Managing Family Relationships During the Holidays
by John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

“No family is perfect … we argue, we fight. We even stop talking to each other at times. But in the end, family is family … The love will always be there.”
—Unknown

For many people, the holidays provide numerous opportunities to spend more time with immediate family members, as well as members of the extended family who they may not see on a regular basis. On TV or in the movies, the winter holidays are often depicted as a time of happiness, peace, and joy, yet we have all experienced how stressful the days leading up to the holidays can be as we face long lines, traffic jams, crowded flights, and deciding what to buy for friends or family members that have everything they need.

And Then, There’s 2016
This year, many people are anticipating (and worried about) an even more stressful holiday season because of challenges associated with the recent emotionally charged presidential election. Newspapers across the country have published numerous articles about surviving the holidays with relatives who may not share your political viewpoint, such as the San Jose Mercury News article, “Emotional Thanksgiving? Families Dread Holiday after Trump’s Election Win.” Some television shows have offered comic relief solutions, such as “A Thanksgiving Miracle,” the “Saturday Night Live” skit where a child resorts to playing Adele’s “Hello” to calm the emotional tempo of a stressful Thanksgiving family dinner.

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Dear Friends,

As another year draws to a close, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on where we stand today with our goals and hopes for Morrissey-Compton Educational Center, with an eye towards creating an even better organization in 2017, and beyond!

When an agency is in the business of “helping people do better,” its successes are not always easy to quantify. We started off the year with certain income and fundraising goals, of course. We’re on track to meeting both. Our goal is always to balance the fees we charge and the reality of rising costs of maintaining two Bay Area offices. I am also proud that we have managed to expand our offerings during the past few months to include psychiatric services and vocational assessment. Our Executive Function Research Program is making solid progress. And the great majority of our clients continue to indicate satisfaction with our services, due in no small part to our gifted clinical staff that has grown to include 30 psychologists, tutors, and educational specialists.

This issue of our newsletter is timely in that our lead article offers some advice that provides ideas and strategies to manage family communication during the holidays. The newsletter also reviews the services we are planning for the early part of 2017, including our social skills groups, parent education, research program, and psychiatric services. For the last decade, Morrissey-Compton has undergone tremendous growth in order to better serve our clientele. However, with growth, challenges arise as we deal with a larger clinical staff and increasing client base, and we recognize that it is time for us to start building a strong group of volunteers to help us with the day-to-day running of the agency, which is how many nonprofit agencies are able to successfully operate. We’ve put out a call for volunteers in the next article, and will continue to reach out to see whether that is something our clients and contacts can help us improve upon in the coming months.

Morrissey-Compton has been operating on the Peninsula for 35 years, and we have helped many individuals with learning differences get into college and enter into productive careers. One of our greatest strengths lies in the close ongoing relationships we have cultivated. Our own current Board President, Jeff Wiley, was a student of Pat Morrissey’s in the past; now, he has a successful high-tech career and a family of his own. Jeff’s parents have been wonderful friends to the agency, and he is continuing his family’s tradition of giving back where and when he can. It is relationships like these that we most treasure, and we wish to continue to build more.

I’ll close my last letter of 2016 with a special request to our current and past clients: Please, let us know how we can better serve you. Tell us what types of events you might be interested in attending, so that we may get to know you outside of our clinical relationships. Connect with us online. Share your testimonials and recommendations, and keep us apprised as to how your child is doing. And above all, be happy, and be well—during this holiday season, and throughout the year.

With Warmest Wishes,

John T. Brentar, Ph.D.
You may have heard us mention once or twice (or perhaps a hundred times) by now: Morrissey-Compton Educational Center is a nonprofit organization.

As such, our resources are much more limited than that of a for-profit business. We do very little advertising, relying on word of mouth and professional referrals. A major source of our being able to provide scholarships to families in need depends on the generosity of our donors.

At the same time, there are ways that you can help Morrissey-Compton that require no money and minimal time and effort. As a follow-on to John’s quarterly letter, if you can, we would very much appreciate it if you could take a few minutes sometime soon to do one or more of the following:

Help Us Build Our Social Media Presence
When you like us on Facebook and/or follow us on Twitter, you help us extend our reach to the world at large. Each has the potential to be a wonderful forum for sharing information and connecting with others who have similar interests. Please take a moment to “like” our Facebook page, review our current content, and comment or post your own links. We’d really like to create a community of engaged users!

Tell Us Your Story!
You’ve seen them in our newsletter, annual report, online...everywhere! It’s no secret that testimonials are a huge help to us in our marketing efforts. However, they are also an inspiring and poignant reminder of why we do what we do. Please, tell us how we have helped you and your family. Share your story on Facebook, or in letters or emails to us.

Consider Volunteering
Our organization has reached a size where we very much need volunteers to help us during regular office hours with the reception desk, clerical work, mailings, events, etc.

In addition, we are looking for new members to join our Fund Development Committee. If you are community-minded, with some fundraising experience (particularly with small, local nonprofits), a minimum of one hour to spare each month, and a specific interest in advocating for individuals with learning differences, please contact us for more information.

amazon
You shop. Amazon gives.

Support Us with AmazonSmile
The amount generated by each transaction might seem small, but it really adds up; to date, charities have received almost $38 million in donations via AmazonSmile! AmazonSmile is a simple and automatic way for you to support Morrissey-Compton every time you shop, at no cost to you. Simply go to smile.amazon.com instead of amazon.com, select us as your charity of choice, and when you purchase eligible items, we receive a percentage of the cost as a donation. Happy shopping!

Get Creative!
Do you have a budding artist in your family, who also happens to learn a bit differently? Creations by our younger clients make wonderful additions to our office walls, newsletter, website, and more. Send your child’s artwork our way...perhaps this will be the first step in a successful design or art career!
More comic relief can be found in the Ellen Degeneres video entitled “Mobile Moderator,” promoting a fictitious service allowing families to “hire” professional moderators (such as Wolf Blitzer from CNN) to moderate dinner table conversations.

Helpful Tips for Maintaining Sane and Happy “Togetherness”

The reality is that family disagreement during the holidays can make your time with relatives unpleasant and add to your stress level. The best way to manage communication, particularly after the fractious presidential election, is to dig deep to access effective coping strategies. Consider using some of the following techniques:

1. Humor. Use “Saturday Night Live” or “Ellen” as inspiration to use humor, such as talking about family memories, telling funny stories, or describing favorite YouTube videos, to help manage stress.

2. Focus on what has brought you together—the holiday—and focus on maintaining family cohesion and creating positive memories.

3. Self-regulation. Use strategies such as deep breathing and reframing your negative/angry thoughts to control your “hot buttons.”

4. Make an agreement that certain topics are off limits at the dinner table, such as politics, the Supreme Court, or religion.

5. Strategically change the direction of conversation through directed questioning (e.g., how are you enjoying your new home, where are you going on vacation, etc.).

6. Avoid excessive alcohol consumption. Although many people report they will have to “drink heavily” to cope with their relatives, we all know that excessive alcohol consumption can lead some to become argumentative and demonstrate diminished self-control.

7. Model good self-control. Don’t instigate argument with a family member and model happiness and contentment.
Beyond the Holiday Season

It is important to note that effective family communication is not only reserved for the holidays, but it is also an important tool to promote family cohesion every day of the year, and a powerful force in the emotional development of family members.

In 2010, as part of the Project Cornerstone initiative by the YMCA of Silicon Valley, approximately 38,000 students were surveyed in Santa Clara County. It revealed that many students, including a majority of students from elementary school through high school, rated family support as an important variable in their development. In addition, 88% of elementary school students rated family communication as an important asset in their development.

Ways to improve family communication throughout the year:

1. **Eat dinner together.** Research conducted through the Family Dinner Project, a nonprofit organization at Harvard University, found that regular family meals are associated with the kinds of behaviors that parents want for their children: higher grade-point averages, resilience, and self-esteem. Additionally, family meals are linked to lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, eating disorders, and depression. They found that families who share meals at least five times a week reap great benefits in promoting family cohesion.

2. **Plan activities together as a family.** Holding a movie night, cooking, or baking together can help create positive family memories and improve family bonds.

3. **Volunteer together.** Researchers have found that developing family rituals and meaningful traditions foster deeper connection and a sense of togetherness among family members.

4. **Focus on developing healthy communication patterns:**
   - Pay attention to what is be said to you (e.g., looking at the other person while a family member is speaking to you, maintaining eye contact, etc.).
   - Listen without judgment.
   - Become aware of family members’ nonverbal cues (facial expressions, body language, etc.) to know when they may be upset, worried, or feeling proud of themselves.
   - Promote a growth mindset in your family. Making mistakes is OK and can be a powerful learning experience. Problem solve together to find a solution.
   - Promote a positive emotional climate through fun activities, humor, and modeling self-control. Freely show appreciation for jobs well done! In contrast, high expressed (negative) emotion in families is highly correlated to increased stress and mental illness.
   - Be fair. Avoid overreactions and make sure any disciplinary consequences are fair and “fit the crime.”
Quick Tips (“Hacks”) for Essay Writing
by Robert Urowsky, M.A.

“I hate to write, but love having written” famously quipped poet and essayist Dorothy Parker. Many students quickly understand the first part of this quote. Given a writing assignment, they feel overwhelmed if not beleaguered by the task before them. Though they may have the requisite information and skills, they may experience blankness or a flight of thoughts resulting in consternation and complete inaction. Parents can be mystified by what seems like their child’s procrastination.

Essay writing can be daunting and extremely labor intensive. However, when properly “project managed” it is surprisingly rewarding. Once having experienced the success of writing an essay using best practices, future essays become more routine.

**A Manageable Plan**

Here are some frequently overlooked steps which provide strategies and solace for those on their writing quest:

- **Create a schedule.** Use a full-size calendar (preferably paper), and write out the days and exact times for work. Add contingency time, and plan to have the paper complete before the due date. Building the habit of being done with extra time left over is both a rewarding and efficient time management skill.

- **Create a numbered, step-by-step procedural checklist.** In virtually all domains of consumer experience, clarity and comfort come from knowing exactly how and when events will occur. When online shopping, we receive an email seconds after clicking “confirm” just to acknowledge the order was received. This is followed by continuously updated delivery tracking messages. In the same way, students benefit from a “You are Here” map and knowing exact progress towards completion. Essay writing checklists are easily available online, and checking off each completed step significantly eases anxiety. Each completed step yields an energy boost, satisfaction, and frees the mind for higher level processing as overall demands are reduced.

- **Simplify and operationalize the prompt.** Read the prompt out loud at least three times. Read with exaggerated expression to get the exact meaning of the prompt. This works because it increases awareness of prosody, which is the intonation, rhythm, and stress in speech. Awareness of prosody has been found to correlate with reading comprehension. It originally meant “a song sung to music” in Greek drama and explains why humans pick up so well on music and lyrics, regardless of their demonstrated level of reading skills. Finish by crossing out unimportant words and circling key words to turn a bewildering prompt into an actionable command.

- **Write the draft in a natural, casual language (“register”).** Students should be encouraged to write in simple language as if they were explaining something to a friend or young child. Embellishments can be added later, but an essay will be judged by its ideas, not the number of multisyllabic words. For example, a student definition for the word “experiment” might be “what scientists do to test something” instead of “a procedure utilized to support, refute, or validate a hypothesis.”
• **Enlist allies.** Jane McGonigal, a survivor of a catastrophic brain injury which forced her to rebuild her most basic cognitive and physical capabilities, discovered that enlisting trusted friends is an extremely powerful motivator for sustained and highly difficult behavior changes. People generally respond best to a chosen friend who can help with the essay or provide support in keeping to a schedule. Even a quick text from an “ally” can have greater impact and surpass in efficacy the entreaties and admonitions of concerned parents trying to extract academic output from a struggling student. For McGonigal’s complete, free motivational system, inspired by elements of gaming, go to [superbetter.com](http://superbetter.com).

**In Conclusion**
Use of these steps, along with judicious and positive parental support, can help establish best practices for essay writing and generalize to other applications of organization, time management, and overall academic success. Good luck!

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**Social Skills Groups**

**Groups for Kids**

**Winter/Spring 2017 Schedule**

Morrissey-Compton’s ongoing skill-building groups take place at our Redwood City office (595 Price Avenue) and are for kids who struggle with issues such as making/keeping friends, impulse control, anxiety, emotion regulation, and managing stress. There are typically three to five boys or girls in a group who are close in age and have similar challenges and goals.

**Girl Drama!**
Middle School Girls: Mondays, 5:30 to 7:30pm (meets in Palo Alto and includes pizza dinner)
Middle school can be a very stressful time for girls, as they navigate the many social, emotional and physical changes that come with adolescence. Girls will explore friendship challenges, such as dealing with exclusion, bossy girls, and teasing or feeling like they just don’t “fit in.” This group will focus on building self-esteem, confidence, and self-advocacy.

**Social Skills: Making and Keeping Friends**
Grades 1 & 2: Wednesdays, 3:45 to 5pm
Grades 2 & 3: Tuesdays, 3:45 to 5pm
Grades 3 & 4: Mondays, 3:45 to 5pm (meets in Palo Alto)
Middle School Boys: Mondays, 5 to 6:15pm
For children who have difficulty navigating the social dynamics involved in peer relationships. Topics include active listening, perspective taking, reading social cues, noticing feelings in themselves and others, understanding how their behavior affects others, and problem solving with peers.

**Strategies for Managing Anxiety**
Grades 3 to 5: Tuesdays, 4:30 to 5:15pm & Wednesdays, 5:15 to 6:30pm
This group will help children identify their fears and understand how to manage anxiety. Children will learn to recognize the situations that trigger their worried feelings, and will practice strategies to help decrease their anxiety.

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Morrissey-Compton Educational Specialist Robert Urowsky, M.A. offers strength-based, student-centered educational therapy with a special focus on Slingerland®. He is open to seeing students grades 3 to 12.
To schedule an appointment with Robert, or any of our educational specialists, please call (650) 322-5910.

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**Groups for All Ages Fill Up Quickly!**
We pay special attention to generalizing learning at both home and school. Group content is specifically designed for the needs and goals of the participants.

Fill out our NEW online form at [morrissey-compton.org/group_programs.php](http://morrissey-compton.org/group_programs.php) for more information or to register your child.

All information provided will be kept confidential.
When to Request a Psychiatric Evaluation
by John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

At Morrissey-Compton, we are often asked when it is the right time to consider prescribing medication to treat a student’s symptoms.

If the student is in treatment with a mental health professional, parents should discuss the possibility of trying medication with his or her therapist to determine whether it would be an appropriate step in the student’s treatment plan. If the student is not seeing a therapist, but is displaying emotional or behavioral difficulties that are not responding to help provided by his or her pediatrician, parents, school staff, and other community supports, consider a mental health evaluation as the first step in developing a treatment plan. The evaluator can help parents decide the next course of action, such as individual therapy, family therapy, group therapy, and/or a medication evaluation.

Not a Singular Solution
Medication can be an effective part of the treatment for a number of mental health conditions during childhood and adolescence, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADHD, eating disorders, psychosis, bipolar disorder, severe aggression, autism, or sleep problems. However, psychiatric medications are rarely used alone and are usually one part of a comprehensive treatment plan. Indeed, there is considerable research that indicates that combined treatment (therapy and medication) is more effective in the treatment of anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder than either approach alone. For ADHD, medication has proven to be the most effective and fastest-acting treatment of attention problems, but therapy can be extremely helpful in addressing self-esteem concerns, social difficulties, and managing stress. Similarly, educational therapy can help improve academic performance.

What to Watch For
Some warning signs that may trigger a mental health or medication evaluation, particularly if they are observed across a variety of settings including home and school, are:

- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Social withdrawal or withdrawal from normal recreational activities
- Symptoms of sadness/tearfulness
- Excessive fears or worries
- Repeated thoughts of death

How it Helps
When medication is prescribed appropriately by a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and is taken as prescribed, it can help reduce or eliminate physiologically-based obstacles to change, enabling the student’s own efforts to be more effective and improve his or her daily functioning. For example, it can also help the student use other support services more effectively, such as therapy (due to improved motivation and engagement associated with lower levels of symptoms), tutoring (due to improved focus/attention), and social support (due to improved social motivation).

Look No Further
We are very pleased that Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist Dr. Thomas Butler has joined Morrissey-Compton to provide psychiatric consultations to families. This allows our students to access medication services along with our other support services such as individual, family, and group therapy; educational therapy; and executive function therapy. Not only does this provide a convenient one-stop center for student support services, but it also allows for close collaboration of the student’s treatment team. However, Dr. Butler’s services are available to all students regardless of where they may receive other services, and he is happy to collaborate with other treatment providers.

To schedule a consultation appointment with Dr. Butler, please contact our intake coordinator at (650) 322-5910 or www.morrcomp.org.
Back by popular demand, Challenge School returns for its 35th summer!

As we do each year, our multi-sensory curriculum is developed with a fun, high-energy theme in mind to allow for real world learning and meaningful connections. This summer’s theme will be Inventions, and we will explore important inventions from ancient times to present day as well as develop our own inventions!

What Makes Challenge Special
This program, for students who have just completed grades K through 6, is the only private summer school in the area that is not part of a year-round school. We meet the needs of our wonderful students by truly delivering an individualized curriculum designed for learning disabled and ADHD students. Not only does the program help maintain academic skills over the summer, but alternative, research-based strategies are taught by trained special educators to support reading, writing, and mathematics achievement. Also setting Challenge School apart is its Executive Function and Social Skills curriculum, which is fully integrated into each classroom at a developmentally appropriate level. Perhaps the best testament to Challenge’s success story and to the magic of the program is our very high return rate each year. Our greatest goal and greatest joy is to foster self-esteem and academic confidence. For many students, it is the place where they begin to shine, learn about their own learning profile, and begin to advocate for their individual needs.

Challenge School will once again be held at the Redeemer Lutheran School campus in Redwood City.

School dates have been set for June 19 to July 20 (no school July 4th). We will start accepting applications in January of 2017. Reserve your spot in this unique program, as it fills up quickly. Visit our website or call (650) 322-5910 for more information.
Announcements

A Special Message from the Crisis Text Line

Crisis Text Line is launching a big push in the Bay Area, partnering with the City of San Francisco, Caltrain, Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco Giants, and more.

Spread the Word
Raise awareness of Crisis Text Line and de-stigmatize talking about mental health issues—use #BAYbrave on social media!

Examples
• Reaching out when you need someone? That’s #BAYbrave. Text BAY to 741741@crisisTextLine.
• My #BAYbrave moment was realizing I can’t do this alone. @CrisisTextLine provides free, 24/7 support. Text BAY to 741741 #BAYbrave.

Join Us/Connect
Become a volunteer Crisis Counselor. We’re 200 strong in the Bay Area! Apply at crisistextline.org/volunteer. For connections to local organizations, schools, and government, contact libby@crisistextline.org.

Participate in Our EF Study!
Executive Function Research Program

What is the purpose of the study?
We want to better understand the cognitive and academic profiles of students with executive function (EF) differences. The more we can understand EF difficulties, the better we can provide assessments, diagnosis and interventions that are effective. In order to achieve that we need to collect data on typically developing students to compare to students that struggle with EF difficulties.

Who are we looking for to participate?
• 8-16 year olds with typical developing EF skills
• No history or presence of learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, anxiety, depression, or any other neurodevelopmental disorder
• Willing to complete cognitive and academic testing at Morrissey-Compton Educational Center

What are the benefits to participating?
We will provide a short summary of the student’s cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses. Participants who complete the study will enter a raffle to win a $150 Amazon Gift Card!

Contact Us ASAP
Email efstudy2016@gmail.com or call (650) 322-5910 x110
Research Associate: Dr. Rita Lopez
Principal Investigator: Dr. Surina Basho
Study Location: Morrissey-Compton Educational Center, 595 Price Avenue, Redwood City, CA
PRE-REGISTRATION REQUIRED FOR ALL CLASSES
Visit www.morrissey-compton.org/parent_classes.php for workshop descriptions, presenter biographies, additional dates & topics, and links to pre-register via Eventbrite (required). For info, contact Sue Garber, M.A. at sue.garber@morrcomp.org.

You may also sign up for the latest news and updates by visiting our home page or sending your email address to info@morrcomp.org.

• Children who Struggle with Impulse Control: Practical Strategies to Help Your Child Stop and Think before Acting
• Connect to Correct: The Importance of Emotional Connection to Parenting
• Considering Medication to Help Your Child with Attention, Mood or Anxiety: Evaluating Safety and Efficacy of Common Medications
• Recognizing and Treating Depression in Children and Adolescents
• Emotion Regulation: Teaching Your Emotionally Reactive Child Strategies to Manage Strong Feelings
• Ending the Homework Nightmare: Supporting Your Child Who Hates Homework

Back by Popular Demand!
ADHD Series with Dr. Janet Dafoe
Five-Part Series, Saturdays, February 25 to March 25, 1 to 3pm in Redwood City

February 25: ADHD and Executive Functions (Grades 4 to 12)
Children with ADHD often have difficulty starting assignments, following directions, organizing projects, writing reports, remembering supplies, and turning in homework. This class will offer strategies to help your child become more organized and to understand his learning style. You will leave with specific ideas to help your child to maximize her success at school.

March 4: Behavior Plans for ADHD Children: Managing Problems and Increasing Desirable Behaviors Using Rewards Instead of Punishments (All Ages)
Rewards and consequences can be used to reinforce the behaviors that you expect, while decreasing problematic behaviors. Learn how to set up an effective behavior plan, used to teach and maintain many kinds of behaviors, such as doing homework and getting along with siblings.

March 11: Advocating for Your ADHD Child at School (All Ages)
Learn how ADHD impacts children in the classroom and what services and accommodations will enable your child to succeed. Understand your legal rights and how to proceed effectively through the complicated process of assessments and meetings.

March 18: Classroom Accommodations and IEP Goals for Executive Function (EF) Difficulties (Grades 4 to 12)
EF difficulties are one of the hallmarks of ADHD. This class will focus on specific difficulties that children experience in the classroom, and provide suggestions for effective interventions. Learn about specific accommodations and goals for specialized instruction obtained through IEPs. Class content will apply to any child with EF weaknesses, not only those diagnosed with ADHD.

March 25: Individual Education Plans (IEP) for Students with ADHD (All Ages)
Bring your child’s IEP (with names and addresses blacked out) and Dr. Dafoe will choose several samples and go through them with the group, providing feedback about how to increase their effectiveness.

About Janet Dafoe, Ph.D.
Dr. Dafoe is a licensed psychologist whose areas of specialty include ADHD, Asperger’s Disorder, school issues and special education law. She provides educational evaluations and therapy, facilitates therapeutic groups for children, leads a support group for parents of children with ADHD, and serves as an advocate for parents going through the special education and 504 processes.
What is metacognition? Often metacognition is defined as “thinking about thinking,” but what does this really mean?

Metacognition is when a person has awareness or insight into what they know or don’t know (about a task, a topic, their performance) and then uses this information to control and manipulate their own cognitive processes accordingly. “Driving their own brains” is a metaphor used to help younger kids understand metacognition (Wilson, 2014).

A Framework for Metacognition

Metacognitive “knowledge” (Flavell, 1979) can be divided into three categories, which may be a useful framework for identifying where a student needs support:

1. **Person variables**, or what one knows about their own strengths and challenges in learning, in processing information, and in different kinds of tasks. “I have attention difficulties, so I often get distracted when doing homework,” or “I have working memory weaknesses, so it is difficult for me to remember my assignments in my head.”

2. **Task variables**, or what one knows about the task (or doesn’t know). For instance, the processing demands (e.g., the big picture/framework of a task, materials that will be needed, steps to take to complete the task) and the expectations around the task (e.g., when does it have to be completed? What quality is expected?). “To write any essay there are four main steps: brainstorm, organize, write, and edit,” or “A draft does not need to be perfect, but the final needs to have no mistakes,” or “I am not clear on what the steps are to complete this project.”

3. **Strategy variables**: The strategies that one can use to complete the task successfully.

This includes individualized strategies that work specifically for the student. “Writing notes during class actually helps me to pay more attention to what the teacher is saying,” or “It is difficult for me to manage taking notes and paying attention at the same time in class, so I will ask my teacher for prepared notes so that I can follow along better.”

Metacognition is the Foundation to Good EF Skills

Metacognition and Executive Functions (EFs) are two sides of the same coin. EFs are a set of skills that help us manage our cognition (learning), behavior (what we do), and emotions (how we feel) to actively solve problems/situations, complete tasks, and achieve goals. Having good insight into what one knows or doesn’t know is the building block for effectively using one’s higher-order EF skills.

Where does Metacognition Break down for Students with EF Difficulties?

**Their perception is different**: “I turned in my homework.” Many students with EF difficulties perceive or interpret situations differently than people with typically developing EFs. For instance, a student will say they turned in their homework even when they didn’t. However, when you have the student go back and think through what happened (i.e., that they brought their homework to school but didn’t remember to take it out and turn it in because their teacher didn’t ask them to) they perceive that they did it because they remember the part about bringing their homework to school or they thought it wasn’t due because the teacher didn’t ask for it.

**Cause and effect disconnection**: “I got a C on my test…I don’t know why.” This is where students with EF difficulties get stuck the most. They can’t identify or pinpoint the specific cause. For example, they get their test grade back and
they think, “I got a C because I didn’t try hard enough” instead of, “I got a C because…my study strategies were not effective, I didn’t understand the information as well as I thought I did, I didn’t give myself enough time to study for the test,” or “I studied the wrong information.”

They do not understand their own cognitive and learning profiles: “I have ADHD, so what does that really mean?” Many students with EF deficits and co-morbid diagnoses (e.g., ADHD, learning differences, depression, anxiety, etc.) do not fully understand how their differences impact their daily functioning and learning. For instance, if a student has ADHD and EF deficits, they may have difficulty sustaining attention and have working memory (WM) weaknesses. Therefore, when they are in class, they may zone out or get distracted, which leads to missing information presented in class and ultimately not understanding the material. Once a student gains knowledge about their own strengths and challenges they can use this knowledge to build effective strategies.

Build Metacognition by Tapping into their Frontal Lobes

Ask meta-questions. These are questions that help the student to think about their thinking. These are not meant to make the student engage in judgments about themselves or to place blame:

- “What strategy could you use to help keep you focused during homework?”
- “Do you think you need a strategy for getting started?”
- “Where are you getting stuck on the assignment?”

Note: Some students may not be able to identify the answers to these meta-questions. If this is the case, ask the question and give possible answers that they can choose from.

Encourage your child to engage in self-monitoring. This can be a difficult area to approach with students because it can be challenging for them. You can ask, “How do you think your progress is going? Do you feel stuck? Do you feel you understand what you are reading?” Students can ask themselves, “Am I spacing out or getting distracted? Am I on track? Do I need to slow down? Do I understand what I am reading?”

Model metacognition by problem solving through self-talk. Verbalize your thinking out loud for your child. “How are you planning the next step, thinking through a problem, adjusting to a situation in real time?” Verbal skills are important for developing self-organization.

Guide them through problem solving.

Step 1: What is the current issue? Example: missing assignments.

Step 2: Identify the cause. What do we think is leading to the missing assignments?

Step 3: Co-create a strategy. Now that we know the cause, what strategy can we use to help?

Step 4: Try the strategy. Let’s try the strategy for a week and see how it goes.

Step 5: Reflect on the strategy. Ask them to reflect on whether the strategy worked or not, is it effective?

If things are working, give them lots of praise for using a strategy and working on the issue. If things have not worked, then go back through the problem solving process with them and help them identify why the strategy did not work.

Be patient. Metacognition is something that many students with EF difficulties struggle with. It is a long-term process to develop effective metacognition and EF skills. The more that you can encourage them to tap into their frontal lobes (and not yours), the better.

References


Honoring Excellence, Raising Funds

A Special Evening in the Heart of Redwood City

The setting was unique and lovely, the wine and food were delicious, and the goodwill, friendship, and admiration were palpable when on Saturday, October 8 at La Honda Winery in Redwood City, almost 100 people came together to join Morrissey-Compton in honoring Chris Bischof, Founder & Principal of Eastside College Preparatory School, and David Laurance, Principal of Beechwood School, as our 2016 Outstanding Educators.

This special evening, called “Providing Worlds of Opportunities,” marked the tenth annual fall fundraising event for Morrissey-Compton. All proceeds benefit the John Inglis Scholarship Fund, providing financial aid to families in need of services. We’re happy to share with you that this year’s event included a matching gift in the amount of $50,000 from an anonymous benefactor, and raised more than $123,000 for scholarships in 2017!

The $123,170 in gifts earned from this year’s event will provide worlds of opportunities for dozens of families in 2017!

- 30 hours of Psychotherapy Services will help adolescents who are suffering from self-esteem issues, social/emotional problems, and ineffective behaviors do better in school, work, and life.
- Nine children having difficulties in regular classes will make new friends and discover their potential by attending Challenge Summer School.
- Through Psychoeducational Evaluations, ten individuals will learn the nature of their learning differences—thereby gaining access to the tools they need to overcome them.
- Thanks to 210 hours of Educational Therapy/Tutoring, students diagnosed with learning differences will get closer to attaining their dreams of attending college.
- By attending Social Skills Groups, ten kids who are struggling to fit in will learn to thrive.
Call for Nominations!
To nominate one of our community’s outstanding educators to be honored at a future event, please contact Lyn Balistreri at (408) 396-8953 or lyn.balistreri@morrcomp.org.

The program took place while guests enjoyed a scrumptious dinner catered by CuisineStyle by Pamela Keith.

Special thanks to Beechwood School Teacher Lewis Hughes for sharing these photos.
It is the mission of the Morrissey-Compton Educational Center to enable children and adults with learning disabilities and school-related difficulties to achieve their goals by providing the highest quality diagnostic and intervention services in a supportive environment.