

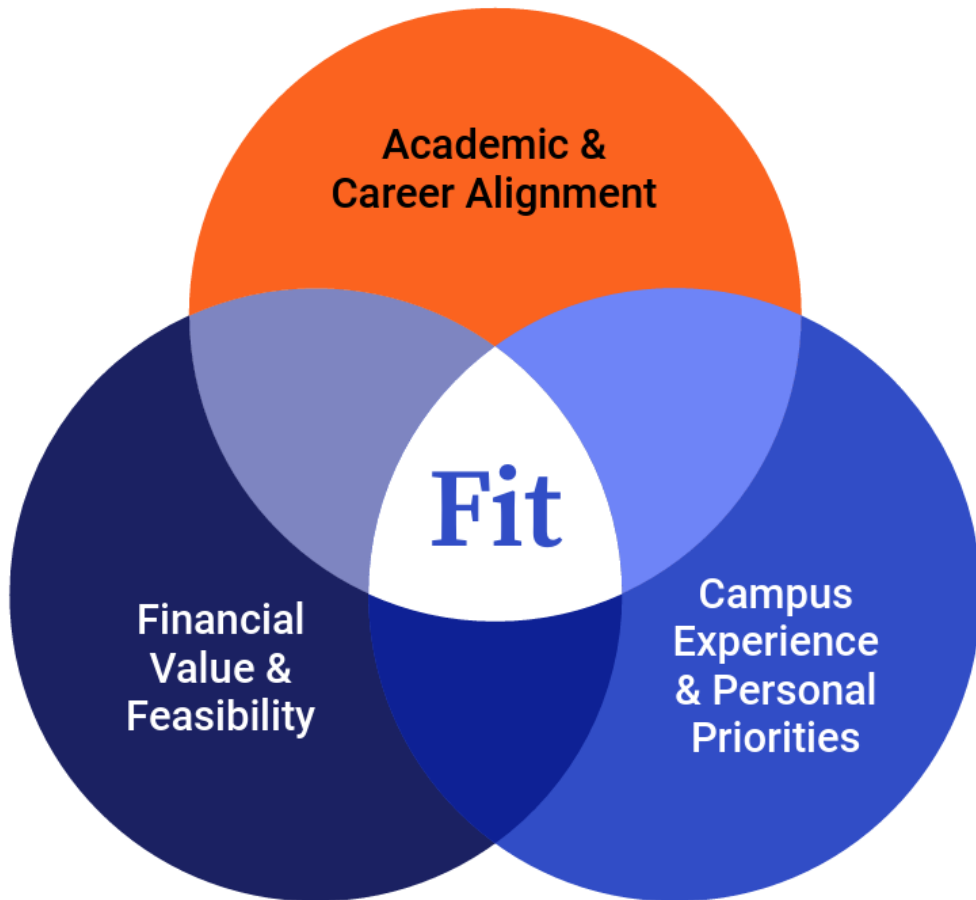
Help Your Teen Build Skills That Matter Most

Ellen Galinsky

September 16, 2026

8:00 PM ET | 7:00 PM CT | 5:00 PM PT



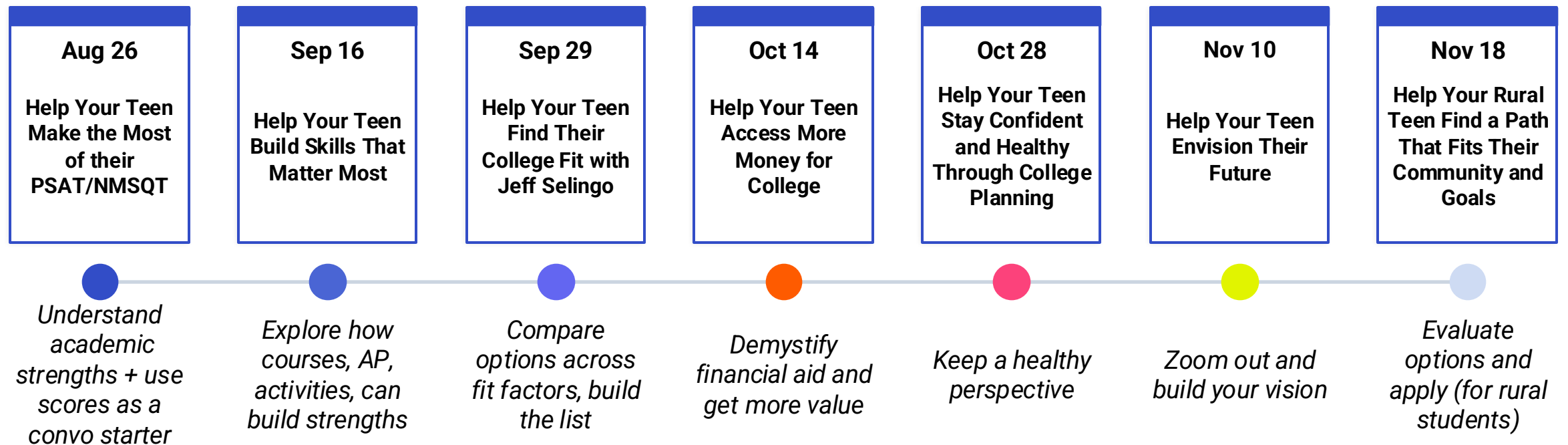


When students find a good fit—one where they experience academic success and a sense of belonging—they're more likely to graduate within four years.



**Download the Future Planning Guide for
Parents, Mentors, and Families**

BigFuture Live: Find Their Fit is here to help you support your teen in finding their unique path.



Meet today's speakers.



Moderator



Greg Rafal-Brooks
Senior Director
Program Strategy, BigFuture



Ellen Galinsky
President of Families and Work Institute



Dan Gonzalez
Executive Director & General Manager, Teamship,
College Board



Kenton Gardinier
Co-founder, Givefinity



Marcy Boyd
Teacher, York High School, NY



What kind of life do you want your teen to have...

Lesson 1

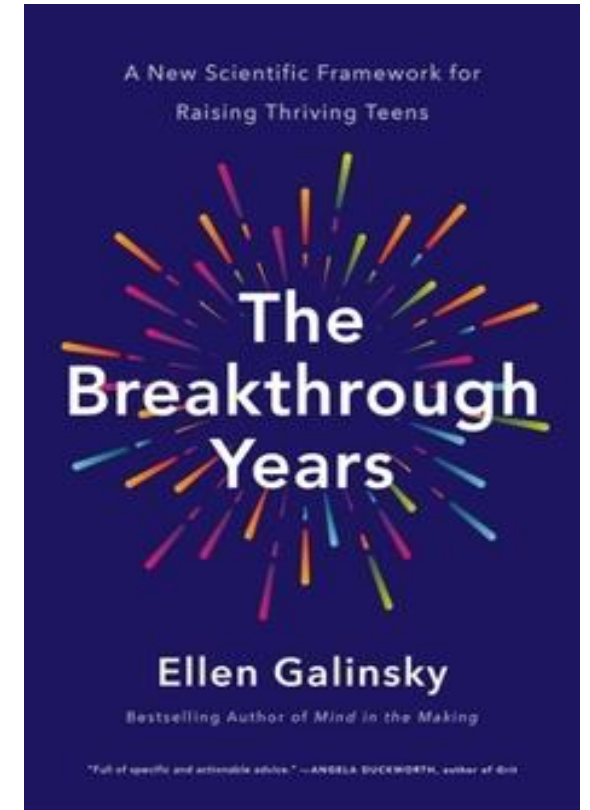
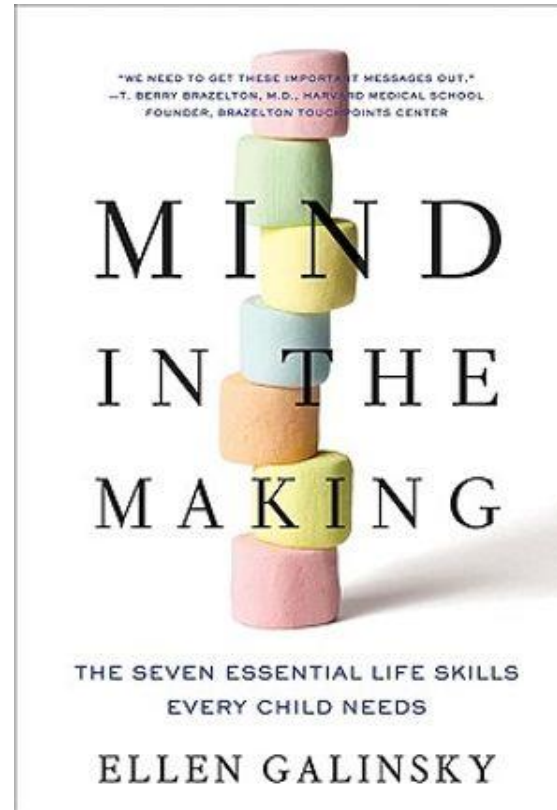
To reach your north star, help your teen learn
Real Skills for Real Life.

About My Journey

Reaching My North Star

A discovery from studying children's development

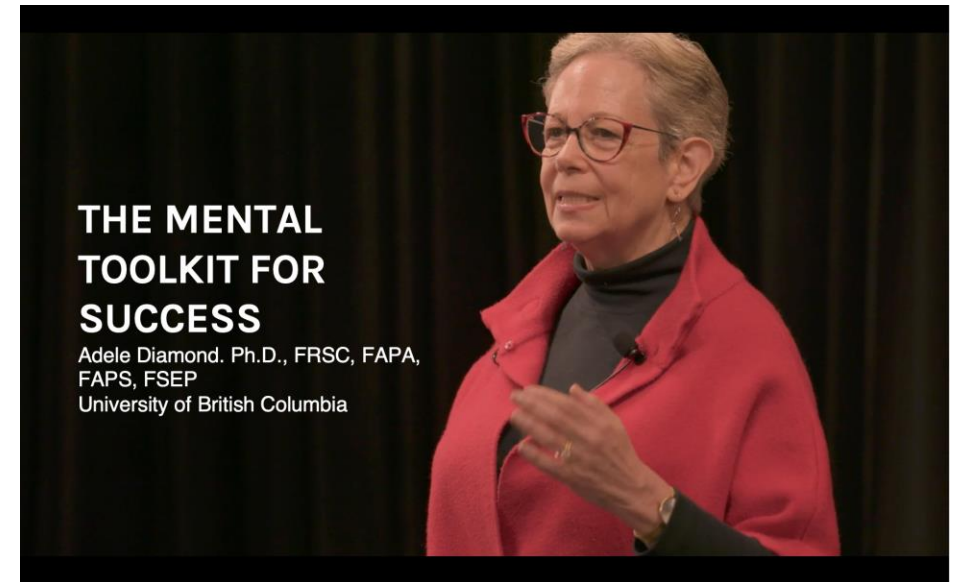
Executive Function skills are the best predictors we have of success in **LEARNING** now and in the future.



Executive Function skills have been found to be more predictive of **academic & career success** than socio-economic status or IQ.

e.g., Alloway, T. P., & Alloway, R. G. (2010) Investigating the predictive roles of working memory and IQ in academic attainment. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 106, 20–29.

Moffitt, T. E. et al. (2011) A gradient of childhood self-control predicts health, wealth, and public safety. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108, 2693–2698.



Think About Learning the Traditional Basics: What skills did you use?

Read this sentence:

The girl has tears in her dress and tears in her eyes.*

*Kathy Roskow

Solve this math problem:

A bat and a ball cost \$1.10. The bat costs 1 dollar more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?**

**ShaneFrederick.2005.

"Cognitive Reflection and Decision Making." Journal of Economic Perspectives 19(4):25–42.

Executive Function skills are a set of attention-regulation skills involved in the goal-directed control of behavior, emotion, thought, and motivation.



We can intentionally sustain our attention, shift it flexibly, and focus it selectively.



SUSTAIN our attention on something so we can keep it in mind and use what we know to learn something new or solve a problem (**working memory**)



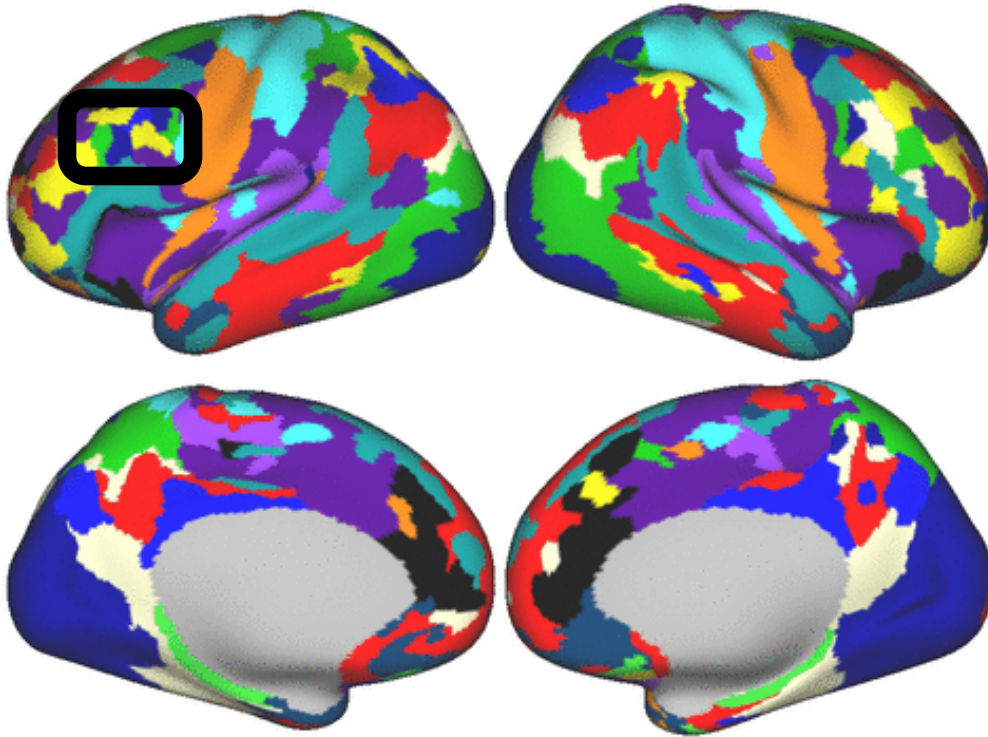
FLEXIBLY consider different perspectives or different aspects of a problem (**cognitive flexibility**)



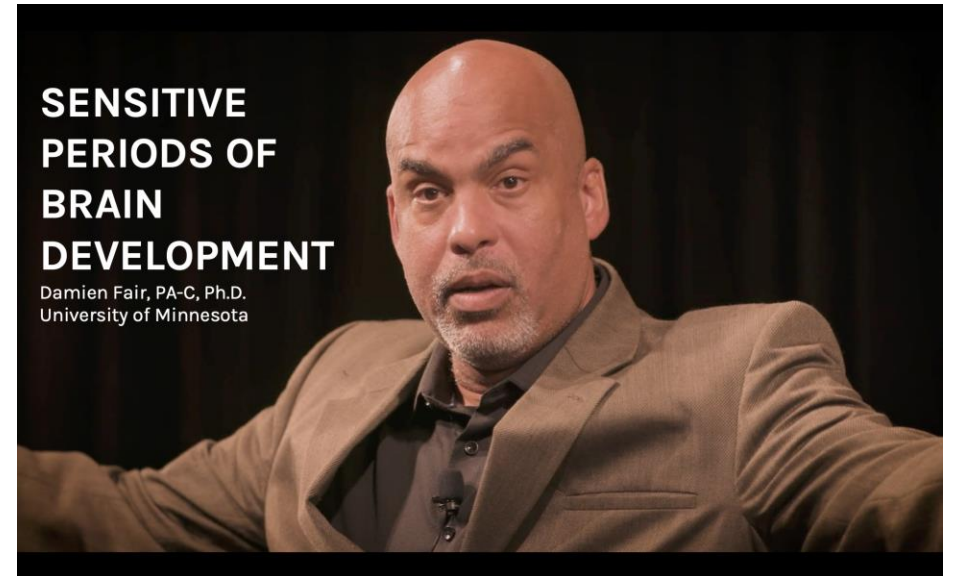
SELECTIVELY use self-control to focus on something to ignore distractions, and resist impulsive behavior (**inhibitory control**)



EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS depend on **reflection**—pausing, noticing, considering options and goals before responding



Networks in 200 Adolescent brains
Hermosillo et al, Nature Neuro, 2023

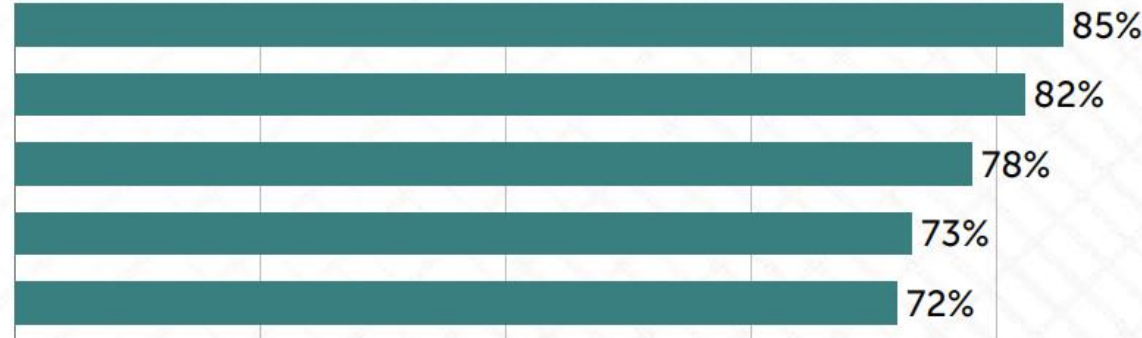




What employers seek on a candidate's resume

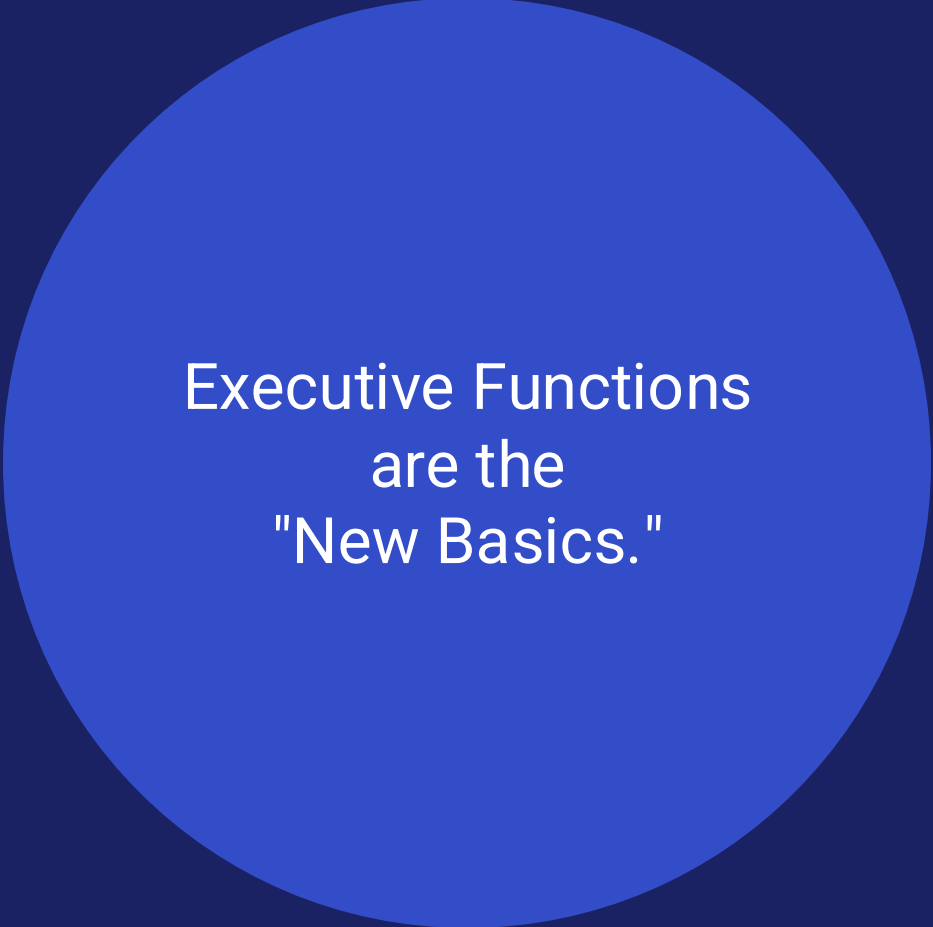
● *Percentages do not equal 100, as respondents were able to choose more than one attribute.

Ability to work in a team
Problem-solving skills
Communication skills (verbal)
Technical skills
Communication skills (written)



According to the Employers' 2026 Job Outlook survey, 70% of employers now use skill-based hiring practices, representing a 5-percentage-point increase from the prior year.

<https://naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/the-key-skills-employers-seek-on-college-students-resumes>



Executive Functions
are the
"New Basics."

They underlie intentional Learning,
including learning the traditional basics
(reading, writing, and arithmetic).

They underlie dealing with challenges.

They are the cognitive building blocks for
Real Skills like Communicating,
Collaborating, Creative and Critical Thinking

Creating a Guide

Ask your teen to think about the places where they felt they belonged and could be their best selves—learning and thriving.



Have your teen make a list of what those places had in common.



Have your teen use that list as a guide for looking at colleges.



Shifting the process—your teen as the chooser.

Creating a guide promotes Real Skills



Determining what your teen values in places
= **Creative and Critical Thinking**



Sharing the list with you = **Communicating**



Looking at the list from your perspective and theirs =
Perspective-Taking



Using the list to guide their selection = **Goal Setting**



It's not just about finding the right college.

It's about your helping your teen build the skills that help them LEARN.

Lesson 2

To reach your north star, help your teen learn to fix problems in the college search process, rather than fixing problems for them.

More About My Journey

Reaching My North Star

A discovery from studying children's development and voices

Executive Function skills are the best predictors we have of success in **THRIVING** now and in the future.



Voices Matters

Youth Voice
on Arts &
Thriving
Research
Initiative



What do youth want
to tell adults about
improving their
mental health?

Youth say...

54%

stated the need for open communication with adults. The most common message was simple: "listen to us."

22%

pointed to the need for broader structural and societal change to support mental health

25%

of youth participants emphasized that adults need to understand the development of young people

2%

of youth respondents wrote about banning social media

LISTEN TO LEARN, NOT LISTEN TO RESPOND

Fostering Executive-Function Skills and Promoting Far Transfer to Real-World Outcomes: The Importance of Life Skills and Civic Science

Philip David Zelazo¹, Destany Calma-Birling¹,
and Ellen Galinsky²

¹Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, and ²Wanderl and Work Institute,
Fairfield, New York

Abstract

Executive-function (EF) skills are a set of attention-regulation skills that provide a neurocognitive foundation for adapting to changing circumstances across the life span. EF skills measured in childhood are associated with (real-world) outcomes (e.g., school and job success). Although training can improve EF skills, the benefits of frequently fail to transfer to these outcomes. We argue that EF skills are associated with outcomes such as success only to the extent that they first contribute to intermediate-level EF-based life skills that are more instrumental in achieving key outcomes. These intermediate-level skills are configurations of EF skills and non-EF skills that are used when reasoning and solving problems in a variety of domains. We argue that an effective way to bridge the gap between specific EF skills and real-world outcomes is by training EF-based life skills that people need to function effectively in society. We propose that this can best be achieved by a civic-scientific approach, engaging citizens (e.g., children, youth, parents, teachers) in the design process beginning so that interventions are responsive to perceived needs and address perceived obstacles to real-world sustainability.

Keywords

executive function, reflection, training, neuroplasticity, transfer, EF-based life skills, civic science

Executive-function (EF) skills are a set of attention-regulation skills that support the conscious control of thought, action, and emotion. These skills depend on metacognitive reflection (i.e., noticing uncertainty, wondering, pausing, considering context, monitoring) and vary along a continuum of motivational significance from "hot EF" to "cool EF" (e.g., Zelazo, 2020). Cool EF skills such as working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility are assessed in relatively emotionally neutral contexts and rely more on neural networks involving lateral parts of the prefrontal cortex (PFC). Hot EF skills are needed in motivationally significant situations; they involve the representation of incentive value and the reversal of strong approach-avoidance tendencies (e.g., forgoing a second chocolate bar despite one's desire) and depend on the orbitofrontal cortex (e.g., Rolls, 2004). Together with metacognitive

reflection, these cool and hot EF skills provide an essential foundation for goal-directed problem solving, flexible adaptation to changing circumstances, social functioning, and intentional learning. Cool EF is more strongly associated with academic outcomes, including math and reading, than hot EF, which is more strongly associated with problem behaviors (e.g., inattentive and overactive behavior; Willoughby et al., 2013). The development of hot and cool EF skills is associated with changes in specific networks involving the PFC (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021).

Corresponding Author:

Philip David Zelazo, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota
Email: zelazo@tc.umn.edu

Executive Function in Psychological
Science
DOI: 10.1177/1948532122112211
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions
DOI: 10.1177/1948532122112211
www.psychologicalscience.org/00000

Sage

AUTONOMY SUPPORT

Stephanie M. Carlson, Ph.D.
University of Minnesota



Shared Solution

STEP 1: Determine the problem

STEP 2: Generate possible solutions

STEP 3: Consider the pluses and minuses of each potential solution

STEP 4: Select a shared solution to try

STEP 5: Evaluate the solution as necessary, and if it isn't working...

REPEAT THE PROCESS AND ARRIVE AT A NEW SHARED SOLUTION.

Shared Solutions promote Real Skills



Determining the problem = **Goal Setting**



Generating possible solutions = **Creative Thinking**



Considering the pluses and minuses of each solution
= **Perspective-Taking**



Selecting a solution to try = **Critical Thinking**



Evaluating the solution = **Critical Thinking**



It's not just about finding the right college.

It's about your helping your teen build the skills that help them THRIVE.

Lesson 3

Finding your north star depends on mindsets.

More About My Journey

Reaching My North Star

A discovery from studying parents

A Possibilities Mindset helps us thrive and learn.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH article

Front. Educ.

Sec. Leadership in Education

The Possibilities Mindset Questionnaire: Design and Validation



Philip D Zelazo ¹



Colin Drexler ¹



Ellen Galinsky ²

1. University of Minnesota Twin Cities Institute of Child Development, Minneapolis, United States

2. Families and Work Institute, Palisades, NY, United States

 The final, formatted version of the article will be published soon.

[Notify me](#) 

Abstract

The possibilities mindset, a construct that emerged through a decade-long civic science-based inquiry, captures participants' beliefs regarding (1) the possibility of changing one's capabilities (growth mindset), (2) seeing stress as a challenge from which to learn rather than something to be avoided (stress as challenge mindset), and (3) one's ability to overcome obstacles (self-efficacy mindset) (Galinsky, 2024). Together, these core beliefs comprise a higher-order mindset that supports an active, engaged, and exploratory approach to life's difficulties. Just as Active Playful Learning (APL) in children involves taking on challenges and learning from them, a possibilities mindset represents an equivalent mindset in youth and adults, resulting in greater well-being. A brief 9-item Possibilities Mindset Questionnaire (PMQ) was developed and refined in an iterative way based on the results of three studies. Study 1 involved 160 mostly female child care employees (ages 18 to 68 years) participating in a state-sponsored apprenticeship training program. Study 2 involved a nationally representative U.S. sample of 1,019 youth (ages 11 to 24 years). The sample for Study 3 consisted of 128 mostly female employees (ages 22 to 71 years) at a social service agency. Across all studies, correlations between PMQ scores and a composite of well-being indicators (e.g., stress, school and work engagement) ranged from $r = .39$ to $.64$ ($ps < .01$), and remained reliable across while adjusting for age, gender, and level of education. Internal consistency remained good despite small changes to the scale as part of the iterative process of scale development, and factor analysis supported a one-factor model. Study 2 revealed that PMQ scores in youth were positively related to youths' endorsement of the importance of thinking creatively, being curious, and wondering. Overall, the 9-item version of the PMQ has good psychometric properties and is an excellent predictor of well-being across a variety of samples and contexts.

Possibilities Mindset

- **Growth Mindset:** Things can be different and can get better.
- **Stress Seen as a Challenge:** I can see this as a challenge and face how I feel about it so I can make things better.
- **Self-Efficacy Mindset:** I believe I can rally and try to figure out how to handle this situation.

Adversity Mindset

- **Fixed Mindset:** Things won't change—this is the way it is going to be in the future.
- **Stress Seen as a Threat Mindset:** Stress is harmful. I feel threatened by it and want to avoid it.
- **Non-Self-Efficacy Mindset:** At this point in my life, I don't think I can change or have much of a choice in how I handle this kind of situation.

Look for Possibilities

Find support in this journey

Keep your north star in mind

When difficulties occur, see that things can change

Try to see problems as challenges, not threats

Understand that you can rally and eventually figure out what to do



It's not just about finding the right college.

The college search is a time when you can build the skills that help your teen—and you—learn and thrive now and in the future.

Thank you!



You've got questions. We've got answers.



Find resources for college and career planning at bigfuture.org/community.



Watch short videos that answer questions fast.



Read articles packed with expert advice.



Get tips for your teen's college and career planning.



Explore tools that help you plan every step, together.

Upcoming Events

All events begin at 8 p.m. ET / 7 p.m. CT / 5 p.m. PT

Build Skills for the Future

September 16

College Fit With Jeff Selingo

September 29

Paying for College

October 14

Well-Being & College Planning

October 28

Envision Their Future

November 10

Rural Pathways

November 18

