

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION + LITERACY: A PREVENTION BLUEPRINT FOR STRONGER YOUTH OUTCOMES

Kim Moody,
PhD, CCC-SLP

Professor,
Wichita State
University

Co-Founder,
Prime Fit Youth
Foundation

OVERVIEW

Why prevention through education matters

The intersection of executive function (EF) and literacy

Evidence-based strategies in schools and mentoring

Outcomes and implications for prevention

Tools and takeaways

PREVENTION SCIENCE SPECTRUM

Spectrum of Prevention

Influencing **Policy & Legislation**

Changing **Organizational Practices**

Fostering **Coalitions & Networks**

Educating **Providers**

Promoting **Community Education**

Strengthening **Individual Knowledge & Skills**

PREVENTION SCIENCE FRAMEWORK

Prevention focuses on mitigating risk and bolstering protective factors

Schools are key environments for prevention/early intervention

EF and literacy development as dual protective factors

WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION (EF)?

- A set of mental processes that support:
 - Self-regulation and emotional control
 - Working memory
 - Cognitive flexibility
 - Planning and goal setting
 - Foundation for learning and behavioral self-control
- EF skills form the foundation for self-regulation and adaptive behavior.

EF SKILLS

- They protect youth by enabling them to:
 - Manage emotions and impulses → reduces aggression, substance use, and risk-taking.
 - Plan and problem-solve → increases resilience when facing stress or peer pressure.
 - Stay focused and persist → supports academic achievement and social success.
 - Adjust behavior to context → helps youth respond appropriately in school, at home, and in the community.
 - In prevention terms: strengthening EF decreases *risk exposure* (e.g., impulsive behaviors, poor decision-making) and increases *protective capacity* (e.g., goal-directed behavior, emotional regulation).

WHY EF MATTERS IN PREVENTION

- EF deficits are linked to higher risk of:
 - Academic failure
 - Substance use
 - Behavioral challenges
- Strengthening EF increases:
 - Resilience and persistence
 - Problem-solving and coping skills

THE LITERACY CONNECTION

- Literacy development requires EF skills:
 - Attention and working memory support decoding and comprehension
 - Cognitive flexibility aids vocabulary and syntax understanding
 - Self-regulation supports motivation and persistence in reading tasks
- Reading builds EF through engagement and cognitive demand

WHY LITERACY MATTERS IN PREVENTION

- Literacy goes far beyond decoding and fluency — it encompasses **language, comprehension, communication, and connection**. Within prevention science, literacy acts as a *protective factor* because it builds the skills, confidence, and opportunities that help youth thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.
- **Literacy Builds Academic Competence**
 - Strong literacy skills are the **gateway to all learning**.
 - Proficiency in reading and writing predicts success across subjects, high school graduation, and employment.
 - Academic competence fosters **self-efficacy**, a key protective factor that helps youth believe they can influence outcomes in their lives.
 - When students feel capable, they're less likely to engage in risk behaviors and more likely to persist through challenges.

- **Literacy Strengthens Communication and Connection**

- Reading and writing develop **language for expression**—helping youth articulate emotions, resolve conflict, and seek support.
- Literacy-rich environments promote **positive relationships** with teachers, peers, and mentors.
- Communication skills build **social capital**—another protective factor that enhances belonging and resilience.
- Youth who can express needs effectively are more likely to access help and less likely to internalize stress or frustration.

Literacy Promotes Cognitive and Emotional Regulation

- Reading comprehension requires **attention, working memory, and self-monitoring**—skills that overlap with **executive function**.
- Engaging with text encourages **empathy and perspective-taking**, which reduce aggression and improve peer relationships.
- Reflective writing activities help students process emotions, making literacy a tool for **emotional regulation**.
- In prevention, literacy becomes a *vehicle* for strengthening EF, SEL, and coping mechanisms.

Literacy Creates Pathways and Purpose

- Literacy is a **predictor of long-term opportunity**: postsecondary success, civic participation, and employability.
- It gives youth access to diverse ideas and possibilities—broadening their sense of identity and future vision.
- A strong reader develops a **growth mindset**, seeing challenges as opportunities to learn.
- When youth envision a future through the lens of literacy, they build **hope and agency**—powerful buffers against risky behavior.
- Literacy is not just an educational goal—it's a **public health strategy**. When youth can read, write, and communicate effectively, they're more engaged, more resilient, and more connected—making literacy one of the strongest *protective factors* in prevention science.

LITERACY AS PREVENTION SCIENCE

Prevention Domain	Literacy Impact	Outcome
Individual	Improves self-regulation, coping, and academic self-efficacy	Resilience, persistence
Relational	Builds communication and empathy	Positive relationships
School	Strengthens engagement and attendance	Lower behavioral referrals
Community	Connects youth to mentors, libraries, and learning spaces	Increased belonging and protective social ties

EF + LITERACY = PREVENTION SCIENCE

- Integrating EF strategies within literacy instruction builds protective factors
- Targeted literacy tools can reduce risk behaviors by improving self-efficacy and academic identity
- Mentoring + literacy = a context for EF practice and growth
- Executive function and literacy are deeply intertwined systems that serve as **dual protective factors**—building the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills youth need to thrive. When developed together, they create a powerful buffer against academic, social, and behavioral risk.

EF Skill

Literacy Application

Protective Effect

Working Memory

Holding story elements,
following multi-step
directions

Strengthens academic
persistence and
comprehension

Inhibitory Control

Sustained attention during
reading and writing

Reduces impulsive or
disruptive behaviors

Cognitive Flexibility

Understanding multiple
perspectives in texts

Promotes empathy, problem-
solving, and perspective-
taking

Self-Regulation

Reflecting on reading goals,
revising writing

Increases perseverance and
emotional control

EF supports *how* we learn; literacy shapes *what* and *why* we learn. Together, they build resilient, self-aware learners.

IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT

- Schools serve as the *frontline of prevention*. Daily routines, consistent adult relationships, and structured learning environments create natural opportunities to strengthen executive function (EF) and literacy.
- **Examples:**
 - Embedding EF routines such as “pause–plan–proceed” during reading or writing tasks.
 - Using small-group literacy instruction to practice self-monitoring and problem-solving.
 - Incorporating reflection journals or goal-setting sheets that blend literacy with emotional regulation.
 - Training teachers to recognize EF-related behaviors (e.g., difficulty shifting attention or organizing ideas) as skill gaps, not defiance.
 - When EF and literacy strategies are embedded in academic instruction, prevention becomes part of the learning day—not an add-on.

COMMUNITY: MENTORING PROGRAMS AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- Prevention extends beyond the classroom into afterschool and community spaces where youth experience belonging and connection.
- **Examples:**
 - Mentoring programs (like those at Prime Fit Youth Foundation) that use reading discussions and reflective writing to strengthen EF skills.
 - Family literacy nights that engage caregivers in shared reading, modeling self-regulation and communication.
 - Incorporating storytelling, spoken word, or journaling to give youth language for emotion and identity.
 - Community-based programs that teach parents how to scaffold EF growth through routines, praise, and consistency.
 - Families and mentors amplify protective factors by reinforcing the same EF and literacy skills taught at school—creating consistency across environments.

PARTNERSHIPS: EDUCATORS, PREVENTION SPECIALISTS, AND YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS

- Effective prevention requires cross-sector collaboration. When schools, mental health professionals, and community organizations align around shared goals, outcomes are amplified.
- **Examples:**
 - Prevention specialists integrating EF and literacy modules into social-emotional curricula.
 - Joint data-sharing systems to track student progress across settings (attendance, SEL scales, literacy gains).
 - Professional development partnerships where educators learn prevention-informed teaching, and preventionists learn instructional strategies.
 - Co-facilitated mentoring or enrichment sessions connecting reading, regulation, and resilience.
 - Partnerships turn isolated interventions into **systems of prevention**, aligning language, expectations, and supports across every adult who interacts with a child.

PRIME FIT YOUTH FOUNDATION EXAMPLE

- **Prime Fit Youth Foundation: A Model for Prevention in Action**
 - **Focus: Executive Function and Emotional Regulation**
 - Prime Fit Youth Foundation (PFYF) centers its prevention model on the development of **executive function (EF)** and **emotional regulation**, recognizing that these two domains are foundational to academic success, behavior stability, and long-term well-being. The organization's mentoring and literacy-based supports are designed to build **cognitive control, self-regulation, and connection**, turning evidence-based theory into daily practice.

IMPLEMENTATION: MULTI-TIERED, RELATIONSHIP-BASED SUPPORTS

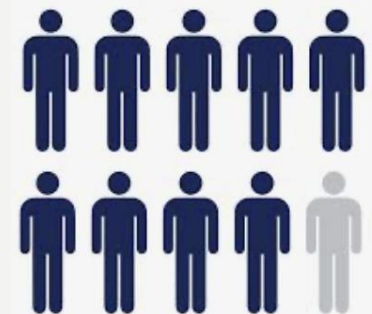
- PFYF implements EF and emotional regulation supports through a **layered system of mentoring, small-group instruction, and classroom-based collaboration**:
 - **Daily Mentoring:** Youth meet with trained mentors for structured check-ins that include self-monitoring, goal setting, and problem-solving.
 - **Small-Group Interventions:** Mentors facilitate literacy-based discussions and reflective writing activities that strengthen working memory, attention, and emotional awareness.
 - **Classroom Collaboration:** PFYF partners with educators to align mentoring goals with academic expectations—helping youth transfer regulation strategies from mentoring sessions to the school day.
 - This multi-context approach ensures skill generalization—youth practice EF and literacy skills across settings where they live, learn, and connect.

CORE PROGRAM ELEMENTS

- **Goal Setting:** Youth identify and track short-term academic and behavioral goals to build planning and persistence.
- **Reflection and Regulation:** Literacy-based journaling, discussion, and storytelling provide space for emotional processing and growth.
- **Connection and Accountability:** Mentoring relationships model co-regulation, empathy, and consistent emotional support.
- **Strength-Based Approach:** Youth are viewed as capable, creative, and resilient, with programming that reinforces competence and agency.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

- PFYF programs have shown measurable improvements in key prevention indicators:
 - **Increased academic engagement** and consistent school attendance
 - **Reduction in behavioral incidents** and disciplinary referrals
 - **Improved emotional regulation** and self-awareness
 - **Stronger sense of connection** with mentors, peers, and teachers
 - These outcomes demonstrate how EF and literacy-based mentoring can operate as *protective factors*—reducing risk behaviors and promoting resilience through connection, reflection, and regulation.



EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES: STRENGTHENING EF + LITERACY THROUGH PREVENTION

- **Daily Check-Ins and Goal-Setting Routines**
 - Builds **self-awareness, planning, and emotional regulation**—key executive function skills.
 - Provides predictable structure that helps youth monitor progress, reflect on challenges, and celebrate successes.
 - Embeds literacy by incorporating written or verbal reflection (“What went well today? What’s one goal for tomorrow?”).
 - *Outcome:* Youth learn to pause, plan, and persist—reducing impulsivity and increasing resilience.

LITERACY-BASED EMOTION JOURNALING & SPOKEN WORD

- Encourages expressive writing that integrates **language, cognition, and emotion regulation**.
 - Strengthens vocabulary for feelings, enhancing emotional intelligence and communication.
 - Provides a nonjudgmental outlet for processing experiences, promoting self-reflection and growth.
 - *Outcome:* Youth build literacy skills while developing tools to manage stress and express emotions productively.

EXAMPLE OF SPOKEN WORD AND JOURNALING



MINDFULNESS AND REFLECTION EXERCISES

- Strengthens **attention control** and **inhibitory regulation** by training the brain to stay present.
 - Can be paired with short reflective writing or “think-alouds” that reinforce comprehension and metacognition.
 - Reduces anxiety and reactivity, improving readiness to learn and engage with peers.
 - *Outcome:* Creates calm, focused learners capable of managing their emotions and thoughts effectively.

COGNITIVE GAMES THAT BUILD ATTENTION AND WORKING MEMORY

- Interactive games (e.g., sequencing tasks, memory challenges, strategy games) directly target **EF skill growth**.
 - When connected to literacy (e.g., word-building, sentence sorting, or story recall), these activities strengthen decoding and comprehension.
 - Games offer immediate feedback and intrinsic motivation, reinforcing persistence and focus.
 - *Outcome*: Strengthens cognitive flexibility and reinforces the neural systems that underlie reading and problem-solving.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: EXTENDING PREVENTION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

- **Engage Families Through Shared Reading and Reflection**
 - Shared reading builds **language, connection, and emotional safety** between caregivers and youth.
 - When families talk about stories—characters’ feelings, choices, or challenges—they reinforce **empathy and perspective-taking**.
 - Reflection activities (e.g., journaling together or discussing “What did this story teach us?”) strengthen both literacy and emotional regulation.
 - *When families read and reflect together, they model the very EF and SEL skills youth need to thrive.*

- **Provide Tools for At-Home EF Support**

- Families play a critical role in reinforcing **executive function routines** developed at school.
- Provide accessible, culturally responsive take-home resources such as:
 - **Visual schedules and checklists** for morning or homework routines.
 - **“Calm-down corners”** with breathing or mindfulness cards.
 - **Family goal-setting charts** to teach planning, follow-through, and reflection.
- Simple, consistent home structures enhance emotional security and reduce stress reactivity.
- *When EF strategies are practiced at home, protective factors are multiplied.*

- **Align Mentoring Conversations With School Goals**
 - Community-based mentors bridge home and school by reinforcing the same **skills, language, and expectations**.
 - Mentors use literacy-based conversations—reading prompts, goal journals, or reflection stories—to connect social-emotional growth with academic progress.
 - Alignment ensures youth receive **consistent messages** about effort, regulation, and resilience across every setting.
 - *Collaboration between families, schools, and mentors transforms prevention from a program into a system of care.*

DATA AND EVALUATION

- **Purpose**

- Data is the bridge between *implementation* and *impact*. By tracking both academic and behavioral indicators, schools and community programs can demonstrate how strengthening **executive function (EF)** and **literacy** reduces risk and builds resilience.

Combining **academic and behavioral data** creates a full picture of prevention impact—showing how EF and literacy growth translate to engagement, resilience, and reduced risk.

Data Source

What It Measures

Prevention Interpretation

Attendance

Consistency of student participation in school or mentoring.

Improved attendance reflects **stronger self-regulation, connection, and engagement**, showing that students are internalizing EF routines and developing a sense of belonging.

Academic Progress Monitoring

Growth in reading, writing, or subject-area performance.

Literacy progress signals **increased persistence, attention, and confidence**, key protective factors that buffer against disengagement or dropout.

SEL or EF Rating Scales

Student or teacher-reported skills in attention, emotion regulation, and behavior control.

Improved **EF and emotional regulation**, demonstrating prevention impact through skill-building and application.

Data Source

What It Measures

Prevention Interpretation

Behavioral Incident Reports

Frequency of referrals, suspensions, or behavioral disruptions.

Fewer incidents reflect **improved coping, inhibitory control, and decision-making**, showing reduced behavioral risk.

Mentor & Teacher Reflections

Qualitative notes on engagement, relationships, and skill transfer.

Positive reflections show **growth in communication, connection, and classroom regulation**, validating both EF and literacy gains.

Family Feedback

Caregiver observations of youth behavior and emotional regulation at home.

Consistent reports across home and school settings demonstrate **generalization of EF and literacy skills**, strengthening long-term protective factors.

LESSONS LEARNED: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE PREVENTION SYSTEMS

- **Collaboration Across Systems Enhances Sustainability**
 - True prevention requires **alignment between schools, families, and community partners**.
 - Cross-sector collaboration—educators, prevention specialists, and youth-serving organizations—ensures consistent language, data-sharing, and follow-through.
 - Partnerships make prevention **sustainable** by embedding EF and literacy strategies into multiple environments rather than single programs.
 - *When every adult reinforces the same skills, prevention becomes part of the culture, not an intervention.*

- **EF and Literacy Growth Are Measurable and Transformative**
 - Growth in **executive function** and **literacy** can be observed through concrete data: attendance, academic progress, SEL scores, and behavioral outcomes.
 - These skills drive both academic and behavioral change—youth become more regulated, resilient, and engaged learners.
 - *Improving EF and literacy isn't just educational—it's prevention science with lifelong impact.*
- **Prevention Through Connection = Stronger Youth Outcomes**
 - The most powerful protective factor is **connection**—to caring adults, meaningful learning, and community belonging.
 - Prevention that centers connection helps youth feel seen, supported, and capable of success.
 - Programs like Prime Fit Youth Foundation demonstrate that mentoring rooted in EF and literacy can change trajectories.
 - *Connection transforms prevention from something we “do” to youth into something we “build” with them.*

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR ATTENDEES

- Executive function (EF) skills are the *engine of self-regulation, learning, and resilience*.
 - Each skill can be explicitly taught, modeled, and strengthened through daily mentoring and literacy routines.
 - Use the EF Spotlight Cards to:
 - Identify EF strengths and growth areas in youth.
 - Embed EF coaching prompts into reading, writing, and reflection.
 - Reinforce protective factors across school, home, and mentoring settings.

CALL TO ACTION: PREVENTION BEGINS WITH CONNECTION

- **Invest in Prevention-Based Learning**
 - Prevention isn't just about reducing risk — it's about **building protective systems** through education.
 - Integrate *executive function* and *literacy* into every layer of programming — classrooms, mentoring, and community.
 - Advocate for funding, collaboration, and policies that sustain prevention as a core part of youth development.
 - *Every EF skill taught and every book read becomes a tool for resilience.*

- **Center Connection, Regulation, and Engagement**

- Youth thrive when they feel **safe, seen, and supported**.
- Build daily routines that foster self-regulation, empathy, and authentic engagement.
- Align prevention around relationships — because connection is the foundation for all learning and healing.
- *Connection transforms prevention from strategy to culture.*

- **Remember: Strengthening EF and Literacy Changes Trajectories**

- When youth learn to focus, plan, and express themselves, they gain control of their story.
- EF and literacy are not just academic skills — they are **lifelong protective factors** that shape opportunity, behavior, and belonging.
- *Prevention is not a program — it's a practice of empowerment.*

IN CLOSING...

- Every skill we strengthen — focus, reflection, empathy, literacy — rewires a developing brain toward hope.
- Every connection we build becomes a **protective thread** in a young person's story.
- When we teach executive function and literacy, we are not just preparing students for school — we are preparing them for life.
- Together, we can create environments where youth feel **capable, connected, and confident** in who they are becoming.

When we invest in prevention through connection, literacy, and executive function, we don't just change outcomes — we change lives.

CONTACT INFORMATION

- Kim Moody, PhD, CCC-SLP
- Professor, Wichita State University
- Co-Founder, Prime Fit Youth Foundation
-  kim.moody@wichita.edu or kim@primefityouthfoundation.org
-  www.PrimeFitYouthFoundation.org