

# Utah Video 1 Script

Hi, my name is Debra Joffe, I am an associate manager at Public Consulting Group. This presentation will provide an overview of Executive Functioning. We will explain what executive function is and how executive skills are developed in the brain. We will explain how executive function strengths and weaknesses manifest themselves in day to day situations. We will also introduce some ideas on how to strengthen executive skills in our clients.

## What is Executive Function?

[Slide 3]

Executive function is a term that describes a set of skills and capacities that are controlled by the frontal lobe of the brain, which is a region that organizes many other brain functions.

Executive function impacts peoples' ability to succeed in the workplace, educational attainment and personal relationships.

[Slide 4]

The easiest way to understand Executive Function is that it acts as the *air traffic controller of the brain*.

A well-functioning air traffic controller helps all planes navigate the same air space safely.

Similarly, Executive Function helps manage important tasks such as time management, organization, and self-control, all of which play a role in people's ability to succeed.

That's why we care about it as human services professionals. Understanding Executive Function is an important way for you to know how to help your customers achieve their goals.

[Slide 5]

There are several the important components of Executive Function.

- First, is attention shifting or flexibility.
  - This is having the discipline to say one thing to a friend, and something else publicly;

- the ability to catch mistakes and fix them;
  - and the ability to change our ways of doing things when we get new information.
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- Second is working memory, which describes the process of remembering a phone number long enough to dial it, or remembering to add the salt in a recipe after we've been interrupted.
  - And third is inhibitory control, which is, quite simply, the ability to filter our thoughts and impulses so we can resist temptations and actions that may not be in our best interest.

These are just a few examples. Later in this training, we will spend a lot of time talking about eight Executive Function Skills --- so stay tuned!

## How does Executive Function develop in young children?

[Slide 7]

The critical years for brain development are 0 to 5.

Research has long told us that focusing on healthy brain development in a child in these early years correlates to improved outcomes in school and as an adult.

[Slide 8]

Parents of young kids can see Executive Function skills being developed every day. Babies exploring their worlds.... Toddlers learning to share.... Preschoolers sitting still long enough to listen to a story - even when there are distractions in the classroom – and that's on a good day!

## We've heard a lot about Adverse Childhood Experiences - what's the relationship to Executive Function?

### [Slide 10]

As you saw in the Theory of Change video, prolonged exposure to drug abuse – neglect – poverty and violence as a child can create toxic stress.

This is a **very real** scenario for many human services customers, especially those who were raised in intergenerational poverty.

### [Slide 11]

The presence of toxic stress or adverse childhood experiences can actually change brain architecture in a way that *negatively impacts* executive function.

### [Animation]

Experiencing toxic stress as a child can have **long-term effects** for an adult, in their behavior and other aspects of their life - such as the ability to hold down a job.

It *is important* to remember, however, that **we are not doctors**. When we encounter a new human services customer, we can't see inside their brains.

What we can see is how they interact with the world. Even if we are not doctors, *we know* what Executive Function challenges looks like – ***because we all experience it in times of stress***.

## But we are not working with children. How does this apply to adults?

### [Slide 13]

Actually, there's good news! New brain science has shown that our brains keep developing into adulthood. This chart from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University *shows the development of skills associated with Executive Function over a person's lifetime*.

[animation]

Here you can see the rapid growth between 0 to 5 --- those critical early years that we know about.

[animation]

But notice continued growth through age 25---- that puts us right in the age range of the customers we serve.

[animation]

Furthermore, research has shown that the skills involved in Executive Function can be built even after the age of 25.

Which means ...

[slide 14]

It's not too late!

We still have time to positively impact our customer's Executive Skills.

## Why do we, as human services professionals, need to understand Executive Function?

It's simple ---- Your job is to help customers improve education and find employment. The skills associated with Executive Function – often called Executive Skills– are critical to success in school and the work place.

[Slide 16]

[animation]

As we show these skills, think about how they are associated with success in school or at a job.

Also remember that **we all** have strengths and weaknesses across these skills. In times of *extreme stress* none of us are our best selves. I'm not... you're not... our customers aren't. This is normal human behavior.

Now let's highlight a few of these critical executive skills that are so important to **all of us**.

[Slide 17]

**Working memory** is the ability to read or receive information and then apply it. For example, getting directions from your boss and then remembering them when you get back to your work station is a way that we use working memory.

[Slide 18]

**Emotional Control** is not saying everything that comes to your mind and tempering your comments for the situation. An example of this would be not *yelling* at your boss or coworker if they do or say something you don't like and instead using an appropriate, professional response.

[Slide 19]

**Planning and Prioritization** is knowing how long tasks take and which tasks are most important - and then planning your work or life accordingly. This skill is all about meeting deadlines and getting the most important work done, first.

## Now that we know about Executive Skills, how will we recognize Executive Function challenges in our customers?

[Slide 21]

Well - let's think about what it might look like if we could see inside the home of a single mom getting herself ready for work and her kids ready for school.

Everything is going well, right? Lunches are made.... the kids are behaving... and the house is tidy.

[animation]

But in **reality** if the mom (or the kids) is operating on *too little sleep or under stress...*

the kids may be fighting.... the mom may be running late... and the house could be in chaos.

**We all know how this feels.** This is a simulation of what living with Executive Function challenges may look or feel like for our families.

[Slide 22]

It is **our** job to remember that crisis and stress can negatively affect executive skills – in **all** adults – and sometimes **there is just not enough bandwidth** to deal with the cognitive load being asked of us.

[Slide 23]

Now let's take this a step further and think about more **severe** challenges we could experience in our daily lives that could impact our use of Executive Skills.

Things like:

- your car breaking down,
- your child getting sick or being sent home from school for acting out,
- forgetting to pay a bill,
- or having your furnace break in the middle of winter.

**Any one** of these could lead to increased stress and a limited bandwidth to deal with anything else.

The impact of these same challenges on the people we're serving in our caseload is compounded by a lack of funds or resources to address the situation.

Furthermore clients working potentially part-time, in hourly jobs, may not have the privilege of flexibility, time, or resources to resolve the issue.

[Slide 24]

Now think about your customers.

[animation]

Do these words look familiar?

When human services professionals describe their customers, ***it is easy to pass off Executive Function challenges as disrespect or lack of motivation.***

But if we understand how Executive Function related challenges can affect behavior, we know that these negative descriptors don't tell the whole story.

[Slide 25]

It is also important to remember that their actions or reactions to the customer can help or hinder the situation.

So take care of yourself..... understand your own triggers and show empathy for your customers.

How you interact with a customer has real implications --- not only on the relationship you have with your customer, but also in how successful your customer is in reaching their goals.

## How does this research relate to Utah's Mandate to End Intergenerational Poverty?

[Slide]

By helping your customers strengthen their Executive Skills, you are not only helping them to develop the skills necessary to get and maintain a job, but you are also teaching them skills that will be transferred to their children.

This intergenerational approach means that by focusing on the adult, we can improve the lives of children too. Utah has dedicated efforts to help end intergenerational poverty, which impacts 25% of our TANF customers.

[Slide]

This is **critical** because 33% of children in Utah are at risk of rearing in poverty as adults.

By developing executive skills in adults, you are helping improve their employment success and giving them the tools to model behavior for their children.

This in turn could help improve school outcomes among children, which could help break the cycle of poverty.

[Slide]

**The big takeaway here is that with proper support, people can overcome these challenges and barriers ... which helps the next generation as well.**