

Supporting Neurodiverse Youth in Residential Care:

Building Executive Functioning and Everyday Success

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About your Presenter

My name is Emma Harding. I am a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist I have worked at Tanager for over 11 years now in a variety of roles. In my career I have worked as a after care provider, program coordinator, residential supervisor, therapist and most recently Director of Learning.

I am an avid lover of my two children, coffee, taking walks, and being anywhere near water.

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Why This Conversation Matters in Residential Care



High rates of ADHD, autism, trauma exposure



Behavior often misinterpreted



Staff burnout tied to repeated power struggles



Executive functioning = daily success skills

What is Neurodiversity?

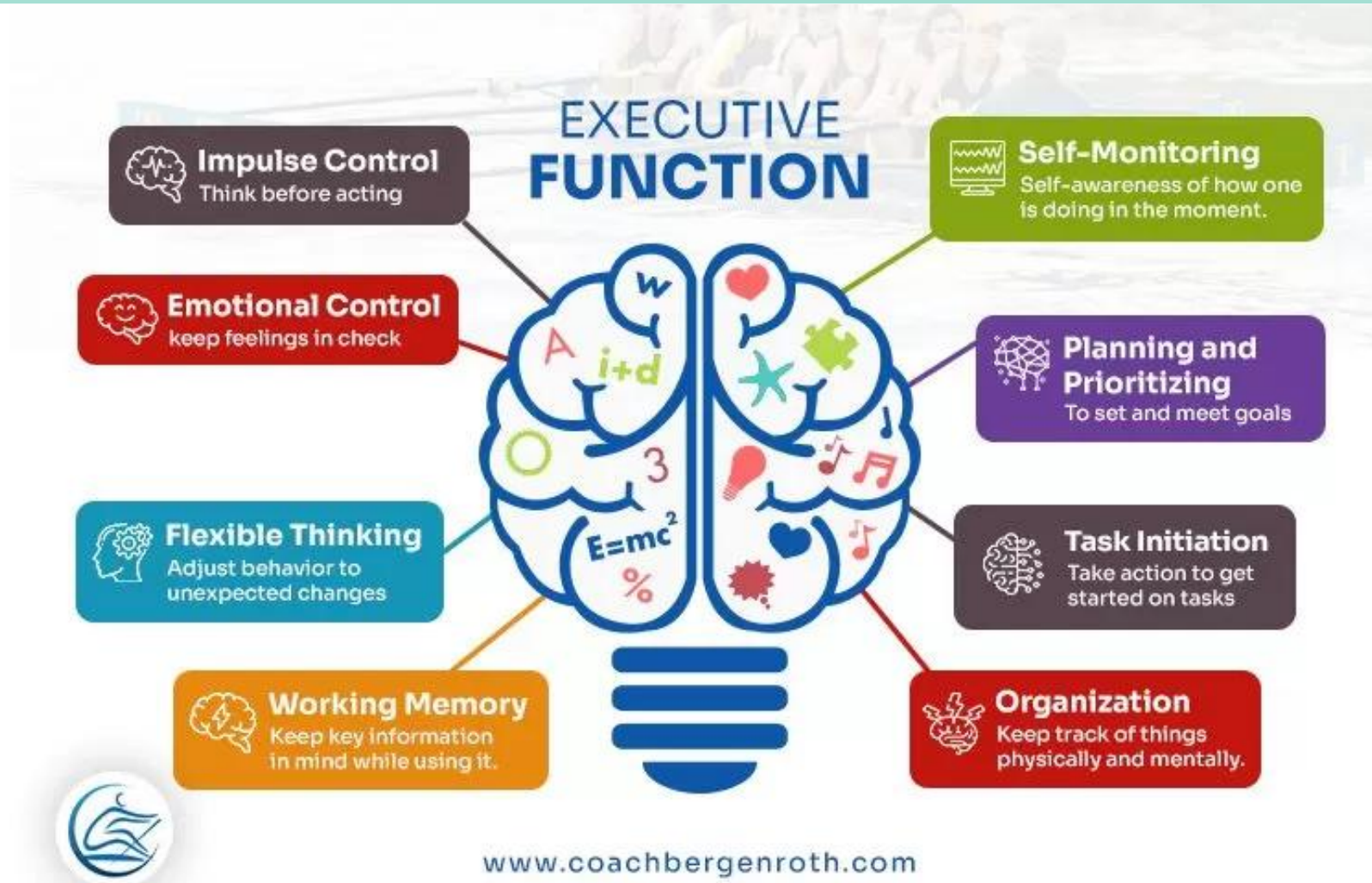
Natural variation in how
brains process
information

Includes ADHD, autism,
learning differences

Not a deficit model

Strengths and support
needs coexist

Executive Functioning: The Daily Life Skills of the Brain



How Executive Functioning Gets Misread

- Staff May See
 - Noncompliance
 - Laziness
 - Disrespect
 - Manipulation

- What May Actually Be Present
 - Initiation paralysis
 - Emotional Flooding
 - Working memory overload
 - Transition anxiety

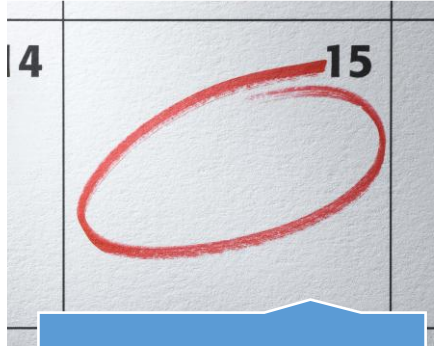
The Trauma Connection

Chronic stress
impairs
prefrontal
cortex
functioning

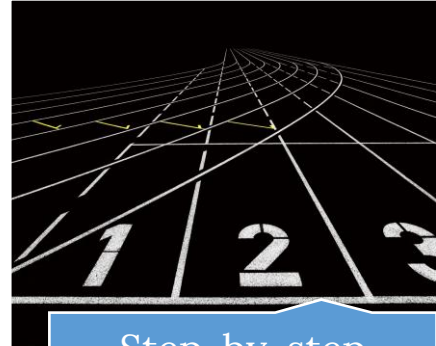
Fight/flight
overrides
reasoning

Executive skills
decrease under
stress

Practical Strategies: Environmental Supports



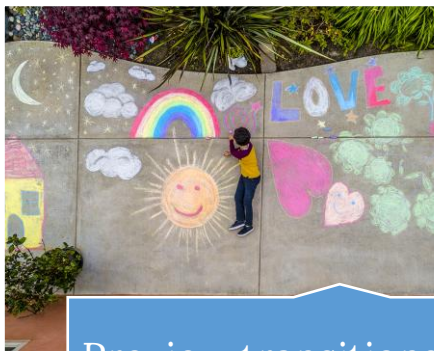
Visual Schedules



Step-by-step
breakdowns



Reduce verbal
overload



Preview transitions



Consistent
routines

Language That Builds Skills



Instead of:
“You know better”.



Try:
“Let’s figure out what made that hard”.

Instead of:
“You need to calm down”.



Try:
“I can see your system is overwhelmed. Let’s reset together”.



Workforce Impact

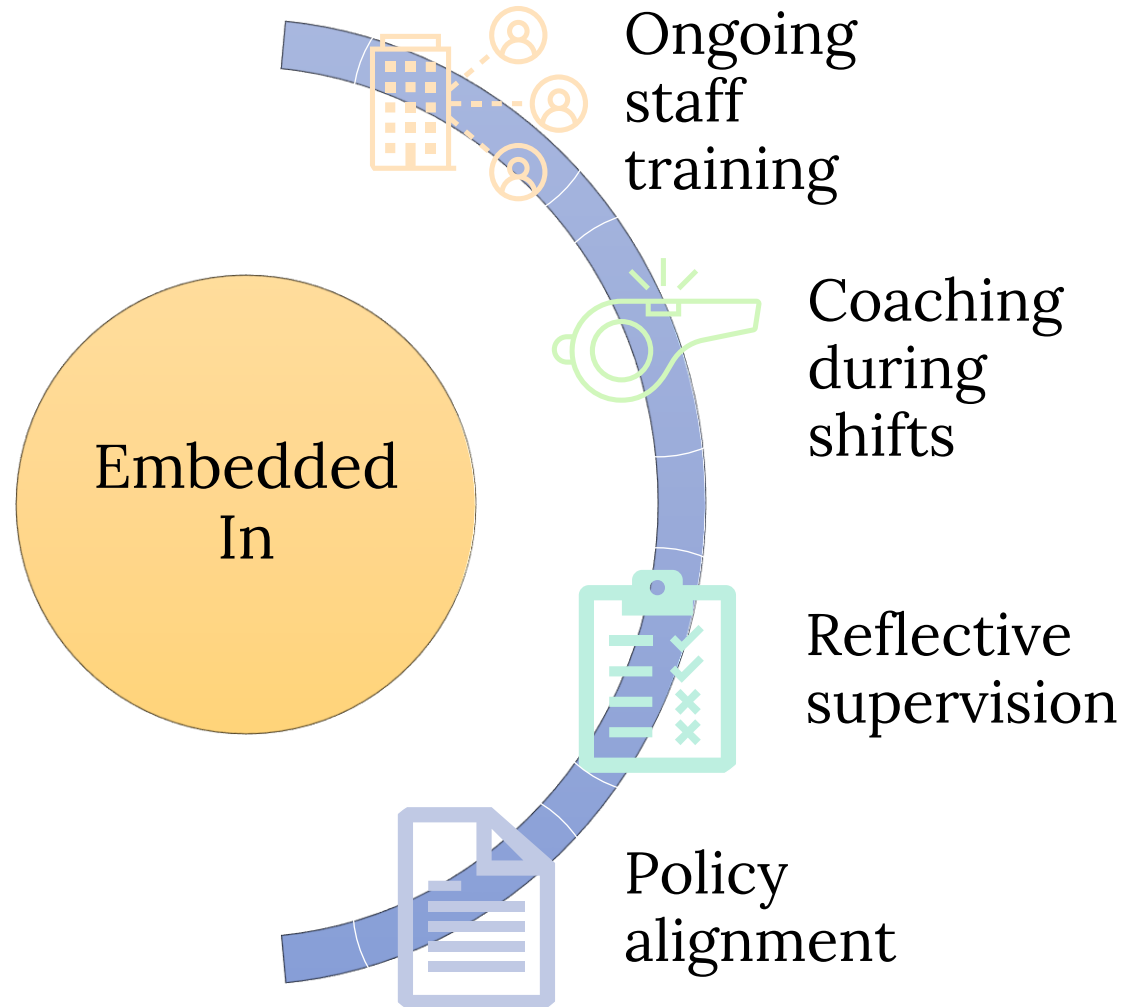
Reduced
power
struggles

Increased
relational
safety

Lower
burnout

More
consistent
interventions

Integrating into Organizational Culture



Audit Your Environment

In your setting, consider:

- ✓= How many transitions occur in a typical 2-hour block?
- ✓= How many verbal directives are given in 30 minutes?
- ✓= How many multi-step expectations exist before 9:00AM?
- ✓= How often must youth regulate before co-regulation opportunities?
- ✓= Where do we require flexibility without preparation?



From Support to Structural Design

If we designed for executive vulnerability we might...

Build in transition buffers

Reduce directive density

Replace level systems with skill systems

Coach staff in cognitive load awareness

Normalize co-regulation before compliance



What would change in your program tomorrow if you assumed EF vulnerability?

Applied Case Example: Executive Functioning in Residential Care

16-year-old youth refuses to begin room cleaning during evening routine

Staff interpretation:

- “He’s refusing”
- “He’s being oppositional”
- “He knows the expectation”

Executive functioning lens:

- Task initiation difficulty
- Overwhelm from multi-step expectation
- Emotional and cognitive fatigue at end of day

Supportive response:

- Break task into first step only
- Provide visual or concrete starting point
- Offer brief co-regulation before directive

Outcome:

- Reduced escalation
- Increased task initiation
- Improved staff-youth interaction

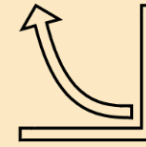


Key Takeaways



Behavior often reflects executive overload, not defiance

Trauma and neurodiversity amplify EF vulnerability



Residential environments are cognitively demanding

Structural design reduces behavioral escalation



Workforce sustainability improves when behavior is reframed



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*Thank
you!*

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