

Executive Function Podcast Clip - Transcript:

Lawrence Barns:

Today we're going to talk about executive function. So let's just start with that basic nutshell definition of, what is executive function, and why is it important for an educator to be aware of it?

Dr. Gendron:

Well in a nutshell, executive functioning is really about the CEO of the brain, or in another way, you can think of it as the secretary of the company. Really both of them, if you think about it, really help organize the day-to-day functioning of that company. So they allow us – executive functioning – they allow us to organize our tasks and our time, from the moment we wake up in the morning, to do all the tasks that we need to accomplish during the day.

So if you take another analogy, it's really like having the orchestra conductor not be present. So you may have all the musicians there, who know exactly what to do, but you don't have the conductor there. They may play very well, individually, but the audience won't be able to tell, because it will sound like chaos to them. The music won't flow coherently; they won't work cohesively together. So really, executive functioning allows us to accomplish our tasks coherently and cohesively, each one of them, in unison, so that we can flow through our day efficiently, complete our tasks efficiently, use our time efficiently, and get through our day.

Lawrence Barns:

Now, often when we are talking around LDs, we hear about deficits in executive function, weaknesses in executive function – so – what is the impact on learning of the executive functions?

Dr. Gendron:

So, executive functioning is – when we have challenges with it, it really does impact student learning. Executive functioning affects all complex tasks. We use executive functioning to plan everything we do in life. So, you can imagine that every moment of the day we are taking decisions about what we need to do next, when we need to stop the particular task that we are doing and get on with something else, knowing when to move on from one task to another, what tools we need to keep ourselves efficiently doing our tasks.

So think about a person trying to plan a birthday party, for example. Think of all the tasks that person needs to do three weeks before the party, two weeks before the party, the week of the party, the day of the party... Executive functioning allows us to initiate the tasks properly, equip ourselves with the tools that we need and really, move forward from one step to the next.

In learning and in the learning environment we are constantly making those types of decisions, constantly moving from one task to another, knowing what tools we need, how to move forward from one to another in an efficient manner and time manage ourselves as well, self-monitor ourselves.