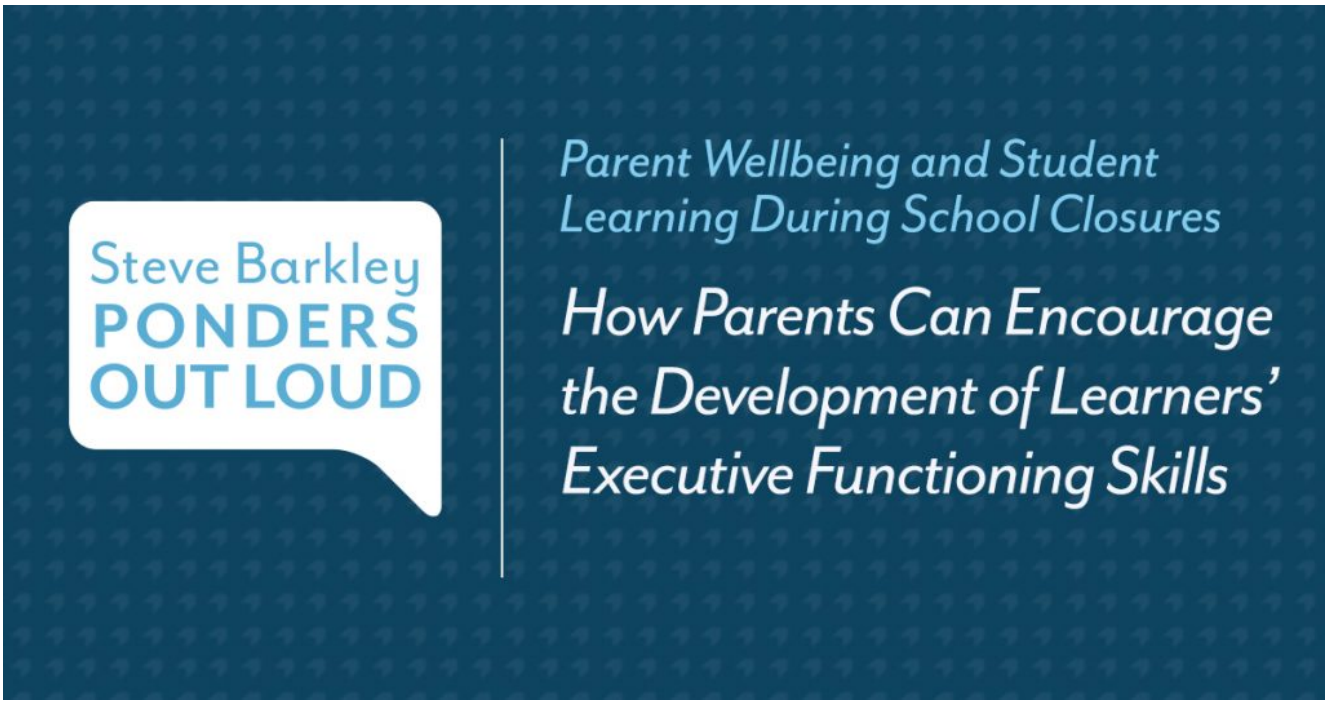
Podcast for Parents: How Parents Can Encourage the Development of Learners' Executive Functioning Skills



Parent, teacher, and teacher educator, Brenda Watkins, shares how parents can support their children at all ages in developing working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. These executive functioning skills are needed for success in and out of school.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello, and welcome to the parents as learning coaches edition of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud

podcast. Parents and caregivers play many different roles, at times, even somewhat conflicting roles as they support children's development. The pandemic has shown a light on the importance of parents supporting learners. In this podcast, I'll look to share my experiences as a teacher, educator, parent, grandparent, and continuous learner that can support your coaching efforts.

Steve: 00:33 How parents can encourage the development of learners' executive functioning skills. Today, experienced teacher, teacher educator, and parent, Brenda Watkins is joining us. I know that Brenda has a history of working with executive functioning as a teacher and as a teacher trainer and having a current high school student and a student college bound, she's in a good spot to talk to us as parents and to me as a grandparent about executive functioning. So welcome, Brenda.

Brenda: 01:13 Hi, good morning.

Steve: 01:16 Brenda, I understand, as I was looking at some definitions of executive functioning, they label three different dimensions – working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility. I'm wondering if you could take those kind of one at a time and give us a little background on the meaning of it?

Brenda: 01:39 Yes. So working memory is that ability to hold the information in your mind and use it. And examples of working memory would be remembering details, following multiple steps, patterning, sequencing things, the ability to hold information and then manipulate it. And honestly, when children are young, maybe, first you do this next, you do that. Then we have that second piece, which is inhibitory control. That's where it is the ability to master the thoughts and impulses so that you can resist temptations, distractions and to pause and think before acting. It's also the last part of the brain to mature and continues to mature well into one's

twenties. It also has most of the rapid changes that they're noticing are from ages three to five, and then once again from 12 to 16 and they play together. Then we jump into that third dimension, which is cognitive flexibility. And that's the ability to adapt our behavior and thinking in response to the environment that surrounds us and they all play together. So they each have their own function, but then they're intertwined together. So it mainly starts with that working memory and then you build into that inhibitory control and then as you mature, the student can gain that cognitive flexibility.

Steve: 03:26 I'm wondering if I gave you an age group one at a time, if you could talk a little bit about where a parent might be expecting their their child to be performing at and what are some of the strategies a parent could use to assist their child in developing their executive
functioning? So if we were talking about preschoolers.

Brenda: 03:53 Yeah. And people also, I'm going to go back to – people have to remember that we're not born with executive functioning skills and they develop over time so it is imperative that parents help get the child going in the right direction with the basics. So even before preschool, I don't know, Steve, if you mind me saying, lap games, playing peekaboo – even peek-a-boo is working on that working memory. Patty-Cake, that's that patterning, copycat games, role-play, inseey weensy spider, things like that. Then we go into that preschool age where the active games such as throwing and kicking, song games, movements, like freeze tag, ring around the rosie. And these are things that people do and I'm sure parents do and preschool programs do, but we need to be more conscious of that and the teaching of it so that we have all the kids doing it and seeing if there are any gaps, because like I said before, you are not born with it, they are developmental. Preschool age, we need to start with even more of the conversations and storytelling. Watching and narrating

a play, having students sitting and doing like morning meetings. I know that when my boys were in daycare at preschool, they would have a morning meeting and they would talk about their feelings and they would hold up like a smiley face or a sad face, or things like that because we want students and we want children in general to know how to identify how they feel and how they're growing.

Steve: 05:45 How about looking at the elementary age child?

Brenda: 05:48 So this is where you could even pull in some of the preschool things too, as in keeping attention to control, quieter activities, slow breathing and things like that. But in the early school years, students can play card games at home, board games at home. I know that what I did to help because being that I have two boys, my second one struggled with executive functioning skills and so every Friday night, it would be game night. And so we would sit down and play those board games. And as you play those board games, it requires players to remember and to make fast responses and it helps with that attention. It helps with that behavioral control. Anything that involves a strategy, physical activity. Foursquare, and how many times do I like even as the teacheer, yes, I'm talking from a parent perspective, but if I look from a teacher perspective, I always say that my job, my hat is a teacher and a parent in one and a coach. That's what I do. And so, I think about even the boys and girls at recess playing Foursquare, how many kids are able to look at that not without throwing a fit? Or being able to control their emotions.

Steve: 07:16 The thought's going through my mind as I'm listening to you – I'm working with some teachers right now who are preparing for the start of this next school year and I know that I've got teachers who are teaching first graders who spent their whole kindergarten year and maybe preschool year being quarantined at home. And so I'm guessing there's executive functioning skills that they didn't get to develop that they would have had they been in preschool or

kindergarten. As a parent, knowing that your child's been in that experience or are there some special things to be paying attention to, to assist your child in making that back to the classroom move now?

Brenda: 08:00 Yeah, the idea of relationship building is extremely important and that's where we have to start when it comes back to the classroom. For students to identify that they are an individual and getting together those communication skills. Because I even saw where we were lacking, being that we shut down in March, and then we were remote for most of every – like all of fall, we were remote or we were hybrid and the communication skills were lacking. And I oftentimes thought about those kindergartners, they didn't have that opportunity to build that strong communication. And without that strong communication in those relationships, a lot of our executive functioning things fell by the wayside. So it's important for the educator as well as to kind of partner with the family and make that those students are having those conversations are able to work on different even household items. Playing with things, any kind of props or, just encouraging them.

Steve: 09:12 So from something you said earlier about the developmental piece as students move into those, what are frequently called the tween years. So talk a little bit about executive functioning at that time and special things parents might be paying attention to.

Brenda: 09:33 Yeah. In the tween years, we just like in the early school years, they need to make sure that they're looking at strategy. Now that sports are back open again, getting kids involved. I was reading somewhere where they said that soccer is probably one of the best things. I mean, we can say that of all different sports, because it improves all the levels of executive functioning, because we want students to be able to monitor their own responses, as well as what the opponents are doing and being able to make quick decisions and

respond flexibly. I even thought about like jumping rope, things like that. There are things that help develop our executive functioning skills. And then going into that adolescent – like we say, tweeners, and then I move into that adolescent idea, but a lot of tweens nowadays are wanting to go out and get jobs. They're wanting to go out and be responsible. And in order to do that, they need that goal setting and planning, and they need to have that idea of self-monitoring and to focus on that idea of the planning process.

Steve: 10:54 So as a parent getting ready for your young adolescent there to be heading off to college, I'm wondering if there's some special things that you're thinking and paying attention to.

Brenda: 11:09 Yes. I have to be honest, my son, Joey, he was extremely responsible and I would say, "Joey, did you do this? Did you go through and fill this out?" "Mom, yes, I did it. I've already done it." And everything like that just came naturally. He was one of those kids that things sunk in and he was able to do that. Whereas Jack, on the other hand, we worked a little bit more and even when he was doing his driver's license, everything had to go by steps and it was okay. And they are getting from point a to point B, but doing it two different ways. Do you see what I'm saying?

Steve: 11:57 So conversations where you're letting those young people talk about their planning process.

Brenda: 12:04 Absolutely. They need to take ownership. They are not going to reach that ideal, that empowerment, if they don't take ownership of it and understand. And that's where, I mean, I see it across everywhere. I look at Joey's friends who are going off to college. Some of the parents are saying, "oh, well, how are they going to do their laundry?" Well, guess what, my boys have been doing their laundry on their own since they were 12 years old. And how are they going to do this? Well, that's where I think a lot of things fall aside. I'm in

a parent group that supports students going off to school for this year that just graduated and I'm reading some of the responses and I'm floored by parents are saying, "oh, well, I'm going to have someone pick their laundry up at this time every week." And I'm like, are you kidding me? They have to be responsible citizens someday.

Steve: 13:00 Helicoptering parent – it interferes with executive functioning. Well, Brenda, I really appreciate your time that you've acknowledged that you've dedicated to us here. Would you give us a an email contact where parents might follow up with the questions specific?

Brenda: 13:22 Yes, I can be reached at bwatkins@pls3rdlearning.com

Steve: 13:30 We'll be sure to put that in the lead in to to this podcast. I'm wondering if there's any word of encouragement to you want to sign off to the parents with.

Brenda: 13:41 Yeah. Remember, it is our responsibility as well as anybody that is in contact with our children, that we want them to be successful in life. And in order to do that, we need to empower them. And what better way to empower the future by giving them the tools to be successful.

Steve: 14:05 Thank you.

Brenda: 14:06 Thank you.

Steve [Outro]: 14:09 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.