Welcome to the Spring 2020 issue of School Psychology News! Fulton County schools are hard at work providing remote learning activities and supports for our students and families. In addition, FCS school psychologists have been supporting schools, staff, students, and families during this time by providing consultation to parents, teachers and staff, participating in virtual meetings, conducting virtual groups or individual check-ins with students, providing resources and information to parents and teachers, and participating in professional development opportunities.

We hope you find the articles on Resiliency, Executive Functioning, and Dyslexia helpful in continuing to promote the academic, social, and emotional growth of Fulton County students. If you have any questions or comments regarding this newsletter, feel free to contact me at backa@fultonschools.org.

Message from the Editor...
Dr. Evelyn Backa, School Psychologist

Bouncing Back: Teaching Resiliency in the Classroom
By Jennifer Briskin, Ed.S.

As we navigate our current reality with coronavirus illnesses and social distancing, many children are likely feeling stressed and socially isolated. Aside from this current situation, children are often faced with stressors and challenges that they must learn to overcome. Teachers are on the frontlines of being able to teach children how to cope and “bounce back” in the face of stress and anxiety. Children react in different ways to the same challenges and one’s level of resiliency may be the greatest factor in their response. Resiliency is the ability of an individual to cope successfully with everyday challenges and stressors. Resilient children are those who use challenges as a spring-board for growth. They are problem solvers who may face difficult situations but attempt to find favorable solutions. Schools provide a critical setting in shaping the self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of control in children. Instead of teaching children to avoid challenges, we can teach children to cope positively and arm them with strategies to promote resiliency.

How Teachers Can Promote Resiliency in the Classroom:
1. Develop positive teacher/student relationships. Students who feel connected to adults at their school report more resiliency in every aspect of their lives.

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2. Encourage students to try to solve problems on their own and model a growth mindset.

3. Emphasize natural consequences that are consistent across settings.

4. Provide assignments that allow students to be successful a majority of the time. Assignments should be at an appropriate level of difficulty and be challenging but manageable.

5. Offer choices. Offering students 2-3 choices allows them to make decisions and feel as if they are more in control.

6. Let your students make mistakes. Letting them make mistakes helps them learn how to face challenges and how to make better decisions in the future.

7. Model resiliency. Children learn by observing the behavior of adults. Give them examples of stressors in your life. Show your students what you do to problem solve and cope.

8. Teach your students to set goals and to monitor their progress in achieving these goals.


10. Teach them different strategies to use when they are feeling stressed or anxious (e.g., deep breathing, drinking water, talking to the school counselor, etc.).

References:


What are Executive Functions? Dr. Dawson defines these skills as, “The brain-based skills that are needed to execute tasks... such as: task initiation, sustained attention, planning, organization, time management, emotional control and self-regulation, as well as problem solving skills,” (Dawson, 2012). As an educator or someone who works with students and children, how can you support their executive functions? Read on to find out!

Planning and Organization

Trying to work while struggling with executive functioning is like being trapped in a really confusing maze. It may be hard to know where you got started, when you’ll be finished, and how far you’ve come in accomplishing your task. Long assignments or long-term projects can be especially challenging for students with executive functioning weaknesses. To support students in these situations:

♦ **Provide students with a model, guideline, or rubric for their work.** By knowing what the end “goal” is for their assignments, they are better able to make a plan to help them get there.

♦ **Give students the assignment in chunks.** When students finish Step A, give them Step B, and so on. By accomplishing small tasks bit by bit, they will stay more organized and find more success.

Flexible Thinking

(Information taken directly from www.understood.org; Rosen, P.; Morin, A.)

Flexible thinking is a skill we use throughout everyday life. A child may struggle with flexible thinking in all kinds of situations.

Kids with poor flexible thinking skills can often seem rigid. They may seem fearful of change or easily frustrated by challenges that come their way. That’s because they tend to get “stuck” in one activity or in one way of perceiving things. They also have a hard time coming up with alternative solutions. In order to help students become more flexible thinkers, play games with them that involve problem solving and perspective taking. Here are some suggestions:

♦ **Find more than one way to do everyday things.** Children may be used to doing things in a certain order, so making small tweaks to an everyday process can show them that there are different options. For example, try making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich by spreading the jelly before the peanut butter. If the children are old enough, ask them to map a new route from school to home. This can help students work on problem-solving skills, which involve coming up with different approaches to solving a problem.

♦ **Make up new rules for games.** Kids who have difficulty with flexible thinking can have trouble seeing that there’s more than one way to do things. Practice seeing alternatives making up new rules for games. Have players slide down ladders and walk up slides in Chutes and Ladders. Run

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Left untreated, dyslexia may lead to low self-esteem, behavior problems, anxiety, aggression, and withdrawal from friends, parents, and teachers. Yet, there is limited American research exploring dyslexia and the emotional well-being connection. European and Middle Eastern research indicates people with dyslexia tend to have more social/emotional difficulties (Novita et al., 2015, Sako et al., 2016). American studies tend to utilize terms like “learning disability in reading,” which in some instances is broader and simultaneously narrower than the term dyslexia. Broader because “learning disability in reading” refers to reading difficulties that impact basic reading, reading fluency, and/or reading comprehension. While dyslexia can impact all three, one of the chief components of dyslexia is difficulty in basic reading (spelling and decoding). Narrower because many children with dyslexia do not necessarily meet criteria for learning disabilities. In 2016, Mammarell found that children with reading disabilities experience more generalized and social anxiety than typically developing children. The study also found that those with reading disabilities had worse depressive symptoms than other types of learning disabilities.

It is certain that stress and anxiety tend to increase when we are in situations over which we have little or no control (e.g., a pandemic, disdainful boss, reading in public). All people, regardless of age, experience stress and exhibit signs of anxiety. There are several theories as to why people with dyslexia have more stressors, which may include: not fully understanding the nature of their learning disability, a tendency to blame themselves for their own difficulties, years of self-doubt, years of frustration, hard work coupled with limited success, progress that is slow and frustrating, excessive pressure to succeed, repeated use of ineffective reading interventions/programs (see part two of this series), and/or inability to access their potential due to psychological processing weaknesses.

Additionally, parents of children with dyslexia feel more stress and anxiety (Bonifacci et al., 2013). Seventy-four percent (74%) of parents report that their child’s difficulties had a mild to severe impact on family life and that mothers of children with dyslexia had higher levels of stress and depression (Snowling et al., 2007). Anecdotal reports indicate these common stressors for parents of children with dyslexia (listed in no particular order):

1. Difficulty with early identification. Many parents complained that without proper identification, their child could not get the proper interventions early enough to get the most benefit.

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2. Feeling “gaslighted” – parents were made to feel like their child’s difficulties did not truly exist.

3. Getting or having access to the proper interventions; those consistent with the National Reading Panel’s Recommendations. Parents reported feeling “guilty” for not doing enough in the earlier years. This guilt exists despite studies suggesting a negligible difference of home literacy environment in children’s reading skills (Wadsworth et al., 2002). In other words, this is not a problem of early environmental exposure as even children who grow up in literacy rich environments can have dyslexia. These differences are more neurobiological in nature.

4. Limited Resources
   a. Financial – Reading tutors for programs identified for use with dyslexia tend to be in high demand and expensive. Many families reported moving their children to expensive private schools utilizing structured literacy or having specific programs for children with dyslexia.
   b. Time – Parents report that they spend a lot of time taking their children to tutoring/appointments. Additionally, parents reported having to explain and re-explain things in multiple ways, multiple times to their child with dyslexia. When schedules are already tight, this can be stressful for parents.
   c. Emotional – Parents report that they need to advocate for their child with dyslexia more than typically developing siblings, which can be emotionally draining. Parents also report that their children with dyslexia have more difficulties with self-esteem, anxiety, self-confidence, perfectionism, and depression. Watching their child struggle with these emotional difficulties on an ongoing basis was reported to be one of the hardest aspects of dyslexia.

5. Stigma – family, friends, and community members may think the child is “broken” in some way.

6. Future – children with dyslexia are more likely to dislike school, drop out of school, complete suicide, be arrested/incarcerated, have substance abuse issues, or be exploited in some way. While these possibilities are stressful for all parents, they can be more anxiety producing for parents of children with dyslexia given the emotional impact of having dyslexia.

While this is not intended to be an exhaustive list, these were some of the most common stressors reported. Individuals with dyslexia may have learned that being in the company of others places them at risk for making mistakes coupled with embarrassment and the inevitable negative reactions from students and adults alike. Furthermore, the use of counseling programs intended to assist with self-efficacy of students with learning disabilities has little effect on emotional well-being, although there can be increases in motivation (Phew et al., 2018). Focusing intervention on the result (anxiety) of mismatched instruction (reading program) is unlikely to improve the stress level of a child with dyslexia.

What Can Educators Do?

- If you suspect a reading issue, act immediately. Identify dyslexia as early as possible and utilize programs specifically identified to help students with dyslexia (see part 2 of this series).
- Avoid triggers in the classroom such as: reading out loud, timed tests, assigning homework, and writing assignments without the use of accommodations or modifications. Help students identify stressful situations.
- Utilize audio books at the child’s level of listening comprehension and/or intellectual functioning. Many children with dyslexia are bright and being forced to read books that are below their potential can be demoralizing.

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Know the signs of anxiety and help children identify the correct feeling in their body.

Help the child understand what dyslexia is and is not.

Utilize bibliotherapy using books that are written for students with dyslexia or are dyslexia friendly.

◊ Hank Zipser Series by Henry Winkler
◊ Tom Gates: Dog Zombies Rule (For Now) by Liz Pichon
◊ The Alphabet War is by Dianne Burton Robb
◊ Dork Diaries by Rachel Renee Russell
◊ Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney

References

www.dyslexiacenterofutah.org/DyslexiaEmotionalEffects 4/20/2020


Wonderful Websites & Awesome Apps

By Rob Shultz, M.S.Ed.

https://www.fultonschools.org/communityresources - Fulton County Schools has created this web page of community resources, such as food banks and distribution programs, online tutoring, and internet providers offering free or low-cost connectivity. This is a place to connect those in need with those who can help.

https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center - The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is committed to providing members and the public with information, guidelines, and resources to help support the learning and well-being of students, their families, and others in the school community during the COVID-19 crisis.

On the lighter side:

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/humor - From its most lighthearted forms to its more absurd ones, humor can play an instrumental role in forming social bonds, releasing tension, or attracting a mate. Most important, humor is largely subjective.

https://www.mombooks.com/mom/online-activities/ - This website offers online mindful coloring (you don’t have to print or have art materials at your house).
the bases in reverse order in kickball. Once your students get comfortable with simple switches like this, try combining the rules of two games to make a new game.

- **Play “What’s this?”** Take an ordinary object like a funnel and see how many different things your students can pretend it is: a party hat, a trumpet, a unicorn horn. This activity encourages your students to see things in more creative ways.

**Initiating**

*Information taken from www.psychologytoday.com; Pychyl, T., 2010*

- **Help your students think of a “stimulus for action” to trigger them to begin an activity** such as studying for a test or working on a long-term project.

For example, Dr. Pychyl discusses a stimulus he has used to help him remember to floss his teeth. He has given himself the stimulus of: whenever he puts toothpaste on his toothbrush, he stops to floss his teeth in that moment. Because the toothpaste action is automatic, his thinking is that by putting a stimulus into his environment to remind him to do the new behavior, the new behavior (flossing) may become automatic, as well (Pychyl, T., 2010).

**Self-Monitoring**

*Information taken from www.ldatschool.ca*

Self-monitoring is the ability to evaluate our own behavior in order to determine when a different approach would be more appropriate. It’s about noticing and fixing our mistakes, and knowing when to ask for help. In a learning environment, students with good self-monitoring will reread their work and make sure that their answers make sense. The students who are challenged with self-monitoring will not engage in such tasks, and of course the quality of their work will suffer. Some strategies to help with self-monitoring skills include:

- **Verbalize your observations to make students aware.** For example, “I hear lots of chatting,” or “I see a few people off task.”

- **Explicitly teach self-monitoring skills.** In math, this may take the form of rechecking one’s responses systematically (perhaps using a checklist) or using the answer to reverse the procedures and arrive at the original numbers. In writing, it might include a visual aid with a checklist prompting the student to re-read their work and check for certain criteria (e.g., writing conventions, grammar, and spelling).

- **Help students recognize when they need a break** and establish a signal for them to ask for one.

**References**


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Excellence in Action!
Take a look at what Fulton County school psychologists are doing!

♦ On November 20th, Mark Hartigan presented to the special education staff at Sandy Springs Charter MS on “De-escalation Strategies.”
♦ Melissa Gordon conducted a new teacher training on parent communication at Haynes Bridge MS.
♦ Brooke Edwards Maurer conducted a STEPS A group for 6th grade boys working on distress tolerance skills at Webb Bridge MS.
♦ On February 4th, Jennifer Briskin, along with her school counselor and school social worker, presented to Wilson Creek ES parents about “Reducing Stress and Anxiety in Children.”
♦ Cindy Vinson conducted a “School Success Group” at Summit Hill ES. The group focused on study skills, test taking strategies, and attention skills.
♦ Melanie Blinder taught an AP Psychology lesson on social psychology for North Springs HS.
♦ Cindy Vinson conducted a “Worry Warriors Group” at Summit Hill ES that focused on learning about how anxiety impacts students on an everyday basis, as well as learning coping techniques.
♦ Travis Bonner hosted “Boys Talk,” which provided an opportunity for the young men of Liberty Point ES to come together in an open forum to discuss COVID-19, remote learning, grade promotion, health & safety, stress and emotions, activities while at home, as well as additional topics generated by the students.
♦ Stephanie Artilus ran a group for students on how to deal with stress and make great choices.
♦ Kelly Dale, along with the rest of the CPSW team at Oakley ES, hosted “Wednesday Wind Down” for the school staff. They met via Teams to talk, share books they had read, or share funny things they had seen.
♦ Beth Byrnside researched and developed a PBIS matrix for the virtual learning setting at Alpharetta HS.

Welcome
The Office of Psychological Services would like to welcome the following new school psychologists:
Kaela Malka, M.A., C.A.S.
Ridgeview Charter MS &
Riverwood International Charter HS
Stephanie Tranum, M.S., NCSP
Mountain Park ES & Woodland ES

Wishing everyone a safe, relaxing & rejuvenating summer!