



Unstuck & On Target!

AGES 11-15

An Executive Function Curriculum to Support Flexibility, Planning, and Organization

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by

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by John Strang, Lauren Kenworthy, Ph.D., Lynn Cannon, M.Ed., Katie C. Alexander, M.S., OTR, Monica Adler Werner, M.A.,
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About the Online Materials

Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15: An Executive Function Curriculum to Improve Flexibility, Planning, and Organization offers online companion materials to supplement and expand the knowledge and strategies provided in this text. In addition to the Worksheets and Home Extensions in this text, purchasers of the book may access, download, photocopy, and print the workbooks, posters, and PowerPoint files for educational purposes. The online materials include:

- One digital Student Workbook, available as a fillable PDF
- One digital Parent Workbook
- Two digital posters, available as print-ready PDFs and PowerPoint files
- 21 Lesson PowerPoint files

To access the materials that come with this book:

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PRINTED MATERIALS SOLD SEPARATELY

Printed copies of the Student Workbook (sold in packs of 5) and a printed copy of the Power Equation Poster can be purchased separately at www.brookespublishing.com.

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Introduction

GOAL OF THIS MANUAL

Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15: An Executive Function Curriculum to Support Flexibility, Planning, and Organization is a plan of action for teaching students how to develop their executive function skills in key areas, including flexibility, big picture thinking, planning, compromising, and self-monitoring.

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS INTERVENTION?

Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15 is designed for students ages 11 through 15 years who struggle with executive function skills, including flexibility, organization, and planning. It may be especially helpful for autistic students as well as students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, or other related diagnoses.

WHO SHOULD TEACH THIS CURRICULUM?

Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15 is designed for use in small classes or groups, with 10–12 students max. *Unstuck* is suitable for school-, clinic-, or community-based settings and can be taught in daily to weekly sessions led by a professional (e.g., a teacher, psychologist, social worker, speech-language therapist, occupational therapist, counselor, or highly trained teaching assistant). Those teaching this curriculum should read the entire manual beforehand and have experience working with students with a range of learning needs, as well as an understanding of positive reinforcement techniques.

WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?

Executive function is a set of brain-based abilities that help people control their behavior (e.g., staying seated at a desk) and reach their goals (e.g., finishing something with multiple steps, like getting ready for school). There are many different skills that make up executive function, including the following:

- **Initiation:** Getting started on something quickly and easily.
- **Inhibition:** Showing impulse control and thinking before acting.
- **Flexibility:** Shifting easily from one activity or idea to another and being able to accept a different way of seeing or doing things.
- **Working memory:** Keeping information in mind while performing a task, like remembering directions while driving to your destination.
- **Organization:** Keeping track of materials, understanding what the main point is, seeing the big picture, and knowing what the top priority is at any given time.

- **Planning:** Developing, carrying out, and modifying a plan of action for a multistep assignment, such as a science fair project.
- **Self-monitoring.** Tracking your performance by asking questions like “How am I doing?” and “Am I doing what I am supposed to be doing?”

WHY TEACH EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?

Executive function skills underlie all aspects of our lives and are particularly relevant for school and learning settings. As children get older, demands on their executive function skills increase, as they are tasked with increasing amounts of independent work while also being expected to successfully collaborate with their peers. The number of abstract and flexible thinking tasks also increases, and by middle school, students are expected to independently generate organizational strategies, such as structuring a paper or presentation, taking notes, and developing approaches for independent learning and studying. Fortunately, executive function skills can be taught using fairly simple techniques. *Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15* makes use of simple, research-based educational methods to improve executive function skills in young teens.

HOW THIS CURRICULUM HELPS YOU TEACH EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS

Although executive function skills provide a foundation for some of the most complex human behaviors (e.g., planning our futures and flexibly responding to a changing world), the skills are themselves fairly easy to teach.

The *Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15* curriculum is composed of 24 topics, which should occur over the course of a school year (or part of a school year). We intentionally use the word topics instead of lessons so that, as necessary, educators can extend a topic beyond a single class period. We encouraged educators to think of the topics as “chapters,” each of which may take some time to unpack with the class. Some of the topics will clearly require multiple sessions, which is indicated at the beginning of the lesson. We recommend taking sufficient time to get through the material in the first unit of the curriculum so that students feel comfortable with the basic concepts, Key Vocabulary, and techniques. The time the educator spends reading and preparing the seven [Unit 1](#) topics is also critical and will allow for smooth implementation of the *Unstuck* curriculum. This is not the type of curriculum that can be conducted effectively without having first read through and prepared the topic prior to class.

Note: Some topics may require you to gather additional materials not typically found in a classroom or school.

Here are the key techniques used in the *Unstuck* curriculum to support students’ executive function skills:

- **The curriculum should be offered in small classes.** The curriculum should be taught in small classes with 10–12 students at the most. Classes should meet at least once a week or more often if necessary. The plans and activities in each topic are important, though you have the flexibility to adapt each topic to best reach your students. For example, educators are encouraged to simplify any language that might be too complex for their students. The educator is also encouraged to share techniques taught in the *Unstuck* classes (particularly the Key Vocabulary and visuals) with the students’ other educators and team members so that the skills can be reinforced (see the “encourage generalization” guidelines below).
- **Incorporate the Key Vocabulary.** The most critical component of this curriculum is the use of Key Vocabulary. The Key Vocabulary is a set of words or short, catchy phrases that communicate the basic skills taught in the curriculum. Key Vocabulary is designed to be easily incorporated into instruction, conversation, problem solving, and everyday life. Educators should aim to use the Key Vocabulary as much as possible, ideally employing one of the words or phrases in every other sentence spoken to the students. Students should be encouraged to

use the Key Vocabulary and related skills on their own and in all settings at school and home. Praise and reward your students when they use the Key Vocabulary and keep a list of the words and phrases present and visible at all times as a reminder for everyone to use them. New Key Vocabulary is introduced as the curriculum progresses but be sure to continue using the vocabulary introduced in previous sessions whenever you can, so by the end of the curriculum all of the key words and phrases are employed regularly.

- **Use visuals to highlight key points.** People who struggle with executive function often benefit from the use of visuals to help them remember to use the skills. *Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15* is a richly visual curriculum with accompanying PowerPoints for each topic and a central poster meant to be displayed and referred to by the educator throughout each class. The poster and worksheets can also be shared as visual reminders in the student’s general education classrooms and at home.
- **Encourage generalization.** People with executive function challenges often have difficulty remembering to use their skills in different settings. For example, they may remember to use their new skills in their *Unstuck* class but may struggle to use them in their other classes and at home without reminders to do so. Because the Key Vocabulary in this curriculum is easily used in many settings, the students’ academic educators may incorporate these words and phrases into their own classroom routine. Other educators are also encouraged to post key *Unstuck* visuals in their classrooms. Additionally, at the end of each topic, parents and caregivers are given home extension worksheets that encourage use of the Key Vocabulary, skills, and visuals during their daily routines at home.
- **Keep it positive and fun.** A key component to improving executive function is the students’ ability and motivation to use the skills spontaneously in different parts of their lives. The job of educators and interventionists is to help students fall in love with the Key Vocabulary and skills by presenting them in positive and fun ways.
- **Avoid using Key Vocabulary in negative, critical, or punitive ways;** otherwise, your students may come to dislike these words and skills. Research shows that when educators model flexibility and positivity, that attitude is mirrored by their students. A simple formula for nurturing classroom positivity is to use at least four specific praise statements (or gestures, or other ways of communicating praise) for every correction or command. Praising statements should clearly identify what the student has done well. Here are a few examples:

“David, I really like how you use Plan A/Plan B. Awesome work!”

(praise #1)

“I’m proud of this class—you all came up with a great compromise.”

(praise #2)

“Nice work, David, that was flexible thinking.”

(praise #3)

“Good work.” (followed by a thumbs up)

(praise #4)

“David, can you help us come up with a Plan B? It seems our group is a little stuck.”

(a correction, presented in a simple and positive way)

Next, offer a praising statement to maintain a 4:1 praise-to-correction ratio.

- **Target students’ motivation.** The *Unstuck and On Target! Ages 11–15* curriculum was developed with the help of young teens, and the activities are designed to be meaningful and appealing to this age range. Modifications and additions to the curriculum are encouraged if they will increase student motivation and engagement. Here are a few motivational techniques that may be helpful:

- **Focus on the “why.”** A central part of each topic is giving the students a chance to think about and discuss why the skills presented are important. By bringing these skills to a personal level, students are able to consider how they are relevant to their lives now and in the future. In examining why a skill is important, the adolescent is building motivation for using the skill.
- **Use humor and playfulness.** Humor can be an effective way to connect with your students and to engage them in using their new executive function skills. Because your students will have different ideas of what’s funny, you may need to tailor your humor to each individual student.
- **Model the Key Vocabulary and skills.** Focus on yourself to start, rather than on the problems and challenges of your students. Later, as your students become more comfortable with the Key Vocabulary and related skills, you can begin to use them to address their challenges. Focusing on your own problems to start takes pressure off the students and allows them to begin to learn the Key Vocabulary and skills without feeling criticized. If students can help fix your challenges (either real or invented), they get a great opportunity to practice the skills and appreciate how powerful they can be. For example, if your Plan A was to watch a video with the class but the Internet went down, you could mention that you feel stuck and ask the class to help you come up with a Plan B (e.g., watching the video during the next class).
- **Use materials, visuals, activities, and examples that connect with your students’ interests.** For example, if a student has particular interest in computers, they may respond well if Key Vocabulary is translated into the world of computers. You could say, *“When I’m stuck it’s like when my computer gets frozen. Then I need to be flexible and reset.”*
- **Link the Key Vocabulary, skills, and activities to real, motivating power in your students’ lives.** For example, if your students are motivated by social justice, they may be inspired by a goal of raising money for refugees. If a student has a passion for astronomy, link the Power Equation to their dream of being an astronomer: *“Your goal is to become an astronomer. Science is one skill you will need. You will also need flexibility, big picture thinking, and planning,”* or *“Nice work using a Plan B, Kim; you are one step closer to becoming an astronomer.”*
- **Reduce complexity of language.** The use of simple visuals helps support young people with executive function challenges. Long periods of talking and using more complex language don’t stick with students as well as the use of Key Vocabulary and visuals. **Note:** Since overly complex visuals can be overloading and confusing to some students, keep visuals simple and straightforward. If there’s enough interest from the class, students can also help design and create their own visuals.
- **Use the Power Plan.** Each lesson starts and ends with a Power Plan. This visual is the essence of the unstuck approach: Goal-Why-Plan-Check. The Power Plan sets out the Goal and Plan at the beginning of each class. At the end of the class, students can Check if they followed their plan, as well as discuss Why the Goal was important. Last, the Power Plan helps students notice if they are getting off track, or stuck.
- **Focus on doing over knowing.** Although there are many key concepts to be taught, the most important part of the curriculum is the doing (i.e., practicing) of the skills in many different settings. If students feel that they already know the skills (e.g., “I know what compromise is” or “I know how to plan”), change the focus to the goal of making these skills habits by saying something like: *“I know you know about planning, and you’ve done some great planning already. This class is about getting into the habit of planning in lots of different parts of your life so that you can get more power. Let’s use this skill to help plan your English paper.”*
- **Think Can’t, Not Won’t.** Key to the success of *Unstuck* is the concept of can’t, not won’t. Tragically, students struggling with executive function challenges are often labeled in many negative ways (e.g., lazy, inconsiderate, rigid) when in fact their real brain-based differences are the issue. If we acknowledge that a student can’t, or can’t yet, do something, we teach the skills and strategies in *Unstuck*, turning can’ts into cans. The key idea is to move away from explanations of student behavior as willful or disobedient and instead focus on students’ neurodiversity and individual patterns of strengths and weaknesses.

Table A.1. Reasons for Unexpected Behaviors

What looks like <i>won't</i> . . .	May actually be <i>can't yet</i>
"Oppositional, stubborn"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive inflexibility • Protective effort to avoid overload
"Can do it when they want to"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty shifting from one thing to another • Trouble paying attention to what other people think is important • Subtle changes in demands can drastically impact performance
"Self-centered"; "Doesn't care what others think"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impaired social problem solving • Trouble understanding subtle social cues
"Doesn't try"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty getting started (initiation) • Impaired planning and trouble generating new ideas
"Won't put good ideas on paper"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor fine motor skills • Trouble organizing thoughts in a way that makes sense to a reader
"Sloppy, erratic"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems monitoring/checking • Overload • Impaired impulse control
"Won't control outbursts"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overload • Impaired inhibition or impulse control
"Prefers to be alone"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impaired social understanding • Needs a break from processing complex social information • Social system just works differently (i.e., less socially motivated)
"Doesn't care about what is important"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural ability to focus on details, but has a harder time relating to the big picture/main idea or other people's priorities

A final powerful idea: The developers of this curriculum, along with autistic adults, educators, parents, and therapists who have used the curriculum, have often described the *Unstuck* executive function skills and vocabulary as useful not only for the students, but also for themselves. For example, the Plan B routine is a powerful tool for a person of any age to help them manage unexpected and/or challenging situations (e.g., forgetting your wallet, getting a flat tire). With this in mind, educators are encouraged to apply these skills in their everyday lives and to model them in ways that make the skills and vocabulary come to life for their students. By sharing some of your own flexibility and planning challenges, as well as how you are working to apply the *Unstuck* executive function skills and vocabulary in your life, you're truly collaborating with your students and learning together.



UNIT 1

**Flexibility, Power,
and Planning**

TOPIC 1.1 Flexible Thinking

BIG PICTURE SUMMARY



This topic teaches and encourages students to practice the language and skills for flexible thinking, an important part of executive functioning. In this topic, students will learn through simple experiments that being flexible helps you get more of what you want and need. The important concept of getting **stuck on a detail** instead of practicing **big picture thinking** is also introduced.

Key Things to Do (This topic will take more than one class period to complete)

Here are the two most important things to do in today's class:


1. **Use the following Key Vocabulary often and in fun and playful ways:**
 - ★ Executive Function Skills
 - ★ Flexible
 - ★ Flexible Thinking
 - ★ Stuck/Unstuck
 - ★ Stuck on a Detail
 - ★ Big Picture
 - ★ Plan A/Plan B
2. **Find ways to spontaneously model flexibility at least once during class today.** Something going wrong during class (or in an unexpected way) is a perfect opportunity to model flexible thinking! You can also stage unexpected events to provide opportunities to demonstrate and practice flexibility with students. For example: "My **Plan A** was to play this video for you, but it's not working. So, I need a **Plan B!** Can anyone use **flexible thinking** and help me come up with a **Plan B?**"

Materials

- ★  **Unit 1 Daily Self-Awareness Rating** (this worksheet can be copied for each student or found in the Student Workbook)
- ★  PowerPoint for Topic 1.1, projected
- ★ Videos demonstrating that flexible objects can be stronger (or find similar videos if these links do not work):
 - Flexible Bridge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7PFAofvztw>
 - Flexible Trees: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdkEhg_BQ74
 - Flexible Japanese Building: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG37gQSvrf4>

Key Vocabulary

The Key Vocabulary is a critical part of the curriculum; it is more important than the actual activities in each topic! The Key Vocabulary should be spoken as often as possible and should be presented in fun and enjoyable ways. Avoid punitive uses of the Key Vocabulary because that can interfere with student buy-in and use of the words and skills. The goal is to get your students to *want* to use the Key Vocabulary and related skills in their everyday lives.

- ★ Pillows, chairs, and so forth for obstacle course
- ★ Stopwatch (to time obstacle course)
-  ★ How to Boost Our Power Level: Reminder List (can be reproduced for each student; located on the Brookes [Download Hub](#) and in the Student Workbook)

EDUCATOR PLAN

Goal: Introduce and practice flexibility.

Why: Flexibility is an executive function skill that helps students gain more power and choice in their lives.

Plan: Do the following before class:

- ★ Watch the “flexible objects can be stronger” videos before class to make sure that the links are still current and you know what to expect. Pull up the videos, so they’re ready to show.
- ★ Project the PowerPoint for Topic 1.1.

CLASS LESSON PLAN

Slide 1: Power Plan

- 1a. **Review with the class the goal and plan for today, pointing to the Power Plan visual for Topic 1.1.** Explain how the Power Plan works (see the Educator Note below). Ask students to imagine why today’s goal is to learn how and why to be flexible. At the end of class, students will again be asked to give thoughts about the “why” behind today’s goal.



Each topic has an accompanying Power Plan visual. This visual teaches students a routine for how to set a goal, develop a plan, and check progress toward reaching the goal. It reminds students of the importance of having a Plan B if Plan A does not work out. It also reminds students of the risk of getting “stuck,” which can interfere with moving forward with a goal and a plan. Finally, the visual indicates that by setting a goal, planning, and following through, students are increasing the power in their lives to get what they want and need.

1b. Introduce the purpose of the group. Get students excited about the skills and the group. Here are some key discussion points to cover:

- ★ In this group, we'll be doing games and planning fun parties and events.
- ★ Our goal is to practice executive function skills. These skills include being flexible, setting goals, and planning.
- ★ These skills will help us get more power and choice in our lives.
- ★ Why is power and choice important in your lives?

1c. Briefly brainstorm the kinds of power this group can help students gain. Ask students in what areas of their lives they want more power, freedom, and choice. Be careful to affirm your students' ideas as much as possible. The next topic will discuss the difference between realistic and unrealistic power, but for this topic we just want to build enthusiasm. Here are some examples of powers that this group can help to build:

- ★ The power to make friends
- ★ The power to get good grades
- ★ The power to earn money
- ★ The power to get more say in your life
- ★ The power to get a car someday
- ★ The power to succeed with your goals
- ★ The power to have more choice in your life

Slide 2: Skills We'll Practice in This Group

2. Briefly introduce and discuss the main skills that will be practiced in this group:

- ★ Flexible thinking
- ★ Focusing on the big picture
- ★ Being kind to yourself and others
- ★ Setting goals and making plans
- ★ Knowing when and how to compromise

Here are some key discussion points to cover:

- ★ Have your students vote on each skill—ask them if they're using the skill already.
- ★ Go through each skill or several of them individually and ask: How does this skill help you? How does this skill help you get more power?
- ★ Ask students why they think it's important to practice this skill and make it a habit.

Slide 3: How to Boost Your Power and Get More of What You Want and Need



3. Introduce Power Boosters—ways to increase your power and get more of what you want and need, titled How to Boost Our Power Level: Reminder List (also included in the Student Workbook). Here are some key discussion points to cover:

- ★ We are here to help each other get more power in our lives.

- ★ It is important to support each other—we are a team, so whenever one person is flexible, we all benefit.
- ★ Let's explore some ways that we can increase our power with each other.

"We're flexible. We share the conversation. We don't get stuck on too many details. We give everyone a chance to talk." Review these key concepts: Be flexible; don't just get stuck on your ideas; speak up and include others by giving them time to talk, too; ask questions about people's ideas; show interest in people's ideas.

"We have flexible feelings. If possible, we let go of our frustration and get unstuck." Review this key concept: We all get frustrated sometimes, and it is our job to use coping strategies to feel calmer so that we can get unstuck and meet our goals.

"We care about people. We are kind to ourselves and others." Review these key concepts: Listen to people; pay attention to people's feelings; be kind when you give feedback.



At the end of this topic, the How to Boost Our Power Level: Reminder List offers more specific behaviors that increase and decrease power. (This list can also be found in the Student Workbook.)

Slide 4: Power Equation

4. **Introduce the Power Equation, using your finger to trace the directions of power (left to right).** You can use or adapt this script:

"This is the Power Equation. This equation tells us how we can increase the power in our lives to get more of what we want and need and to make the world a better place. These skills that help us build our power—they're called executive function skills. And these executive function skills include being flexible, using big picture thinking, and setting goals and making plans."

Here are some key discussion points to cover:

- ★ We get more power and choice in our lives by being flexible, by using big picture thinking, and by setting goals and making plans.
- ★ I know you use many of these skills already.
- ★ We're going to practice getting really good at these executive function skills and making them a habit.
- ★ Let's discuss the meaning of the different parts of the Power Equation.
- ★ Can you come up with examples for different parts of the equation? For example, how did being flexible or planning help you get more power in your life?

Slide 5: Flexibility (the First Part of the Power Equation)

5. **Introduce and discuss the power of flexibility.** Here are some key discussion points to cover:

- ★ Flexibility is one of the best ways to boost our power.
- ★ Flexibility helps us get what we want because we don't get stuck.
- ★ When we're stuck, we may not be able to move forward.

- ★ When we're stuck, we may not get what we want because we get off track.
- ★ Getting stuck means we might lose power. We might not get what we want.
- ★ Getting stuck can also annoy other people.
- ★ What are some ideas you have about the importance of flexibility?
- ★ Also, are there some situations when getting stuck might be the right thing to do (e.g., when standing up for civil rights and not backing down)?

Slide 6: Flexible–Rigid Table

6. **Draw a Flexible–Rigid Table on the board (or type in the PowerPoint Flexible–Rigid Table).** Ask students to provide examples under each column and write/type their examples in the table. Give ideas/hints if necessary. Continue to fill out the table during the next several activities (activities 6–8 that follow). Below is a sample Flexible–Rigid Table you can use as a model:

Flexible Things	Rigid/Stuck Things	Flexible Thinking	Stuck Thinking
1. Rubber band	1. Dry spaghetti	1. Trying Plan B when Plan A doesn't work	1. Giving up when it doesn't work the first time
2.	2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.	4.
5.	5.	5.	5.

Here is a sample script you can use as you fill in the table:

"There are different kinds of flexibility—physical flexibility and flexible thinking. In this group, we are going to focus on flexible thinking, but let's start by talking about flexible and rigid things. We have 60 seconds—name as many flexible and rigid things as you can!" Fill in the first two columns with student ideas.

Slide 7: Flexibility Videos: Flexibility Is Stronger

7. **Discuss how flexibility can make things stronger using the three short videos of physical objects bending but not breaking.** Begin to connect this to the idea of flexible thinking if the group is ready to do so. Add students' ideas to the Flexible Thinking and Stuck Thinking columns of the Flexible–Rigid Table. (Go back to [Slide 6](#) if you're using the PowerPoint Flexible–Rigid Table.)

Show the following short videos, which demonstrate (through real-life scenarios) how being flexible often increases physical strength. After each video, ask students to think about how and why the object was powerful (e.g., because it was flexible and could bend, it didn't break).

Flexible Bridge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7PFAofvztw>

Flexible Trees: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdkEhg_BQ74

Flexible Japanese Building: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG37gQSvrf4>

Here are some key discussion points to cover as you add ideas to the Flexible-Rigid Table:

- ★ How can being flexible make things stronger? (Flexibility allows things to bend and adapt instead of breaking.)
- ★ How can flexible thinking help you to be stronger?
- ★ How might stuck thinking make it harder to get what you want?

Slide 8: Obstacle Course: Flexible Is Faster

8. Try this flexibility experiment with students to demonstrate how flexibility is faster.

Say to your students: *“In this flexibility experiment, I need you to make a simple obstacle course for me to walk through. I will go through it first with a **rigid** body and then a **flexible** body to see which is faster.”* Make sure students understand the words rigid and flexible.

Invite students to build a simple obstacle course using pillows, chairs, and so forth. Have them time with a stopwatch which is faster: when you go through the course with a totally rigid and stiff body (slower) or when you go through with a flexible body (faster). Make this fun and comedic.

After the experiment, remind your students that *being flexible also helps us be faster*. Now transition to the idea of flexible thinking and ask students:

- ★ How does flexible thinking help us be faster and more efficient?
- ★ How does stuck thinking slow us down?

Add students’ ideas to the Flexible Thinking and Stuck Thinking columns of the Flexible-Rigid Table. (Go back to [Slide 6](#) if you’re using the PowerPoint Flexible-Rigid Table.)

Slide 9: Stuck on a Detail Versus Big Picture Thinking

9a. Model stuck on a detail versus big picture thinking by role-playing. Ask students to raise their hands when they notice you getting stuck on a detail. Here’s a sample script you can use:

“Flexible thinking is powerful. Getting stuck can make it hard for us to get what we want. It can also sometimes be annoying. In this experiment, my big picture idea is to describe my favorite animal, but I’m going to get stuck on a detail (maybe even a few details). Let me know when you can tell what detail I’m stuck on by raising your hand.”

Use the example below or create your own example of getting stuck (overfocused) on a detail such as your pet’s feeding schedule. You can also try getting stuck on a detail at some point during the lesson and see if your students catch it. In the example below, getting stuck on the details about ostriches gets in the way of the big picture because it takes more time, and there are so many details that it gets hard for the listener to remember the main point.

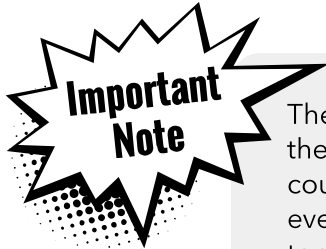
“So, I really like ostriches. They are my favorite animal. I always used to dream about having an ostrich as a pet, but then I learned that they probably wouldn’t make the best pet. Actually, sometimes I even have dreams about ostriches at night—I think they are so cool. But as I said, probably not the best pet because they are way too

big for cages, and they can run faster than dogs (and people). They can be pretty aggressive, so I like to see ostriches from a distance or in shows. I don't know if you know, but ostriches can't fly—and if they could fly, that would be pretty wild because they can weigh up to 350 pounds! I can't really imagine a 350-pound bird flying around, but it sounds kind of scary. I bet you're wondering how I got interested in ostriches: I first saw ostriches at the zoo when I was a little kid, and now I like to watch shows and videos about them. I have a picture of an ostrich on my wall at home, and I was even thinking of naming my cat Ostrich. But then I decided that it would be a little weird to name a cat after a bird. I bet my cat would be scared of an ostrich, anyway, considering how big they are. I could talk about ostriches all day, and maybe I will . . .

Now, sometimes it's useful to be stuck on a detail, but you can't be stuck on details all the time! So when we get stuck on details, we need to decide how long we want to be stuck on that interesting detail. For 1 minute or 2 minutes?"

Role-play other examples of getting stuck on a detail using student volunteers.

To start, have students identify a big picture topic (e.g., discussing the best movie; answering "What's your favorite color?"). If your students show difficulty understanding the concept, you can role-play with them and continue modeling getting stuck on a detail. Or your students may be ready to playfully engage with getting stuck on a detail in improvised role-plays with each other. Introduce the question "*How long do you want to be stuck on that detail? One minute or 2 minutes?"* as a way of helping the class to manage getting stuck on details in such a way that it does not interfere with the big picture lesson goal.



The stuck on a detail routine should be used throughout the remainder of the curriculum at any point during each class when student interest in a detail could get in the way of the lesson goal, topic, or activity (or big picture). Whenever a student (or the educator!) gets stuck on a detail, such as a specific off-topic idea, you can ask, "*How long do we want to be stuck on that interesting detail?"* The important point here is to praise the student or the class for their interesting topic and also remind them that at some point we will need to get back to the main topic or activity, which we call the big picture.

After you ask, "*How long should we be stuck on this interesting detail?"* you can present a couple of choices: "*Thirty seconds or 1 minute?"* Then use a timer to time the 30 seconds or 1 minute duration. When the time's up, you can say, "*Great! We were stuck on the detail for 1 minute, and now we can get back to the big picture.*" This gentle approach to getting back on task can help students who struggle with maintaining the big picture topic and being flexible to improve their self-regulation skills.

9b. Have students help you complete and review the Flexible Thinking/Stuck Thinking part of the Flexible-Rigid Table. (Go back to [Slide 6](#) if you're using the PowerPoint Flexible-Rigid Table.)

Say to your students: "*Now let's go back to our table. What do we know about flexible and rigid thinking?"* Have the students brainstorm different kinds of flexible and stuck thinking. Provide support and examples as needed.

- ★ **Examples of flexible thinking:** Trying a new way of doing something, listening to another person's ideas, moving on when stuck on an idea, considering a different perspective
- ★ **Examples of stuck thinking:** Getting stuck on one idea, trying only one way, ignoring other people's ideas, missing the big picture because you're stuck on a detail

Slide 10: Topic 1.1 Wrap-Up: Why Practice Flexibility?

- 10a. Ask students why our goal was to learn how and why to be flexible.** Point to the Why section on the Power Plan. Students can fill in the answer, or just discuss. Gently lead discussion to focus on how flexibility can help us gain more power in our lives. Ask students to consider how they might use flexibility at school or home to help them increase their power to get more of what they want and need. Also mention the term executive function and explain that flexibility is one of the most important executive function skills. If students have heard about executive functioning, they can discuss what they know about it. Make sure to affirm the variety of thoughts and opinions the students give so all of the students feel heard and celebrated.
- 10b. Ask the students to fill out the [Unit 1 Daily Self-Awareness Rating worksheet](#) by marking an X somewhere on the arrow to show how they are feeling.** Let them know that it helps you to know how they are feeling.
- 10c. Send Home Extension for Topic 1.1 home with students or e-mail it to parents.** Encourage parents to read this handout and follow the suggested tips with their child at home.
- 10d. Talk to other educators about generalization opportunities in other classes.** Share the Executive Function Skills List with your students' educators (this handout is found at the end of Topic 1.1 and can be copied). Ask the other educators to post the list in a highly visible location, so their students can remember to use the Key Vocabulary spontaneously during class. Explain to educators the use of the Key Vocabulary:
- ★ Educators should work to integrate the words into lessons and discussions with the entire class, not just a few students.
 - ★ Educators should use the words in a positive way, not as a punishment.
 - ★ For this week, educators should focus on the following Key Vocabulary words: flexible thinking, stuck/unstuck.
 - ★ Help educators come up with a few examples of how they could use these words during their lessons. For example:
 - In history class: *"Benjamin Franklin was a **flexible thinker**. He wasn't **stuck** on what already was. He thought **flexibly** and came up with new inventions. For example, his **flexible thinking** helped him invent swim fins and the lightning rod. He even invented a new musical instrument."*
 - In science class: *"Okay, our first try with the experiment didn't work, but let's not be **stuck** there! Let's use **flexible thinking** and try it in a slightly different way."*
 - In any class: *"Thank you for helping me get **unstuck**. You helped me see a different way of thinking about that problem. That's **flexible thinking!**"*

CHECK: How are my students doing?
Do I need to make any adjustments for next class?

- ★ Were students engaged?
- ★ It is critical to give the students praise much more often than commands/corrections. Did I maintain a 4:1 praise-to-correction ratio? (Avoid using Key Vocabulary in negative, critical, or punitive ways; see the Introduction for more information.)
- ★ Did I reinforce the Key Vocabulary during class?
- ★ How can I help my students use the Key Vocabulary and skills in their everyday lives?
- ★ Are there specific words or activities that students do not like? If so, can I come up with alternatives?
- ★ Was this topic too hard?
- ★ Did I get into a power struggle with a student?
- ★ Am I having trouble telling the difference between executive function difficulties and willful behavior? (See the section [Think Can't, Not Won't in the Introduction](#) for more information.)

These questions also appear in [Appendix A](#) so that you may use them for reflection after each unit. If your answers to the questions above suggest that adjusting your approach could be helpful, see the Troubleshooting section ([Appendix B](#)) for guidance on how to proceed.

DAILY SELF-AWARENESS RATING: UNIT 1

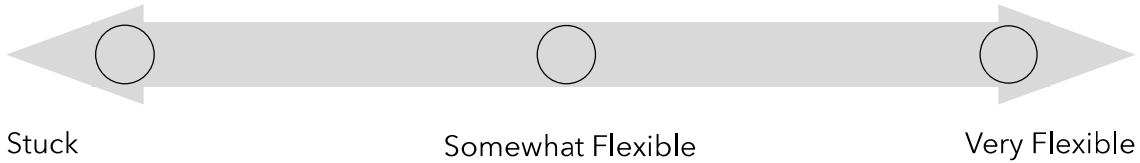
NAME: _____

Executive Function Skills

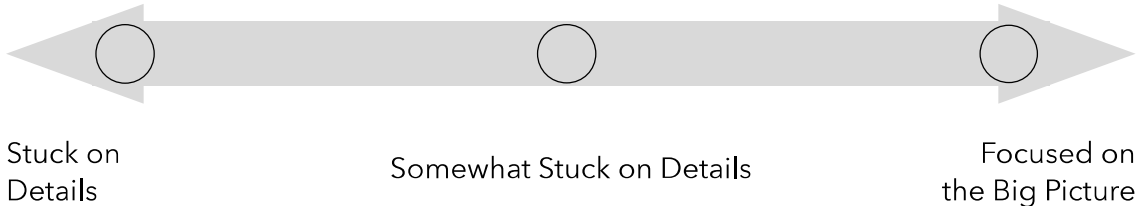
Flexibility + Big Picture Thinking + Goals and Planning = POWER

Mark an X on the arrow to show how you feel today:

How flexible are you today?



Are you stuck on details today?



HOW TO BOOST OUR POWER LEVEL: REMINDER LIST

How to Get More of What You Want <i>How to increase your power</i>	How to Get Less of What You Want <i>How to decrease your power</i>
Using a calm voice	Using a loud voice
Leaving space for other people to talk	Interrupting
Asking what other people want: <i>"What do you want to do?"</i>	Not including what other people want
Using kind words: <i>"Cool. I'm not sure it will work, but it's a good idea."</i>	Using harsh words: <i>"No, that would never work," "That's wrong," "My idea is better."</i>
Flexible feeling and thinking	Stuck feeling and thinking
Making kind suggestions: <i>"Do you want to put that on top?"</i>	Telling people what to do: <i>"Put that on top."</i>
Participating	Getting distracted or distracting other people

HOME EXTENSION FOR TOPIC 1.1: FLEXIBLE THINKING

In today's topic, students learned about *flexibility*. Flexibility is an important executive functioning skill. Just as students can build a flexible body, they can also build a *flexible mind*. Being flexible helps you get more of what you want, creating *more power* in your own life. They learned that getting stuck on a detail can prevent them from seeing the big picture. Getting "unstuck" can help students reach their goal, get what they want, and gain more power in their lives.

In the next topic, students will learn an important way to be flexible: When a first plan (Plan A) doesn't work, they can be flexible and choose another plan (Plan B).

Here are the Key Vocabulary words and skills your child is learning about:

Flexible

Flexible Thinking

Unstuck

Stuck

Stuck on a Detail

Big Picture

Plan A/Plan B

Your child will be watching a Pink Panther, Minecraft Pig and Apple, or Chicken Little video during our next group session. The Pink Panther video, called "Think Before You Pink," shows the Pink Panther making many different plans to cross a busy street. He comes up with one Plan B after another. In the Minecraft Pig and Apple video, the pig tries various plans in order to get an apple that is out of reach. In the Chicken Little video, Chicken Little quickly shifts from Plan A to Plan B to Plan C to achieve his goal to save the planet from alien invasion.

See if you can find these videos by searching the Internet and watch the videos with your child (they are only a few minutes long). We found the videos here:

- Pink Panther video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPzCkajdLvE>
- Pig and Apple [Minecraft Animation]: <https://youtu.be/gwVlsv1n7Mo>
- Chicken Little video: <https://youtu.be/RicWg5H9QIM>

The next time your child hits an obstacle, ask them, "What would Pink Panther (or Pig) do right now?" ("He'd come up with another plan!") or "Should we try Pink Panther's (or Pig's) way and come up with a Plan B?"

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS LIST

Flexible thinking

"Thanks for being flexible!"

"Nice job being flexible."

"You were flexible and got what you wanted even faster. Nice job!"

Plan A/Plan B

"If Plan A doesn't work, then we'll try a Plan B."

"I'm feeling stuck—my Plan A didn't work. Can you help me come up with a Plan B?"

"Do you need a Plan B?"

Stuck/Unstuck

"How can I get unstuck?"

"Nice work. You were flexible and got unstuck."

"You noticed you were stuck and then got unstuck. That's how you boost your power!"

Goal-Why-Plan-Check

"What's the goal?"

"Why is the goal important?"

"What are the steps of the plan?"

"Let's check to see if we reached our goal."

Are we focused on our big picture goal or stuck on an off-topic detail?

"What's our big picture goal?"

"Is this an off-topic detail?"

"Should we get stuck on this detail or get back to our big picture goal?"

Compromise

"Let's come up with a compromise."

"Compromising lets us both get some of what we want."

"Nice compromise! It's a win-win for both of you."

"You both let go of your Plan A so you both could get *some* of what you want. That is a winning compromise and helps you boost your power!"

Efficiency = doing a task well and fairly quickly

"Keep your eyes on the prize—stay focused and excited about your goal!"

"Keep your eyes on the clock—don't get stuck on off-topic details!"

"Great work. You were efficient. You didn't get stuck."

Managing frustration and disappointment

"Being disappointed is normal. How can we manage it?"

"When we're frustrated, there's always a Plan B!"

Unstuck & On Target!

AGES 11-15

An Executive Function Curriculum to Support Flexibility, Planning, and Organization

The popular, evidence-based *Unstuck and On Target!* curriculum has helped elementary school students across the country develop critical flexibility, planning, and organization skills. Now there's a version of *Unstuck* for ages 11-15—with **all-new lessons** specially designed to help **middle school students** build the strong executive function skills they need to manage more complex independent work.

Ideal for in-person and virtual classrooms! Includes digital posters, home extension activities, and digital student and parent workbooks.

The curriculum includes 23 lessons on topics that are key to success in school and life: **flexibility, big-picture thinking, planning, compromising, and self-monitoring**. These 45-minute lessons are taught in small groups in any setting, including general and special education classrooms, pull-out groups, or after-school clubs. Through catchy scripts, memorable visuals, engaging role-plays, and positive reinforcement, students will learn skills that will help them in middle school and beyond. Lessons and scripts build on each other, and students get many opportunities to practice and generalize their new skills to school, home, and community settings.

With this proven, highly effective approach to executive function intervention, middle school students will develop the skills they need to set and reach goals, flexibly collaborate with peers, use organization strategies independently, and lay the groundwork for a bright future.

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