

Book Review / Recension

P. Dawson & R. Guare. (2009). *Smart But Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential*. New York: The Guildford Press. 314 pages. ISBN: 978 1 59385 445 4

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If you have stopped by your local bookstore lately, you may have noticed that there is no shortage of self-help books. Parents, in particular, are a vulnerable target audience for quasi-scientific writers aiming to offer anything from childrearing advice to boosting their children's brainpower.

The book in question, *Smart But Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare falls within a unique subsection of this self-help/advice giving genre. It promises readers that it "will show you how you can modify the daily experience of a child aged 4 to 14 to build the executive skills that will make it possible for the child to get on track and get things done" (p. 2). An attractive sales pitch indeed, without falling into the diagnostic dilemma of targeting only individuals with specific disorders of attention. Instead the authors choose to use a more inclusive approach, where prospective readers may be left wondering who would not benefit from boosting their own powers of self-control and organization, never mind their children's.

The authors exude credibility, with Drs. Dawson and Guare reporting to have had over 30 years of field experience working with children who have difficulties with learning, attention, and behavior disorders. Not to diminish Peg Dawson's worthy accomplishments, it is comforting to note that Richard Guare is a neuropsychologist because their book addresses issues of executive functioning in general, and brain-based behavior paradigms in particular.

Just so the reader does not confuse “executive skills” with preparing their child for life in the corporate world, the authors make it clear that they are referring to “brain-based skills that are required for humans to *execute*, or perform tasks” (p. 13). More specifically, their model is subdivided into a set of 11 developmentally and functionally differentiated skills that range from response inhibition and working memory to flexibility and metacognition. Thankfully you do not need a medical dictionary or neuroscience textbook to gain at least a perfunctory understanding of these 11 skills. The authors provide ample definitions along with corresponding examples to illustrate each skill’s meaning and purpose.

To simplify matters even more, their model and overall *motis operandi* for the book is based on two basic principle of learning. The first is an acknowledgement that most individuals have an array of executive skills that range from areas considered to be strengths to those that are less well developed or areas of weakness. Second, the authors rationalize that areas of weakness need to be identified so that intervention plans can be developed. The road to success is a combination of building skills and manipulating the environment so that problems related to skill weaknesses are minimized or prevented.

The book itself is divided into three distinct but related sections. The first part promises to explain why you are smart but scattered. A tall order, indeed, but four chapters are all that is needed to identify individual strengths and weaknesses so that one can “match the child to the task” (p. 59). The second chapter assists the reader to identify a child’s strengths and weaknesses. A developmental chart for executive skills points out what tasks or skills individuals should have mastered from preschool through to grade eight. The challenge would be to determine if a child is indeed capable of performing the task or simply choosing not to comply with an adult’s request. Either way careful observation would be required to determine the consistency of behaviors and corresponding contingency patterns.

To add an element of objectivity the authors provide a series of questionnaires designed to assist the rater to determine levels of age-related executive skill development. They provide a five point likert scale to use for each of the eleven executive skills. After completing the 33 item checklist, the rater simply uses the three highest and the three lowest

scores, to determine an individual's executive skill strengths and weaknesses. As an aside, it would be interesting to have multiple raters complete the same checklist to determine levels of agreement and areas of rater bias. However, the authors' intent appears to be one of straightforward facilitation rather than getting bogged down in the messy details of reliability and validity. After all, strengths and weaknesses are relative, are they not?

Perhaps you have noticed a negative tone as I reviewed the authors' pseudo-scientific approach to the assessment of executive skills. However, it should be pointed out that the authors devote 11 out of 16 chapters in the book's third section to devise "an elaborate multicomponent plan" (p. 121), tailored to an individual's unique constellation of strengths and weaknesses. Needless to say, this plan could be doomed for failure if the observation-based assessment data are skewed or inaccurate.

In a round about way the book does address this issue in the third chapter where readers are invited to determine their own profile of executive skills strengths and weaknesses. The parents' questionnaire employs a seven point likert scale, for increased accuracy no doubt, and covers the same 11 executive skills with 33 items. Again, the determination of the three highest and three lowest areas is merely a matter of addition. Quite simply, knowing your own executive skill patterns will help determine the goodness of fit you may have with the child in question. The authors allude to the fact that the adults' perceptions or biases are likely influenced, if not a direct result, of their own executive skill development. Therefore, our intolerance of other's perceived areas of weakness may simply be due to a mismatch in executive skill related values between the adult and the child.

So the next time you find yourself in the parenting/psychology section of your local bookstore or virtual vendor, you might want to give *Smart but Scattered* some consideration. There's enough in this soft-covered compendium of brain-boosting suggestions to warrant a second look if not a purchase. The bonus is that you can always say you are buying it to help your child, when, in fact, you may be the one who benefits the most from reading it.