

Balancing the needs of neurodiverse and neurotypical classrooms

Colin Foley CEO Neurodiversity Training UK
colinfoley@neurodiversitytraining.uk

Dimensional not
Categorical.

“ what you are suggesting Colin, would benefit all the learners in my class.”

“what about the others, aren't we just holding them back?”

What is a “typical” classroom in terms of barriers to learning?

1 in 5- 7 neurodivergent- diagnosed or not. Comorbidity and partial diagnosis.

Masking.

Mental health vulnerabilities- trauma, learner anxiety. 1 in 5
(Young Minds 2025)

Adolescence. Peer pressure.



“Every Child Achieving and Thriving”

Updated version April 2026

“Schools must be places where every child is included..... stretched and challenged within the curriculum... with adaptive teaching.”

“The increasing reliance on EHCPs as the mechanism to access support has – over the past decade – shifted the system away from making support available for early intervention and a strong universal offer.”

Attention, Handwriting & Use of Technology.

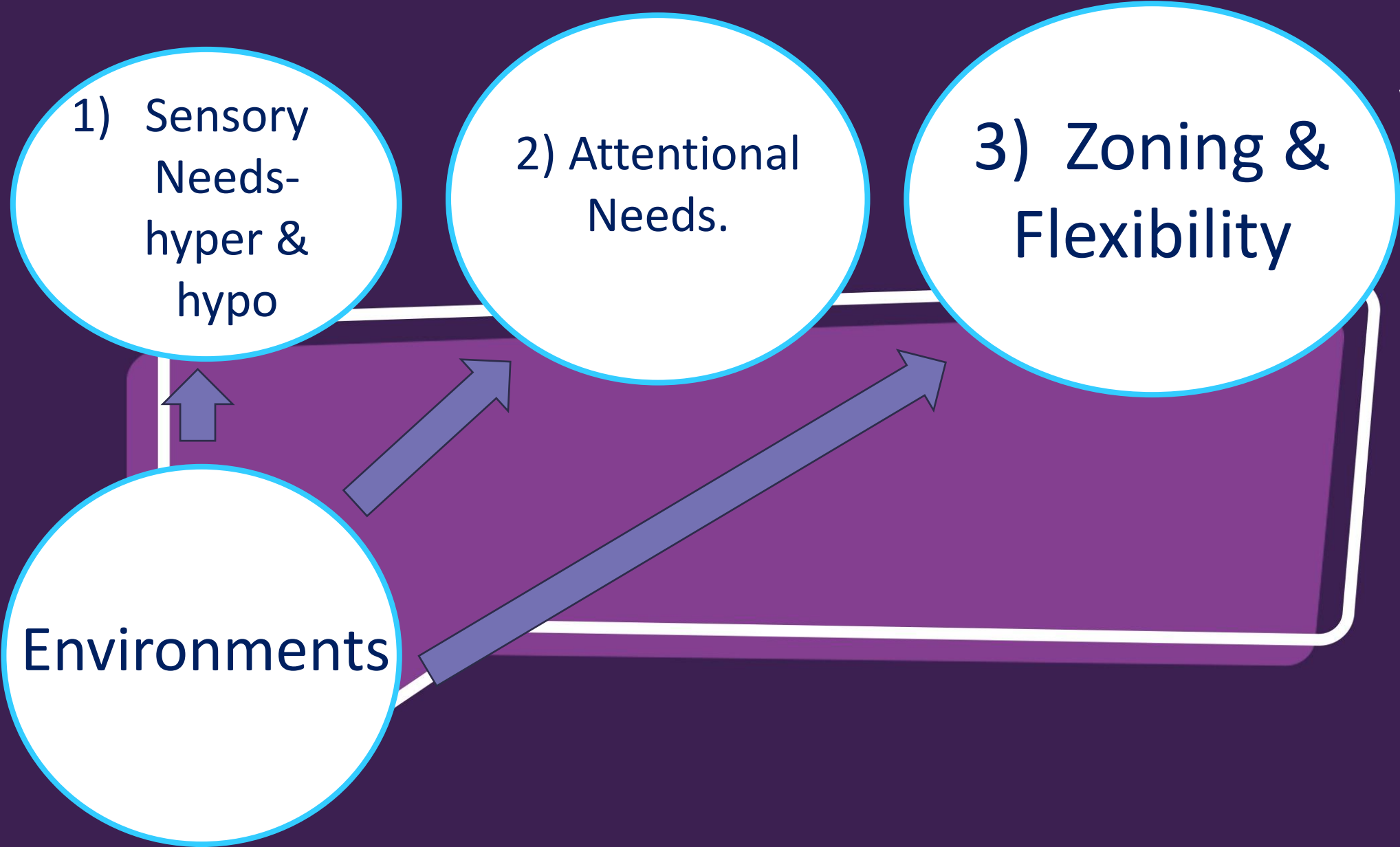


“A strong universal offer” or a “strong support offer”

What does support look like- every day, every lesson?

- 1) Environments.
- 2) Access, and use of, to assistive technology.
- 3) Lesson culture: Executive functioning & metacognition.
Activity and lesson planning and design.
- 4) Teacher mindset.





1) Sensory
Needs-
hyper &
hypo

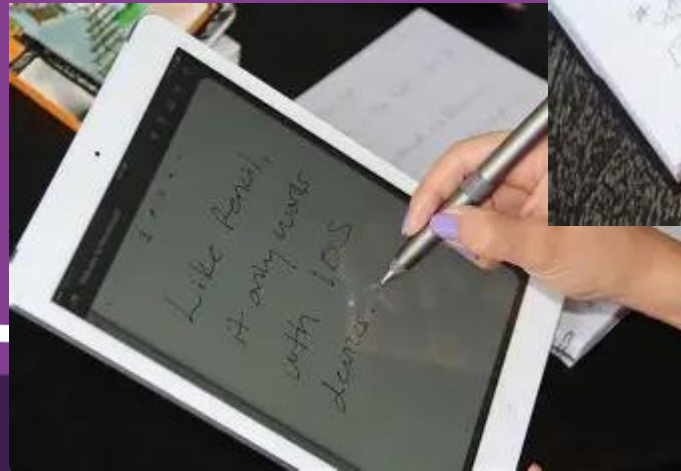
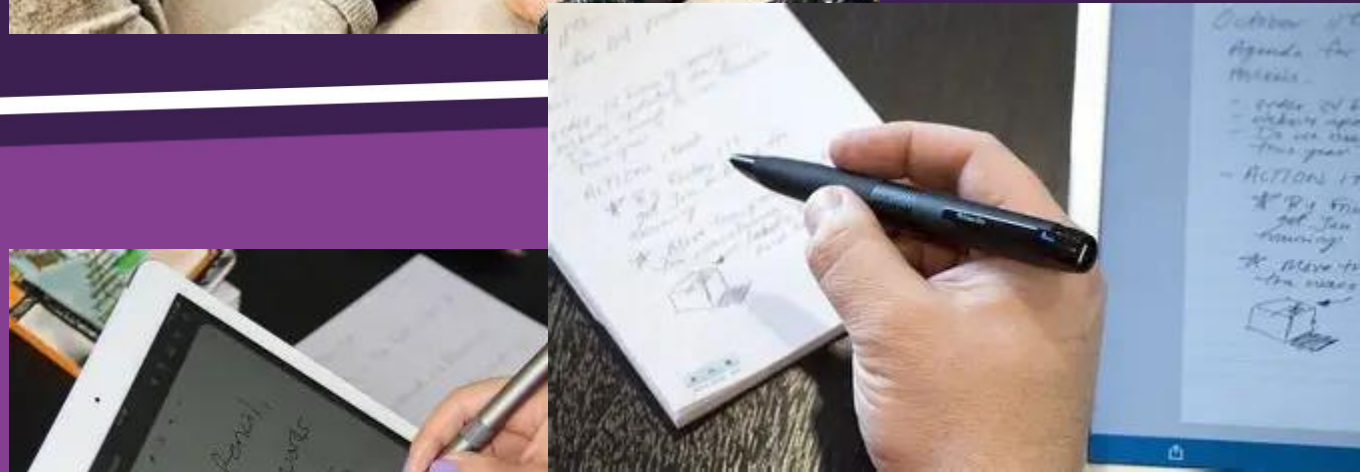
2) Attentional
Needs.

3) Zoning &
Flexibility

Environments

Assistive Technology tools:

- 1) **Text-to-Speech Software** – NaturalReader, Read&Write, Immersive reader- convert digital text into spoken words.
- 2) **Speech-to-Text Software** – Dragon, Google Docs - dictate their thoughts and ideas, which the software transcribes into written text.
- 3) **Visual Scheduling Apps** - Choiceworks, First Then Visual Schedule - visualise and manage daily routines, tasks and transitions.
- 4) **Noise-Cancelling Headphones.**
- 5) **Smartpens** – LiveScribe, Neo Smartpen- captures what you hear and write, for example, making notes whilst teacher is talking.



Assistive Technology tools:

6) **Graphic Organiser Software** - Inspiration, Popplet- visually organise ideas, concepts, and information through mind maps etc.

7) **Assistive Writing Software** - Co:Writer and WordQ - predicts words as the student types, provide grammar and spelling support and text-to-speech feedback.

8) **Adaptive Seating and Positioning Equipment**- Wobble chairs, therapy balls, adjustable standing desks.

9) **Movement resources**- Resistance bands, foot pedals , treadmill bases, desk bikes, treadmill desks.

10) **Virtual Reality (VR)** Learning Experiences Nearpod VR and Google Expeditions provide immersive, multi-sensory learning experiences.

11) **Working Memory supports**- Fieldy- records conversations and downloads transcript with actions.



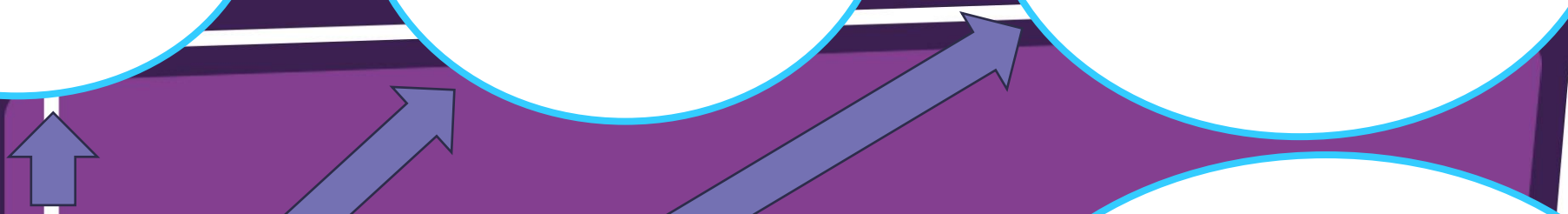
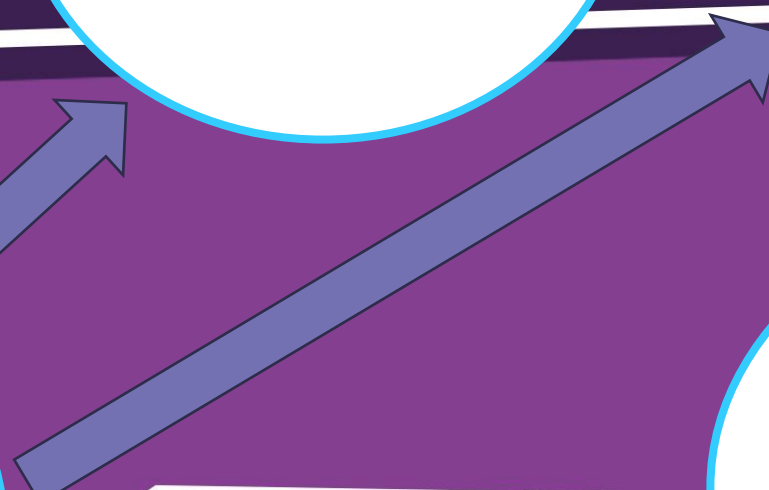
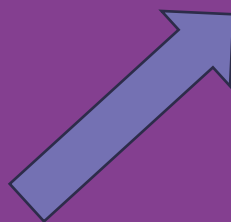
1) Can I move?

2) Can I talk
(safely)?

3) Can we go back?
(Retrieval)

What are the
routines
expectations in
your lessons
every day?

4) Do I have a
choice?



Example: Introducing a piece of written text- all learners are to read.

Dyslexia friendly format.

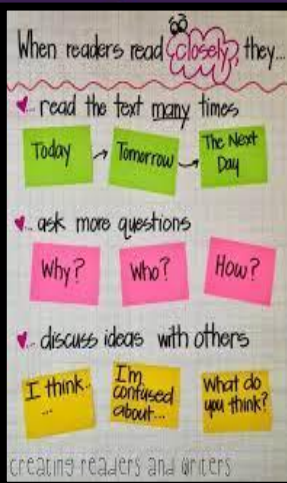
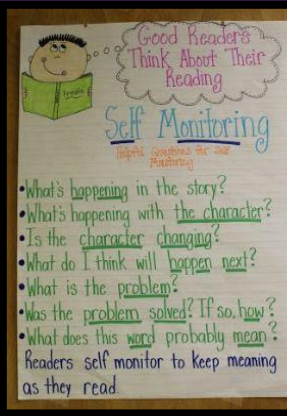
Preview, highlight and pre-teach key words then explain in context of the text.

Anchor sheet or “Read Do Checklist” available.

Provide Support offer: solo read, pairs, immersive reader, reread, with a prompt sheet, read with teacher (includes opportunities to read in sections, stop, review, externalise.) Attentional resources available.

Apply the learning from the text with follow up activity applying the Support offer.

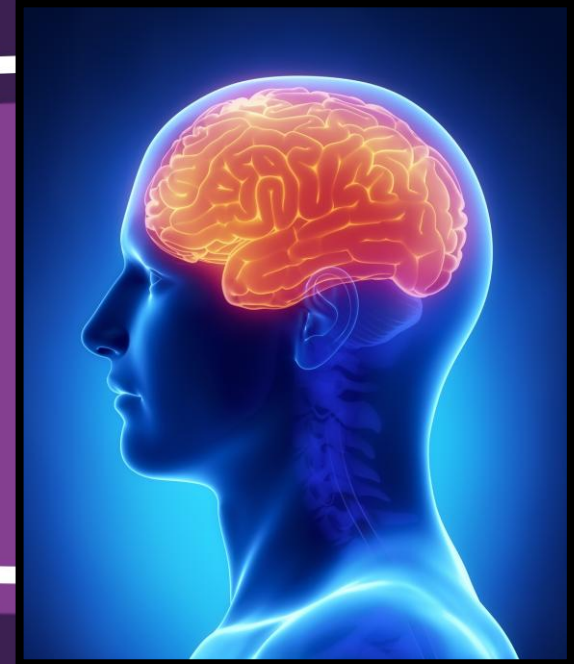
Review- metacognition activity. (some use Anchor sheet or “Read Do Checklist”)



Executive functioning: The top-down regulation and management of everything your brain does.

Intelligence is **what you know**- Executive Functioning is **how you use what you know** to achieve your goals.

“Those cognitive abilities needed for **goal directed action.**”

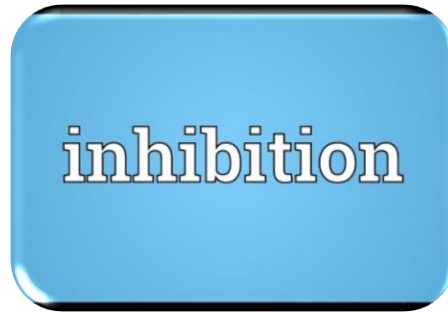


Executive Functions

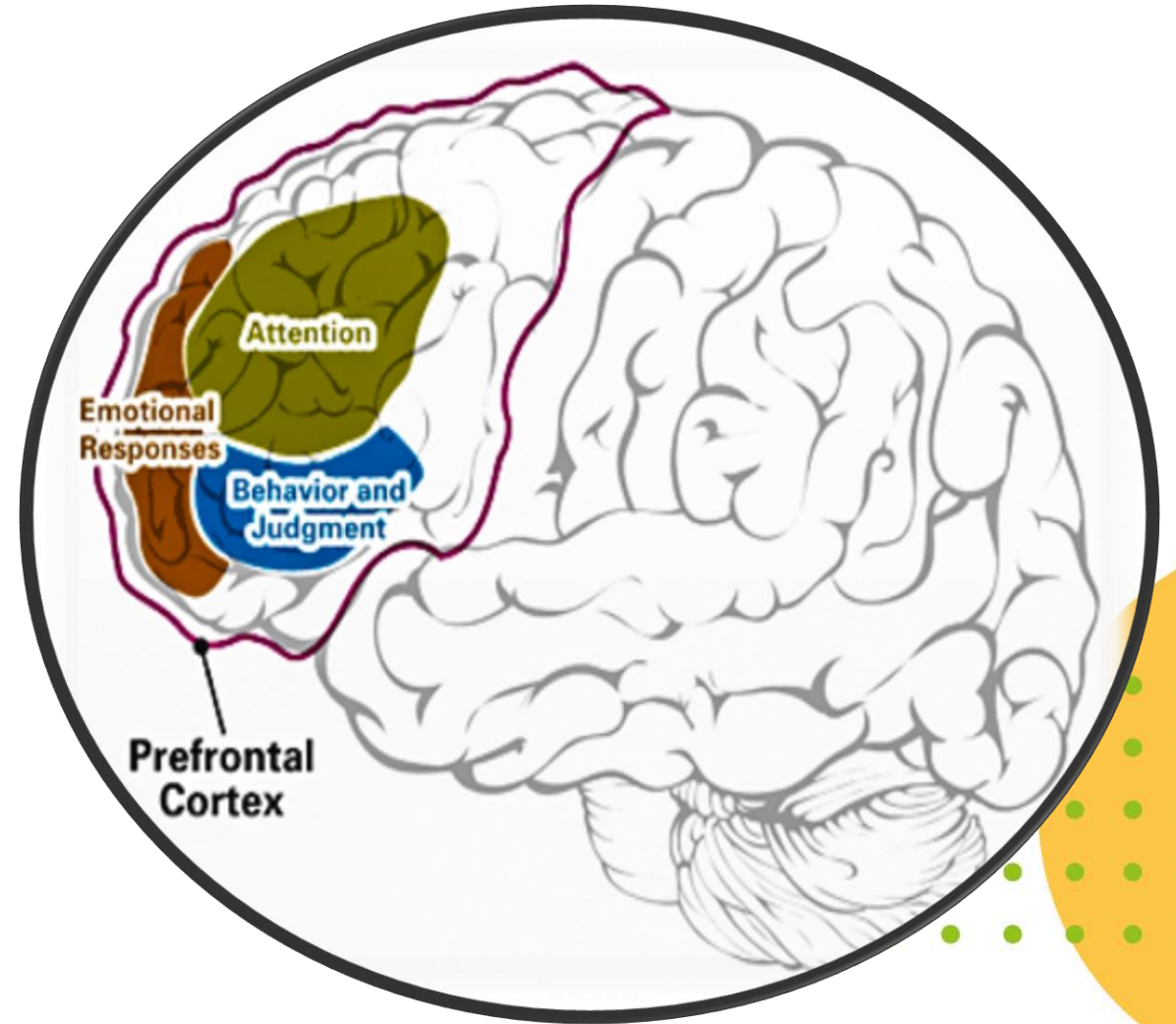
Two Major Components

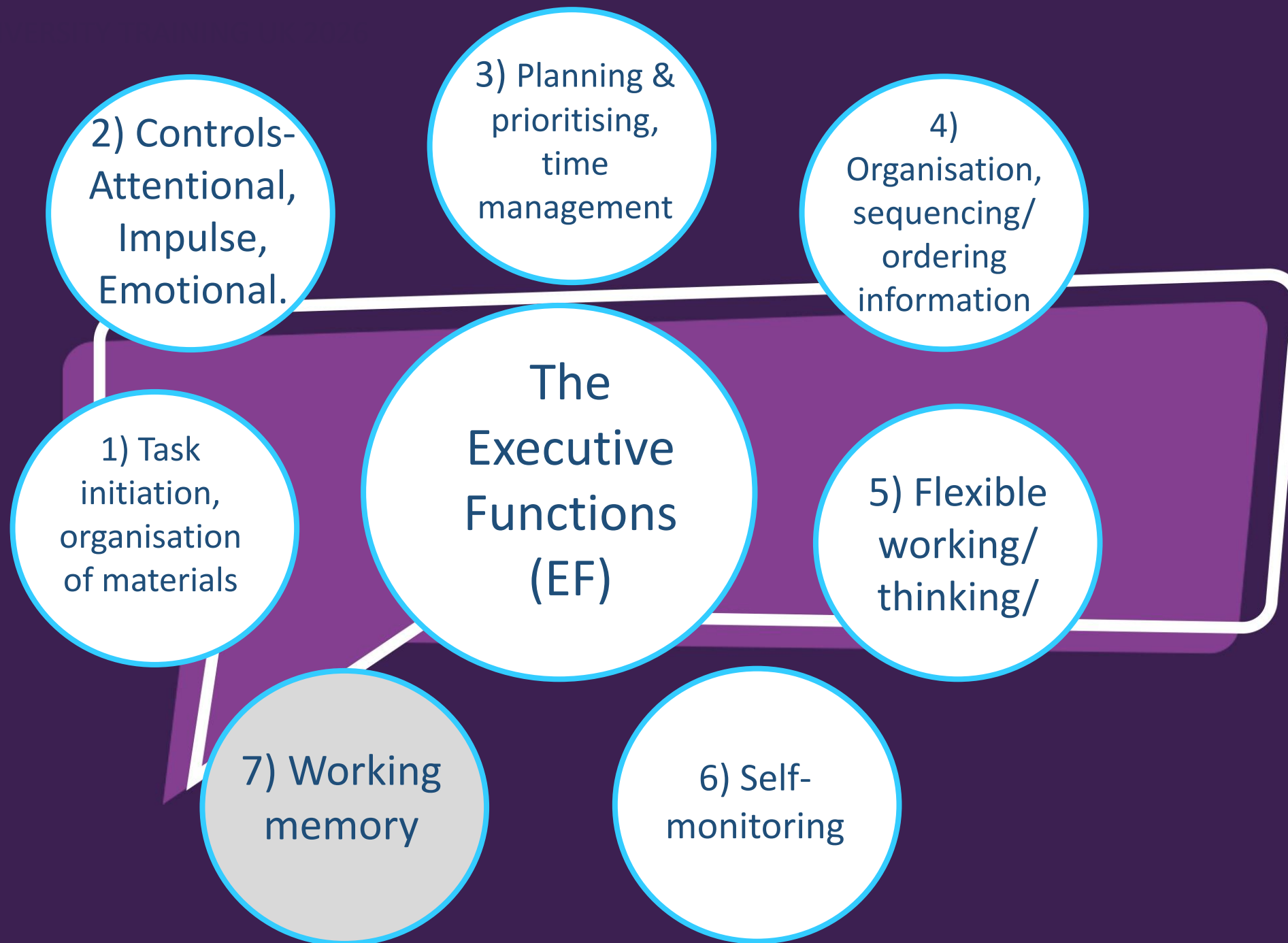


The ability to organise your own thoughts to support goal focus.



The ability to regulate emotions and behavioural responses





The central executive function is Working Memory- the capacity to store information whilst simultaneously doing something with it (forming new ideas, relating to prior learning, making and acting on a plan in real time.)

10 strategies to support Executive Functioning.



1. Creating a Structured Environment.

Consistency in planning expectations.

Visual aids & externalisations: Display visual schedules, calendars, and reminders to help children plan and organise their tasks effectively- can also help with time management & transitions.

A well-organised physical space: Arrange the classroom in a way that minimises distractions and promotes focus. Keep materials and resources easily accessible and labelled, allowing children to independently locate and utilise them.

10 strategies to support Executive Functioning.

2) Task analysis: Break down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps. Provide children with checklists or visual guides to help them navigate the task and monitor their progress.

3) Graphic organisers: Use graphic organisers to help children organise their thoughts, make connections, and visualise information. Graphic organisers can be particularly useful in activities that require planning, problem-solving, and decision-making.

4) Practice self-reflection: Incorporate regular reflection exercises where children can evaluate their own learning and identify strategies that work best for them. Encourage them to reflect on their strengths, areas for improvement, and goal-setting.

10 strategies to support Executive Functioning.

5) Explicitly teach time-management skills: Provide children with strategies to effectively manage their time, such as creating schedules, setting priorities, and estimating task durations. Teach them how to break down larger assignments into smaller, manageable chunks with set deadlines.

6) Use timers and reminders: Incorporate the use of timers or visual cues to help children pace themselves during activities and stay on track.

7) Model and scaffold planning: Demonstrate effective planning techniques and guide children through the process of creating action plans for assignments or projects. Scaffold their planning by providing templates or graphic organizers to support their organisation and prioritisation.

10 strategies to support Executive Functioning.

8) Teach emotional regulation strategies: Introduce techniques such as deep breathing exercises, mindfulness activities, and self-calming strategies. Help children identify their emotions, manage stress, and stay focused during challenging tasks.

9) Encourage flexible thinking: Engage children in activities that require them to consider multiple perspectives, think outside the box, and adapt their strategies based on new information or feedback. Foster a classroom culture that values openness and flexibility.

10) Provide opportunities for decision-making: Offer choices and decision-making opportunities within appropriate boundaries. This helps children develop decision-making skills, consider consequences, and take responsibility for their choices.

Teacher Mindset

data, modelling, sharing, peer support.

Further resources:

“Why learning fails” Alex Quigley

“Attachment in the classroom” Heather Geddes

“Memory at work in the classroom.” Francis Bailey & Ken Pransky

“The Scaffold Effect” Harold Koplewicz

“68 Kagan Structures” Dr Spencer Kagan