



# NEW MOMS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IMPLEMENTING AN EXECUTIVE SKILLS APPROACH

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### INSIGHTS FOR THE FIELD

This case study describes how an innovative workforce development program and social enterprise is integrating brain and behavioral science research into practical strategies for staff and participants.



*This case study was created collaboratively by Global Learning Partners, Inc. and New Moms, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

Over the last several years, our nation’s workforce development sector, and broader human service sector, have paid increased attention to the implications of brain and behavioral science for policies and programs. Programs are testing new approaches and sharing their insights with the field.<sup>1</sup>

A particular focus has been on executive skills, the cognitive abilities that support us in many aspects of our day-to-day lives: 1) How we organize and plan; 2) How we react to things; and 3) How we get things done.<sup>2</sup> Executive skills develop throughout childhood and young adulthood; research suggests that they are “malleable, and can strengthen depending on how much they are practiced.”<sup>3</sup>

This case study recounts the work of **New Moms**, an innovative agency that supports the success of young mothers. They provide services to help stabilize families and alleviate the effects of toxic stress. Over the last few years, New Moms has thoughtfully studied research on executive skills and applied that research to their workforce development program and social enterprise, Bright Endeavors (candle-making company that provides paid transitional job training and skill development for young mothers).



The Executive Skills (ES) approach embraces five key components: Environmental Modifications, Executive Skills Knowledge, Coaching, Goal Tracking, and Incentives. New Moms’ years of practical experience suggests that a comprehensive executive skills approach can have a positive, empowering effect on workforce development participants and staff in many ways. To highlight a few:

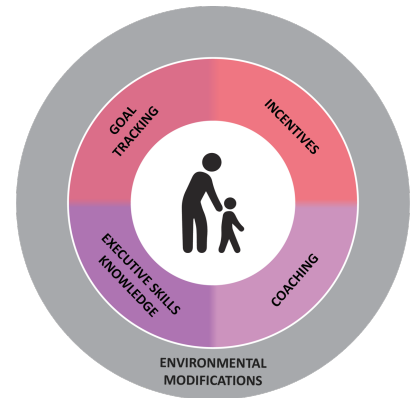
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<sup>1</sup> Visit [www.EFWorksLibrary.org](http://www.EFWorksLibrary.org) for a wealth of resources on Executive Function Skills, behavioral science, coaching and more. The site also features various program applications, models, and examples.

<sup>2</sup> The framing and definitions of executive skills in this case study come from influential work of Dr. Dick Guare.

<sup>3</sup> Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. [developingchild.harvard.edu/science](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science)

- This approach focuses program designers and implementers on **environmental modifications** that can minimize barriers, reduce stressors, and increase the likelihood of participant success. Modifications made to the physical space, processes, materials, technology, and tasks need not be costly or complicated to improve goal attainment.
- This approach heightens self-awareness of both staff and participants. Knowing and sharing profiles about their own executive skills allows them to better tap strengths, accommodate struggles, and support one another. It also deepens the connection among staff and participants.
- This approach provides staff with a powerful framework for **coaching**, which relies on a fundamental belief in the potential of all people and a common language to support clear communication. In this way, coaching becomes a mindset rather than a process.
- The approach focuses staff and participants on setting short-term, meaningful, and achievable goals, while **tracking progress** over time on more complex life goals. Embracing this approach means continually experimenting with processes and materials to find what works for participants.
- Finally, the approach encourages experimentation with **incentives** that remove barriers, provide support to overcome obstacles, and celebrate effort put into goal attainment.



*New Moms'  
Executive Skills Approach*

The approach has taken root in workforce development and expanded across the agency, through development and communications, housing, and family support. New Moms' experience suggests that integrating this approach effectively relies on a number of factors: trust from leadership; a core team of committed staff; curiosity about the research and integrity in translating the research into programs and policies; a comprehensive effort to educate staff; and opportunities for staff to connect to the learning. New Moms' experience also suggests the importance of keeping an open mind about what is and isn't working and being willing to try new approaches.

New Moms is experimenting with ways to capture data on quantifiable indicators (e.g. increases in program and job retention and decreases in parenting stress) that reflect the value of this approach. However, the effects of this approach cannot – and should not – be separated from the broader workforce development effort. An executive skills approach does not stand outside of a program – it provides designers and staff with a lens to examine and strengthen all aspects of a program. A focus on ES remains key to the work of New Moms. This ES approach is now being integrated into a broader strategy, Family-Centered Coaching, that New Moms has embraced. The Executive Skills Implementation case study can offer insights and inspiration to other programs considering how to incorporate a focus on executive skills.

## A Case Study, Toolkit, and Video

The **Opening** of this case study reviews the key, interdependent components of an ES approach. We see how early support from internal leaders and external consultants allows staff to develop creative applications of brain and behavioral science in their unique program.

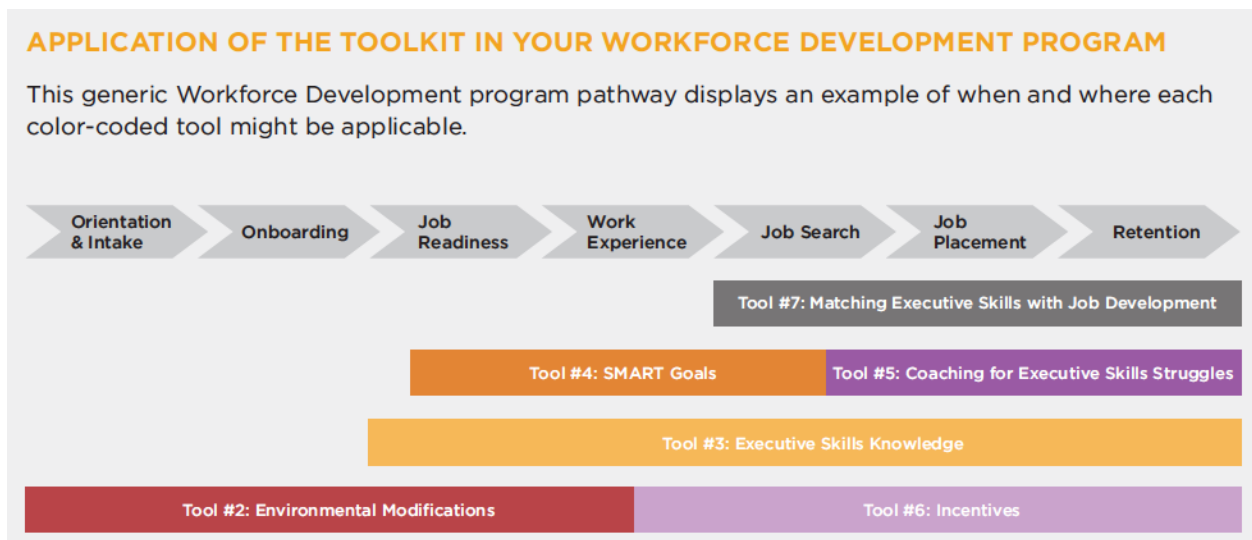
**Part One** reviews the **PATHWAY** participants follow in New Moms' workforce development program. Exploring this pathway underscores the value of introducing participants to the key components of an ES approach early on and reinforcing them throughout their journey.

**Part Two** examines the approach's five components, highlighting examples of how New Moms integrated each into their workforce development program.

**Part Three** highlights how this approach has evolved into a broader "Family-Centered Coaching" (FCC) framework and how leaders can work together to weave the principles and practices of FCC into an organization's culture.

The final section offers **closing insights** for the field.

Along with this case study, New Moms has compiled a toolkit for programs interested in initiating or expanding an ES approach. The **TOOLKIT** offers resources for staff of workforce development programs (as well as other human service programs) to help implement an ES approach. It also includes examples of materials that New Moms uses with participants. As illustrated in the graphic below, the kit includes seven tools that programs may apply at different points along their participants' pathway, the first of which is a readiness assessment.



We also created a short, 7 minute **VIDEO** that describes the five components of an ES approach, with examples of how they are integrated at New Moms. Use the video to introduce the approach to stakeholders, inspire colleagues, or guide staff's own implementation vision.