

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

Executive Function Life Skill: Self-Directed Engaged Learning

It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

- Establish a trustworthy relationship with your child.
- Help children set and work toward their own goals.
- Involve children socially, emotionally and intellectually.
- Elaborate and extend children's learning.
- Help children practice, synthesize and generalize.
- Help children become increasingly accountable.
- Create a community of learners.

Suggestions for Promoting Self-Directed Engaged Learning

Self-Directed Engaged Learning is **self-directed!** We don't always have to interact with others or be entertained by technology. The Snowy Day is a great example. You can have a conversation with your child about Peter's experiences and how he had fun on his own playing in the snow. Then **elaborate and extend** this discussion to your child's life, asking: "What are some things you enjoy doing alone?" This back and forth interaction is what researchers call "**serve and return.**" Like a game of ball, one of you says or does something (serves) and the other responds (returns). The importance of these everyday interactions to brain building is a key finding from child development research.

One of the principles of promoting Self-Directed Engaged Learning is helping **children set and then work toward goals.** **Executive Function** skills are driven by goals. Peter's goal is exploring the snow. Ask your child: "What are the many ways that Peter learns about the snow?" You can ask your child about something he or she would like to explore. You can also share an experience when you learned something through exploring.

Peter brings some snow into the house and then it disappears. Ask your child: "What happened to the snow in Peter's pocket?" You can set up an experiment to show your child what happens when we leave something icy in a warm house by putting an ice cube onto a wash cloth and seeing what happens over time. By doing so, you are **elaborating and extending** what your child has learned from the book.

You will notice that this tip promotes two brain development principles: **Serve and Return** and **Executive Function** skills.

Serve and Return involves a back and forth interaction between you and your child. Like a game of ball, one of you says or does something (serves) and the other responds (returns). It is important to listen and then to build on and extend what your child says or does and to keep this going for as long as your child is interested.

Executive Function skills are skills you use to manage your attention, your emotions, your intellect and your behavior to reach your goals. They are at the core of the Seven Essential Life Skills. They include focus, working memory, cognitive flexibility and self control. When children are older, these skills include reflecting, analyzing, reasoning, planning, problem solving and evaluating.



Illustration by Devon Meyer

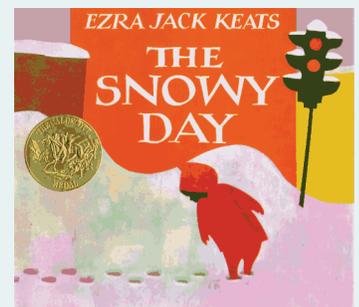
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The Snowy Day

By Ezra Jack Keats

In this endearing classic, a boy named Peter awakens to find his world transformed by snow. With sled in hand, he sets out on his own to explore a winter wonderland. Children readily relate to Peter's curiosity and desire for independence.



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