

Mary Miele:

Hello. My name is Mary Miele. I am a tutor, a teacher, a parent and the founder of Evolved Education Company. We are a full service tutoring and advisement company for all of your educational solutions.

Mary Miele:

On this podcast we'll explore ideas, techniques and resources that you can use to support your school-aged child to conquer any learning issue. I'm so glad you're here.

Becky Reback:

Hi everybody. This is Becky Reback. I work with Mary Miele here at the Evolved Education Company. I'm really excited to be here on our podcast again to flip the script yet again. I think the last time it went really well, where we talk with Mary about some new and exciting ways that we are evolving, no pun intended, but pun intended our tutoring.

Becky Reback:

And today we're here to talk about executive function. This is the September, 2022 podcast edition, and we are starting off the school year. And so we thought the best place to start is executive function and making sure that everyone has a strong, organized start to learning this year.

Becky Reback:

So without further ado, I'll introduce Mary who is going to talk to us about our Evolved Education Integrated Executive Function Coaching Model, which is a mouthful, but it really works. We promise. So Mary, thanks for having me on to interview you again today. It was so fun last time. So I'm excited to be here.

Mary Miele:

Yes. Thank you. It's so fun that we get to just chat, I think about our work and just give everyone an insight into what we're doing here that is so evolved. So I just know we got so much amazing feedback last time around this format. So we're just going to keep it up. When we know something is working, we just do it.

Becky Reback:

Yeah, exactly.

Mary Miele:

All right. So that's sort of where this came from. So I know it is a mouthful. It's Evolved Education Integrated Executive Function Coaching Model. And the reason this came about was because I was working with students in the past couple of years on their executive function work and I noticed some things that we were doing here that were really working.

Mary Miele:

So when that happened, I'm so excited and I want to be able to write about it and share it with everyone. And that's really what we did. So we created this integrated model that is based on research.

And I did a training this summer with our team and with other learning specialists in our community and I think it was very well received.

Mary Miele:

So I'm excited to talk with everyone today about what this model is for the parents who are listening and how you can use it to really help your child at any age to have more executive functioning skills.

Becky Reback:

Yes, absolutely. So before we get into exactly what the model is, I want to define executive function. It's such a hot term these days, and everyone's talking about it. Everyone's calling me as the head of tutor services saying, "I need an executive function tutor."

Becky Reback:

And I'm like, "Okay, great." So let's talk about what that actually is. What are executive functions? Why are they important for anybody, but especially our kids as they go back to the school year?

Mary Miele:

What a great question. And I agree. I think even for me, as I wrote this book on the integrated model, it took some time for me to also solidify my true understanding of executive functioning because our industry and teachers and everybody around me seems to also put a lot of other definitions into the way we think about this.

Mary Miele:

So I just want to maybe peel back the onion layers and get to the root of what it really is. And then we can talk about some of the ways that it extends into some other things that I know everyone also qualifies executive functioning as, right? So to start, it involves three major areas.

Mary Miele:

Cognitive flexibility, which means it's your process of thinking about something in many different ways. You use cognitive flexibility often in learning because you weigh various perspectives as well as different characters, points of view when you're reading.

Mary Miele:

You can also take a look at a problem for math and maybe you're going down one way, one path of solving it and you need to change course because it's not really working.

Mary Miele:

So it's used a lot in the process of being a student, but cognitive flexibility is one of those key executive functioning pieces. Right? Then the next one is working memory. And Becky, gave me the best way to describe this. Do you remember?

Becky Reback:

That's just my favorite metaphor here.

Mary Miele:

Yeah. Your favorite metaphor, which I love. It's a post-it note that goes into your brain. Everyone has a different size post-it note and you place information onto that post-it note that you then use and sort of manipulate around while you're also remembering it.

Mary Miele:

So the way that would translate would be if you're reading a chapter book, you're going to remember information from the first chapter and build on it into the meaning of the second chapter. And if you are writing something, you might write something in your first sentence of the paragraph, and then you're holding that context into your mind.

Mary Miele:

And then you're writing what comes next in the second sentence. You could also be following your outline that you have a little bit imprinted into your brain as to where you're going with something. Working memory is used just throughout the life of a student.

Mary Miele:

So it's a really important executive functioning piece that we look at. And then inhibition or inhibitory control is also known as a person's ability to intentionally suppress attention or ignore distraction or stop an impulse action or overcome a routine or action that is highly learned.

Mary Miele:

And this is really where we also get into sustained attention around a task. We are able maybe as a student to avoid the noises in the hallway when something is happening in the hallway and we're supposed to be listening to the lesson in our classroom, right.

Mary Miele:

Or we're maybe able to attend, even though we're feeling a little hungry or we really want to go hang out with our friends instead of being in this class, right. So there's those kinds of inhibitions that we know are part of executive functioning.

Becky Reback:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for that description. I think it's so important that we all understand, and obviously our podcast is geared towards parents of learners, but I also think everyone, this is throughout our entire life and work and play and everything that we do. So having a good understanding of it even as an adult is really important.

Mary Miele:

Absolutely. Yeah.

Becky Reback:

So let's talk about the model that we created and why move forward with kind of making this framework that we follow in order to support our students and their executive functions.

Mary Miele:

Sure. So the model really comes from, again, the practice of working with students. And what I wanted to do was really create a model that we could just continue to evolve within, if that makes sense. So it would always be feeding from current information, what we know in the field, things like that.

Mary Miele:

So it's really a broader model and it involves academic research at the first pillar. So that means that we bring in what's happening in the colleges around the different academic research for executive functioning, but also for learning as well because students are taking part in a learning process.

Mary Miele:

Then we also take a look at areas of increase in instruction as the second pillar. So that means that we not only look at executive functioning within the life of a student at school, but we also look at it at home. We look at it, maybe on the field for athletics.

Mary Miele:

We look at it on the stage for arts, performing arts projects, things like this. And we look at all areas of a student's functioning and that's a second pillar. And then the third pillar is assessment. So when we work with students, we assess them using different assessments that are available to us in the field.

Mary Miele:

And these might evolve as we go forward in the next 10 years, but right now we have some assessments that come to us from neuropsych evaluations, the mind print learning assessment as well as questionnaires that we have targeted to parents and students to get a more complete picture of how executive functioning works for a student.

Mary Miele:

And then the fourth pillar is strategy instruction and skill mastery. And this is where we teach a student to have a strategy for something that isn't very strong in executive functioning. And that strategy becomes a skill once they use the strategy on purpose over and over and over again.

Mary Miele:

And remember it in our sessions by encoding it each time. So there's really four parts to the model. It's a little more macro, right. So it's academic research, areas of instruction and inquiry, assessment and then strategy and skill instruction.

Becky Reback:

And I think what's so important, not even just about this model, but everything we do at Evolved is it's very bespoke. It's very base. Yes, we have these pillars and this framework that we're kind of following.

Becky Reback:

So there's a little bit of quality control across everybody who's going through the executive function coaching model, integrated coaching model. And we have an idea of where we're going, but we're really responsive to the needs of each individual student, which I think is really important.

Becky Reback:

That I think sets us apart from a lot of other people. We're not just doing one set program or one set curriculum. We're really giving a student a strategy that's based on what they really need.

Mary Miele:

Absolutely. And that was really my intent always around building this company, as you know, and I think that this model allows me to train an individual around the executive function coaching that I know works.

Mary Miele:

And it gives that person enough space and room to pull assessments, to pull strategies, to look at different areas of inquiry and instruction, to pay attention to different points of research based on what the students needs. And that's actually exciting, right?

Mary Miele:

So when we get somebody into train them, we're saying, "Hey, as of 2022, here's the research that's available about executive functioning. Here's the research that's available around learning. Here's some areas of inquiry that you might look at with your student. Here's some assessments that you might use with your student. And here is the way in which we actually build these skills. We do that through integrated strategy, instruction and skill mastery."

Mary Miele:

Once a provider has those different pieces of information and training and the invitation to use the model, they are able to create something very bespoke for the student. So it doesn't look like this. It's not me handing a teacher a workbook or some kind of written curriculum and saying, "Lesson one, you need to do this. Lesson two, you need to do this."

Mary Miele:

It's not that way by design because that's not how students build their executive functioning skills. They do it when they're in a point of pain, they do it when they don't know how to proceed through something that they need to do as a student. That's what we need to integrate. We need to coach into what is challenging for a student. And that's how come this works really well.

Becky Reback:

Yeah, absolutely. My next question was going to be what is the model, but I think you've given a really good description into that. Is there anything else you would say you would want to add about what this model is or isn't?

Mary Miele:

Sure. Well, I think it's just important to understand that it's always being informed by our field. And if you remember, our field of special education is only three decades old. And so it's, well, three, five, something like that.

Mary Miele:

My working memory there was not great, let's just put it that way, but 1976. So it's in its fourth, fifth decade of existence, right. And it's really important to understand that we haven't really studied this all that much for kids.

Mary Miele:

The research really is there for very young kids and it's there for adults, but it's really not there for teenagers who come to us all the time for executive function coaching, right.

Mary Miele:

So it's just important to know that part of our work here is to continue reading and learning and evolving what we're doing based on what the field is doing in the academic sense, right?

Becky Reback:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's so important that we're always evolving and changing. So like you said, we have these pillars and this framework, but we're bringing in the newest research. We're bringing in the newest understanding of whatever piece of it that we need to bring in.

Becky Reback:

It's not just going to stay this forever. Let's talk about parents and what parents can learn and how they can support their children. And what are some takeaways for parents as they support their children through executive functions? What can they do? What can they learn?

Mary Miele:

Sure. Well, I think the biggest thing for parents to know is just that if you hire somebody to help your child with executive functioning, I really want that person to be delivering strategies that have a name and that your child can talk through in a practical way for them, whether that be in a multisensory way, as in they're using note cards to kind of show the different processes, or if they have a document where they have the how-tos written out, you should be able to see the strategy that your child is getting in that session.

Mary Miele:

I think that also it's really important that parents take this as a longer term investment in the work that we do with students, because we're asking kids to change their behavior within an area that has been challenging for them.

Mary Miele:

So they may have come up with a way to cope or manage that particular task that isn't very effective and now we're asking them to change that process, change that neuro pathway in their brain.

Mary Miele:

And that doesn't just happen overnight. It happens when we get into a session and what it looks like is a student will tell us how they're going to do that which they can't do.

Mary Miele:

And by encoding it out loud or in a multi-sensory way by writing it or by seeing it again, they have a better chance of using that new process on their own later on. So it's a longer term commitment to build your executive functioning in this way. So the other thing I would say to parents is try to be as proactive as you can.

Mary Miele:

We know that kids learn a good amount of executive functioning between the ages of two and six from the research. This is very young and most families, again, are coming to us as teenagers because they don't know what to do. They're missing assignments.

Mary Miele:

They can't pack up their bags. They're not turning things in. There are different pain points that are coming up for them, but we can do a lot proactively for very young children by routinizing certain processes for them and helping them to be organized in their tasks, their time and their things.

Mary Miele:

So those are two takeaways that every parent listening should really think about. And even if you do have an older child and you're thinking, well, Mary, you're not talking to me because I have a teenager and how can I be proactive?

Mary Miele:

Well, you can still be proactive because you can actually investigate how your child's doing with their executive functioning. And you can start to address it by offering them an invitation to create a strategy to do their work in a more effective and optimal way. Right?

Becky Reback:

Absolutely. I mean, I think noticing, even if you the parent notices something and you bring it to your child's attention and maybe, I mean, hopefully they do something about it, but even if they just notice that it's not as effective as it could be, or as efficient as it could be, that is a step in the right direction.

Becky Reback:

I think the mindfulness of knowing that there's something that's not working perfectly is a lot of the battle because then they can take steps to learn a strategy to make it work better.

Mary Miele:

Oh, such a good statement there. I think that's so crucial and really, I love the word invitation. I use it so frequently with my teenagers because I don't want to assume that I know all of the things that will work for them in a strategic sense. I want to invite them to participate in that strategy creation because I'm so excited about what their brains can come up with.

Mary Miele:

And so to your point, if you're a parent and you notice something isn't quite right, what a lovely gift you're giving your child, just by simply saying, "I notice that you're really struggling with getting your work done earlier in the day and you're going to bed so late at night and then in the mornings you're so tired."

Mary Miele:

"I really wish that could be better for you. I think it could be if we used a different strategy, would you like to do that with me? I'm just going to give you the invitation, because whenever you're ready, I'm happy to work with you on that."

Mary Miele:

Or I have a resource for you, but I think it's so nice because over time, if a kid keeps hearing that from you as the parent, first of all, they just feel heard, listened to and attended to, but also you are really providing leadership to them around the fact that, "Hey, it doesn't have to be so painful. You don't have to go about working this way if you don't want to." And that's a great life lesson.

Mary Miele:

You could tell your adult kids that, you could tell yourself that, right. And I think that's so fun about what we do with kids because once we get them involved in this process of coaching, they are starting to see that they can take part in a process of improvement and less pain around their learning, which is really important.

Becky Reback:

Yeah. I want to go back to one thing you said, which I think I have young children. My daughter is four and I have a baby, but he's not quite there yet. But my four year old, we talk a lot about what strategy she used in order to solve a problem. And the other day we were in the car and she was asking a question and she kind of worked through it herself.

Becky Reback:

And I was like, "That was an awesome strategy." We were counting and she wanted to know what number came before 15. And I said, "I don't know what number comes before 15." And she just started counting up. She started at one. Now can I work on her strategy to start at 10 instead of one? Sure. Right.

Becky Reback:

But I'm talking to her about that word strategy, which I think for a long time our students that are maybe teenagers didn't necessarily hear the word strategy or weren't taught strategies. So they don't know that they actually are strategies to solve problems or work more efficiently.

Becky Reback:

So I think that's a one way parents of young kids also even teenagers start using the word strategy. Wow, I noticed you did X. That was an awesome strategy. Right. And that builds their capacity to learn a strategy and know that there is strategies out there to solve their problems that they're having.

Mary Miele:

Oh, I love that so much. And I think that's really also a great takeaway for anyone listening is just, I want you to do this exercise for me actually if you're listening.

Mary Miele:

I want you to think about your school-aged child and what's something that you just know isn't going as well as it could go, whether it be getting out of the door in the morning or going to sleep at night or eating dinner or getting homework done, a process of any kind that's not going well.

Mary Miele:

And then I want you to think, okay, when that's not going well, what is a strategy we could do to create a better experience for us? And you can even ask your kids, what's a better strategy for us to do this?

Mary Miele:

I wonder if you guys could come up with that and then we could just use it. We'll try it. These are all really great conversations just to continually have with your child because it will start to build their executive functioning.

Becky Reback:

Absolutely. Absolutely. So let's talk about this school year. It's September, it's the beginning. Most kids went back to school just last week. So we still we're all fresh and maybe still have a little summer brain dusting off the cobweb.

Becky Reback:

So let's talk about how we're using this model this year and what parents can do if they want their children to have executive function coaching with Evolved.

Mary Miele:

Sure. Well, first and foremost, we have services for families. So you can contact Becky and set up your intake call during which we'll talk with you a little bit about your child and you can set up your preferred days and times.

Mary Miele:

And we of course do a little work on the match because there has to be a connection between the coach and the child and what the child is needing in terms of executive functioning work. So it always starts with a phone call. That's how you come in here. That's how we set you up with whatever support you need.

Mary Miele:

And essentially the sessions are anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on your child's, they can be online. They can be in-person. And I think it's just a really important investment for this particular school year in general for a lot of our kids.

Mary Miele:

In terms of other ways we're using this model, we are actually continuing to professionally develop our tutors as well as different professionals in schools as well as private tutors and learning specialists. So there is a book available on our website.

Mary Miele:

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You can actually download it for free and you can read all about the research and the model itself. And there are many different strategies in there that we also cover. And then in addition, there is a book on Amazon called 30 Strategies: For Learning Well in College.

Mary Miele:

And that book covers literally 30 strategies that I have taught kids in their freshman year of college around executive functioning so that they can meet the demands of that transition. So we're coming up with many more resources around this model this year. Our intention is really to get our hands dirty in that regard.

Mary Miele:

But I guess the other part I would just say to all of you listening is feel free to follow us on social and ask us in the DMs about any questions that you do have about your child because I always post tips and things that our group comes up with there. So you can grab a lot of information as you go along as well and support.

Becky Reback:

Yeah. Maybe you can put the link to the book in the show notes or something.

Mary Miele:

Oh, that's a great idea. Yeah. I'll tell Sharon about that. That's great.

Becky Reback:

We have an offer, the Evolved Education Back to School Blueprint, which involves one of our big assessments in the Executive Function Coaching Model, the mind print learning assessment.

Becky Reback:

And our offer here is to have kids come in, take a mind print and then we'll kind of help get them based on their mind, print, help get them up and running for the school year. If you want to talk about this a little bit. because I think this leads in really nicely into some of the executive function work that we do too.

Mary Miele:

Oh, yeah. 100%. I was so excited when we came up with this offer because I just think it's a really nice springboard into what's possible for your student to optimize their executive functioning.

Mary Miele:

So what it is, as Becky said is you just can find out about it through Becky or on our website, but essentially your child takes, eight years and up, they take a mind print and then we learn about the cognitive skills most closely aligned to success of being a student.

Mary Miele:

And we go over that exam with you, the parents and also create really a blueprint for the different types of strategies that we all could be working on together to make sure your child is learning at their best. That's really the goal.

Mary Miele:

So this is really particularly great. For example, we have a lot of these kinds of students, right. They're a little inconsistent. They're really dedicated students. They want to do well, but they maybe don't study as precisely as they need to.

Mary Miele:

So there's a B here and there and it's really, really frustrating when that happens. Or they missed some of the writing prompt pieces and didn't get the full score on their writing. Or maybe they forgot to turn in one assignment, but most assignments are actually turned in.

Mary Miele:

So there might be just a little bit of something there to address that would really launch a student into optimization. This service is particularly fabulous for that as well as just providing overall executive functioning planning and that kind of work.

Becky Reback:

Absolutely. And we're calling it a back to school, but I think it can really be done at any point.

Mary Miele:

At any point, if you're listening to this year from now, we're going to still be doing it. It's totally fine for us. Anyway, it's great.

Becky Reback:

Yeah. We'll always offer this.

Mary Miele:

100%.

Becky Reback:

We do it as a back to school just to get people jumpstart and up and running as the school year goes on. Mary, anything else you want to share about this model about the executive function work we're doing?

Becky Reback:

I think it's such good work. I'm so happy and excited to be a part of it. And you're so passionate about it. I'm just as passionate about the executive function work as well. It's kind of my whole life.

Mary Miele:

I know, it totally is.

Becky Reback:

I can spend the next three hours talking about it, but I don't know if people want to listen for that long. Anything else you want to close off with?

Mary Miele:

Sure, sure. Listen. I was just so excited to write this up because it really allowed me to think about this subject in a very formal way. And I think there's just a couple of, I guess, surprising pieces of evidence that I found that I'll just share with you in the book.

Mary Miele:

Maybe this is clear to many of you, but executive functioning is affected by our emotions. So when our children are really not feeling great about a class or a teacher or something happening in the class socially, or they're just feeling kind of yucky in general, this can affect how a child employs their executive functions. Right.

Mary Miele:

So we have to look at that as an overall piece of the assessment. So we do ask our kids how they like each of their classes in their assessments, which I love doing. So insightful.

Mary Miele:

It's really interesting for the parents to hear all of their input, but you could do this too at home where you do an interview and ask your kids about what they like, what they don't like and what they wish for within each of their classes, because you will likely get some really interesting information.

Mary Miele:

And you could just keep saying, "Oh, that's interesting. Tell me more. Tell me more." I love doing.

Becky Reback:

Active listening.

Mary Miele:

Yeah. It's just, you get a lot of really nice insights.

Becky Reback:

How so? Yeah.

Mary Miele:

How is that possible? Yes, exactly. So I think that was really interesting. There's also this concept which I didn't know too much about. So I did learn a little bit more about hot and cold executive functioning.

Mary Miele:

And cold is really the processes that we operate in more neutral contexts when you're thinking like your metacognition, like how did I do on that test? That's metacognition, right, or attention.

Mary Miele:

So I'm going to focus on what I'm doing right now and be in the moment or problem-solving, right. And hot executive functioning involves behaviors and emotional regulation as well as decision-making, social skills, insight, empathy.

Mary Miele:

So it's a little more complex, right. And I think that it's fun for me to see which areas my students tend to perform really well in, where they have some of the challenges, especially in those hot areas, which I think are really fascinating.

Mary Miele:

Especially when you have a kid who's a little more impulsive maybe and they're socializing as a middle school kid and maybe they said something they shouldn't have with a group of friends. And now they're having a whole bunch of different kinds of consequences coming their way based on that really impulsive share or statement. That can really send a child into some kind of turmoil.

Mary Miele:

And I think it's just, that's something where if you have your child working with a coach, there's a safe place to sometimes talk about and inquire about any of those kinds of behaviors that might be coming up so that a kid doesn't have to go through that all on their own, which I think is really important especially as they are in middle school and high school.

Mary Miele:

But anyways, you can read a little bit more about it in the book. I could also talk about this for hours. I'll leave you with one more invitation, which I think is always nice to have as a parent. So we are having a live event on Thursday the 29th of September, and it's between 6:00 and 8:00. It's at Marymount Manhattan College on the Upper East Side in Manhattan.

Mary Miele:

And parents are invited to come to our education expo, which is an opportunity. It's an open house opportunity, an open house format where you can just pop in and really engage with different types of people that offer support for your family and your child. There's going to be our team.

Mary Miele:

So we'll be providing any information about school and learning, executive functioning, tutoring, any of those kinds of questions. And then we'll have also some members of our network there including a pediatrician, an occupational therapist, speech and language pathologist, neuropsychologist, camps, specialist for the summer.

Mary Miele:

So just a nice network of our people that we work closely with to really support students. It takes a village and is all right there. You can just walk in anytime, have a little chat, get a little information just so you have it at your fingertips.

Mary Miele:

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And I really hope to see everyone there. We'll be posting this as this episode comes out. So hopefully you can find some information just on our social or email us or go to the website and sign up. Would love to see you there.

Becky Reback:

Yes, absolutely. Well, thank you so much. This was great as always. I love chatting with you. And hopefully people got some questions answered about executive functions and if anyone has any further questions, you can reach out to us. And we'll see you in October.

Mary Miele:

See you in October. Yes. I can't believe that's already happening. All right. Bye everyone.

Becky Reback:

Bye.

Mary Miele:

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Mary Miele:

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