

# Andrew Fuller

Clinical Psychologist  
Author and Speaker

[www.andrewfuller.com.au](http://www.andrewfuller.com.au)  
[www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com)



## Learning Strengths-The Five Key Skills that Increase Success for Every Child

Andrew Fuller

### The Big Five

There are five skills that reliably predict success for children & teens. These skills put us in the 'driver's seat' of life rather than being a passenger directed by others & are collectively known as '*executive functions*'.

These skills are:

- **Impulse control**- this is pause button of Life & allows us to think before we act
- **Planning and decision making**-- constructing plans & implementing them
- **Concentration**- directing attention & focusing on the important aspects of an issue
- **Memory**- remembering information such as the steps in solving a mathematical problem
- **Emotional Regulation**- - settling yourself when upset & calming yourself when stressed.

Parents & teachers play a powerful role developing these skills.

Being able to do this turns out to be pretty handy. Having these skills predicts achievement, health, wealth & quality of life more powerfully than either IQ or socio-economic status.

Having at least some of these skills enables kids to be ready for school & to succeed once they get there.

The importance of these skills does not end in childhood. They are crucial for success in getting & keeping jobs, making & keeping friends, establishing good relationships, weight control, staying out of jail & resisting drug abuse. Adults with these skills are happier & have a better quality of life.

### Building the 5 skills

We all start out fairly impulse-driven, easily upset with flighty concentration & limited memory. As we mature & as our frontal lobes kick into gear, we generally improve in most of these areas. When parents & teachers work to develop them, the gains are substantial.

It's not all smooth sailing though. Impulse control is not always at its best in the early teen years. Planning can go missing at times. Our organizational skills don't peak until our mid 20's. We've all had days when our ability to calm & settle ourselves has been a bit patchy.

While generally we all get better at these skills as we mature, put a bit of stress into the mix, add some tiredness & a fear of getting something wrong & our functioning dips fairly dramatically.

Of all the skills that develop during childhood it would be easy to make the case that these five are the most essential.

## **How to Develop Executive functions in Children & Teens**

The easiest way to develop any new skill is to start from what is already strong & build upon that. For this reason, begin by knowing students main learning strengths from [www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com)

Once we know their learning strengths we can then start helping to them plan, delay their impulses, concentrate, remember & calm themselves.

Let's talk about a few ideas to use learning strengths to increase executive functioning. These ideas are discussed in more detail in a series of papers on each of the five skills. Each paper will outline a few activities for children & for teens & young adults.

## **Spatial Reasoning**

Young people with this learning strength are strong in thinking using pictures & symbols. They are often skilled in design & layout.

Using visual signs or cues for focusing & mapping tools for planning are often a successful starting point. Talking about zones of feeling such as red for anger, blue for calm or yellow for happy is also successful. Building memory skills through noticing & memorizing pictures & objects also works well. Developing good summarizing & note making skills powerfully predicts school success.

## **Perceptual and Motor Skills**

People with this learning strength often develop ideas first using their body & their senses.

Sports & games are great ways of learning. This is particularly so when they involve creating a strategy such as in games like chess, checkers, quoits & netball.

Learning to orient your body to pay attention & focus, going for walks & planning, & using your body to calm yourself down, develop these skills.

## **Concentration and Memory**

Concentration is like a laser beam. Ask yourself, *'What is the most important thing to focus on right now?'* & *'What is the most important part of this to remember?'*

Students with existing learning strengths in concentration & memory can build the big 5 skills by focusing on completing a task while remembering the sequence of things to be accomplished within a reasonable timeframe.

## **Planning and Sequencing**

Learning strengths in planning & sequencing are a major advantage in a world that is more reactive than intentional. However, not all of our plans are successful. Learning to develop a Plan B (& sometimes, plans C, D, & E as well) is helpful.

To-do lists, checklists & shopping lists also build these skills.

## **Thinking and Logic**

The big 5 skills all involve our frontal lobes as does our ability to have learning strengths in thinking & logic. While these overlap, it is still beneficial to develop all of these skills further.

Our frontal lobes are the part of our brain that helps us to think in advance, 'maybe that's not such a great idea' or 'I wouldn't do that if I was you.'

Thinking & logic activities that also build executive functions include philosophical & ethic dilemmas, being involved in debates listing the pros & cons of an issue, watching courtroom dramas & reading detective novels.

Asking young people, 'What do you think might happen next?' also helps.

### **People Smarts**

Learning strengths that attune you to other people often give people sensitivity & the ability to consider how others might feel.

Teaching kids to say to themselves, 'Before I act how might other people feel?' & 'Maybe I should pause & see what other people think before I decide what to do' helps.

### **Language and Words**

Being an articulate & skilled communicator is a great learning strength but we also need to give other people a chance to contribute.

The dazzling verbal skills of these young people can also mean their thoughts tumble along at a rapid rate. Teach them the art of being a good listener. Learning to pause by saying to yourself, 'Stop. Ask. Wait. Listen.' assists in developing the big 5.

### **Number Smarts**

Utilizing number smarts to develop executive functions usually pays off rapidly & impressively.

Simple skills like giving a percentage value to the importance of concentrating on the different things happening at the same time,

developing a number system to enhance memory & counting to ten before acting, all develop these essential skills.

There are many ways to develop executive functions & we can learn these strategies at any point of life. Concentrating & controlling our impulses is easiest when we start on our learning strength areas & develop outwards from there. These skills often require that we pause even when we want to act quickly. Small delays, during which we think before acting, results in massive pay-offs throughout our lives.

In the following series of papers on each of the executive functions we'll develop a range of strategies parents & teachers can use with children & teens.

### **More information**

#### **Andrew's website**

[www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com) has helped over 11,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

#### **On face book:**

andrewfullerpsychologist  
Learning Strengths

#### **On Linked in and at**

[www.andrewfuller.com.au](http://www.andrewfuller.com.au)  
[www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com)

#### **Book for Parents**

*Unlocking Your Child's Genius*

#### **Book for Teachers**

*Neurodevelopmental Differentiation-  
Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise  
Learning* (Hawker-Brownlow).

