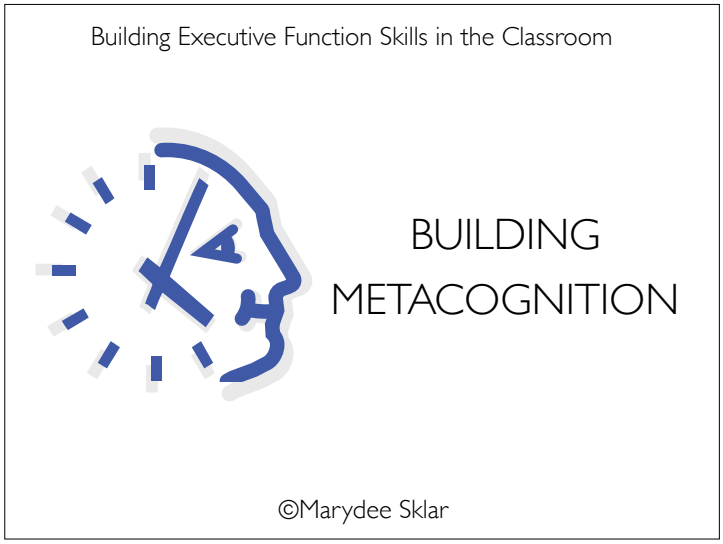
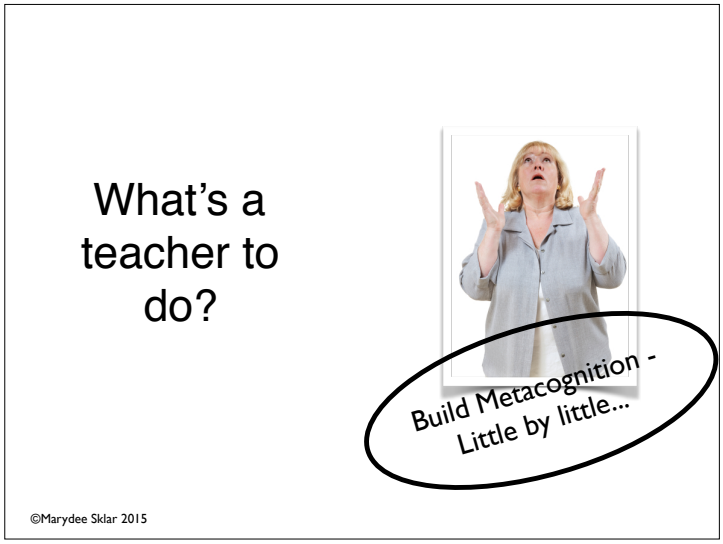
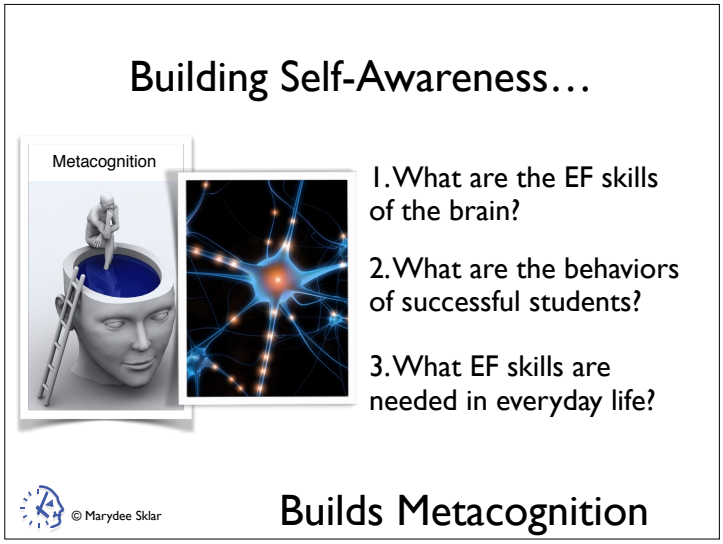


Our last lecture series gave you a foundation in understanding the executive functions of the brain. I also showed you how long it takes for the prefrontal cortex to develop those executive functions. All that information about the brain is very useful and valuable, but as educators, our problem is how to get the students to do things they need to do NOW– this week's homework, the project due at the end of the month. In the next four lectures we are going to focus on activities to do with your students to develop the metacognitive awareness of the importance of executive functions. This knowledge sets the base for behavior changes.



So what's a teacher to do?

Build your student's metacognition, little by little…



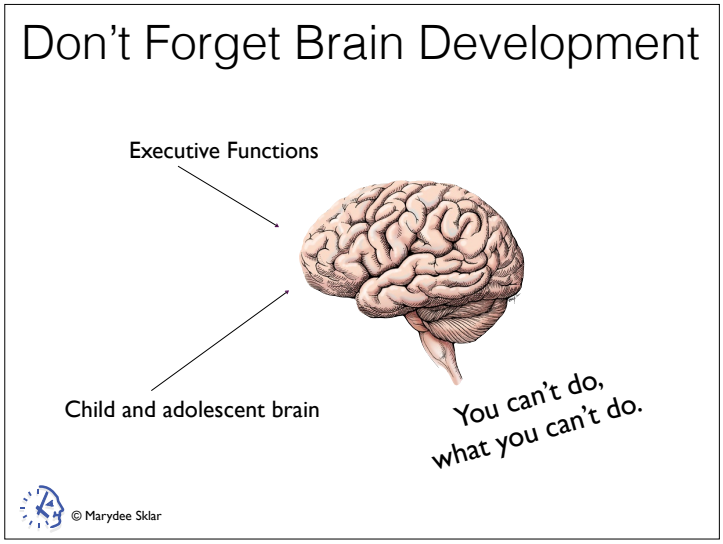
First, we will go to the brain and help students to learn about executive functions and have them evaluate their own EF strengths and weaknesses.

Next we help them reflect on the behaviors of successful students.

And finally, we will have students analyze the EF skills they need to use in their daily life.

What educators and counselors typically do, is to tell the struggling student to use specific strategies. They suggest using checklists, timers and planners.

What I have learned through my many years of working with struggling students is that handing out a directive to use a strategy just doesn't work for maybe 99.9% of those floundering kids. Why?



Part of the problem is the naive assumption that the student HAS the executive functioning capacity to independently USE those strategies.

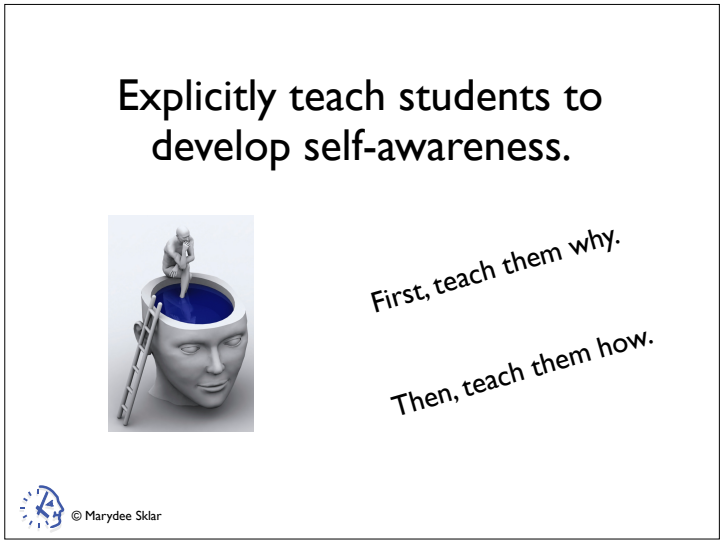
You now know, that from the perspective of brain development, your struggling students lack that capacity.

Remember, you can't do what your brain can't do.

The other part of the problem is motivation, getting buy-in to USE the strategies. Step out of your shoes for a moment and into the shoes of that struggling student. If you have been failing at getting work done and turned in, you have an integrity issue. This is serious. You have experienced a history of letting other people down, not meeting their expectations. And perhaps more importantly, you have been letting yourself down. You don't believe that that you CAN get better.

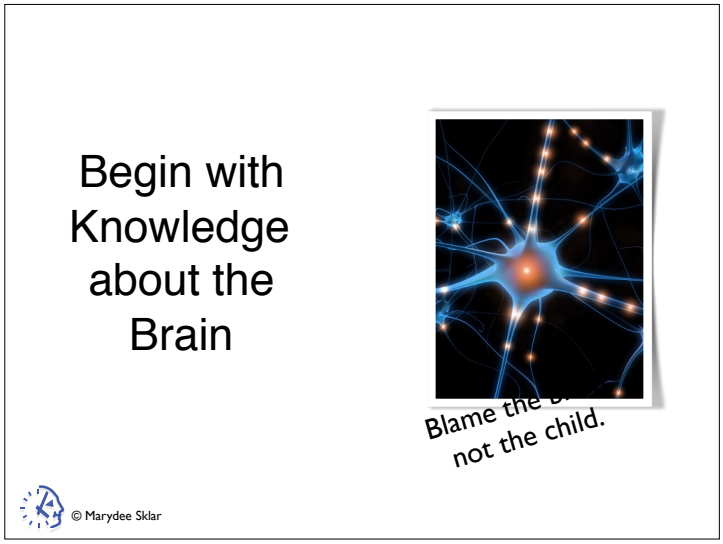
No child intentionally sets out to fail. I remember every September vowing that this was the year that I was going to actually write in my planner, and keep on top of assignments. That vow would last for the first week or two and when the homework load ramped up, my vow disappeared - lost in my brain's executive functioning weaknesses. Years of these negative patterns builds in defensiveness, a lack of hope. A defensive student doesn't even want to TRY to use a tool, because she is convinced she will just fail again. Why bother?

Realize you are dealing with wounded and defensive learners.



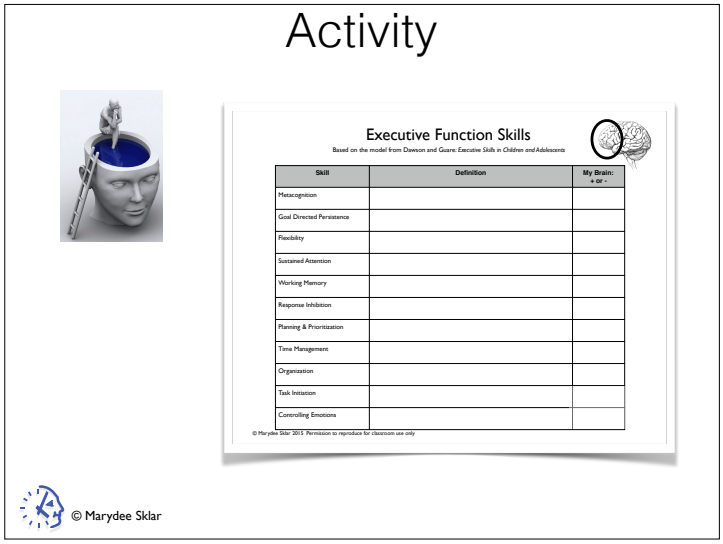
To get the behavior changes we want our students to make, we have to explicitly teach them to develop their metacognition connected to executive functioning. To get the buy in to use strategies, students need to know WHY they have challenges. With the foundation of "why", we THEN teach them how to use tools to support their brains.

Students need to stop and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. They need to learn to analyze their challenges, and problem solve which strategy will help them. How do we teach them to do that?



You start with the brain, not their behavior. Blame the brain, not the child. By focusing on the brain, you are depersonalizing the problem. You are removing guilt and shame. Removing that guilt and shame, opens a tiny window of hope, hope that they really can get better at time management, planning and organization.

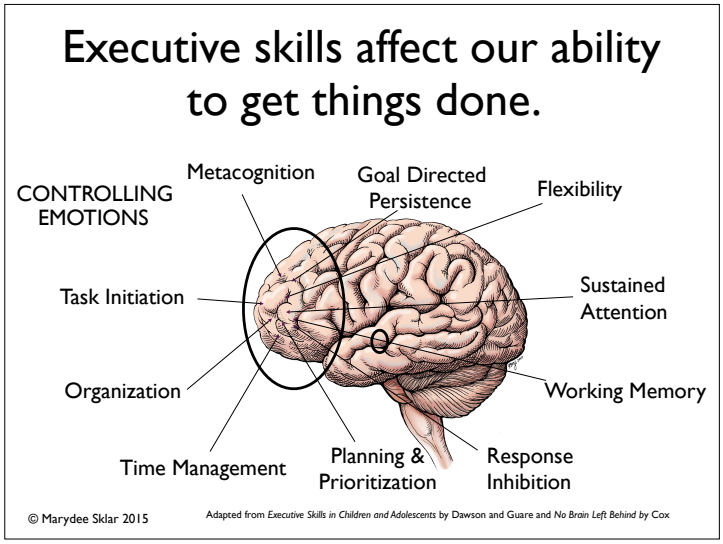
And, EVERYONE loves to learn about their brain! Focusing on the brain is a great motivator to open up curiosity which leads to the possibility for change.



We want your students to consider their brain's strengths and weaknesses in the realm of EF skills. I have provided a student version of the form that you used in our first lecture. Depending upon the ages of your students you may choose to do this activity in small chunks, highlighting a couple of EF skills at a time. You may want to create an adaptation of the form.

As you present information about EF skills, be sure to share YOUR brain's EF weaknesses. That sets the stage for the students to be more accepting of their own brain. Make sure that students understand that no one has the perfect brain. Even if one has multiple EF difficulties assure them that you will be teaching them to tools to get around their brain's challenges.

Once this form is completed, have your students store it because it will be used again for at least one more activity.

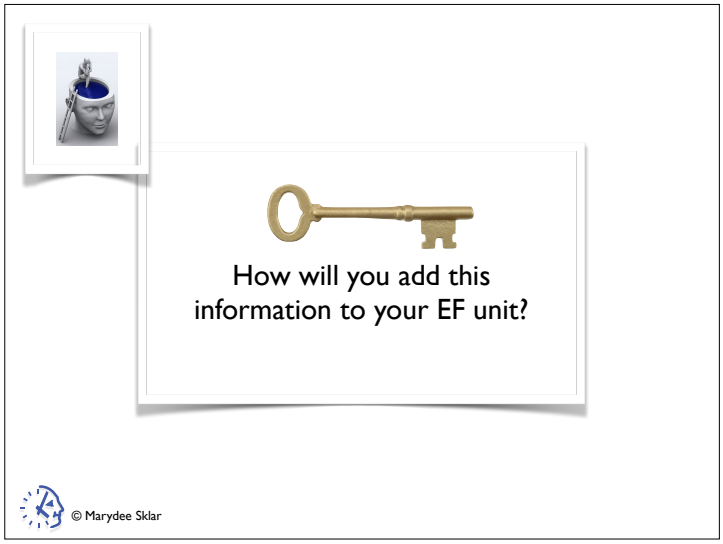


As you present this background information about the brain, be sure that you use visuals and connect students to their prefrontal cortex. One sixth grade teacher started her EF unit by showing a video on very basic brain anatomy. Then she had the students use plasticine clay to create their own brain model. The students loved it. The internet is full of videos on the brain.

When it comes to choosing words to describe the executive functions don't be afraid to use the "big" words from Dawson and Guare. Give your students the definitions. It is important to build higher level vocabulary. Students love to be able to use a BIG word like "metacognition." Spend some time coming up with EF descriptions and definitions that will have relevance for your student population.

Students can review these new keywords and concepts by making up quizzes for each other or creating a match game using three-by-five cards. One card has the EF skill written on it with a brief definition. The other card should have a drawing that represents that EF concept.

The goal is two-fold. The drawing tests their conceptual understanding of the EF skill. If you understand something, you will be able to make some sort of visual representation of it. Playing the game to find the match is the repetition that cements new learning in the brain. AND playing games is very motivating and engaging for the brain, especially one with ADHD.



Other teachers have had students make posters to represent the EF skills. I heard about a school where students created a superhero for each EF skill. This superhero helps students become better and happier students.

Whatever you choose to do in your unit, be sure to make some of the activities hands on. This will engage your learners AND their brains. Pause the video at this point and consider how you will introduce executive functions and the brain to your students. How will you start your EF unit? Once you have recorded your thoughts resume the video.

Well done. You now have an activity to provide your students an introduction to executive functions. In the remaining three videos of this series on metacognition you be given activities for deeper self-awareness and self-reflection.