



Southeast (HHS Region 4)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

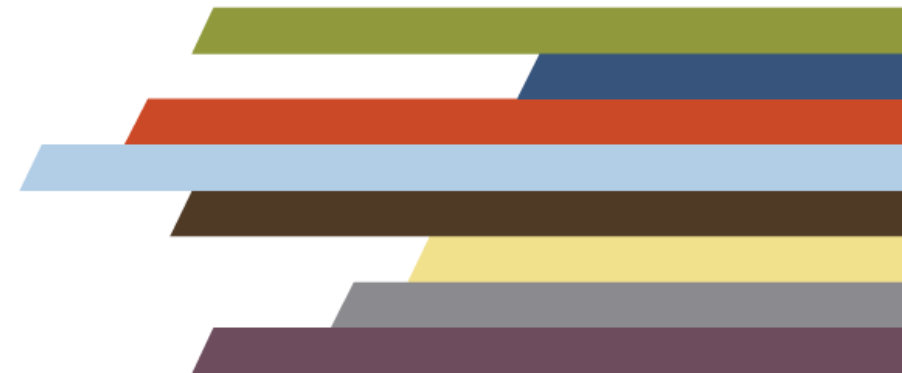
# Supporting the Executive Function of Autistic Students in the Classroom: Your Questions Answered

Katherine Pickard, PhD

Emory University School of Medicine

November 2, 2023

**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration



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The views, opinions, and content expressed in this presentation do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).



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**The Southeast MHTTC** is located at Emory University in the Rollins School of Public Health.

**Our Mission:** To promote the implementation and sustainability of evidence-based mental health services in the Southeastern United States.

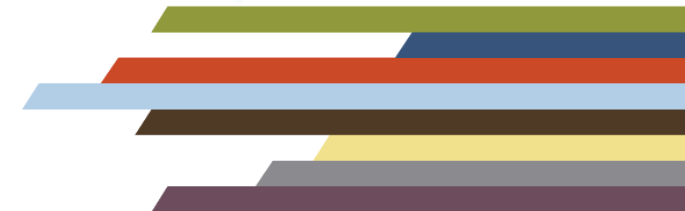
**Our Vision:** Widespread access to evidence-based mental health services for those in need.

**Our Services:** We use a public health approach to build leadership capacity and to provide mental health trainings and resources to providers, agencies, and communities across the Southeast.



**SAMHSA**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health  
Services Administration



# Katherine Pickard, PhD

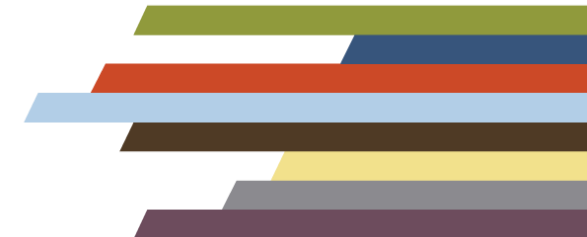
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## Assistant Professor

Emory University, Department of Pediatrics, Division of Autism and Related Disabilities

## Research and Clinical Interests

- Translating best practice interventions for autism into community settings.
- Extensive work within early intervention and public school systems.



# A Note on Identity First Language Use

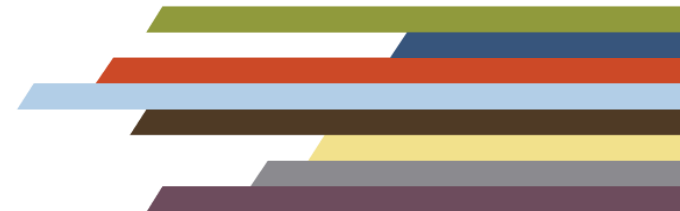
Within our products on autism, we use *identity first* language.

We have made this decision:

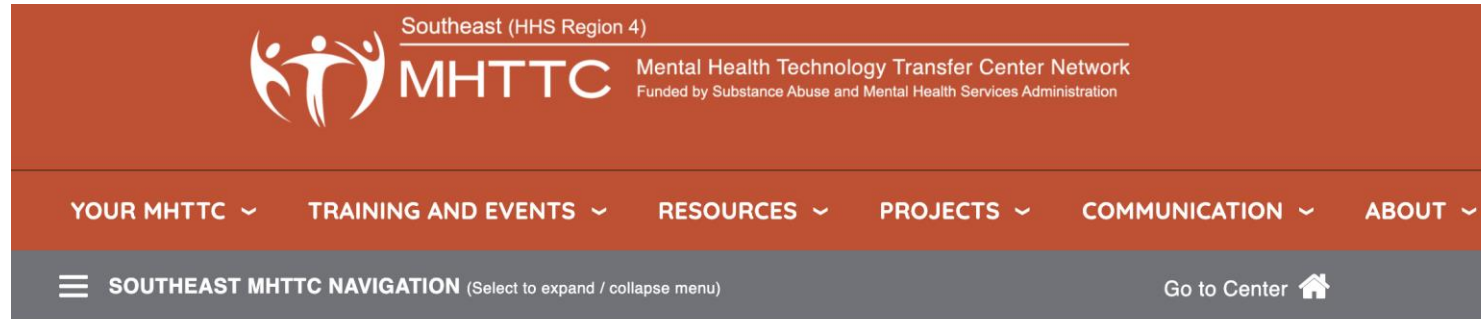
- In response to the neurodiversity movement.
- Based on the preference of many autistic adults.
- In order to avoid the use of ableist language.

However, we recognize that this is not the preference of every individual or family and that many people continue to use person-first language.

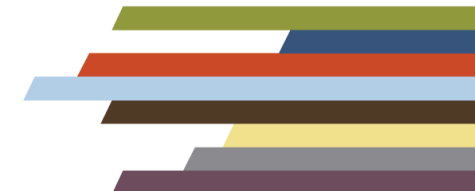
Bottema-Beutel, K., Kapp, S. K., Lester, J. N., Sasson, N. J., & Hand, B. N. (2021). Avoiding ableist language: Suggestions for autism researchers. *Autism in Adulthood*, 3(1), 18-29. Link: <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/aut.2020.0014>



# Toolkit for Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students



## Toolkit for Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

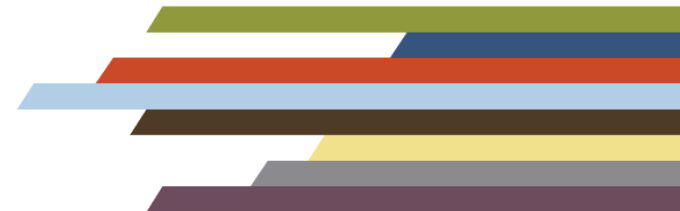


# Office Hours Objectives

The first office hour is devoted to identifying common executive function differences in autistic students.

By the end of the learning sessions, participants will be able to:

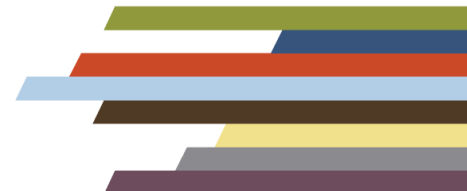
1. Define executive functioning and its importance for autistic youth.
2. Know executive functioning differences that are common in autistic youth.
3. Identify executive functioning differences among autistic youth within one case example.





# Polling Questions

1. What is your professional role?
2. How much of your professional time do you spend working with autistic students?
3. How much of your professional time do you spend supporting the behavior and/or mental health of autistic students?
4. What is your familiarity with executive functioning differences in autistic students?



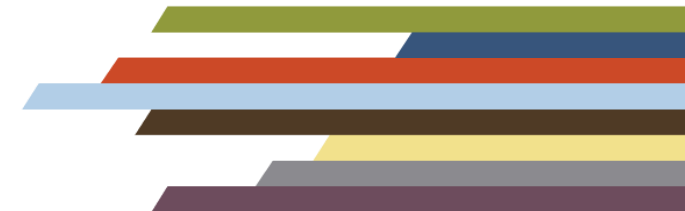


# Prevalence of Mental Health Challenges in Autistic Individuals

Mental Health Category	ASD	General Population
ADHD	28%	7.2%
Anxiety	20%	7.3%
Depression	11%	4.7%
Bipolar Disorders	5%	0.7%
Schizophrenia	4%	0.4%

**PRE-COVID!**

(Ghandour et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2019)



# Co-Occurring Autism and ADHD



Prior to 2013, if a child had a diagnosis of autism, they could not also have a diagnosis of ADHD.

In 2013, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) was released.

There were significant changes to autism in the DSM-5, including that children could now have both autism and ADHD.

# Research on Autism and ADHD

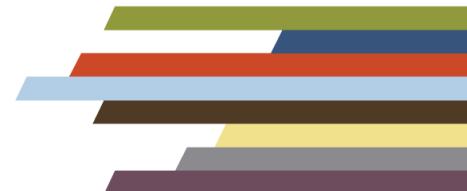
Changes in the DSM-5 opened the door for more research on overlapping characteristics in autism and ADHD.

This has included research on executive functioning, which is a primary and significant area of overlap.

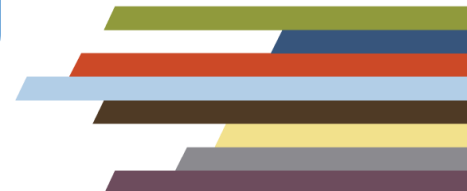
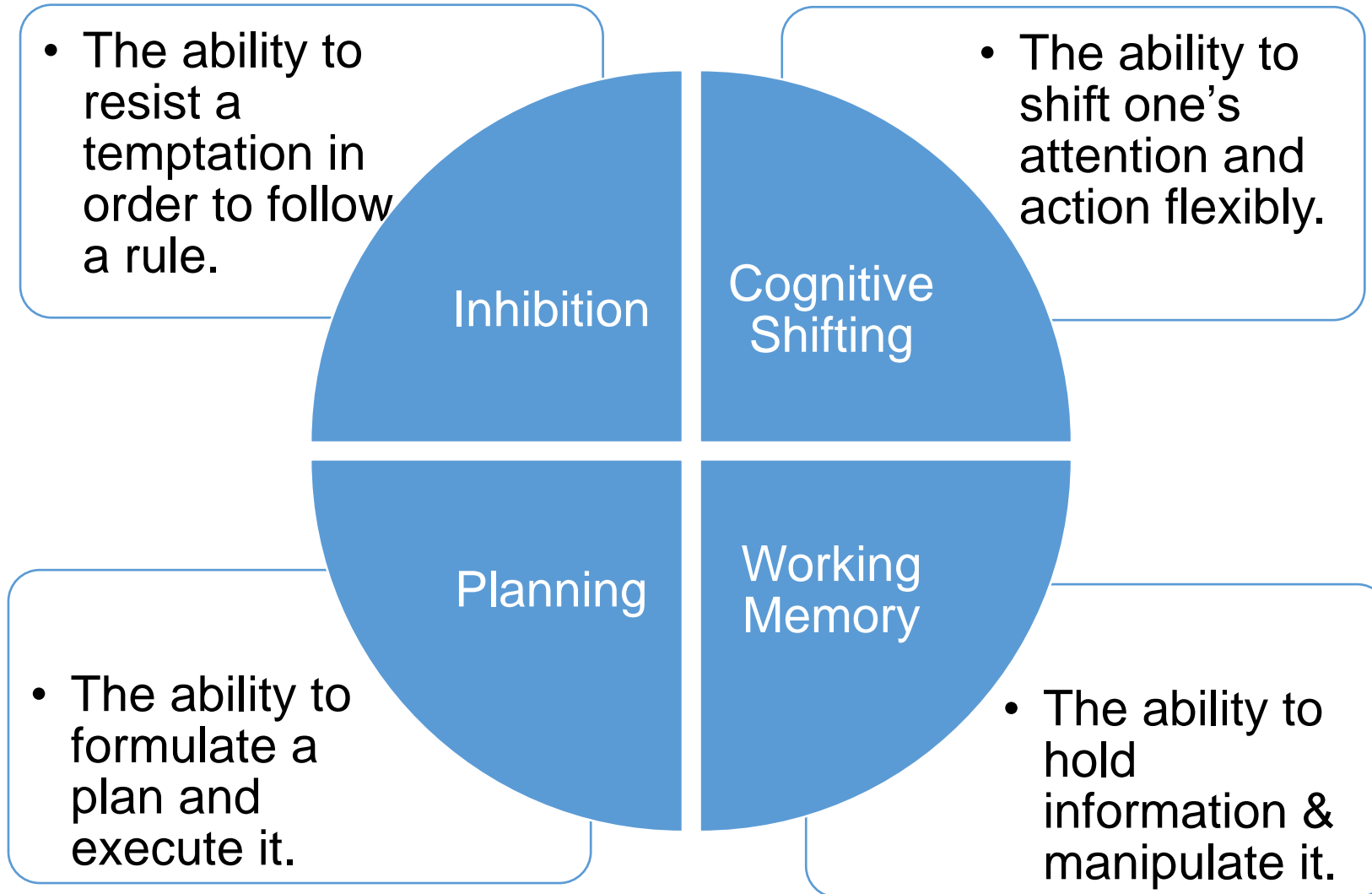
# Executive Functioning: What it is

- Executive functioning is a set of “cognitive control” processes.
- These processes enable:

“Self-regulation and self-directed behavior toward a goal, allowing us to break habits, make decisions and evaluate risks, plan for the future, prioritize what we do and cope with novel situations.”

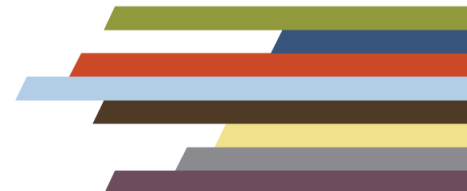


# Executive Functioning: What it is



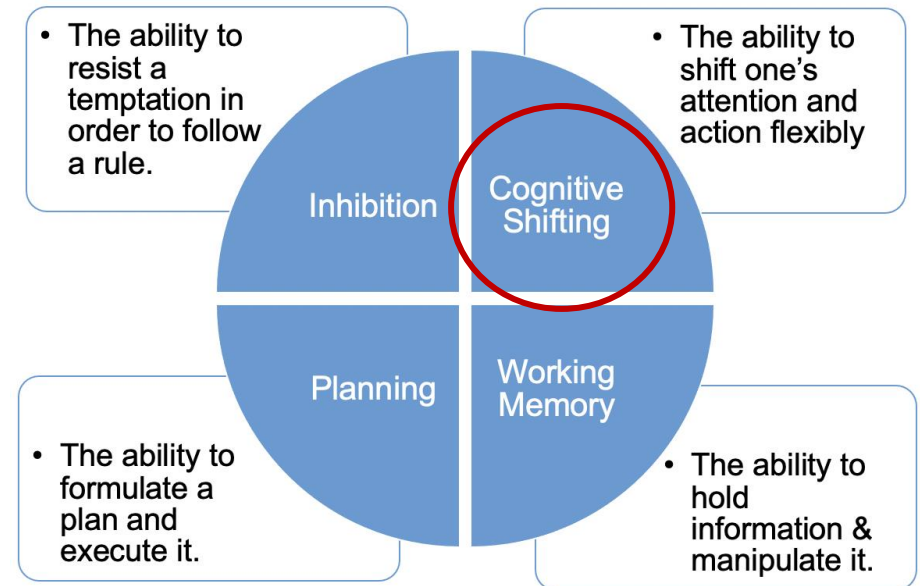
# Executive Functioning Profiles

- Both autistic children and children with ADHD have differences in executive functioning when compared to peers without autism and ADHD.
- However, the executive functioning profiles of autistic children and children with ADHD are not the same.
- These differences can be helpful in distinguishing autism and ADHD, and in thinking about school-based services and supports.



# Cognitive Shifting

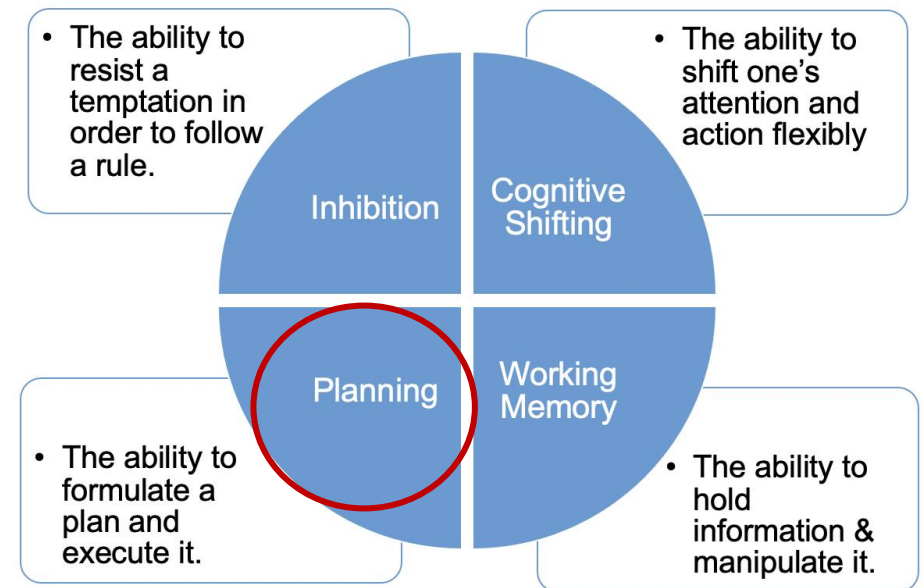
- Autistic students tend to have greater challenges with cognitive shifting than students with ADHD.
- Cognitive shifting differences could manifest at school as:
  - Difficulty with changes in routine.
  - Monitoring and sticking to the rules.
  - Having trouble flexibly shifting perspectives.





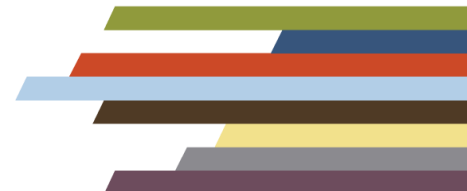
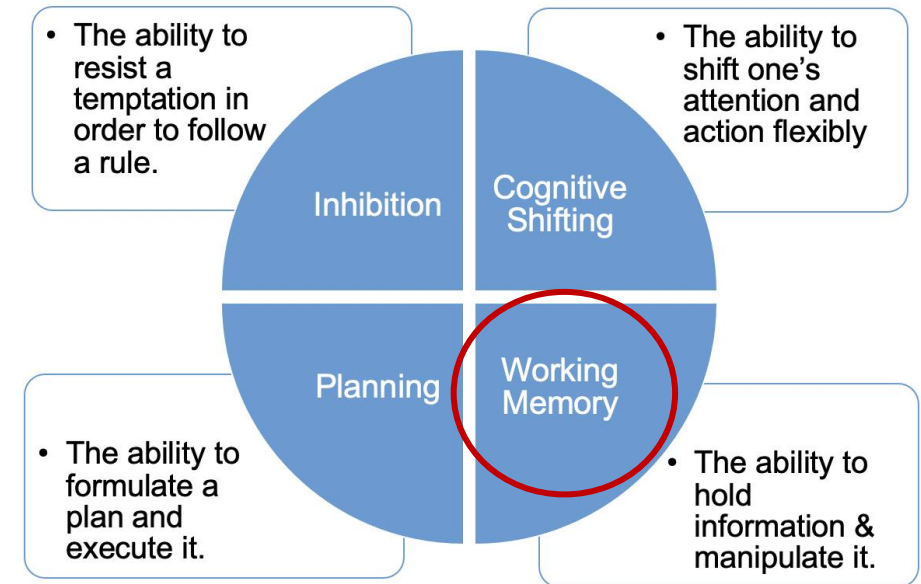
# Planning

- Autistic students tend to have greater difficulty planning than students with ADHD.
- Planning differences could manifest at school as:
  - Difficulty knowing the steps needed to complete tasks at school.
  - Taking a while to get started on activities.
  - Needing reminders or visual supports to complete routines and activities.



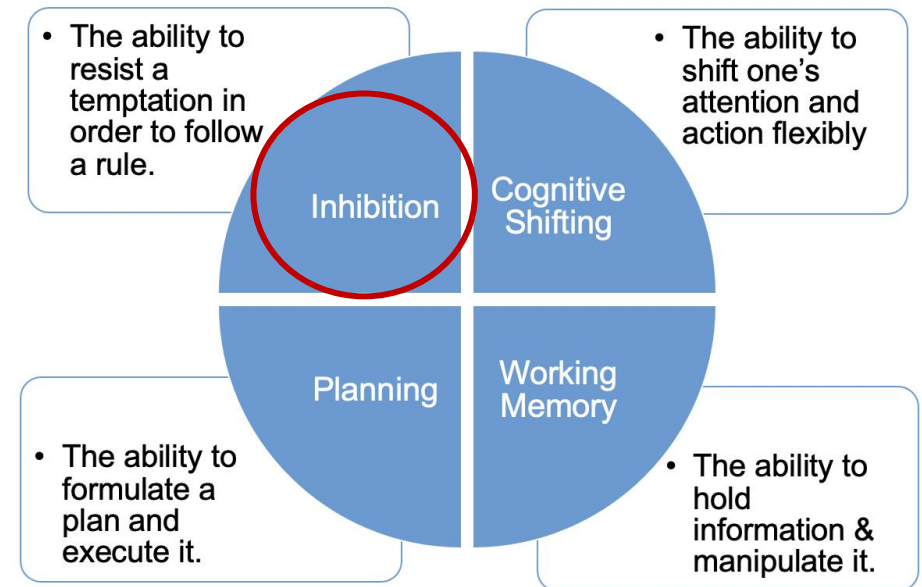
# Working Memory

- Students with ADHD and students with autism have similar difficulties with working memory.
- Working memory differences may manifest as the following at school:
  - Difficulty remembering information that was recently shared with them.
  - Not processing instructions well.

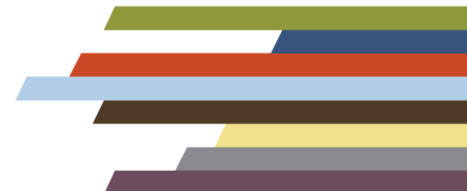
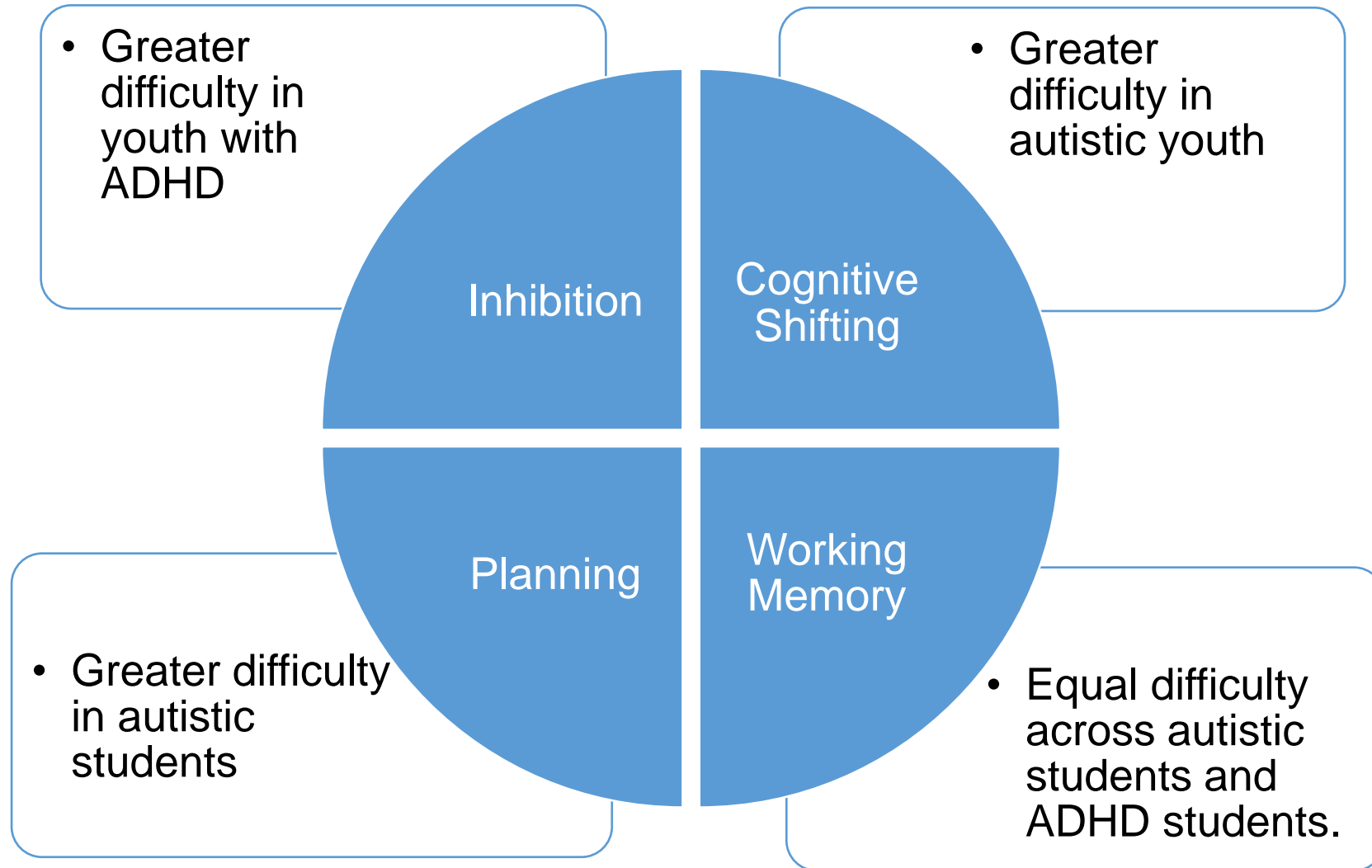


# Inhibition

- Students with ADHD tend to have greater trouble with inhibition than autistic students.
- Inhibition difficulties may manifest as the following at school:
  - Difficulty remaining seated.
  - Sharing answers without raising hand first.
  - Touching or fidgeting with objects during class.



# Executive Function Summary



# Executive Functioning: Why it Matters

Executive functioning skills are linked to all sorts of developmental outcomes for children with and without autism.

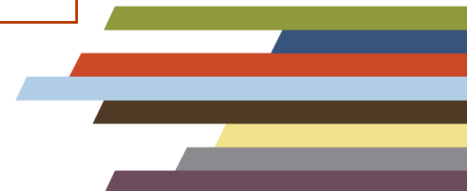
Theory of Mind

Adaptive Skills

School Readiness

Mental Health

(Pellicano, 2012; Pugliese et al., 2015)



# A Note About Emotion Regulation

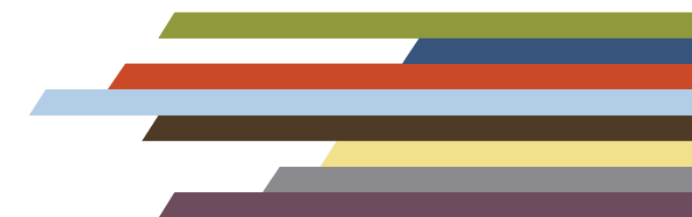
Emotion regulation is not a core executive functioning domain but is considered highly overlapping

Autistic students are more likely to have difficulty with emotion regulation.

This may include having emotions that “go from 0 to 100” quickly at school

# Case Study 1

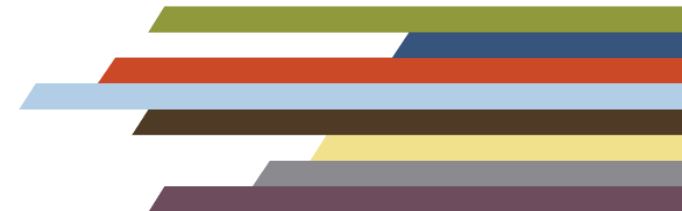
William is in the fifth grade. William has autism and participates in General Education. William is a motivated student who does well, but he does not like group work, and is quick to correct his peers if they don't follow the rules of the project. Peers are starting to make fun of him and call him the "rules police." William does better during individual work. However, he needs support from his teacher to get started completing activities and reminders to stay on task. Without this support, William will sit and stare at his work without starting. On the playground, William becomes upset when his peers break the rules during tag. In these instances, William is quick to hit and push his peers. His teachers are wondering which of his challenges are related to executive functioning and how to approach these challenge.





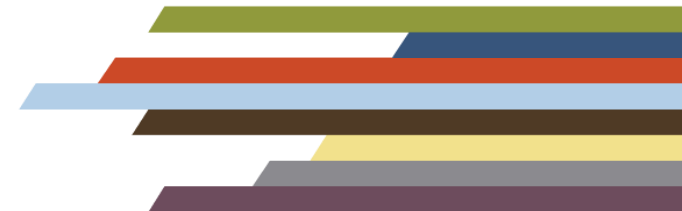
# Question 1

What specific behaviors make you think that William may need additional support with executive functioning?



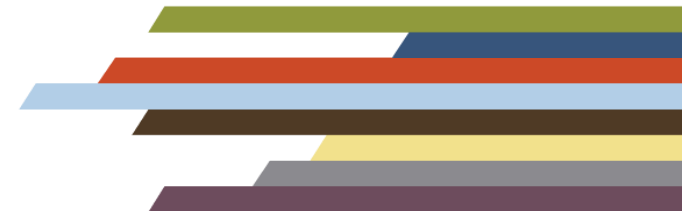
# Question 2

What makes you think that William is experiencing executive functioning differences and not “just being difficult?”



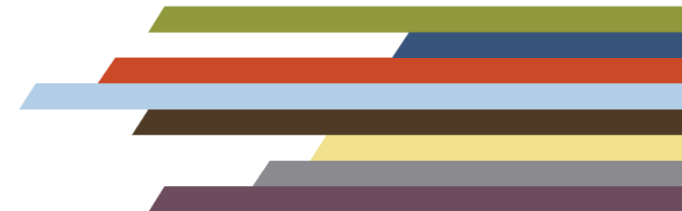
# Question 3

What other information would you want or need about this student to feel confident that they are experiencing executive functioning differences?



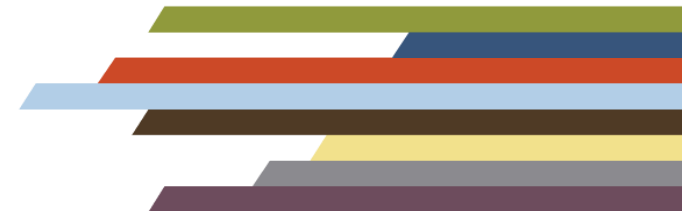
# Question 4

If you suspect William needs support with executive functioning differences, what are your next steps to confirm this suspicion?

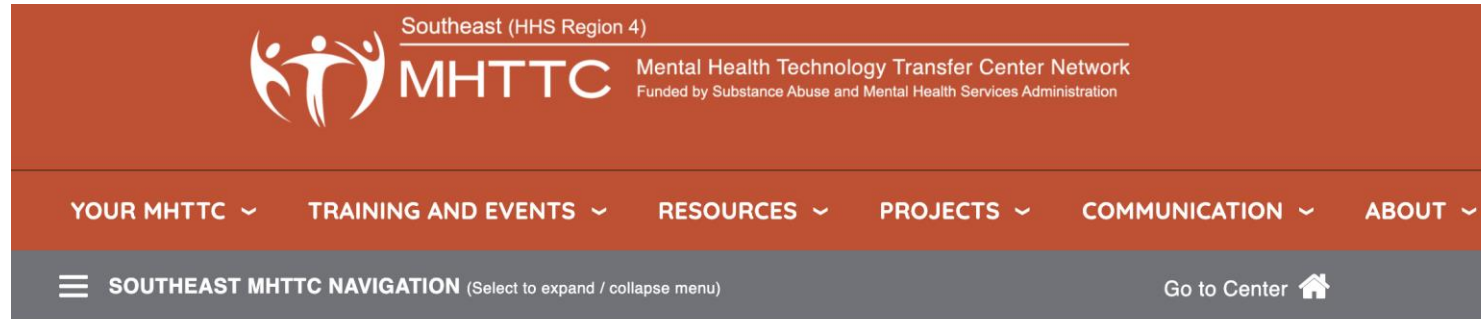


# Question 5

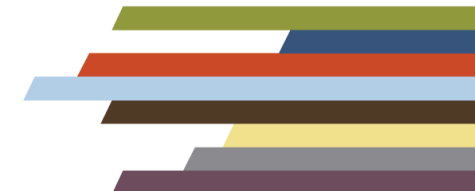
If you work with students like William, what other difficulties do you notice at school that cue you into them having executive functioning differences?



# Toolkit for Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students



## Toolkit for Supporting the Mental Health of Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities



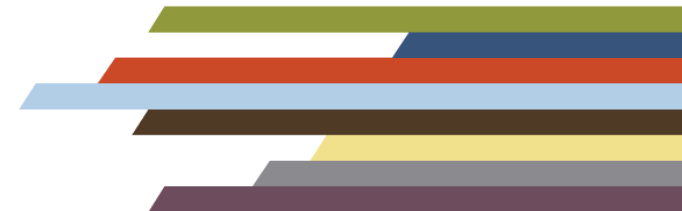
# Upcoming Events

## [Office Hours #2:](#)

- Describe evidence-based approaches and strategies to support executive functioning skills in autistic students.
- Identify strategies that may support an autistic student with executive function challenges as described within a case example.

## [Medicaid & School Mental Health Policy – 2-Part Webinar Series:](#)

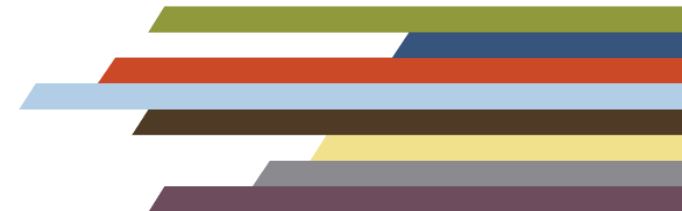
- Fundamentals of Medicaid financing
- Policy changes affecting Medicaid financing in school mental health today





# Polling Questions

1. What are mental health topics that you would like more information on?
2. For the topics you identify, how would you want information presented?



# Thank you!

Southeast MHTTC:

<https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers/southeast-mhttc/home>

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Website:

<https://www.marcus.org/autism-research/autism-research-team/katherine-pickard>



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