

Tailored for Young Learners: SMARTS Elementary

HOW DO WE EMPOWER CHILDREN to tackle difficult problems and achieve personal goals, both in school and in life? Lynn Meltzer, PhD, president and director of the Institutes for Learning and Development, says one possible way is to immerse them in a school culture that values, fosters, and celebrates metacognitive awareness.

“Metacognitive awareness is the foundation for understanding our strengths and challenges and how they impact our learning,” says Meltzer. “And that’s the key ingredient for identifying and then using executive function strategies that will work best for us when tackling problems and striving toward our goals.” She adds, “This is true for all of us, whether or not we experience ADHD.”

The exciting part is that we now know how to teach metacognitive awareness to students of all ages, she says,

even young school-aged children. Meltzer and her team at the Institutes for Learning and Development have created a curriculum that does just that—and more. It’s called SMARTS Elementary (SMARTS = Strategies, Motivation, Awareness, Resilience, Talents, Success).

Fostering metacognitive awareness

SMARTS Elementary comprises thirty lessons, all designed to teach, foster, and celebrate the use of executive function strategies in ways that lead to greater school success. They do this by helping children become more metacognitively aware. Designed for grades 3 to 5, the user-friendly, strengths-based curriculum weaves high-interest activities throughout to help children continually explore their strengths and challenges. At the same time the curriculum also weaves in the specific executive func-



tion strategies that will be most helpful when it comes to performing better in school and in life.

In a SMARTS classroom, learning effective executive function strategies no longer pertains only to children with ADHD. We all have unique learning profiles. And we all benefit from learning more about how we learn so that we can determine which executive function strategies will help us do better throughout our day. Says Meltzer, “When students develop metacognitive awareness so that they understand their strengths and weaknesses as well as how they learn, they can become flexible thinkers and problem-solvers who can succeed academically and in life.”

Meltzer and her team are also the authors of the original SMARTS curriculum, which was the recipient of CHADD’s 2018 Innovative Program of the Year Award. The original curriculum is designed for middle school and high school students. ResearchILD’s elementary school version is intended to teach younger students similar strategies but at an earlier age.

“Teachers have long been asking us to create a curriculum for elementary school students,” says Michael Greschler, MEd, director of SMARTS. “We agree. Extending our curriculum to earlier grades helps to prepare students for future school and life demands that place increasing emphasis on executive function.” He adds, “SMARTS Elementary will not only help elementary students perform better today, it’ll help them perform better down the road as well.”

Tailored to younger students

All SMARTS Elementary lessons are developmentally tailored to the needs of students in grades 3 to 5. Some lessons are similar to those in the original curriculum, others are new. As with the original curriculum, all still target five areas under the executive function umbrella:

- cognitive flexibility: the ability to think flexibly and shift focus
- goal setting: the ability to set realistic goals and a step by step plan for achieving them
- organization and prioritizing: knowing how to manage and prioritize day-to-day school responsibilities, such as completing assignments when due, turning in completed homework
- accessing working memory: learning to access information efficiently
- self-monitoring and self-checking: asking oneself questions such as, *Am I on task right now? How can I read-just my strategies to get back on task? Have I re-checked my test responses?*

According to Meltzer, “The SMARTS curriculum has

been designed to promote metacognitive awareness, to teach executive function strategies explicitly and systematically, and to promote academic self-concept and resilience.” The thirty SMARTS lessons are divided into six separate units:

- an introductory unit that familiarizes students with metacognitive and executive function terms and practices
- a second unit that includes strategies for teaching students how to set goals and then achieve them
- a third unit that includes strategies to help students learn to shift flexibly between multiple perspectives
- a fourth unit that includes strategies to help students organize materials and information, and to develop an understanding of time, including how to estimate it, how to measure it, and how to prioritize it
- a fifth unit that includes strategies to improve working memory, lock information into long-term memory, and remember unfamiliar information
- a sixth unit that includes strategies to help students to stay on task for longer periods of time, self-monitor their work, and better regulate their emotions.

The units conclude with a wrap-up lesson, where students review SMARTS strategies and create a Strategies for Success sheet they can use moving forward. (These unit descriptions represent only a brief overview of areas covered; find a more detailed description at www.smarts-ef.org.)

Each SMARTS Elementary lesson is divided into four twenty-minute modules:

- an activity designed to directly engage students in the lesson and increase their interest (referred to as a “metacognitive activator”)
- guided instruction, where teachers model the strategy and guide students through its successful implementation
- independent practice, where students practice the strategy in class on their own
- reflection, where students spend time reflecting upon how the strategy worked (referred to as a “metacognitive wrap-up”).

All SMARTS lessons provide teachers with specific learning objectives, methods of instruction (such as discussion, direct PowerPoint instruction, guided and independent practice), necessary materials for implementing the lesson, and specific teacher preparation instructions. Lessons are also well scripted and easy to follow, with each flexibly tailored so that it can be integrated into academic lessons throughout the school day.

“When teachers create a classroom culture that promotes metacognitive awareness and self-understanding, they can maximize the effectiveness of teaching execu-

tive function strategies in the context of the curriculum,” says Meltzer. She observes that when classroom instruction promotes metacognitive awareness so that students understand their profiles of strengths and weaknesses, they are more likely to generalize their strategy use across content areas.

SMARTS Elementary also provides ongoing updates for parents on executive function strategies their children are learning at school, so that strategies can be practiced and reinforced at home as well.

School study teams will find that SMARTS Elementary lessons can be easily incorporated into 504 Plans and IEPs. The curriculum includes a series of measures that can help school study teams, parents, and students assess progress toward any or all of the five executive function processes described earlier. The curriculum is also compatible with Response to Intervention (RTI). All students can benefit from executive function strategies—strong students with no learning issues, as well as students just starting to exhibit attentional, executive function and/or other learning-related challenges, and students whose challenges in these areas have already grown more serious.

Creating a culture of executive function strategy users

Meltzer and her team are well aware of the role that executive function strategies will play in the children’s lives down the road. That’s why their curriculum is designed to create a culture of executive function users. In a SMARTS classroom, teachers and students celebrate their use. Students, in fact, will actually earn credit for using them.

Meltzer reminds us, however, that simply teaching executive function strategies alone is not the answer. Students have to link their use of executive function strategies to specific academic tasks (reading, math and writing), and practice using them throughout the school day so that they come to see the benefits. Meltzer also reminds us that new pathways to greater success at school and in life begin when we become metacognitively aware, a necessary first step in empowering all children to tackle difficult problems and achieve personal goals. 🗨

A clinical and consulting psychologist, Mark Katz, PhD, is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center in San Diego, California. As a contributing editor to Attention magazine, he writes the Promising Practices column and serves on the editorial advisory board. He is also a former member of CHADD’s professional advisory board and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.

FOR MORE INFO



Meltzer and members of her team will present a workshop for parents, teachers, and others interested in executive function strategies and the SMARTS Elementary curriculum—as well as the original curriculum for older students—at the Annual International Conference on ADHD in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania this November.

Learn more about the Annual International Conference on ADHD at www.chadd.org.

Learn more about SMARTS Elementary at www.smarts-ef.org.

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