

Professor Adele Diamond

Evidence-based strategies for improving executive functions and the relation of that to academic, health and well-being outcomes

Abstract Executive functions consist of a family of 3 core skills: inhibitory control (resisting one's first impulse and giving a wiser, more considered response instead; staying focused and persevering), working memory (mentally working with and playing with ideas and facts, relating one to another), and cognitive flexibility (thinking outside the box; looking at familiar problems in new ways). These make it possible for us to think before we act, resist temptations, reason, creatively problem-solve, and meet novel, unanticipated challenges. They are important for every aspect of life. Executive functions are often more predictive than IQ of achievement, health, wealth, and quality of life and can override the effects of economic disadvantage.



“Brain-based” does not mean unchangeable. Executive functions depend on the brain, but they can be improved even in very young children and throughout the life span by exercising and challenging them, much as physical exercise hones our bodies. Educational practices that improve executive functions may not only lead to better academic outcomes, but also to reduced incidence or severity of mental health disorders such as ADHD. Many issues are not simply education issues or health issues; they are both. Many different activities have been shown to improve executive functions. Regardless of the activity, a few principles hold.

Principles that characterize all the different methods that improve EFs will be discussed, including: (1) EF training transfers, but the transfer is narrow; children only improve on the skills they practice. (2) Setting aside a time to work on EFs is less effective than working on EFs as part and parcel of all activities. (3) Whether benefits are seen depends on the way an activity is done and the amount of time spent practicing it, pushing oneself to improve. Practice is not passively sitting in one's seat, listening to a lecture. Practice must be active and hands-on. If information is not relevant for action right now, we don't pay attention in the same way. We learn something when we need it for something we want to do. At every age we learn better when we are actively engaged in using information than when we just listen. That is especially true for young children who are not built to sit still for any length of time.

Evidence that social, emotional, and physical well-being are inextricably tied to good executive functions will be presented. The brain doesn't recognize the same sharp division between cognitive, emotional, social, and motor function that we impose in our thinking. Anyone's ability to reason, exercise self-control, and have the flexibility to adapt to change (that is, executive functions) are better when that person has had enough sleep and exercise, is not stressed, and feels emotionally and socially nourished. Conversely, executive functions suffer first and more than other skills if a person is sad, stressed, lonely, or not healthy or physically fit. Since executive functions are critical for academic and career success, a society that wants its children to excel needs to take seriously that the different parts of the human being are inextricably interrelated. If a child is stressed, sad, lonely, or not physically fit, the very academic performance a school is trying to improve will take a hit. The most effective way to improve executive functions and academic achievement is probably not to focus narrowly on those alone, but in addition to directly training and challenging those, to also address children's social, emotional, and physical needs.

Learning Objectives:

1. Become better able to describe what executive functions are.
2. Become better able to explain principles & strategies for improving executive functions.
3. To understand interrelations between executive functions, emotions, social needs, and physical well-being.
4. To appreciate the bidirectional relation between prefrontal cortex (executive functions) and the amygdala (stress).

Professor Adele Diamond

Effects of early life trauma and what we know about the brain and child development to help promote resilience

Abstract Adverse childhood experiences constitute a huge public health problem facing the world today, and yet far too little is being done to address or minimize them. They pose a risk to brain development, physical health, mental health and psychological development, and put people at greater risk for experiencing stress later in their lives and for adopting unhealthy or unsafe behaviour patterns.

The single greatest mitigating factor is terrific mothering – responsive parenting by a caring, warm adult. This does not have to come from the child’s mother or even a relative. But when done truly sensitively and well this can completely override the effects of early adversity or disadvantage.

How can we help parents be more nurturing and responsive? Being a good parent is hard work. It’s exponentially more difficult for parents facing major stressors, such as a major disruption in their lives, immigration to a new country, fear of violence or deportation, mental illness in the family, prolonged poverty or food or housing insecurity. Parents need training in what makes good parenting, and education on what to expect as their children go through different developmental stages. And, we can help parents be better parents by reducing societal stresses which impair their ability to be the parents they’d like to be.

We need to routinely consider the possibility that a child who is misbehaving, someone who is over-eating, smoking, drinking too much or using illicit drugs may not have too weak inhibitory control (insufficient willpower) but instead might be doing this in response to severe stress or in an attempt to escape the psychic pain or despair from severe early stress or trauma.

A child might be acting in the most awful manner because he’s been terribly hurt and is afraid of being hurt again, so he may push you away before you have a chance to reject him or will test you to see if you are really someone he can feel safe with. If we see the behaviour as coming from hurt, we can react completely differently.

Children need to know that they are valued and that you care about them. They need joy in their lives. They need to see that you believe them and they need do-able challenges to see for themselves that they are capable. They need to feel proud of who and where they come from. They need to feel safe and that they are part of a community that supports and helps one another. They need to be able to express their feelings and someone they can talk to.

All of this possible, ever so rewarding, and far less expensive than trying to address the severe health and social problems that can easily arise if these things are not done.

Learning Objectives:

1. To better understand how early adverse experiences can affect physical and mental health.
2. To appreciate how prefrontal cortex regulation of the amygdala’s stress response can get disrupted by early adverse experiences
3. To better understand what can be done to mitigate the effects of stressors in children’s lives and in their parents’ lives.



Jill Schofields

Positive behaviour for learning and student well-being

Abstract This presentation provides a brief introduction and summary of Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL). PBL is a whole school approach to creating a positive, safe and supportive school climate in which all students can learn and develop. PBL is not a specific package or program, but rather a framework that assists schools to establish the social culture and learning supports needed to meet the learning and wellbeing needs of every student.



Positive Behaviour for Learning enables schools to use evidenced based practices to create positive learning environments. Each school develops a continuum of support that promotes student learning and wellbeing where students have access to more support when they need it. PBL supports schools to design systems to enhance the capabilities of school staff to provide safe, supportive and responsive learning environments in their own local context.

This session aims to develop a basic understanding of PBL in the NSW educational context. It will reference current initiatives in NSW Public Schools to improve student wellbeing and how the PBL approach is supporting schools in this important work. An overview of the key features for PBL implementation and the PBL problem solving process that supports school decision making will be explained and demonstrated with a recent school example.

Learning Objectives:

This session aims to provide participants with:

- a basic understanding of the importance of wellbeing to schools within the current educational context
- information on current research for learning, behaviour and wellbeing in schools
- an understanding of what is PBL and how PBL supports schools to address the learning and wellbeing needs of students within a whole school approach
- An overview of the elements of the PBL problem solving process that supports school decision making
- A brief summary of the key features for implementation of PBL in schools

An example of PBL practice within a local high school in NSW

Jennifer Coen

School safety, self harm and the duty of care

Abstract As increasing numbers of young people suffer from mental health disorders the capacity of mainstream educational facilities to support and maintain students has become a significant challenge. With 1 in 10 teenagers admitting to engaging in deliberate self harm, there is a need for school staff to respond to such behaviour in ways that support clinical practice and maintain a safe and supportive environment.



This workshop will examine the latest research on the mental health of young Australians and outline a management plan that school staff can use to support students with serious self harming behaviour. It will consider the legal obligations of NSW schools under the Education Act.

Guidelines, procedures and templates will be shared that can be used by school staff to minimise the risk attached to this behaviour.

Learning Objectives:

1. Raise awareness of how proactive positive management can affect student outcomes
2. Focus on factors that can be influenced or controlled by schools
3. Understand the legal obligation and duty of care
4. Describe return to school planning using assessment and planning tools

Dr Heidi Lyneham

Identifying and managing anxiety in young people

Abstract Anxiety is a common and costly problem that appears across the lifespan. In young people problematic anxiety undermines engagement in social and educational activities, leads to significant distress, increases risk for future mental health disorders and it can stagnate success in achieving life goals. Thirty years of international research has provided a working model of what causes and maintains problematic anxiety in young people. This has led to development of evidenced based tools that identify problematic anxiety and skills based programs that provide effective intervention strategies that address underlying factors. Understanding the rationale for treatment strategies assists us to effectively support anxious young people in different contexts which leads to better long term outcomes.



Learning Objectives:

- Understand how anxiety impacts on a young person.
- Gain knowledge of ways to identify problematic anxiety.
- Understand the rationale for treatment strategies used when treating anxiety.
- Learn options for responding to anxiety across contexts.

Associate Professor Barbara Spears

We've 'done' bullying: What does that mean for positive school climate?

Abstract Happy, safe, and well children and young people learn best. Children who are victimised, for whatever reason, are known to suffer from increased mental health difficulties, poor peer relations and compromised life-long trajectories.

This presentation will explore key issues associated with bullying and cyberbullying for contemporary school settings. It will assume a level of knowledge of the fundamentals: that bullying is a deliberate, unprovoked, proactive form of aggression, with key defining features which separate it from conflict and fighting: that is, it is about power, deliberate intent and most often involves repetition.

This presentation will provide an overview of current knowledge about bullying, cyberbullying, sexting and diversity bullying, with a view to locating strategies which can support the growth of a positive school climate and enhanced wellbeing. Schools are not static institutions, however, and what is done one year may not be sufficient: for the new cohort of students and parents arriving the following year, or the change in leadership, or the departure of the wellbeing champion on staff.

Be prepared to interact and contribute to the conversation.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of the session, attendees will be able to:

- Explore different forms of bullying with a view to locating strategies which can support a positive school climate.
- Reflect on school change and its impact on prevention and implementation approaches and subsequent school climate



Dr Victoria Rawlings

Eroding difference: Gender-based regulation, aggression and 'bullying' in schools

Abstract The most common forms of insults, abuse and violence in schools relate to gender and sexuality, and research has demonstrated that aggression that relates to gender and sexuality is seen by young people as the most hurtful and damaging. Despite this, anti-bullying measures in schools often reject these moments as being 'bullying' at all. Teachers and students are often reluctant to identify that violence that relates to gender and sexuality is problematic or preventable. This combination can make schools unsafe and precarious for certain young people, particularly those that are diverse in their sexual orientation or gender identity. In this talk, Dr Victoria Rawlings will explore the ways that gender and sexuality function in schools to constrain the opportunities for all students. She will reflect on her own research around young people, popularity, gendered violence, schools, and LGBTQ self-harm and suicide in order to make a case for a new understanding of 'bullying', as well as to advocate for greater awareness and training around gender and sexuality in schools.



Learning Objectives:

Attendees will:

Explore statistics around LGBTQ youth, self-harm and suicide

- Interrogate the reasons why LGBTQ youth experience poorer social, health and academic outcomes than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts
- Reflect on the ways that aggression relating to sexuality and gender affects all students
- Examine the shortcomings of current anti-bullying approaches in schools

Review future possibilities for increasing gender diversity and student wellbeing in schools

Terry Taylor

Don't just do something...sit there! Mindful approaches to student and staff well-being

Abstract Mindfulness is currently fashionable and therefore at risk of being written off as a mere fad. Fortunately there is a growing and encouraging body of research to support the application of Mindfulness in school settings and workplaces. This presentation will look at evidence-based practices which can promote student and staff wellbeing and will also discuss the practicalities of introducing Mindfulness to school settings.

Terry will speak from first-hand experience in establishing a Mindfulness program in a very challenging school and in promoting Mindfulness practices for staff welfare. Terry will share interesting observations, tips and insights he has gained from years of practice, training, reading and reflection.



Learning Objectives:

Participants will gain a broad understanding of Mindfulness in schools programs and an appreciation of practical considerations in their implementation. The promotion of staff and student welfare will be a central theme.

Dr Angela Dixon

Working with traumatised children in the classroom

Abstract Research now shows that trauma can undermine children's ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom. Although some children demonstrate extraordinary resilience in the aftermath of trauma, many experience significant distress or develop psychological or behavioural difficulties that can be serious or long lasting. Schools and teachers are uniquely positioned to help children reach their potential. School is a place where it is possible for traumatised children to forge strong relationships with caring adults and learn in a supportive, predictable, and safe environment.



These are factors that can help protect children from, or at least ameliorate, some of the effects of exposure to trauma. Trauma-sensitive school environments benefit all children - those whose trauma history is known, those whose trauma may never be clearly identified, and those who may be impacted by their traumatised peers. This seminar will examine how schools and teachers can partner with families to strengthen traumatised children's relationships with adults in and out of school; what teachers can do to help children to modulate and self-regulate their emotions and behaviours in the classroom; and what can be done to enable traumatised children to develop their academic potential.

Learning Objectives:

1. Develop an understanding of the potential impact of trauma exposure on a child's learning and behaviour
2. Develop positive ways to respond to difficult behaviours in the classroom
3. Develop strategies in the classroom to enhance the self-regulatory capacities of children who have been traumatised
4. Develop strategies in the classroom to re-engage traumatised children in learning and to increase competencies across multiple domains

Professor Fiona Brooks

The link between pupil health and well-being and attainment: Core business for education

Abstract Research evidence shows that education and health are closely linked. So promoting the health and wellbeing of pupils and students within schools and colleges has the potential to improve their educational outcomes and their health and wellbeing outcomes. Drawing on a rapid review approach that provides a broad, succinct scope of the scientific evidence. This presentation highlights the link between health and wellbeing and educational attainment. It underlines the value for schools of promoting health and wellbeing as an integral part of a school effectiveness strategy, and highlights the important contribution of a whole-school approach.



Learning Objectives:

1. Pupils with better health and wellbeing are likely to achieve better academically.
2. Effective social and emotional competencies are associated with greater health and wellbeing, and better achievement.
3. The culture, ethos and environment of a school influences the health and wellbeing of pupils and their readiness to learn.
4. A positive association exists between academic attainment and physical activity levels of pupils.