

Episode 26 – RTT Series – Developing Executive Skills

In this podcast episode, the focus is on aiding children and youth in residential treatment to develop executive skills, which are crucial for regulating emotions, thinking, and behavior. Developing residents executive skills is essential because it's their deficits in being able to regulate their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that accounts for why they need to live at a treatment program in order to receive services, instead of living in the community / with their families.

Executive skills begin developing in childhood but can be delayed or overwhelmed by environmental challenges, trauma, deprivation, insufficient parenting, or neurological conditions. The key to improving executive skills lies in practice, with the brain becoming more adept at whatever skills it regularly engages in.

The podcast introduces 13 executive skills, two of which are primarily focused on regulating emotions, eight of which are primarily focused on regulating thinking, and 3 of which are focused on regulating behaviors.

Strategies are presented for developing reaction inhibition and stress tolerance, crucial for emotional regulation, include labeling and check-ins. Stress tolerance is further fostered through empathic listening, creative arts, journaling, and coping activities.

Cognitive executive skills such as planning, prioritizing, organizing, sustained attention, time management, task initiation, working memory, and flexibility are explored. Practical techniques involve fostering autonomy in planning, using a choice model for prioritization, engaging in organizing tasks, and employing coping activities to enhance stress tolerance and several cognitive executive skills.

Coping activities are divided into eight categories, including diversions, tension releasers, organizing tasks, cognitive coping skills, social coping skills, physical maintenance strategies, limit setting, and spiritually fulfilling activities. The podcast emphasizes the importance of teaching children positive coping activities while being aware of negative coping actions.

Negative coping actions do work, in-the-moment, to help a person tolerate stress, however, they have longer-term self-destructive effects. These are things such as drug use, self-injurious behaviors, over-eating, and blaming people and yourself.

Lastly, the podcast touches on additional executive skills such as goal-directed persistence, self-awareness, and meta-cognition. It highlights the role of residential staff in supporting children to stick to goals, improve self-awareness through labeling, and encourage meta-cognitive thinking by exploring motivations and intentions. Overall, the episode provides a comprehensive guide to helping children in residential treatment enhance their executive skills through intentional and practical interventions.