

# Building the Skills Adults Need for Life

A Guide for Practitioners Working with Adults



## Designed for anyone who works with adults and families, this guide:

- 1 • Explains the science behind the skills adults need to manage work and parenting.
- 2 • Provides suggestions for how to help adults build those skills.
- 3 • Recommends ways to change how services are delivered to adults so those skills aren't undermined.

This material is derived from the Center on the Developing Child's report, *Building Core Capabilities for Life*. For more detailed information about adult capabilities and for references and sources, please see the full report at [developingchild.harvard.edu](http://developingchild.harvard.edu)

We all need a set of basic skills to manage life, work, and relationships successfully. These skills—or “core capabilities”—help us do things like get and succeed in a job, provide nurturing care to children, manage our money, and contribute to our communities. **These core capabilities include:**

<b>PLANNING</b>	Being able to make plans and goals and figure out how to keep them
<b>FOCUS</b>	Concentrating on what's most important at any given time
<b>SELF-CONTROL</b>	Having the right level of control over how we respond to our emotions and stressful situations
<b>AWARENESS</b>	Noticing people and situations around us and how we all fit into the picture
<b>FLEXIBILITY</b>	Being able to adapt to changing situations

By helping adults to strengthen these skills from the inside (at the individual level) and from the outside (by changing how we deliver services), we not only help them find pathways out of poverty and adversity, but we also ensure that the next generation (the children of these adults) will have the experiences and relationships they need to take on challenges and succeed in life. And that will make our society stronger and healthier for everyone.

# The Science Behind the Skills

Scientists who study the brain group these core capabilities under two categories: self-regulation and executive function.

**Self-regulation** is like it sounds: it helps us regulate and control ourselves. It helps us use the right skills at the right time and manage how we respond and react to the world around us. There are two kinds of self-regulation: *automatic* (our fastest and first reaction; it's where the "fight or flight" response comes from) and *intentional* (where we think about and plan our response and next steps). **Having the right balance of automatic and intentional self-regulation at the right time is an important part of our core capabilities.**

**Executive function** makes intentional self-regulation possible. Executive function skills help us remember our goals and the steps we need to take to reach them, ignore distractions along the way, and come up with a Plan B if Plan A doesn't work out.

No one is born with these core capabilities, but we can *all* learn them over time. The brain's architecture begins developing before we're born and continues into our teen and adult years, but **the types of experiences and relationships that children have in the first few years of life affect how well the different parts of the brain connect and communicate** with one other. Positive, healthy experiences and responsive, "serve and return" interactions with parents and other adults help build strong connections in the brain that serve as a sturdy foundation for all the health, learning, and behavior that follow.

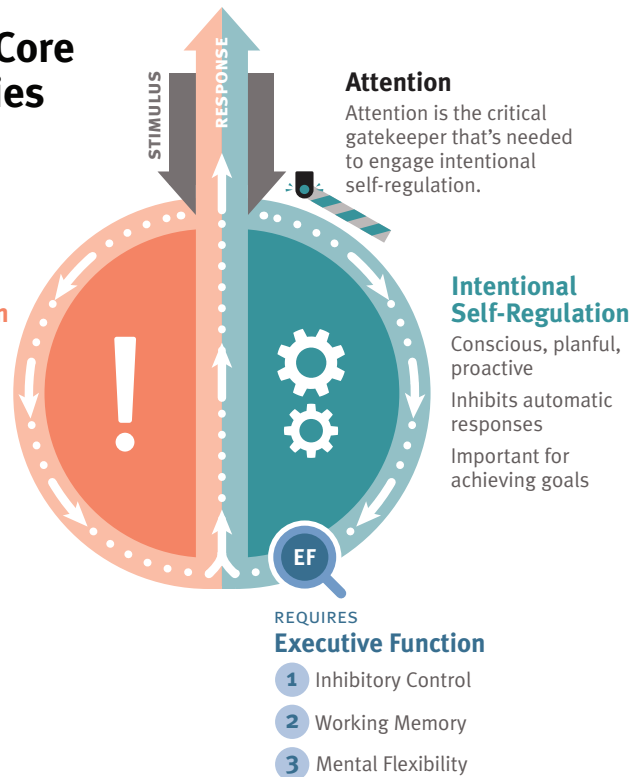
Skill begets skill as brains are built from the bottom up, with increasingly complex circuits building on simpler circuits, and increasingly complex and adaptive skills emerging over time. By age 3, we start learning to use core capabilities in basic ways—like remembering and following simple rules. Between 3 and 5 years old, we make huge gains in using these skills as we practice them more and more. By the later childhood and teen years, our brains are ready to build the skills required for more complex situations—with the right experiences and support.

Although it's much easier to learn these skills early in life, it's also never too late. Even after our mid-20s, adults can still learn new skills and make weak ones stronger.

## How Our Core Capabilities Work

### Automatic Self-Regulation

Rapid, impulse-directed  
"Fight or flight" response  
Important for urgent situations



## What gets in the way of these skills?

Working with adults, you may have noticed that not everyone seems to make the best use of their core capabilities. That's because **experiencing a pile-up of adversity—such as financial insecurity, violence, addiction, depression, or abuse—causes so much stress that it can overload our ability to draw on these core capabilities.**

Yet those are the very skills needed to succeed in the face of adversity! And if adults didn't have the childhood experiences and relationships to help them develop and practice these core capabilities early in life, they can be at even more of a disadvantage.

Why? Because stress and adversity trigger *automatic* self-regulation—that immediate fight or flight response, the one that doesn't involve careful thinking or planning. When that response is triggered constantly in childhood without an adult to buffer the effects

and model a response, the brain overdevelops the ability to perceive and respond quickly to threats—instead of the ability to respond more thoughtfully. That's why, as adults, some people may struggle to keep track of the multiple problems in their lives, find solutions for dealing with them, and set priorities for moving ahead. Even if they can come up with a good plan, they may find it harder to stick to it.

**The good news is that, even if adults didn't have opportunities to develop strong core capabilities before, they can learn to build up these skills individually through coaching and practice.**

# 5 Ways to Empower Adults to Build Their Own Core Skills

Strengthening from the Inside



1

## Use real-life situations to practice skills.

Imagining and preparing for a specific stressful situation (e.g., trying to cook dinner while a baby is crying and the phone is ringing) helps adults see how the skills are relevant to their lives and identify simple, everyday ways to practice them.



2

## Spot and stop automatic responses.

Help adults recognize their emotional triggers (e.g., intense anger or fear) and then “stop and think” when they occur. Taking a deep breath and focusing on long-term goals before responding to whatever has triggered their intense emotion will empower adults to become more self-aware and develop coping strategies for the heat of the moment.



3

## Take a second look at stressful situations.

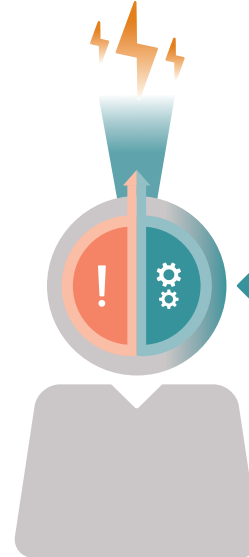
Viewing a situation in a different way (also called “reappraising” or “social distancing”) helps diffuse anger, frustration, and fear. It also helps prevent responses that are out of proportion to the situation. Adults can think of someone they admire and imagine how that person would handle the situation. They can also learn to reappraise tasks that seem overwhelming or difficult—like filling out a long application form or getting children ready for school.



4

## Focus on personally motivating goals.

Asking adults, “What type of job would you like to have and how can we help you get it?” changes the tone of your relationship to one of collaboration and support and encourages them to think long-term. Once they can picture themselves achieving a goal and imagine how it feels, they’ll begin to see potential for the future. They’ll also find it easier to create steps for reaching their goals—and a plan for dealing with obstacles that might stand in their way.



INDIVIDUAL

Individual approaches help adults build their core capabilities.



5

## Recall positive memories and build on small successes.

Adults who have lived through significant adversity may stop believing that they have any control over their lives. Focusing on positive memories (e.g., recalling a proud parenting moment when they or their children did something well) may help adults see that their actions—even the smallest ones—can make a difference. This gives them a positive place to start from to change their self-image, to reinterpret life’s challenges as less threatening, and to plan for the future.

# 4 Ways to Deliver Services That Support Adults' Core Skills

Strengthening  
from the  
Outside



1

## Meet basic needs first.

By reducing the burden of stress caused by whatever is scarce in people's lives—child care, transportation, time, cash, or crucial supplies like food and diapers—we enable adults to shift their focus from basic survival to longer-term programs and services like education and training, financial planning, and goal-setting.



3

## Be a coach, not a boss.

By approaching adults with respect, truly listening to them, and building on what they do already that's positive, we can reduce the stress and potential threat of our interactions and avoid triggering their threat response system. Providing feedback in positive ways will help adults become more open to new opportunities, and having a consistent format for interactions will provide them with some sorely needed predictability.



2

## Simplify, simplify, simplify.

Streamlining application materials, processes, and procedures within and—whenever possible—across agencies and providers will ensure that services designed to help adults do not inadvertently become additional sources of stress for them. Make informational materials widely accessible by producing them in a variety of formats, using clear language, and breaking down required tasks into steps.



4

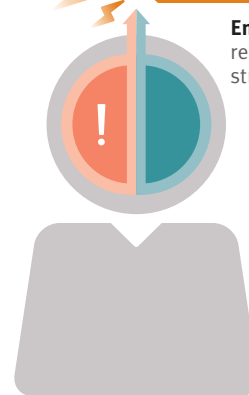
## Use easily accessible and familiar tools.

Asking adults what helps them to stay organized will provide the best insight in what will work for them. Tools like checklists may help adults better manage life's many demands and break down tasks into incremental steps. By enabling adults to sign up for text message reminders about upcoming appointments, deadlines, or classes, we put the power to solve problems and practice skills back into their hands, while using a tool (cell phone) that they already rely on.



ENVIRONMENTAL

**Environmental approaches** reduce exposure to stressful experiences.



## Learn More

For more information on core capabilities and for more detailed examples of ways we can help adults strengthen them, go to [developingchild.harvard.edu](https://developingchild.harvard.edu)