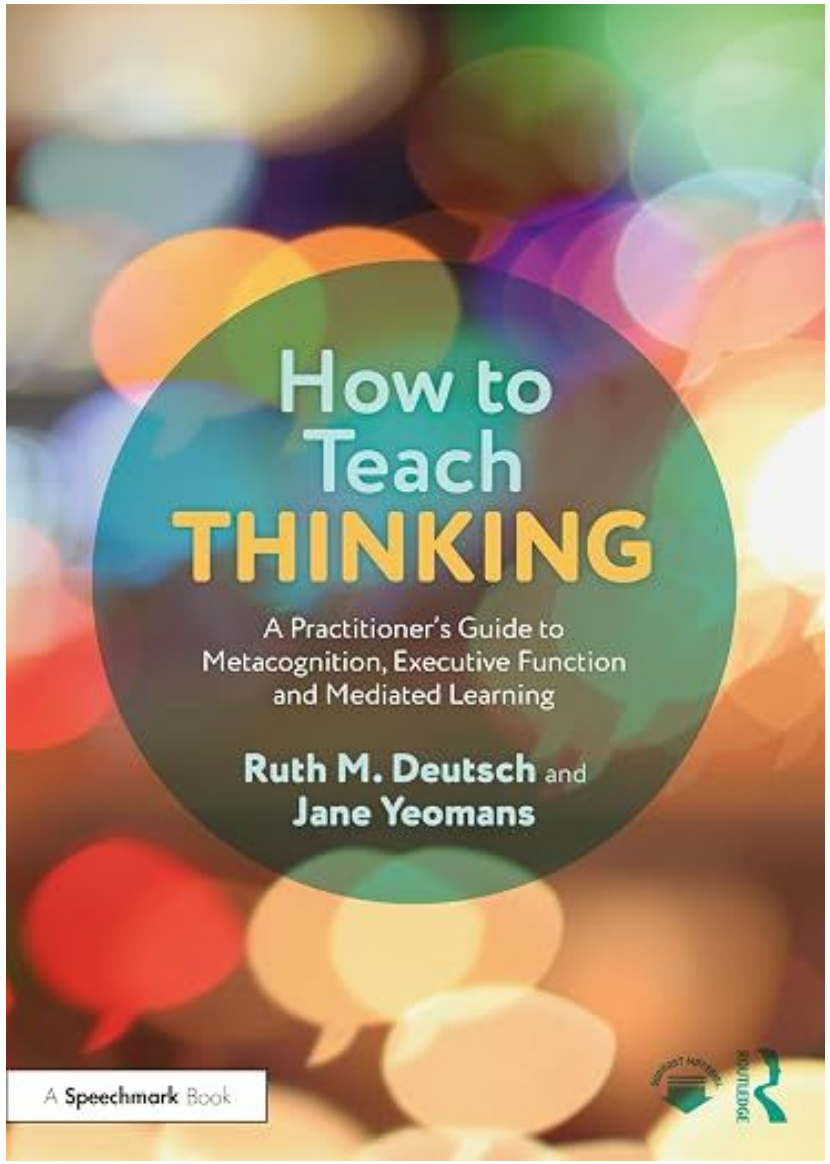
An EF-friendly setting

- Modelling
- Interactive
- Open-ended questions
- A focus on ***how*** as well as ***what*** (process as well as content)
- Learning objectives are not just written on the board but are **discussed explicitly**, making links to previous learning

- **Step-by-step** instructions
- **Explicit** organisational strategies
- Encourage **reflection** and **taking time** (self-regulation)

Reflection on learning

- What have you learned about EF?
- Has anything surprised you about this?
- Which pupils in your class might be struggling with these areas?
- Identify one thing that you will you do differently over the next week as a result of this webinar
- What ‘burning question’ do you have now that will help you to incorporate EF into your practice?



Further study

- Explores executive functioning, metacognition, and reasoning tools applied to real-world problem-solving.
- Inclusive framework to naturally embed thinking skills directly into the daily curriculum.
- Step-by-step mediation guides, practical scripts, case examples, and adaptable resources.

Available here

Resources

Executive Functions: What They Are, How They Work and Why They Evolved by Russell A.Barkley. Guilford Press

Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom by Joyce Cooper-Kahn and Margaret Foster. John Wiley.

Promoting Executive Function in the Classroom by Lynn Meltzer. Guilford Press.

Executive Function Skills in the Classroom by Laurie Faith, Carol-Anne Bush and Peg Dawson. Guilford Press

Coaching Students with Executive Function Skills Deficits by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare. Guildford Press

Diamond, A. and Lee, K. (2011). Interventions shown to Aid Executive Function Development in Children 4–12 Years Old. ***Science***, 333(6045): 959–964. Available here

Best, J. and Miller, H. (2010). A Developmental Perspective on Executive Function. ***Child Development***, 81(6): 1641–1660. Available here

Free resources/videos are available from Smart but Scattered Kids, produced by Dr Peg Dawson & Richard Guare. Available here

Hammersmith and Fulham EP service have a helpful guide to EF for teachers, parents and carers. *Supporting Executive Functioning in the Classroom*. Available here

The Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University also has some information on EF. Available here

Extend your knowledge

MEd SEND and Inclusion

Deepen your knowledge of SEND and inclusion, identify areas for development in your school, undertake an action research project in your setting and work on strategic initiatives that deliver real change.

Large range of modules to choose from, a few listed below:

- Autism Spectrum Conditions
- Leading Inclusive Practice
- Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Evidence and Pedagogy for Inclusion
- Coaching and Mentoring in Education
- Dyslexia Leadership and Intervention

Fully online, self-paced learning with expert tuition.

Find out more

Spotlight modules!

Cognition and Learning

Find out more

Gain in-depth knowledge of what constitutes cognition, including the relationship between cognition and learning, models of disability, and neurodiversity.

CCET and CPT3A

Bring psychometric testing in-house by becoming a BPS-qualified Test User who is able to administer a range of psychometric tests to understand areas of need (CCET).

Build on this qualification to become your setting's exam access arrangements assessor (CPT3A).

Find out more

SEND in an international context…..

International Diploma in Inclusive Classroom Support

For TAs/other support staff

- Explore theories of learning and how barriers can be overcome for neurodivergent learners.
- Explore SEND in an international context.
- Become more confident planning, implementing and evaluating learning activities / interventions.
- Understand the principles of cognitive load, metacognition, adaptive teaching and effective exposition.
- Explore international legislation around EEDI and an international toolkit for safeguarding.

Find out more

iSENCO

For SENCOs, aspiring SENCOs & Inclusion Leads

- Explore SEND in an international context and engage with international research and evidence-based practice. Research legislation and policy in your home country.
- Improve your leadership skills and refine your personal approach as a leader of inclusion.
- Examine how you will identify knowledge gaps and support staff through effective CPD.
- Undertake a 2-day placement in another international school to compare and contrast SEND provision with your own setting. (Remotely if required)
- Evaluate your school's strategy and policy for inclusive education. Review a new or existing SEND intervention.

Find out more

Questions

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