

Trauma & Executive Functioning, How Does it Impact EF?

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SPEAKERS

Seth Perler

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- S** Seth Perler 00:00
What is up, parents and teachers? I got this email from Michelle, that says "I'm wondering if you have any experience with 2e kids that are most likely 2e due to ongoing stress and trauma. My son has difficult life circumstances in addition to the 2e challenges. Thank you, Michelle."
- S** Seth Perler 00:17
Alright, so that is a fantastic question and I'm gonna break that down for you. So for you, parents and teachers, this is a good one for both of you. My name is Seth Perler, I'm executive function coach, and I help struggling students navigate this thing called education so they can have a great future. And when we struggle to execute, it limits and impacts our quality of life and our potential in our future, quite literally. This is no joke here. This is legit stuff we need to figure out if we're going to help these kids. What I'm going to talk about here today is trauma and 2e, but really trauma and executive function. I'm going to give you three super solid insights. I'm going to build this up for you so that you really can take these insights and have some ideas of what to do to serve the kids that you're trying to be helpful to. So first, parents and teachers, let's start with what is 2e. If you're not familiar with 2e, or twice-exceptional, 2e kids (or adults) have two exceptionalities, generally speaking. That means that they are gifted and talented on the

one hand, and on the other hand, there's a learning challenge or learning disability or whatever words you prefer, it doesn't matter. There are legitimate challenges and legitimate gifts. These people are very complicated, and the discrepancies oftentimes between the challenges and the gifts can really exacerbate a lot of the problems that these kids are having in terms of being understood by people who're trying to be helpful. So that's what 2e is.

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Seth Perler 01:35

Now executive function and 2e, people who are 2e, who have challenges, usually the challenges involve executive function challenges. Challenges with getting important things done in very simple terms. Planning, prioritizing, focus, attention, concentration, follow through, self-starting, anything involved with getting things done. These kids often will struggle with executive function.

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Seth Perler 02:02

So now, what about trauma? We have this thing called trauma. Well, for those of you that think trauma is just a big event, it is not necessarily, so you need to understand this, if you haven't heard about big T and little T, please follow me here. But to back up a little bit. When I'm thinking about trauma, what I think about is we have the brain, the story, the mind, the narrative, okay? Then we have the body and the nervous system, let me explain. Our mind, our brain, our story or narrative in our mind is always looking out for danger. Sometimes we notice something that is dangerous, or that feels unsafe, or that feels threatening to us. When we feel threatened or our safety is being threatened, what happens is our story tells the amygdala, a small part of our brain there two amygdala and our brain, tells the amygdala, "Hey, watch out, something's wrong." In the amygdala, here's the story and says, "Oh," it doesn't hear the story, it just hears that message, it doesn't know what the story is. The story could be abuse, it could be a rattlesnake on the ground near your foot, it could be that you just stubbed your toe. It could be that you have to speak in class in front of a bunch of people and that feels really uncomfortable and unsafe.

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Seth Perler 03:19

It's anything real or imaginary, that we're perceiving as threatening. With trauma, what happens is that we can become really hyper-vigilant and really fearful about the things that are going to happen. Does that impact executive function? Absolutely. I'll talk about that. But let me back up here though with a trauma. So we have the story and the narrative. That tells the amygdala "Hey, we got a problem." The amygdala goes "Cool,

we're in danger, I got this. I'm going to work with the body," within a fraction of a second, the amygdala sends a message to the heart, to the adrenals on top of the kidneys, the adrenals send adrenaline to the heart, the heart sends adrenaline to the muscular system so that we're ready for fight, flight, freeze, faint, so that we're ready to protect ourselves from whatever that perceived threat to safety is.

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Seth Perler 04:11

That is what trauma is about. It's about how we can have experiences that are traumatic, that really tell the nervous system, "You are not safe," and then do we process that in a healthy way? Are we guided with other people who are working with us, and co-regulating with us, and loving us, and helping us move through that, or does it almost get, you could, say stuck in a way? What do we do with those traumas? Now I want to talk about the big T and little T. So the big t traumas are referred to like big giant events that happened. That's what people usually think of when they think of trauma. Some big thing happened that was really traumatic to someone and that's what trauma is, but that's not just it. Little T traumas, anything that we've been through over and over and over, where it feels unsafe. You could have a teacher for a year who you feel shames you and criticized by, or anybody in your life that criticizes you and puts you down, nothing's ever good enough. They're always finding fault with you. It could be a boss, it could be a spouse, it could be a relative, it could be a friend, it could be someone you work with, it could be someone that you know. It just seems like there's this trauma of shame, just drip, drip, drip, like water torture, just drop after drop, just continually for a long period of time. That can be traumatic. Okay, so anyhow, you have to understand that it's not just big events, kids can go through, or anybody can go through, also what's called little T trauma. We also can have something called attachment trauma, where we're trying to attach and feel secure with our parents, or grandparents, or relatives, the adults in our life, or young children. Adults have attachment trauma too, obviously. But as kids, we're trying to find secure people. When we feel that somebody is avoidant, or somebody is overbearing, there's two main types of attachment. We can have, most of us have, variations of attachment trauma. There are many therapy models that deal, there are many therapy models, and they are dealing with these traumas.

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Seth Perler 06:15

How do we work through things in good ways? So one of my favorites is called polyvagal theory. It's an amazing theory, and I run an executive function summit and Deb Dana will be talking about polyvagal theory this year on summit at ExecutiveFunctionSummit.com, it's amazing. But polyvagal theory is one of my favorite ways to describe what's going on in the body.

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Seth Perler 06:38

Anyhow, getting back to Michelle's question, let me see exactly how this was worded. "Do you have any experience with 2e kids that are most likely 2e due to ongoing stress and trauma?" I would say yes. Or that if there was already executive function challenges, that the challenges are exacerbated, absolutely by trauma. I would say, yeah, sure. I think that's not uncommon at all. Before I go on, we need to know that the brain develops from the back-forward. In the prefrontal cortex of the brain where executive function takes place is the last part of the brain to develop. In fact, it doesn't develop until we're 25 or 30 years old. I mean, it's developing the whole time, but it takes a long time to fully develop. So while that's going on, there are many, many, many, many influences on the developing brain and on how executive function develops. Things like chemicals and lead paint, and things like that. Obviously, alcohol, cigarettes, those things obviously affect a young person's or in a newborns brain development. Sorry, my brain is a little bit fried, I did not sleep much last night. And genetics, obviously influences our developing brain. And culture. When we're learning executive function, particularly when we are around adolescents, cultural influences are very important. Executive function is going crazy during that time. There's a huge burst in executive function development during adolescence. One of the things that's happening is we're trying to figure out is how do we fit in this world? Who are we? What's our identity? And cultural influences definitely impact our values. So that can impact the developing brain. Food impacts to the developing brain, sleep, income, is a predictor of executive function, even. People who have more opportunities and educational opportunities, and who have preschool and they have more opportunities to develop executive function.

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Seth Perler 09:09

In trauma, yeah, it influences executive function. So a lot of the students that I work with have difficult life circumstances and or trauma. The good news, to me, is that when I work with these kids, when these kids have somebody safe, and who cares about them, and there's healthy and secure attachments, and these kids know that they're safe with the adults in their life, and that these people are there for them, and they show up and they guide them. I've seen these kids who have had tremendous traumas and challenges. I don't necessarily like the word 'overcome,' makes it sound like it's just something that doesn't continue to impact you. Anybody who is watching this right now, who's had trauma knows that it continues to affect us. But it doesn't rule them anymore. Or they can get to a place where it doesn't rule them, where they can use it as an opportunity, they can use it for growth, and they can use it as an opportunity to really self-actualize. Many, many, many people have used their difficulties, myself included, to create careers that are really meaningful to them, where they've used the things that they've went through to help other people. I just want to mention that there's a lot of opportunity. The fact that

you're at emailing asking me about this, you're one of those adults who is in this kid's life, trying to figure it out and trying to be helpful, that matters, that is everything. So this child will be uniquely positioned as an adult to use their experiences to help others in some way.

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Seth Perler 10:56

Number one: So, what works? I told you I was going to give you three things. What what helps with kids like this? Well, first thing I'm gonna mention if we want to help these kids is us, me, you, us doing 'our' as adults. Doing our own deep inner work on ourselves. Doing our own therapy, or support groups, or reading, or journaling, or men's work, or whatever we're doing to develop ourselves. We are modeling for them, even if we don't even say what we're doing, our nervous systems are modeling for them that we care about ourselves, we take care of ourselves, we take care of our mental health, we work on our stuff. We come and apologize for things, and we show up, and we hold space, we learn skills. Us working on ourselves is number one. We also are going to mirror emotional regulation better for these kids, we're going to co-regulate with these kids when we've done our own deep inner work, meaning we're a stable nervous system, and we're telling them that we're a safe, stable, nervous system when they become dysregulated. So that's number one, doing our own deep inner work.

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Seth Perler 11:56

Number two: We want to be helpful teaching kids about trauma tools. Research on the internet, or wherever, trauma informed schools, or trauma informed this-or-that. Just the words 'trauma informed,' and you'll see a bunch of things that come up. What we want to do is we want to teach toolkits, toolboxes, tools, teach kids how to work with these things. You know, a lot of us grew up in families or in cultures or subcultures, where we were taught: don't feel, it's not good to feel, don't cry, be quiet, stop crying, grow up, you know, let it go get over it. And we weren't taught, "Oh, I value and respect that you're having a feeling right now. What can I do? I'm here," we weren't told that. We were often invalidated. Teaching these things, teaching vocabulary around trauma, how to regulate emotion, there are many methods, how to be reflective and introspective, and have a reflective practice and self-awareness practices of mindfulness, and breathing, awareness of our breathing, what our nervous system is doing, and being able to talk openly about what we're going through, and not shaming these kids for how they feel, or shaming at all. So teaching trauma tools is number two. Teaching. Teaching about trauma and guiding kids to have toolboxes to work with this stuff.

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Seth Perler 13:20

Number three: Building secure attachment with them. I mean, we do that by doing our own deep inner work and by learning tools ourselves, but we want to learn about attachment theory and building secure attachment. These kids need one adult in their life, at least one adult who's secure for them, who's there for them, who's got their back, who sees them and hears them, who understands them. We want to repeat these secure attachment messages, whether they're verbal or nonverbal. We want to be saying, "Hey, I'm here for you, I may not be perfect, but I am here for you. I am trying to listen, I'm trying to grow as human being. I'm here," and repeating that over and over and over in many, many, many different ways that communication that says, "Look, I'm trying to be here, I'm here. I am here. I'm not perfect, but I am here for you. I promise I am here. I will do my best and I will keep working on it."

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Seth Perler 14:09

So anyhow, awesome question. Michelle. Thank you so much. Those were the three things that after setting up a base for you, I hope that helps. Doing your own deep inner work, teaching trauma tools, and building secure attachment with these kids so that they have at least one solid person in their life. My name is Seth Perler, I have a website called SethPerler.com. I've got lots of free resources for parents and teachers. Go subscribe and support me if you want. If you like what I'm doing, please support me. Leave a comment below. What did I leave out? What else could you contribute to the conversation? What have you learned or what questions do you have? Leave it in the comments below. How can we help other people in the comments? Give me a thumbs up and a like and all the things. But most of all, if you like this, share it with somebody who might benefit from this. Again, my summit, ExecutiveFunctionSummit.com is coming up in August. Go ahead and check it out. It's incredible. And thank you for being here. Have a great day. The most important thing today is to go connect with your kiddo in a meaningful way. Take care.