



Workshop Description: This workshop includes practice for discussing and understanding the development of executive control or functioning (i.e., the ability to carry out goal-directed behavior using skills such as impulse control, memory, attention, etc.) in youth. Successful implementation of this workshop will ultimately help staff to better support youth in their development of executive control while leading them to understand the importance of this development both for youth and the success of the program.

This workshop guide will ask participants to communicate and collaborate with one another to increase awareness of their own executive functioning skills and of the benefits of thought, behavior, and emotion control. Participants will also learn how emotion coaching relates to the development of executive functioning in youth.

Preparation Time: The preparation time for this workshop is approximately 15 to 20 minutes. This preparation time should include reading background information on the Emotion Regulation and Positive Youth Development website and in this workshop guide, collecting materials, and gathering any additional information you may need.

Instruction Time: It will take approximately 90 to 120 minutes to complete all activities within this guide. If you do not have time for the full workshop, only use the most relevant activities to make the workshop fit within your timeframe. Be sure to keep the reflection portion of the activities and workshop as this is where staff should consider how the activities and knowledge apply to their work.

Materials:

- Envelopes containing the pieces of the puzzles in the Resources section of this workshop guide titled Instructional Aid: *Developmental Puzzle Key* for each age group (9-11, 12-14, and 15-18). There should be enough envelopes for each group to have one
- Uncut copy of Instructional Aid: *Developmental Puzzle Key* for each of the age group puzzles
- Paper for each participant
- Writing utensils for each participant
- Two large blank white sheets of paper or a whiteboard

Preparation Instructions: You should read the content related to this topic on the Emotion Regulation and Positive Youth Development website, specifically the content related to Emotion Regulation and Youth Development Factors. In addition, you should review the background information in this workshop guide, gather all necessary materials, and prepare for the activities.

In this series of workshops, youth program staff will learn skills that build on one another in a specific sequence. We recommend you complete this set of workshops the workshops in the following order:

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| 1. <i>Understanding Emotion Regulation,</i> | 6. <i>Understanding and Practicing Inquiry,</i> |
| 2. <i>Development of Executive Functioning,</i> | 7. <i>Understanding and Practicing Acceptance,</i> |
| 3. <i>Understanding Peer Relationships</i> | 8. <i>Understanding and Practicing Problem-Solving, and</i> |
| 4. <i>Understanding Emotion Regulation – Staff,</i> | 9. <i>Understanding and Practicing Cognitive Reappraisal.</i> |
| 5. <i>Understanding and Practicing Active Listening,</i> | |



Knowledge: Understanding Executive Functioning in Youth

Emotional development during adolescence is unique due to rapid changes in the brain. As children enter adolescence, they experience changes that improve their abilities to regulate their own emotions. During adolescence, for example, the brain undergoes changes that impact habit formation and reward-related behavior³⁰ and can lead to improved executive functioning³¹ and increased ability to control actions.³²

Executive functioning is the deliberate control of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions and can be an important indicator of emotion regulation abilities. Development of executive functioning abilities means that youth will undergo a significant shift in their emotion regulation capabilities,³¹ which can have impact on other aspects of their lives (e.g., academic functioning, social development, etc.).

Individuals with better executive control tend to use healthy emotion regulation strategies and have lower incidents of problematic behavior (i.e., cheating, fighting, etc.),⁷⁷ do better in school,^{78, 79} and suffer from fewer emotional symptoms like depression and anxiety.⁸¹ Emotion regulation strategies can help to mitigate negative outcomes and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. Therefore, the development of executive functioning is important to the positive youth development of individuals and the success of the program overall.

Objectives:

- Identify examples of executive functioning and its benefits
- Understand the development of executive functioning in youth based on developmental factors
- Understand ways of supporting the development of executive functioning in youth

Introduction (5 minutes):

- Describe executive functioning and how it supports positive youth development and program success.
 - What to say: “Today we are going to talk about how the development of executive functioning or executive control in youth contributes to positive youth development and program success. Executive functioning refers to the effortful control of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. The ability to control actions and reactions contributes to the ability to manage emotions. For youth, executive functioning helps them to avoid negative emotional responses and outcomes and increase the likelihood of positive emotional responses and outcomes. This relates to program success as an environment full of youth that experience positive emotional responses and outcomes will lead to positive outcomes in other areas (i.e., academic, social, etc.)”
- Transition into Prior Knowledge activity:
 - What to say: “To start, we are going to gauge how familiar you are with the concept of executive functioning, or the control of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, and where the gaps in our knowledge are.”

Prior Knowledge (5-7 minutes):

- Ask the staff to share how they would change or add to the definition of executive functioning you have provided. You may need to assist with these definitions using the background

information provided for you to jumpstart the conversation. Record these responses on a large sheet of paper or white board so staff can see.

- Once you have a basic definition, come up with some examples of the deliberate control of thoughts, behaviors, or emotions as a group. Examples may include a time when you and a friend reunited and excused yourselves to keep your excitement from disturbing a larger group. Another example might be taking a deep breath in order to avoid an emotionally charged response to a negative comment or conversation.
- Ask the staff if there is anything they are unsure of in regards to executive functioning or control, or if there is anything they want to learn through this workshop. Again, record responses.

Activities:

Activity: *Mirror* (10 minutes)

- Describe the *Mirror* activity:
 - What to say: “We are going to do a group activity that will use your executive functioning skills. The goal of this exercise is to give you a practical experience of executive functioning so that you know what to look for in youth as they develop these skills.”
- Lead the *Mirror* activity:
 - Divide staff into pairs and have the pairs stand facing one another.
 - Instruct the pairs to designate one partner as the actor and one as the mirror. The actor is allowed to move in whatever way they choose, and the mirror must copy the actor as exactly as possible. After some time has passed (one to two minutes), have the pairs switch roles.
 - After the individuals in the pairs have both had a chance to act and mirror, come back together as a large group and discuss the activity, emphasizing what this activity has to do with executive functioning:
 - Thinking ahead and considering what someone else is doing or going to do next or planning your movements is an important aspect of executive functioning, which is just another way of saying deliberate control of thoughts, behaviors or actions, and emotions.
 - A controlled activity like the *Mirror* activity provides a low-risk opportunity for youth to practice controlling their movements/behaviors/actions.
 - Ask staff to share how it felt to be the actor. Next, ask staff to share how it felt to be the mirror. Ask what the most challenging parts of each role were and what the easiest parts were. Ask staff how they think this game could be implemented with youth in the program.
 - Transition into the next activity by asking staff to think about how planning type activities might involve executive functioning.

Activity: *Focus on the Future* (15 minutes)

- Describe the *Focus on the Future* activity:



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- What to say: “Now that you are more familiar with the basics of executive functioning development, we are going to do an activity that can help youth develop executive functioning skills for themselves.”
- Lead the *Focus on the Future* activity:
 - Provide each staff member with a sheet of paper and a writing utensil. Ask staff to divide the paper in half with a line, one half for goals and the other for strategies.
 - Ask the staff to think of several short- and long-term goals that they would like to achieve. Then, ask staff to brainstorm two or three strategies or actions involved in achieving those goals.
 - After everyone has had a chance to write down some goals and strategies, come together as a large group and ask volunteers to share a goal and strategy or two.
 - Discuss these goals and strategies as a group, and draw attention to the idea that setting goals and brainstorming strategies and actions is an advanced executive functioning task because it requires individuals to plan to control future actions, emotions, and thoughts.
 - Discuss the ways this activity could be implemented with youth. Ideas might include to have youth keep a goals journal with a section for completed actions and outcomes. This would show youth the power and value of controlling one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings through executive functioning.
 - Discuss what each of these executive functioning strategies might look like in your youth program:
 - Goal setting, planning, and monitoring
 - Awareness of interruptions (recognizing how multitasking distracts us from focusing)
 - Self-reflection (personal journal)
 - Perspective taking (reflecting on what motivates others)
 - Strategic play (sport, musical instrument, theater, strategic games)

Activity: *Characteristics of Youth Puzzle* (45 minutes)

- Describe the *Characteristics of Youth Puzzle* activity:
 - What to say: “Understanding how we develop executive functioning means we need to understand the characteristics, behaviors, interests, and perceptions of youth as they grow and mature physically, psychologically, intellectually, and emotionally. This next activity helps us to understand how youth develop and the implications for working with each age group.”
- Lead the *Characteristics of Youth Puzzle* activity:
 - First, separate the staff into about four groups. The size of these groups will vary depending on how many participants there are.
 - Distribute one envelope to each group containing the pieces of the three different age group puzzles (9-11, 12-14, and 15-18).
 - Explain that the envelope contains three different puzzles in it. The puzzle for each age group is in the form of a geometric figure. The puzzle for the 9- to 11-year-old group is shaped like a circle, the 12- to 14-year-old group a hexagon, and the 15- to 18-year-old group a triangle.



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- What to say: “The goal is to identify, separate, and put together the three different puzzles. You will need to determine which characteristics best fit the age you have from the set of pieces contained in your envelope. One suggestion is that you first brainstorm with your group about the characteristics you believe are common to each of the ages.”
- Let the groups work while you monitor their progress.
 - Instructor Note: If the groups become stuck you can offer clues:
 - “There are three colors in each puzzle.”
 - “There are about 10-11 pieces per puzzle.”
- Once the staff have been working on the puzzle for about 10 minutes, you can tell them to check in with you when they think they have each of the puzzles correct. You will then check the group’s puzzles against the key. If they are correct, congratulate them and have them talk amongst themselves until the other groups are finished. If the group is incorrect, let them know which of the puzzles contains incorrect information and allow them time to alter their puzzle.
- Once all groups are finished, facilitate a brief discussion as a large group. Some of the questions you can ask staff include the following:
 - What did your group discuss regarding linkages between developmental characteristics and executive functioning?
 - How do you think the characteristics for each age group impact executive functioning?

Reflection and Recap (5 minutes):

- Return to the staff’s responses gathered at the start of the workshop (see Prior Knowledge activity). Ask the staff what they learned during the course of the workshop and record the information on the same paper or a new blank page if there is no room. Draw attention to topics that were on the list generated earlier, new topics, and questions that were answered.
- Ask follow-up questions, such as “What part of the activity made you realize that?” and “How could you use these strategies with youth?”

Resources:

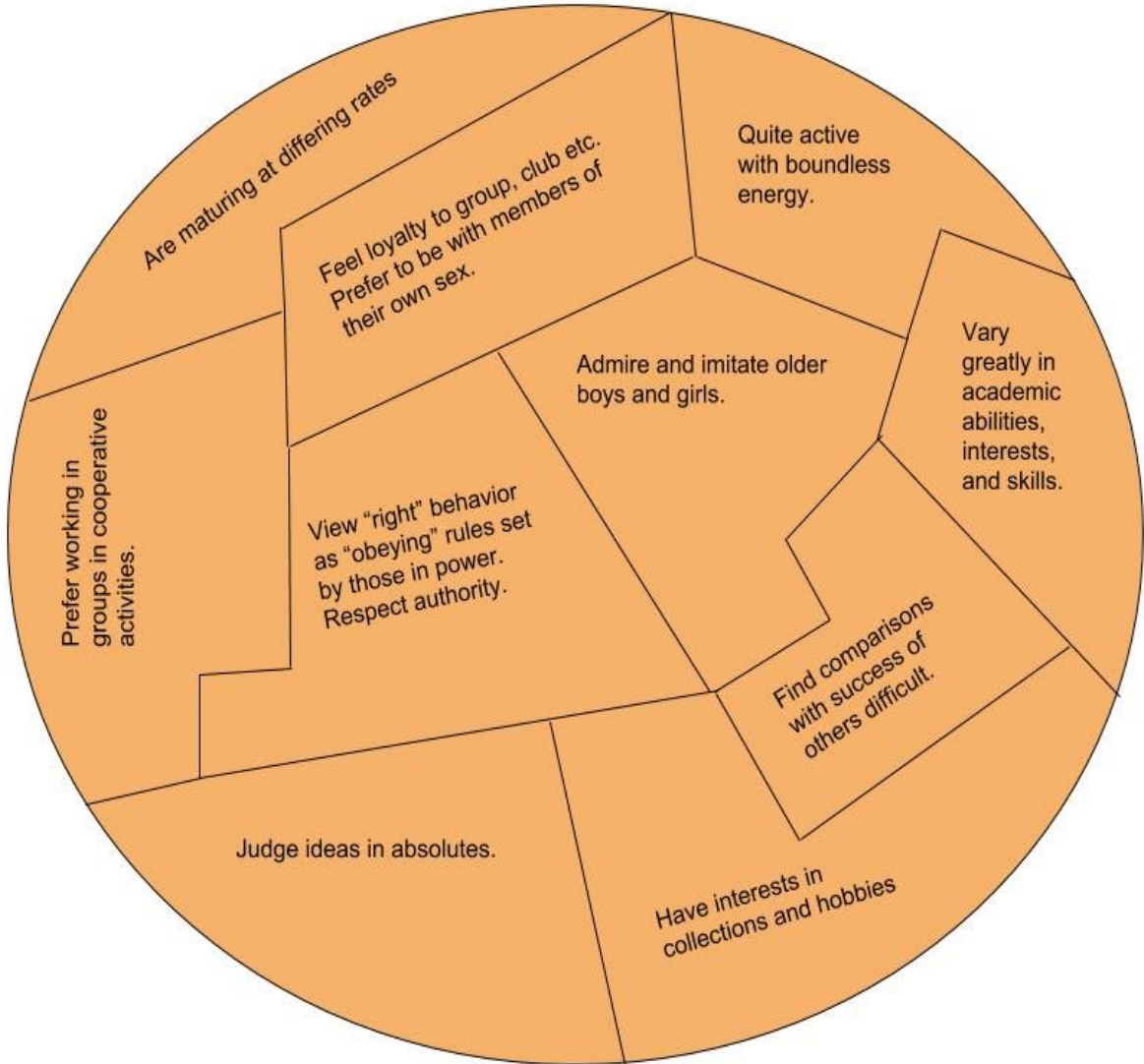
None

Sources:

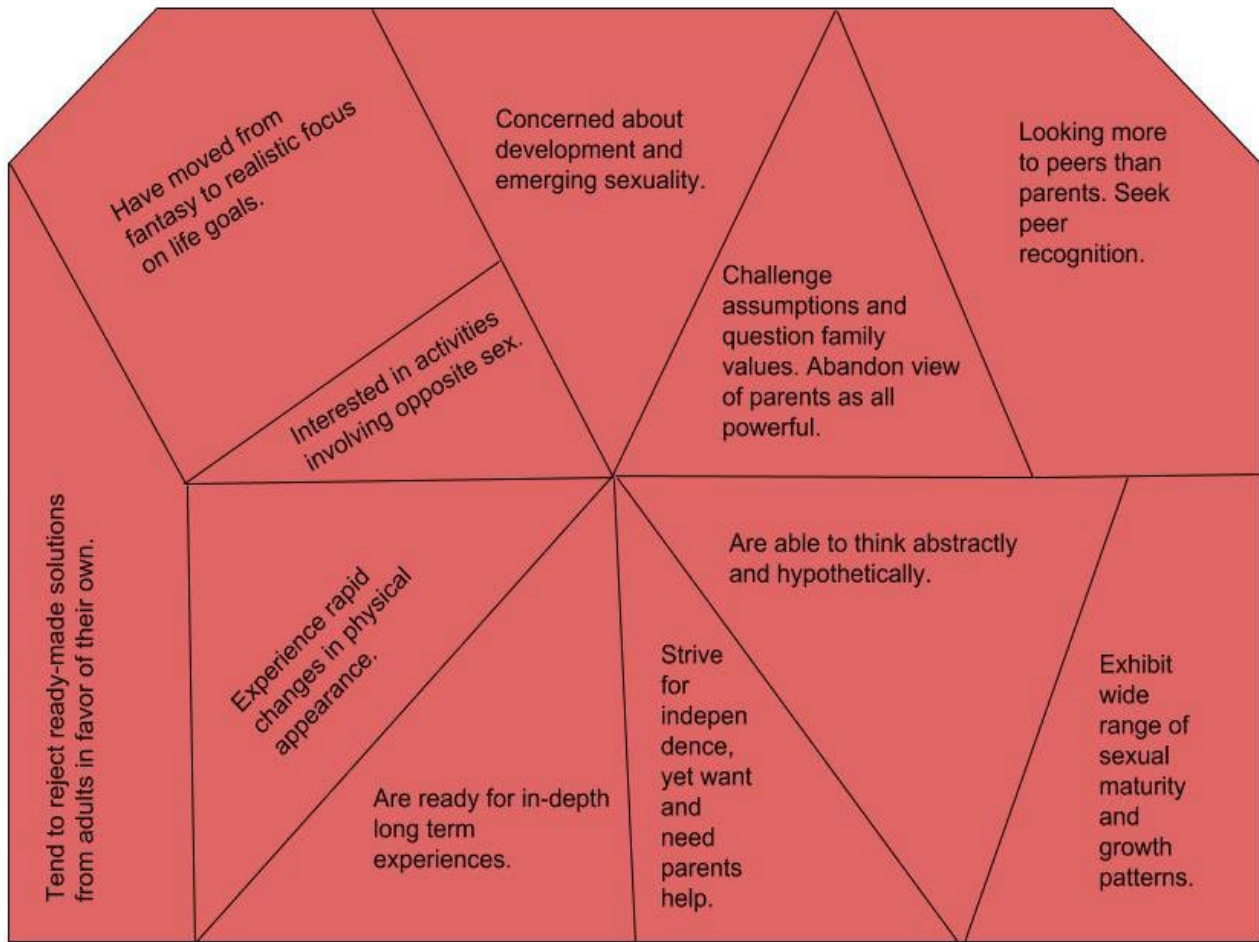
Enhancing and practicing executive function skills with children from infancy to adolescence. (2015). *Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University*. Retrieved from <https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Enhancing-and-Practicing-Executive-Function-Skills-with-Children-from-Infancy-to-Adolescence-1.pdf>

4-H Military Partnerships. (2008). *Preparing the youth development professional, Day 2, Session V*. Kansas State University. Retrieved from: <https://res.cloudinary.com/four-hmpp/image/upload/v1555800247/educators/resources/lessons/Preparing%20the%20Youth%20Development%20Professional/Day2P-min.pdf>

Age Group 9-11 Development Puzzle:



Age Group 12-14 Development Puzzle:



Age Group 15-18 Development puzzle:

