



Episode 10: Emerging Executive Functions

Hosts: Tracy Stackhouse · Cory Dundon · Michelle Maunder

LISTENER NAME

DATE LISTENED

TOTAL LISTENING + REFLECTION TIME (MINS)

CPD HOURS CLAIMED



Episode Summary

We carry the social-emotional thread into executive functions, working through the SPIRIT model. Cory presents a case she got permission to share: a 10-year-old boy with ASD and ADHD she has been seeing for about six months, and whom Michelle worked with years earlier, which lets the three of them watch his executive functions unfold across time. He is, in her words, socially motivated and delightfully distractible. Michelle paints the early picture, flinging the door open, seven questions and four play ideas in two minutes, his body moving wherever his eyes went. Tracy widens the lens to why families seek intervention for a child like this, and why multiple diagnoses reflect layered complexity rather than separate problems. The clinical heart is Cory's breakthrough: following him into nursery rhymes, then enhancing the moment with rhythm, predictability and containment on the bolster swing they call the log, sitting low and close so he could find her easily. Tracy unpacks how that shared sensory-motor-social moment hooks the motivational system, the high route of the affective function in SPIRIT, which is the bootstrap into attention and the core executive functions of inhibitory control and working memory. His gaze flicking off to a toy and coming back, again and again, becomes a bicep curl of inhibitory control. Michelle marks the three-year arc, from needing to be fully visually occluded in the Lycra to staying with Cory across a big, open, window-filled room.



Resources & Mentions

- The Spirit model (Sensory, Affective, Motor; Tracy Stackhouse, Developmental FX), used here to reach executive functions through the high route of the affective function.
- The core executive functions discussed: inhibitory control, working memory, effortful control and attention.
- Jean Ayres on hold on and stay put as one of the earliest adaptive functions that higher-level capacities build from.
- Check out DFX's Learning Journeys to build your clinical reasoning skills: <https://dfxlearningjourneys.thinkific.com/>



Reflection Prompts

Take a few quiet minutes to consider each prompt and write freely. Add or remove a prompt block to suit the episode.

- 1** Executive functions are usually framed as cognitive skills you teach, but here they emerge from shared, rhythmic, motivating moments. How does that shift where you would start with a distractible child?

- 2** Multiple diagnoses reflect layered complexity rather than separate problems. For a child with several labels, how could the SPIRIT model help you find the key capacities to build rather than getting lost in the chaos?

- 3** The breakthrough was following the child into nursery rhymes, then enhancing it with rhythm, predictability and containment. For a child you're working with, what motivating moment could you follow, then enhance the same way?

- 4** Tracy describes the gaze flicking to a toy and back as a bicep curl of inhibitory control. Where might you reframe a child's distractible moments as reps of an executive function being built, rather than failures of attention?

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Michelle marks a three-year arc, from needing full Lycra occlusion to staying connected across an open room. For a child you support, what would the long, slow widening of their window of capacity look like over time?
