

## Professional Learning Module

### *Supporting Executive Functioning Skills in the Preschool Classroom*

#### Overview

Executive functions are a set of cognitive abilities involved in important tasks such as regulating emotions, controlling impulses, filtering out distractions, following directions, and adjusting to changing demands. These abilities are essential to building a strong foundation for the early development of cognitive, physical, and social skills. Executive functioning skills provide essential support for learning, development, and school readiness. Research suggests that they predict academic success better than I.Q., alphabet awareness, and number sense. While children are not born with these important skills, the first five years provide a critical period for laying their foundation. They develop through quality interactions, creative play, interesting activities, and daily opportunities for exploration.

The three primary areas of executive functions are inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility.

- Inhibitory control describes the ability to manage thoughts and impulses. It supports preschoolers as they learn to take turns and follow rules. Young children display this skill when they focus on an activity, wait their turn, and seek teacher assistance to resolve a conflict.
- Working memory refers to the capacity to store and manipulate information over time. This skill allows children to follow multi-step directions, remember the actions and words to a familiar song, and easily rejoin a game.
- Cognitive flexibility supports preschoolers as they manage transitions, learn to take another's perspective, and adjust to changing demands. Children demonstrate cognitive flexibility when they experiment with different strategies to solve a problem, complete a task, or work out a conflict.

When trusted adults support their efforts, young children are likely to build effective executive functions. Educators and families foster the development of these emerging skills when they:

- Establish and maintain warm and caring relationships with preschoolers.
- Create predictable routines and achievable rules.
- Consider the child's interests and provide engaging activities.
- Model how to behave in different situations.
- Encourage gradual independence and facilitate decision-making.
- Actively teach children how to manage their emotions.
- Plan activities that support creative play and encourage social interaction.
- Narrate the steps involved in an activity.
- Engage children in fingerplays, familiar songs, and predictable stories and rhymes.
- Encourage exploration by providing a variety of engaging materials.
- Talk with the child often and introduce new words and concepts.
- Play imitation games (e.g., clapping patterns and Follow the Leader.)
- Encourage participation in clean-up routines.
- Support turn-taking.
- Play matching, memory, sorting and patterning games.

Because executive functioning skills develop and strengthen with practice, a preschooler's day should be filled with supportive interactions and opportunities to develop and sharpen these essential skills.