

Teachers 10 Tips for an Executive Function Friendly Classroom...

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SPEAKERS

Seth Perler

 Seth Perler 00:00

Hello teachers, my name is Seth Perler. I'm an executive function coach and I help struggling students navigate this thing called education so that they can have a great life. And in this video, this is a resource in a series of resources that I'm creating for you. This one is the top 10 teacher tips for executive function. So if you have students who are struggling in the classroom, whether it's a virtual or in-person, you'll be able to adapt these tips to your teaching and hopefully be able to to serve your students who are struggling with executive function challenges. I do a lot of trainings for teachers, for school districts, I get a lot of emails from teachers, I was a teacher for 12 years. As a coach, I am involved with all sorts of schools, all kids of all different ages. So I've heard everything from teachers, in terms of what they're struggling with, what's working, what's not. So these tips are really based on what I think are some of the very most important things that will help you. So I hope you find this helpful. I've got 10 tips for you, some of them are more abstract, and some are more concrete. But each one of them I think you'll find pretty valuable. If you're a notetaker, go ahead and get ready to take notes because this is a resource. I'm going to throw a lot at you pretty quickly. Here we go.

 Seth Perler 01:19

Number 1: Close the door and teach. So a lot of times you'll hear seasoned teachers tell you, "Close the door and teach." What that means to me is that sometimes we just got to really shut off all of the noise. From top-down education, from standards, from pressures, and really look at the human beings that are in front of us in the classroom, and really do what we need to do for them. Close the door and teach. What I want to mention about 'close the door and teach,' is that I think it's important for us educators to understand our unconscious programming. What I mean by that is that we built this system, this thing called a school system, these methods of teaching, these approaches to education, we built these things. So we can change them, we can unbuild them, we could have built them differently. It often feels like "Oh, that's just the way it is. This is how we've always done it. This is all I've ever been exposed to in my childhood and what I see right now, so this must be the way." But what tends to happen is teachers often get a nagging gut feeling that something's off. When people have been teaching for a while, like seasoned teachers, they have realized that you know what, their gut has told them something was off because something was off. And they needed to adapt their teaching style, their craft, their art. There is an art and a science of teaching, they need to adapt their craft to what the kids need. They actually do know what kids need. So I really want to encourage you to close the door and teach, do what you need to do, really understand that you've been influenced in terms of how things are and that they don't have to be that way. Everything we built.

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Number 2: To question everything. So my second thing in terms of supporting students who struggle with executive function is question everything. What does that mean? Question grades. Why do we do letter grades? Do they work? Are they doing what we think they're going to do? Are they motivating? Are they helpful? How are they helpful? How aren't they helpful? Question testing, question the way we do assessments, question textbooks and curriculum, and where they're from and who produces them, and what's in them and how it works for the students, and question the standards and who writes them, and how mindfully they're written and how they work for everybody. Question the top-down nature of education, question yourself, question everything. So number two is question everything. Really ask yourself, "Why are we doing things the way we do them? Does this really make sense?" Because a lot of things we do are outdated and archaic and are not working. A lot of things are working, but really question everything so that you can get clear in your own gut.

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Number 3: Create success experiences. Oftentimes, there's a lot of top-down pressure to

use the curriculum, or the standards, or whatever it is that we are being asked to do. So we are using those standards, or curriculum, or guidelines, or whatever, to drive how we teach. To drive what we teach. What I want you to imagine is creating success experiences first. So pretend like that stuff doesn't exist, what would need to happen for you to create experiences where the kids walk out of your classroom every day feeling successful? Not feeling overwhelmed or daunted or disengaged. What could we do that would make them feel successful? Because so much of what students with executive function struggles experience is that they can't be successful. Nothing they do is good enough. No matter how hard they try, nobody notices their effort. They always have to do makeup work, incompletes, late work. It's it's an uphill battle for them. So imagining "Well, how could we create a classroom that is built around them walking out of there feeling like a success every day?"

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Number 4: Creatively differentiated curriculum. This is just a term that I use that describes differentiation, but in the way that I think works best for these kids. Creatively differentiated curriculum. We differentiate everything creatively. What does that mean? It means we give kids choices, as much choice and content process and product and environment as possible, as much flexibility as possible. If you don't know a lot about that just Google 'content, process, and product,' that's a great place to start.

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Number 5: Next, this is very related to the content process and product and creatively differentiated curriculum, but rubrics. If you don't use rubrics, learn all about rubrics. Rubrics are really cool because what we want to do when we're teaching, when we're differentiating, when we're teaching neurodiverse, kids, kids who have all different abilities in different domains. What we want to do is we want to give them structure, but we also want to give them freedom. Okay, those sound like the opposite things. What does that mean? When I'm designing curriculum, I want to create curriculum that has as little structure as possible, but as much structure that is needed so that everybody can scaffold and have these successful experiences. But as much freedom as possible, in terms of choices, process, content, process, product, environment. So we want to have a balance. Every time you're designing a unit, you want to design that unit based on, how do I create a rubric that encompasses places where we want these kids to grow, but we want to give them some structure and some freedom, how do we balance that? So that really drives how I design curriculum is that one question. And rubrics help. So number five, was rubrics. Learn to master rubrics, they're so cool. There's so much flexibility in terms of how you can design awesome learning experiences.

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Number 6: Chunking. I talked about chunking a lot. These kids who struggle with executive function, when they hear "Do your homework" or "Do your classwork" or "Do the assignment," or whatever, it can feel very overwhelming to them. They can get analysis paralysis, they can procrastinate and not be motivated. It can feel very large, it can feel like a mountain to climb. So they need it chunked. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. The journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step. However you look at it, what we're trying to do is make things bite size. Again, success experiences. We need to chunk things into manageable pieces where they can be successful. There are two ways to chunk. You chunk by time, you chunk by task. You can look at some of my other videos to learn about that. But essentially what this means is, if a student has let's say, a worksheet, we all love worksheets, right? If they have a worksheet, let's say that has 30 problems on it, they see a lot of stuff there. They don't see an end to it. So chunking means, well, how do we break that down so that it feels like five at a time, or a section at a time, or 10 at a time, or one at a time? What does each student need to feel successful? How do we chunk it down? Chunking by time means, you know, can they do something for 10 minutes, or 15 or 30, or an hour, or a day, or week? Like how do we chunk things in realistic, reasonable ways so that they can be successful? Whether it's by time or by the task. So when you are designing curriculum and learning experiences, be very mindful of how you chunk things for these kids so that they can have successful experiences.

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Number 7: This one's pretty concrete, this is what you're probably looking for. This is about creating an executive function-friendly classroom. So in this concrete one, creating an executive function friendly classroom, think about UX or 'user design.' When people are designing apps or programs on computers, they want to imagine the user experience. So when you, the user, are on an app or program or software that you like, what's the experience like for you? It's easy, it's smooth, it's quick. It makes sense, it's intuitive, all of those things. They put so much energy into that. Well, unfortunately, we don't often put that much energy into the classroom. Now, I know teachers who are very intentional about how they set up their classroom. But are we doing it to really consider neurodiverse brains, attentional difficulties, processing issues, and executive function? In order to create a great user experience, I want you to really dive into understanding executive function, you can do that with free teacher course, a micro-course that will really help you there. You want to create systems. And you want to work with what I call systems, mindsets, habits and routines. So an executive function-friendly classroom, the systems are black and white. They're easy, they're simple, kids can understand them. The mindsets in this classroom are, "You can do this, there's no shame here, your effort matters, everything you do matters. All of your effort, everything you try, don't compare yourself to others," and

that's hard to do in a system that uses grades and the way we've set it up. But that's what we want in an executive function-friendly places is a place where they can have a mindset of "I can be successful, I can do this. I am seen, I am heard, I am noticed, I am understood. People take the time to actually understand me." And the habits and routines, you want those black and white, you want them simple. You want them posted, you want them visual. Next thing that you want in executive function-friendly classroom is an FAQ that parents and everybody can find on every email everywhere. On every assignment that explains all of your systems, all of your requirements, all of your expectations clearly, because let me tell you, parents, I mean, teachers, parents are confused. They have a lot to try to understand what's going on in different classrooms. The kids, especially younger kids are learning to understand different expectations of different teachers. This is big stuff and an FAQ helps. All your common questions, get them out there for everybody that make it easy to find. Next is really think about, you know, visual, auditory, kinesthetic learners. How people learn and process information, and consider that when designing your classroom. Next thing is to have a trauma informed classroom, meaning that a lot of your students have had different levels of different types of traumas that are impacting them all the time. Not 24/7 necessarily, but some of them. But they're impacted by these things. Their nervous systems are always there. We don't know what experiences our kids have had in our classroom. So really be compassionate, and empathetic, and understand that there may be trauma there that has impacted their life. And that may be triggered, and they may be experiencing, even if they aren't showing it outwardly, their internal experience and may be experiencing that. Next thing in this type of a classroom is to ask the kids, "What do you need to make my classroom better, to make it easier, to make it easier to find my systems, to understand my expectations, and to make yourself happy, to make successful experiences for you? What would make that happen?" Ask them, they'll give you great ideas. Next thing is to use bright, clear, big labels everywhere. Everything should be labeled clearly. Next thing is colors. Color-code things. Make everything simple. And finally, poster routine. So those are some concrete ideas about number seven, creating an executive function-friendly classroom.

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Number 8: Engage. When we evaluate teachers, I don't really care for how we evaluate teachers, generally speaking, and there are some great administrators out there that are so supportive. But a lot of times people, teachers, don't really feel supported by the evaluation. Well, what are we evaluating? What I think would be cool is if we evaluated engagement, how engaged are the kids? Because if you have an engaged classroom, there's buy-in, there's ownership, there's choice, there's freedom, there's creatively differentiated curriculum, there's experiences of success, there's fun, there's joy, there's laughter, there's play. So number eight is engage. And if the kids aren't engaged when I

was a teacher, my philosophy for around this stuff is if there is fault, let it be mine. The kids aren't engaged. It's not that they're not trying, or they're being lazy, or they're unmotivated, or anything external. It's my fault. I'm not creating an engaging, learning experience. What can I do differently? So number eight is engaged. And if there be fault, let it be mine.

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Number 9: Empathy and compassion. So teachers, being empathetic to how the parents and students feel, and remember who you're serving. You're serving them, they're not serving you. So most teachers watching this, I'm sure you're there, but there are a lot of teachers out there. I mean, I'm dealing with this regularly, where teachers are very rigid, not understanding, not compassionate, not empathetic. They're very much about rules, and following the rules, and imposing rules, and the kids need to do what they're told and, they lose sight of the human being that's right there in front of them. So that is number nine, empathy and compassion for the parents and the students. What are they going through? Parents, oh my gosh, they're struggling, especially during hybrid learning and things like that. They're really struggling to understand and balance everything. This is hard. So just really understand, we don't always know the whole story behind what somebody is going through. Be empathetic and compassionate. Always assume positive intent.

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Number 10: The last one for you, is do your own deep inner work. So for me as a teacher, and as a human being, I have and continue to do my own deep inner work. My own therapist, my own journaling, my own getting trauma informed help. Learn about trauma and how it impacts you. Learning about my nervous system, your nervous system, cymatics. Learning about how we are reactive, and we want to respond rather than react. Reacting is very blind, and we're very programmed. Most of what we do day-to-day is very reactive. But the more mindful we get, the more we can be responsive, the more we can notice what I call, 'the story and the body.' The story is the narrative in our mind, how true is that story? Do we know that our stories are true? Are they 100% true? 50% true? Sometimes we make mountains out of molehills, or we misinterpret, or we misunderstand. And these kids who struggle with executive function are so misunderstood. They're often labeled as being lazy, or not trying hard enough, or not caring about school, or unmotivated, or "You've got so much potential." Well, these things can shame people. And that's because the teacher has a story, if a teacher is conveying those messages. So changing that story can help. But we have to learn and by doing our own deeper inner work. What are our stories? What did we grow up learning? Is it correct in this

circumstance? Our body, our nervous system responds to the story. How are we co-regulating? How is our nervous system co-regulating with the students that we serve? What messages is our nervous system telling them about how valuable they are? How important they are? How important it is to hear them, listen to them, and respect them, and treat them with dignity and things like that? So number 10 was do your own deep inner work.

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If you're taking notes, you can go back through this and replay it and take some more notes if you want, but here are the the 10 things. (1) close the door and teach, (2) question everything, (3) create success experiences when you're designing curriculum, (4) creatively differentiated curriculum, (5) rubrics, (6) chunking, (7) executive-friendly classroom, (8) engage - if there be fault let it be mine, (9) empathy and compassion, and (10) is to do your own deep inner work. So if you like this, please share it with somebody right now. Share with some teachers, or even parents that might like this. Again, my name is Seth Perler. I'm an executive function coach, I help struggling students navigate this thing called education so they can have a great life. I want to wish you peace and joy. Take care.