



Executive Function Challenge

How schools are benefitting from training that simulates executive dysfunction

Overview

According to the Journal of Attention Disorders, an estimated 30% of school-age children with ADHD also have issues with executive functioning (EF). The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted routines and transformed the educational experience for millions of children. While this has helped illuminate executive function challenges for many parents and educators, it has also compounded the problems related to executive functioning impairment.



In 2021, Learnfully launched the Executive Function Challenge™, a workshop for educators and parents that simulates the educational hurdles that learners with EF challenges experience daily. The workshop instills educators with a more informed practitioner mindset, and equips them with resources to help them better meet the needs of students with a diverse set of skills and challenges.

A school district recently participated in the workshop with a group of its educators to equip them with an understanding of EF and how to recognize EF issues in their classrooms. Teachers found the sessions informative, insightful, and beneficial to their practice. “All teachers would benefit from this experience. It’s so important for educators to know how kids with executive dysfunction learn,” commented a workshop participant. Over 90% of participants suggested they would recommend the simulation to others.



“One of the hardest things was focusing throughout the tasks—it was so frustrating! Now I understand my learners better and I am definitely approaching teaching this year differently.”

13-year veteran 3rd Grade Teacher and participant of the Executive Function Challenge

Approach

Beginning with an overview of executive functioning, the workshop then breaks educators out into six groups to experience a series of hands-on executive function challenges. For 60 minutes, teachers rotate through six learning stations containing exercises that simulate the different executive functioning challenges students often encounter in a classroom, including issues with: working memory, emotional regulation, impulse control, organization, planning and prioritization, and sustained attention.



Each station in the simulation is designed to immerse participants in activities that evoke the sensations and frustrations of a learner with executive dysfunction. In one station, workshop participants are tasked with remembering and then quickly recalling symbolic information. The station helps simulate weaknesses in working memory and the small amount of data that can be stored in the brain for use in cognitive tasks.



The Executive Function Challenge helps educators better understand the diverse learning needs of their classrooms by giving them a direct, first-hand experience of the challenges associated with executive dysfunction. This not only helps teachers absorb complex information more effectively, it also increases their empathy for learners' differences.

Results

Learning simulations have proven to be an effective teaching tool in schools across the country, increasing the awareness of learners who function differently. Educators participating in the simulation reported a better understanding of common executive function issues that learners face.

"The Learnfully EF simulations are filling a key void in education: providing a firsthand sensory experience for educators, so they can better support the challenges their students face," shares Dr. Sheila Murphy, an experienced educator and expert in executive function. "The result is that educators are equipped to meet the needs of a range of diverse students and work with them in a manner that best suits their strengths."

Workshop participants have so far confirmed Dr. Murphy's observation. "I found it to be very enlightening and also triggering. Experiencing what my students experience was exhausting!" exclaimed one. "[It was] a wakeup call to be more aware of learning differences."