

NEURODIVERSITY > EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

Executive Functioning

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1. Executive function – what it is and causes of poor executive function

Hi, I'm Megan. I have a son who is neurodiverse, and I'm here to ask the experts some questions on executive functioning. I'm Georgina Hemmings. I'm a speech and language therapist for Social Speaking. Kia ora, I'm Andrea. I work as a resource teacher for learning and behaviour in Cluster 35. We service the north-west area of Christchurch, and my interest area is in autism. Kia ora, my name is Vanessa Rowan. I'm a teacher from the Southern Health School. Thank you. So, I have done a lot of research, but I hadn't come across executive function, and so I thought a good question for today could be, what even is it?

Can you tell us? So, it's all of the skills. It's all of the skills that you need to be able to achieve a goal. It's split down into quite a lot of different skills and different skill areas, ranging from inhibition, self-control, emotional control, shift and flexibility, planning and organisation, being able to organise the materials that you need to be able to do something, being able to self-monitor. And change things if you need to. It's neurologically based, and it kind of develops through your life span. Does anyone else want to chip in with any other thoughts on defining that, or from your perspective?

I think Georgina's done a good job. Yeah, their cognitive skills, that's kind of the way that I look at it. Yes, and they do impact in the classroom with literacy and numeracy. Yeah. There's other ways of functioning within that social space. So, with regards to how it impacts you in the classroom, do we know what causes poor executive function? I think there's a lot of different causes. Sometimes it can arise from an underlying diagnosis. So, ADHD, autism, sometimes obsessive compulsive disorder. Anxiety plays a big part in it. Depression. And then sometimes it can have causes outside of that.

So, if you're thinking about older generations, then it would be any kind of brain damage or trauma to the brain, and anything degenerative. So, as they get later in life, things like Alzheimer's and dementia are going to have an effect on executive function. So, it's not just related to neurodiverse people. No. It is just a term for something that could happen to anyone. Yeah. Ah, okay. That's interesting. Yeah. But with regards to, you know, performing in the classroom or at your work, how does this relate to memory? Big question. Yeah. I guess I could answer that one. Yeah. So, working memory is one of our executive functions, and typically we would pick up that somebody who has a poor working memory, which is often linked with ADHD.

They will have trouble remembering what they've read. They will have a lot of trouble with maths. Those are the two main indicators. They will also struggle to follow instructions. They will really struggle if they need to copy something from the whiteboard down onto their book. That's a real difficulty for them. It's much better for those kids to take photos. So, there's a whole range of different signs that somebody has poor working memory. Yeah. You know, it's in the brain, but the post-it notes are written in invisible ink. Yeah. And so, all the stuff that they have to retain doesn't necessarily get retained for them to be able to then perform that task.

Short-term memory might be fine, so facts and information that they need in that respect, but that long-term, being able to kind of retain that information and then perform the task is what's difficult for them. So, therefore, sequencing events become difficult. Yeah. And so, when it comes to literacy, for example, sequencing stories and when it comes to numeracy, sequencing the tasks that are required for that particular mathematical equation as they get older, that type of thing. Is dyslexia related to this at all? Because when you were speaking, I was just thinking when you do maths backwards, is it totally separate or is it related to executive functioning?

Or the one with the maths? Dyscalculia? Yes. Yeah, part of it. I think it's more around the... I can't answer that. I can't answer that question. I don't know whether that's a yes or a no. Yeah. But what I do know is that it's the memory, remembering, you know, what comes next, what do I do after I've done this step? You know, what's the next step? Yeah. And remembering that step. But then there might be three steps that, ugh, it's too hard. Yeah, okay. So, I actually won't start the task. Yeah. It makes it easier. Yeah. If I don't start. Yeah. I've seen that. Yeah.

2. Executive Function - Brain and body communication

So we've spoken about learning in the classroom sense, but in the physical sense, if your body and brain don't seem to be communicating, is that related and can you explain a little bit about that? Maybe all of you. Yeah, that's great. So if you think of executive functions, which we all have, we all have executive functions, if our brain is not able, has got a lag in particular areas, it's sending messages to the body, and so the body's interpreting those messages and it's exhibiting it as a behaviour. So if we've got poor time management, we will see someone who struggles to get to school. There could be other reasons, obviously.

Yeah, so if we have poor planning, and like you say, task initiation, we will see that in that workspace, that academic workspace as well. And not necessarily having all the right materials at the right time. And that can be like in the classroom. For young children, it can also be experienced by students at high school where they don't arrive at the right class with the right equipment or the right book or because... Or their bag. Yeah, or their bag. Even though they intended to. Yeah, yeah. But there were so many other things, their cognitive load was just getting a bit too much. And it might seem a simple task to try and remember, but all these other things were going on.

I think it's also got a big impact with kind of your sensory system as well and the level of neural arousal because if you're heightened either in an excitable way or in a kind of an anxiety way, then it's going to be a lot harder for you to access the frontal cortex of your brain. And that is the bit that executive function comes from. So if you're anxious about something, then you're relying more on your emotional brain than you are on your thinking brain. And so some of those executive functions shut down. That is a really good explanation because I've seen that in myself. I was running around the airport last week and I left my phone somewhere and I couldn't even...

Yeah, and you know that you start to get into a panic and all of those kind of skills that you would normally have when you're feeling calm are not there when you're stressing about things or panicking or... Okay. Or if you're very excitable about something and you really want to get on and do it, then sometimes that inhibition of, I need to do this. That inhibition of, I need to stop and think about what I'm going to do, make sure I've got everything that I need to do this task goes because it's, I need to do this now. And so the kids that are in the classroom that are kind of rushing into things sometimes that haven't thought it all through and then it goes disastrously wrong, potentially that is why it's because they've got that heightened level of neural arousal.

So they're kind of using that emotional brain rather than the thinking one.

3. Executive Function – Is this behaviour developmentally appropriate or an issue

So the question then around what is normal development because we see kids all the time acting before they think it's you know what it looks like to us how do we know that that's normal for their age or if this is poor executive function is there a way to tell but it's just really being aware I guess you can gauge a larger group or it depends on your experience amongst young people you get a sense for what you know is more typical and what's not so typical I guess a 10 year old having a tantrum versus a two-year-old is very different the 10 year old that's not going to be typical behavior so that's more than likely going to be something relating to executive I think between seven and twelve they're probably starting to get an understanding of what's right and wrong maybe have some kind of moral compass it gets into the teenagers and you've got all of the hormones and navigating all the kind of complexities of being a teenager that sometimes it's hard for them to then differentiate different emotions and some of that because I don't know if I'm right here but some of that executive functioning can yeah you can kind of go by the wayside a little bit I would say that probably when you're younger a lot of those those kind of harder executive functioning challenges are supportive of the teenagers and then it gets into the teenagers and you've got all of the hormones and you've got all of the things that they need to be supported by parents doing things for them so parents manage their time parents plan and organize them to get them to places as you get older and you're kind of moving into intermediate and high school you're starting to take that responsibility for yourself and that's often where we see things starting to fall down a little bit it's a good reminder for me as a parent not to like baby them too much because otherwise I'll never know if they can function on their own or not I think that's important also to mention that those executive functioning skills don't actually mature until they're 25 what yeah so they develop through the lifespan but they aren't considered to be matured until they're 25.

oh really and then you can always kind of learn new skills through different kind of pathways to doing stuff yeah on average isn't it on average that's longer do we know if the if it differs for boys versus girls yes it differs for boys versus girls and or so you the order of your birth within a family really yes yeah yeah so there's studies on that that if you're like the youngest you might not develop it or the vice versa yeah Nathan Wallace it's Nathan yeah yeah he's done a lot of research around that so he's a very good person to listen to and also the teenage brain I think it's really important to remember that the teenage brain shuts down to 10 capacity so we're kind of going back to a two-year-old in an adult body so those are the executive functions like you've just mentioned will become more of an issue again and also kids with ADHD or who are ASD their cognitive load becomes a lot greater at high school so there's a lot more expectation placed upon them they're expected to learn more manage themselves a lot more and so in year nine and ten we often see everything just completely falling over yeah yeah so it's a very vulnerable time for kids who do have some struggles with executive functions seems to be especially when they move from intermediate to high school if you find that as well but where they've been kind of supported in a more of a pastoral kind of base and they're not moving around the school so much you know they've got that one core teacher and then they move up to high school and they're moving around all over the place they've got to navigate their way to different classrooms different teachers different styles of teaching and that's where seem to fall apart we will have transition support for students moving from intermediate to high school and it's interesting too that you know we're talking about how executive function moves through your lifespan and using these strategies throughout that whole time is just as important as using them when they're young to be using them all through their schooling and it's okay and to not stop using them because you think they're working yeah

4. Executive Function – Developing stronger executive function skills

I wanted to ask as well, just at that point, if you know, in your experience, you might not be able to answer it because you're not doctors per se, but do we know if medication can help with this? So medication doesn't improve executive functions as such, but it does, it can for some young people who've got diagnosis of ADHD and a whole range of different neurological conditions, so to speak. It can definitely help improve it for some people, yeah. For some, I would say that cognitive behavioural therapy helps as well, alongside that, say, the therapy side of things. The word I might know for that is just therapy, psychologists.

Yeah, so it's kind of using techniques to teach them strategies and tools to support them, sometimes alongside medication, sometimes independently of, and that can make a difference as well. That's good to know. I think the thing that I've noticed with, the young people I've worked with who have gone down the medication pathway is that it gives the, it has allowed the brain the time for the CBT to actually really sink in and create those new pathways in the brain to find new ways of dealing with things. Especially those ones with kind of anxiety, where the anxiety has just caused so much overwhelm that they just don't know where to start, or the ones that perhaps have, I don't know, you probably see it more often.

I don't know more than me, but the ones that have got obsessive-compulsive disorders, where they just get stuck on one area, and it's like a block. And that medication can just kind of make that a little bit simpler, so that they can kind of think and process things through. Yeah. So what can parents do to support their children in this area, to help them through when they're having a hard time with executive functions? I think you would all have something to say. There's so many answers. Yes, there are, and it depends what function you're talking about. Give me your top three. Visuals is probably a really big start.

Like time management? Well, even for organisation, so it could even be for getting dressed, for example. So if you're at home and your child is having difficulty knowing what to put on first, that type of thing, then having visuals that show what you put on first, what's next. What comes next, and so forth, so that you've got a system of what's going to happen. And once he or she has completed that particular task, they can take the little visual off. It might be on Velcro, like on one side, and Velcro on the other. It might just be a checklist. It could be a checklist, depending on the level that your child is needing the access for.

Yeah. Also, are you talking about just at home or at school? No. At home? At home, yes. What can parents do at home? Being realistic as well. So sometimes the goal that the child has is not achievable right now. And it might actually be that that goal is a long way in the future, and there's a lot of smaller goals that need to be achieved before they reach the end goal. So it's about supporting them, but it's about being realistic that, okay, that goal is maybe not achievable at the moment because we've got to achieve this goal before we get there. And that's a big step to that goal. So say, for example, I've got a couple of teenagers that are really keen to go and get a job, but they don't have the kind of social skills to be able to go and sit in an interview.

They don't really know what that whole interview etiquette is about. They have never written a CV and experienced all that. So it's about, yes, my end goal might be that I want to get a job, but I've got to think about the fact that I need a CV. What skills and qualities do I have that I can put on a CV? I need to think about all the interview techniques, and maybe I don't have the skills at the moment for sitting in an interview and those kind of people skills. And so you would then take that end goal of the job and break it down into, okay, the first thing we're going to work on is your CV. That's your goal.

And then break it down even further. So sometimes it's about being open to them and saying, okay, you want to do this. Let's look at what smaller things are more achievable. And break it down so that you've got smaller goals. Toilet training, for example, you don't go straight into it. Riding a bike, it's building up to it gradually. And sometimes it's just about making those goals smaller and more realistic for the child. And social stories around things like that so that they know what to expect. So a social story can be like a little story with pictures in it or photos, maybe from the internet or from that building that they're going to have that interview in.

And to say that, you know, what time, how we'll get there, how we'll arrive. I'll be waiting in the foyer for you. This is what the building looks like. The room would look like this. The questions that the interviewer is likely to ask are, they might ask some other questions. And that's okay. It's all about pre-plumbing. Yeah. Yeah. I have a lot of anxiety too. Yeah. When you say social stories, do you mean just talking them through it or do you mean actually like laying it out? Making it. Making it. Ah. Yes. It depends on the child. On the level as well. Yeah. On the cognitive level. That's a good tip.

And walking them through it as well. Like doing something with them, alongside them. Modelling it. Yeah. Modelling it. Yeah. Yeah. And then you can address little things that might pop up as well. So not expecting them to. Not expecting them to know how to do something. Which we all do. You know. That's not a criticism of parents. It's just recognising, okay, I've made that assumption. Then I know how to do this. We actually need to do this together for a while. Yeah. I would say a big one there for parents is teaching them it's okay to ask for help. Yeah. Because we all do it as adults. If we're stuck with something, we'll go and find someone that can help us with it.

Yeah. And it's recognising that asking for help is okay. Yeah. And often younger kids, they don't actually know that they need the help either, do they? No. No. Because they don't. They are their normal, if that makes sense. So they don't know that they might have these struggles. You know, they can't verbalise it or even perhaps recognise it in their bodies. So we have to recognise it for them and give them the language for it as well. Yeah. And sometimes you can do that by modelling it as a parent in terms of, oh, I'm not quite sure how to do this. Let's go see if there's someone that can help us.

Or, oh, I've made a mistake with this. Oh, what could we change to do it better next time? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, if they know what to do, it'll be the moment of change to do it better next time, because we all learn from our mistakes and if they recognise that making a mistake is okay, and that asking for help is okay, they're more likely to succeed with something. They're less likely to get that kind of overwhelm of, oh, it's all too difficult, so I'm just not going to do it. Yeah. And we see that in the classroom, when teachers model that for children, for all the children in the class.

And so, what's good for children who have executive functioning difficulties, then it's hard work. the types of things just like that it's good for everyone yeah there's a lot of these things that can be put in place good for everyone

5. Executive Function - Techniques to support children – at home and at school

So in regards to schools and what they can do, I have seen schools put up, you know, visuals like on the TV they'll say what the tasks are so that they can constantly refer. Yes. Or a time clock. Yes. Or everyone does something. Have you seen any other good techniques that schools have implemented to support children? Those visual timers are great. Yes. Yeah. For those time management. Just be aware that some kids struggle with the noise and some of the visual timers aren't noisy. That is true. Noise, yeah. They just show the

passing of time in red. Yeah. We tend to use them more than we use the ones that kind of make a noise because we can struggle with the noise.

Yeah. Some of them are quite sensory to it. Yeah. And asking for help is not always, it doesn't always have to be verbally. So we've got some kids that use like a card system and the green would say, it's just a little on the corner of the desk and the green would say, I'm doing okay at the moment. Oh. If they turn that card perhaps to a user. Yeah. If it's a yellow or a red, then that might be, or just check in with me. So as the teacher's coming round, then it's the teacher that's just generally checking with the whole class that they're okay with everything rather than the kid having to put their hands up.

Because I know when you get to kind of intermediate aid, putting your hand up to ask for help is not seen as great by your peers. So just doing it discreetly and the teacher just regularly checking in. And if you're, if it's a child who's typically more introverted or more anxious, they just say, that's a, that's a huge ask to put their hand up. Yeah. It's just another, you know, barrier. So yeah, having those little visuals just on the desk are great. And sometimes as well as those visuals being up on the screen, having visuals separately on the desk and the breakdown of tasks for the kids that might struggle with the kind of visual from the board to, to where they are can sometimes help to just have a little checklist of this is what I'm working on at the moment, when I've done this, when I've done that.

Yeah. So that might need to be broken down even more into, so for example, if it's writing time, then it might be the task is broken down to get your book out. So a picture of the book, and it might be to turn to this page and it will show a page open with nothing on it, write the date, will have started and then they can get going. And sometimes a visual of knowing what it looks like when it's finished and that applies to home as well. So say, if you want them to tidy the bedroom, what does my bedroom look like when it's tidy? What does this task at school look like when it's completed? How will I know when I've finished and what do I do when I have finished?

Yeah. And teacher modelling, teachers can model that up and then sometimes they might even have a template, you know, as they get a bit older in a writing task, for example. And so, yeah. Yeah. So it's broken down into parts and in each individual part, it might explain what needs to go in this bit, what needs to go in this bit and what needs to go in this bit. So it's broken down and that's for all children. So it's not just, you know, for one child or two children or yeah. And for thinking back for those that have impulse control difficulties before children go out to play or lunchtime. Yeah.

The teacher will often give pre-corrects. So that means before they go out to play, the expectation is this is what you'll be doing. This is where you can play. This is the sorts of things you can do. And then when you hear the bell, we come back. So it's just reminding them of how play is going to, and just all the time. Like Vanessa said, the scaffold, the guide rails of what's about. Yes. And it's for all children. Yeah. I know what works for me at home is asking them to repeat it back to me just so we're all on the same page as well. That helps a lot as well. And that rule of three. So they say to jump things into three, if you're trying to give them information, because the, with working memory, you know, the three separate bits.

Even in IT, three bullet points on the side. Yeah. And do it visually as well. So first I need you to do this, then this, then this. No more than three things. No other three things. That's a really handy tip. Some kids it will be less than that. Right. Yeah. One at a time. Yeah. Yeah. There's also, Maureen reminded me of talking cans, which I've used in the past as well. So you can, they have little magnets on them. You can put them on the fridge and you just put your instruction in it. You record your own voice and then the kids can come back and replay it. So that if you have given three instructions and they've forgotten number three, they can come back and replay it so you don't have to be constantly repeating yourself.

Yeah. So that works well in a classroom as well. And even when it's writing, writing stories, because sometimes children think they've verbally told you what they'd like to write and then they think, well, I can't remember now what I was starting with. And so if they start speaking and you can record a bit of their language and then they, you can say, well, you write that bit down and then what comes next? And then you can actually give them some leading questions or some open-ended questions about what's happening next in the story. You've just said X, Y, Z, and that works, has worked really well.

Or for older kids, getting them to mind map things before they start to actually start a task. So they've got all of their ideas down on paper because then they can go around and kind of take this off, take that off. Is it hard to teach neurodiverse kids or kids with poor executive function how to do mind maps? No, I do spend quite a lot of time with my teens teaching them how to do that and how to break it down. There's quite a lot of apps on the computer that actually show you how to do it and work it through as a process. And again, that's modelling, it's video modelling. And video modelling, there's a lot of literature around that that shows that video modelling is a really good strategy to use.

Video modelling. It's a bit like YouTube, you know, when you see something, how to make something on YouTube and you think, oh, how am I going to do X, Y, Z, and then you think, oh, what was that step again? And you can go back to it. And that's the good thing about it. OK. A lot of the kind of children that we work with are visual learners and learn best through that visual mode. I have definitely worked with some neurodiverse young people who are very resistant to mind maps. Yeah. I'm not too sure why that is, but so I think it's just balancing out that, you know, for some young people, it's just not going to be their thing, but there'll be something else visually.

It'll be something else visually that will work. But I don't know whether it's just too chaotic. Yeah. Not linear enough. There might be too many things to look at and understand at once. Possibly. Yeah. So not one thing will fit everybody. It's just kind of. Yeah. I think that's important to remember as well. Yeah. I think it's important that what your organisation and planning systems might be might not necessarily work for your child. I know I'm a very kind of paper-based person. I love my lists. I love my post-it notes and things, but other people might be very kind of computer focused and they've got all the planners on the phone or on the computer and it's working out what works best for your child, because what works for you might not necessarily work for them.

And sometimes that can work with teachers as well. Mm-hmm. Yeah. Sometimes if teachers have got a certain system and they're maybe trying to incorporate that system with everyone, it's recognising that not everyone will learn in that way, and that sometimes those systems need to be adapted to suit the child. Buddy systems are also really good in the classroom, but particularly, well, yeah, high school in primary actually. Within the class, having a buddy who's there. Yeah. Just someone just to lean on a little bit if you're getting a bit lost, not someone to rely on, but someone who's there. Mm-hmm.

Someone who you can touch base with if I, okay, I've, you know, I've done all the things I know that I need to do, but I'm still feeling lost or I've still forgotten this and that's just that go-to person they can use before they go to the teacher who might be overwhelmed with the number of students in their class on any particular day or just busy for other reasons.

6. Executive Function - Using technology, having a buddy, modelling

have you been able to use technology in the classroom to help with this other than the YouTube videos we spoke about is there anything else technology can help with I have with older students with slightly the ones that I mean it's a bit more difficult now they're not allowed to have the phones in class because we used to use phones quite a lot for them to take photographs of things the ones that are maybe not so good with the homework diary used to kind of take photograph of the board and what the homework plan was on the board so they got a visual representation of it but it's a bit more difficult now to have their phones in class to do that they what they use in some schools is have something called school ology and so homework and is written on there for the students and yeah and yeah or google classrooms or teams so if they're needing things for food technology or something then it's written down what it is that they're needing to bring for next time things like that so that's a useful tool but there's other other tools that you can use to help support with sequencing and things like that with reading is we've used this rainbow readers that have a book and you have a reader pen and the reader pen will read to you and you that same book for a week and that child then becomes so familiar with that text after that week it does help with their fluency then to read that book by the end of the week and with lots of different examples of of activities to do within that book that they can take do over that week and it could be with a peer okay but the interesting thing about peer you were talking about peers before having a buddy the tuakana taina model where um you know using one's child's strength to support those that are learning and then the the student who does have an executive function difficulty might be um have a skill in some area that's that's really helpful for other people and they could then be the the tuakana and help support others and that will help boost their um their self-esteem and their and reduce their anxiety and things like that yeah i like that and i think i think it's really important to remember is that we all have our strengths and we will all have some lags on you know it might be that working memory might be an area for one of us here you know that if we are unwell or stressed that's the bit that might fall off a little bit more so um so any anyone who is on the spectrum or adhd or anyone with neurodiversity will still have you know strengths that they can offer the world and they just have those struggles that's where i feel it's important to model as well in terms of everybody has got their strengths and weaknesses everybody as adults we use different tools to support us with our difficulties um you know some people have reminders on their phone and timers that go off for various things and and it's it's kind of using that and explaining that to your child to help them on the mirror first thing in the morning because you know you're going to see that and it's referring to them and saying look this is what i do to help me so that they realize that it's okay to have those supports and it's okay to use those strategies yeah we teach quite a lot around and it ties in with the kind of peer support we we teach a lot around tuning in and being able to use your peers around you um and observe what's happening in the room to be able to kind of pick up clues as to what you need to do and how you need to behave and because they do especially younger children take their clues from what they can see other people doing if i'm lost and i don't know what i'm doing i'm going to watch my friends and see see if i can figure it out so we spend quite a lot of time teaching those skills of being able to kind of observe and and notice what's happening around them to be able to then kind of tune in and copy that can you summarize a little bit about how you would teach that because i've been trying to teach that like ask people look around but sometimes it seems like that it's very hard for them to do this it's hard especially if they've got other things going on if they're quite visually distracted or they struggle with different noises and things like that that they don't want to ask yeah so sometimes like if they're if you're in a playground for example the scenario of being in the playground and um this your child might want to go into the sandpit but there's all these children in there then and they'll take a step back and not want to join um you know saying you can see oh i can see that child over there in the blue shirt is using a spade and putting it in a bucket um oh i can see so you it's called descriptive commenting so and you're noticing and so saying to the child oh notice that child over there modeling yeah yeah okay this is what they're doing with the sand um and look they're sitting on the side of the sandpit and so that they can reach the sand easily yeah and so things like that and that makes it when your child sees it that's how you're thinking you're observing yes because when you're

saying just have a look they think well i'm looking but what are they looking at exactly right yeah i can see a space in the sun pit though yeah i think you go on that's it not space oh that was great

7. Executive Function - Does executive function improve with age

And so we spoke about how when you're older you get techniques for, you know, like your post-it notes, even I have post-it notes, so does that mean that executive function can get better with age or do you just learn to deal with it? I think it does develop with age, you learn new kind of pathways for things, you try things, things don't work, so you try a different method. So yeah I think it can improve with age, like we said it's sort of around 25 is when you get in those skills all the time, but everybody's always learning, everybody's always trying things out, if that doesn't, if you don't succeed with that and you make a mistake you try a different way to do it, and then when you find what works you stick with what works.

We do know that it declines later in life as you get older, but then that's when you bring the skills in. Yeah. And then you bring those supports and those strategies back in place again, you know, and you do use those tools and supports. Yeah, I know for high school students when they're going through that transition from intermediate to high, and they have different subjects at different times on their timetable, and so a way to help support students with that is colour coding their timetable to their books.

So in their timetable it might be say maths and then they've got science and then they've got English for example, they say maths might be all blue, so anything that they need to take to maths, put a piece of blue tape on it, and so therefore they know okay what have I got first, I've got maths, so I've got to have all my maths stuff in here, what's next, oh I've got English and that's all red, so I need everything that's got red tape on it in there, so they'll then go to class with the right equipment, and sometimes in some high schools there'll be, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know, to make sure that they have the right materials, sometimes they will have spare exercise books, or they might have some pens and pencils available for those that are needed.

Or the ones that really struggle, they might have a tray in that specific classroom that's got all that stuff in there, and it doesn't leave that room, it just stays there so you know they've already got it, but you can support them at home with that as well in terms of thinking about all the things that they might need for a particular day, having that visual up somewhere where they are going to look at it. So there's a couple of students that I've worked with where the parents have put the information on the fridge, or they don't look at it, but if it's on the back of the front door, I'm going to see that before I walk out the door, and that's going to jog my memory that this is what I need.

And having everything in a set place at home, so if they get home and they always do homework in the same place, have a homework box that's got all the tools that they need for homework within that box, and everything goes back into that box afterwards. Specific places for when you come home with your drink bottle and your lunch box, they go in a specific place, so you know that you've got to get them from that place in the morning. Sometimes for younger kids we've done little visuals on the bag, little flip key rings, these are the things that I need, and the key rings might change each day if they've got a PE kit or something else they need to remember.

For some kids it's on the outside of the bag, for those that maybe want to be a bit more discreet it's on the inside of the bag, and it's just a visual check of I need this before I leave the house, and then at the end of the school day it's I need to check that all these things are going back into my bag. It just helps them to remember. I've started setting an alarm at night for certain things we need to remember. There's parents who probably still have to help, you know, put it all on the kid. That's the other thing as well, trying to do as much as you can to pre-prepare, so anything that can be done the night before, you know, anything that's already in the bag by the front door ready to go is going to make the big one.

Getting ready the night before, yeah definitely.

8. Executive Function - Distinguishing between won't do or can't do

about teenagers and they could be quite sensitive how do you as a parent balance not wanting to over baby them but still support them but then distinguish if they're just being lazy teenagers what's the secret or the trick or how can you how can you best help in that case i guess it's having conversations with them because most in my experience anyhow most children and young people they they want to do well you know and they actually want you know they might they may kind of portray a completely different um attitude or um yeah perception of themselves but most young people really do want to do well so i think when they are starting to well when the wheels are starting to fall off the wagon it's not usually because they want that to happen yeah there's something getting in the way to have i think to constantly have that perspective and assume the best is the best thing a parent can do yeah and just talk to them and talk and you know you're not always going to catch them at the right time or they may not even be able to verbalize what it is but just by always um maintaining that healthy relationship it gives them the opportunity to come to you once they realize or you might start to recognize patterns yeah i think it's really amazing as well that's um you're always going to go for the thing that's more motivating the thing that's

kind of going to give you that instant reward yes um and so if you are faced with two tasks and one is something you can do pretty easily and one is something that you're really going to struggle with yeah we're all going to do the easy tasks first because it's easy it makes us feel good um and we're all going to put off as long as possible the tasks that we find difficult um because and then it kind of leads to all that frustration and disappointment because you want to do but you can't physically get started on it because and sometimes it can be a little bit of a challenge but it can be a little bit of a challenge but it might be especially for those younger kids that you do have some kind of um external reward for for what they've achieved so when i've completed this this is what it will look like this is what i will gain um and then gradually as they start to do it as part of their routine then you can sort of face the rewards down but especially for those young kids sometimes that's needed what i've seen in the in the high school um when it's come to homework that hasn't been done um is breaking the homework down into this is the easy stuff i can do and i can do it by myself and they're putting so putting it into three piles when you get home this is the stuff i can do this is the stuff i want some help from someone at home to help me with and this is too hard and and letting the teacher know this is too hard and i couldn't do it and that's okay as well yeah but but also going back to you know is it a little bit of a challenge and i think that's a really good tip but also going back to you know is it a little bit of a challenge and i think that's a really good tip one tourism can't do um sometimes they just might need some space and quiet and it's been busy at school if there's been a lot going on they when they come home they just might need some minutes to be by themselves in the quiet before they start anything else because normally when you get home well what how was school um what if you got homework so it's all again it keeps going so just have a little bit of time to think about what you're going to do and what you're going to do and having that little bit of chill um when you get home can help just sort of settle then have a bite to eat and a drink then let's settle down to what do we need to do next sometimes it's that it's hard for those ones that lack flexibility as well in terms of my school work is for school yes and i know i'm at home and home is my calm space and my relaxed space why am i doing school work at home um so we have to do quite a lot around teaching that kind of flexibility and maybe approaching the homework in a different way um maybe recognizing that homework at home doesn't work for everyone and that there might be other opportunities during the school day to get that worked on okay

9. Executive Function - Christchurch children – the impact of the quakes

in your experience or what's your thoughts have you thought about this that um i think my opinion christchurch kids might be struggling a little bit more than other kids because when it comes to executive function you can be impacted by anxiety and trauma and kids that are approaching that like 13 year mark now might have gone through the earthquake they might have gone through another earthquake they might have been around some other things and now we're in a recession and parents can't you know we might have a smaller house than he used to have uh 10 years ago so have you seen that that might be something that you're starting to see in your experience you've certainly seen a rise in anxiety yeah specifically canterbury at the health school we've definitely seen that the impact from the earthquakes and from the mosque shootings yeah yeah and then from covid now yeah yeah so yes the earthquakes definitely there was a research studies done around that um i remember somebody saying to me at the time that the two-year-olds were at the time of earthquakes would be the ones with the largest impact so they're our year 11s at the moment yep yes so as we talk about preparing for interviews and jobs and high school you've got to remember that those kids might be carrying trauma and anxiety that's impacting all of this as well straight after the earthquakes um the new zealand might cross plowed a lot of money and to group into um different schools um and to support the kids with that kind of flexibility that emotional regulation and those areas of executive dysfunction that they were perhaps struggling with as a result of the earthquakes um and we we did quite a lot of work in schools running school groups all around those skills that they were struggling with because they recognized that that's good that was an area of difficulty in the area of need there's even um the babies and children at the time too were impacted yes for sure don't you say that 13 year old coming through now yeah yeah yeah and what we see in our service now is a lot more complexity coming through with with children um with quite diverse needs and um that are impacting their their learning and behavior in the classroom so that's one thing that we've noticed over over that time yeah it's quite interesting i think with that that's been more understanding and more awareness of things over the last few years as well yeah so there's more kids kind of getting diagnosis yeah small kids are kind of being recognized as needing support not just all the trauma stuff but all the as i was saying like the economic crisis and stuff now i remember my dad when i moved to you was like why are you in someone's backyard because we have a rear section and my son doesn't have the big yard i had when i was a kid and i would just after school spend three hours out there just playing this now i don't really know why they're doing this now they might not have the space they can't get home and just unwind they don't have their own room because they share there's a lot of factors now that can impact this yeah

10. Executive Function - Resources to support children and key messages

Could each one of you share with us your top resources to support in this space? My top resources would be these two manuals. The purple one is an executive functions toolkit for teachers and the blue one is the one that i share with parents. It's got really great strategies and tools in there. They are both resources that we use as well. The blue one especially for parents. Can anyone just order those or do we have to get them through a teacher? I would imagine they're easily ordered, but i can find out for definite. I guess it's

just important to remember that not one tool will fit everybody, so it's a case of just experimenting with what works for individual children.

The other resource is the app called Lumosity which targets different executive functions and it helps us to strengthen and grow those executive functions that we might not be able to do on our own. I think it's really important to remember that. I think it's really important to remember that. I think it's really important to remember that. I think it's really important to remember that you might have some legs in as well. So OK, that's a good app for children and adults. Andrea? Yes, so other sort of soft resources, so to speak, would be using a talking tin that we talked about before.

Talking, talking, what did you call it? A talking can. A talking can, yeah. And there's rainbow readers that are used in the classroom. There's the sequencing cards with ready to reads. There's also a CPen, which is a reader pen that can read and has multiple functions. So we use those resources a lot, but we also use Smart Books Scattered. There's a different series of books for the different age groups. Smart Books Scattered, so there's one that's aimed at children, one towards teenagers, there's an adult one as well. We also use quite a lot of kind of task type apps, so AnyDo, Inspiration Maps sometimes for the mind mapping software.

We've got a resource called Get Ready, Do Done that was created by a psychologist. If you kind of look on Google and just type in Get Ready, Do Done, it will tell you how to do it. It's a method of kind of doing it. It's a method of kind of doing it. It's a method of kind of having that end goal and working backwards to work forwards. So you start with the end goal and then you kind of break it down and look at what resources you need and what the plan of doing it might be, and we use that a lot, alongside kind of that breaking the goals down, which we do through another method called Goal Plan Do Check that just helps you to break it down and to kind of review it one step at a time.

So that's one way to do it once you've done it as well. And then of course, it's the visuals and the visual timers and the scheduling with older children with colour coding books to their timetable. Okay, thank you. So I'd like to ask everyone your takeaways from this session. Mine would be that this can affect anyone. It's not just a neurodiverse thing. It can happen to anyone, even if you're under stress. Um, that the biggest thing I heard today. There was a bit of a shock is that teenagers will probably feel this a little bit more because their brain capacity to handle things goes down to 10% when they function.

So they're going to need some extra support. And as parents, I think that we could just have the best intention mindset when we approach our kids and know that they're not intentionally being lazy, not intentionally trying hard. It's just that they're going to need support and we need to learn the tools to help them get through some of this. So can I ask you? Each of you, what your takeaways were from the session, we'll start this off. I think I would just stress that it's really important to encourage them to ask for help and to help them to recognise that making mistakes is okay, because that's how we learn and that's how we grow and that we all use tools and strategies to support us with our executive dysfunction.

And there's nothing wrong with that. And I would say visuals, visuals, visuals, and because visuals are, they just take that cognitive load away. And they're there. And don't we all like to see a sign that has a picture on it when we're in a place that we don't know? So yeah. And mine would be just to reinforce the fact that we all have, we all have to function with executive functions and we all have our strengths and our lags and that executive functions are cognitive functions. So cognitive functions drive behaviours. So if we've seen behaviours in our kids that aren't ideal, they're not going to be ideal.

Yeah. To use that as a communication tool. So look at the behaviour and think what that is telling us about that child rather than interpreting it as being naughty or something trying, and just trying to have those conversations and keeping those relationships open with young people. Yeah. Instead of assuming the worst, I guess. Yeah. Sure. Yeah. Thank you very much.