



## Episode 21: An interview with Emily Hawe

### Christine Goodner:

Well, welcome everyone! Today I'm excited to be talking to Emily Hawe and Emily, I hope that you could just start by telling people a bit about who you are and what you do.

### Emily Hawe:

Yeah. Thanks so much for having me. So I was a former teacher. I taught seventh grade English for many years. And then since then I've transitioned to being an executive function skills coach. So, what my goal is is to really provide the support that I realized my students were missing. While I was teaching, it always felt like there was this missing piece in the classroom. I had some really bright students who were just not performing to where you would expect them to perform. And I was seeing things like, I always tell people this story of how I had this one child come to my class and she arrived. And she said, "Ms. Hall, I need to go back downstairs because I dropped all my books and my binder on the floor." And I looked at her like, "well, why didn't you pick it up?"

### Emily Hawe:

She didn't want to be late to class. So she just dropped it and came upstairs to then ask me to go back downstairs to get it. And so at the time, you know, it's like what is going on? Because it wasn't just the limited incident. It was across the board. All the students I was seeing were really struggling with the things that we think of as just common sense. And so when I, when I did leave the classroom and I had my own children, and one thing led to another and I was working with students a lot one-on-one and I really realized that there was something missing. It wasn't a lack of intelligence. It wasn't a lack of motivation or a lack of trying. They were just lacking a skillset. And it turns out that skillset is executive functioning skills. So for those of you not familiar with what executive functioning skills are, I like to compare them to sort of like the control tower for your brain.

### Emily Hawe:

They, you know, like the air traffic control tower at an airport, they're directing all the different stimuli that are coming at us. They're telling you what to pay attention to, what to ignore, what to focus on, what to prioritize, where to put your belongings, all the day-to-day things that happen in the background that we don't necessarily think very much about. When these skills are lacking, it becomes very apparent. And that's what I was seeing in my students. And since then, I've realized that I myself am really lacking and struggling with those skills. Most people with ADHD, which I am a late diagnosis, ADHDer myself, struggle with executive function skills. That's really a core characteristic of people with

ADHD. And, you know, when I was growing up executive function skills, weren't something that was ever talked about even as going through teacher training. I won't say how long ago I did that, but you know, not too long ago, it was never mentioned in my coursework, all throughout grad school I never heard the term. Fortunately, I think it's becoming more part of our conversation. More parents are familiar with it. You know, I think it's wonderful that you, as a music teacher, music professional are aware about this and we realize how essential it is to pretty much everything we do in our life. So my goal is really to provide the support now, that I wish I had had as a child and that I really see my students could have benefited from.

**Christine Goodner:**

Hmm. Yeah. So interesting. I think I only became aware of this term...I mean, not that long ago. And I just wondered, is it a newer term? Why didn't we hear about this in our own teacher training or growing up as adults? Do you know when people really started talking about this or studying it?

**Emily Hawe:**

Yeah. You know, I'm not sure. I think definitely within the last 10 years. I'm sure it was talked about that you can find articles in psychology publications and certainly ADHD literature, but I think it's really entered more of the mainstream within just the last 10 years, maybe even more recently.

**Christine Goodner:**

And you and I share that in common. I was a late adult diagnosis, ADHD as well. And just so many of the executive function skills. I just think all the things I used to think was wrong with myself, and it's actually like, "no they're skills! They're not character problems or deficiencies, they're skills that hopefully we can help now our students and the children in our lives work with, instead of just feeling like what's wrong, but no answers.

**Emily Hawe:**

Yes. And so many times when I'm working with children, their parents are like, "oh my gosh, this is me too." My primary role is working with children and teenagers. Oftentimes I have adults following me and asking for help too, because you're right. Like we fell under the radar often, especially for women, a lot of people are talking about how women go undiagnosed. We might not necessarily have the hyperactive hallmarks of ADHD that doctors and teachers often look for, but yet we're still struggling with these executive function skills.

**Christine Goodner:**

Right. I wondered for people who this is a new topic and they're less familiar, could you share with us a few of the skills that might fall under that umbrella of executive function skills? What kinds of things are we talking about?

**Emily Hawe:**

Sure. So it's everything from sustained attention- being able to pay attention to things, even if it's not that interesting to you. Organization, both organization of your thoughts and organization of physical belongings. Emotional control, impulse regulation -are you blurting out? Are you interrupting? Goal-directed persistence, being able to really stick to a goal. Flexible thinking. That's a big one. That's particularly challenging for a lot of children. What happens when things don't go as planned? That's an executive function skill to be able to shift your thinking like that. Metacognition, self-monitoring. So

being able to reflect on how you're performing, how am I thinking, what do I need to change about my performance here? So pretty much all of those like meta-skills that are, that are operating in the background fall under the realm of executive functioning skills.

**Christine Goodner:**

It's so interesting because when young people are practicing their instruments and you know, parents might be coaching through or other family members might be coaching them through the process. It just seems like practice is all about all these skills, staying focused, and working on the things that are not as interesting, but need to be done and self-assessing, and figuring out what to do next in order to improve things. So it seems so important to me as people who work with music, students to understand these skills and realize some of what might seem like misbehavior or this child is not interested in music, might actually be that they need these skills to be further developed or they need some, some help with them.

**Emily Hawe:**

Yeah. I think that's why it's so great that you're doing this work and I'm so grateful that we connected because I'm not, I have no musical background. My son just started piano lessons as I was telling you. So I'm new to this territory, but I think it's so interesting the overlaps of our work, because you're right. Executive function skills come into place so much with musical practice. I mean really any practice, but I think you especially see it with music and it's such a great opportunity for children to really develop these skills. So I think any child who struggles with executive function skills, practicing an instrument is such a great opportunity for them to really develop those skills in a context outside of school, where they might feel like they've struggled in the past. Here you have this other territory where children who might struggle in school, they can suddenly excel. So I think it's wonderful what you're doing.

**Christine Goodner:**

Right. And I think some of the benefits of music, if you're practicing on your own, you can sort of self pace. I think you can't-if it takes yourself or your child a little longer to learn something, but they're learning how to develop these skills in the process. I think it's a little, it's easier to do that one in a one-on-one activity than we're keeping up with the class (doing air quotes in the air), or like everybody has to do this at the same speed. I think music allows us to sort of tailor things to the needs of our child, but too, if we're doing it right.

**Emily Hawe:**

Yes.

**Christine Goodner:**

I, when I was diagnosed as an adult, you know, one of the things that made it challenging, I think to pinpoint that I had ADHD was that I did okay. In school. Like I was not failing any classes. So it seemed like I was doing okay even though it was a struggle. And the professional I was working with said probably practicing music my whole life since I was three, the structure of that and the discipline of that probably just taught me a lot of skills that helped me get through school, even though it was still a challenge. I thought that was so interesting to think about.

**Emily Hawe:**

So interesting. It makes so much sense. I think a lot of us would say the same for me. That I was a high performing student, so no one would have ever guessed how much I was struggling. So I think so many

of us, we have find some way to cope. We find these strategies for you. It was music, for other people, they become really good at it at a Google calendar or whatever it might be. And those are great skills to have. But I think knowing that there's this missing piece, it explains so much, at least for me, it was like, oh, my whole life is starting to make a little bit more sense. And I think for our children too, to be really explicit in naming these skills and really identifying and talking about what they're strong at and what they're weak at, it helps them so much to take ownership of their learning.

#### Christine Goodner:

And I think sometimes in the music world, it can be like, well, if it's not easy for you, maybe this isn't for you. I think that misconception happens whether it's from certain schools of thought about teaching or from, parents who might feel like, well, it's a struggle and maybe they should be doing some other activity. And I think realizing that just when we support these skills, music can be so great for students. Even if it's not immediately easy for them to figure out how to practice or how to play the instrument. It doesn't mean it's not worth working on it. They can really learn a lot through the process, even if they're not naturally looking like they're a prodigy in the first moment, there's so much to be learned through the process. So I think if we kind of take this conversation to the next stage is what are some ideas that teachers can put into place when they're teaching students that might help support executive function skills?

#### Emily Hawe:

That's such an interesting question. So I think, again, coming from a non-musical perspective, but it seems to me like so much of practicing anything and it's probably, especially for music, is that element of self-monitoring. So being able to reflect on your progress. And I think oftentimes as teachers, as parents, we take over that role for our children. So our children depend on us for that feedback. Now they're looking to us to say, was that better? How did I do? They're looking at us to even tell them when to practice or what they need to practice or how much they need to practice. And we've taken over that role. And sometimes we need to do that. Executive function skills don't fully develop until children are at least 25 for some of us, especially people with ADHD, it's not until even later than that.

#### Emily Hawe:

So we do have to sort of lend out our frontal lobe where executive function skills reside to our children. But if we do it completely all the time, we're never letting them exercise those skills. It's like a muscle. We have to practice it to let it grow. So thinking during your practice session, what can you give the students control over? You know, how instead of having them rely on you for feedback, how can you first turn to them and say, how was that? How did that feel? You eat being more specific, you, depending on the child, did you feel like you were really focused here? What does it feel like to be in... I often talk to children about, are you "in the zone"? I'm not sure if you have a different term for that for music, you know, are you really in the music?

#### Emily Hawe:

Are you focused? What does that feel like? Have, you know, when you're really there, what does it feel like to play a piece successfully? What does it feel like when you're not so connected to it when you're struggling and what do we do with those feelings? So instead of the teacher saying, you know, you look really distracted. Maybe we should take a break, prompting the child to come to that realization. So, you know, Hey, I noticed that that you're kind of wiggling on the seat. What do you think? What what's up with that? And instead of saying you look distracted, why can't you focus? You know, leading them to

pay attention to their bodies, pay attention to their mind. And so ultimately we want the child to be able to say, "I'm having trouble sitting still right now. I think I need to stretch. Or I think I need to walk around the room one time or have a glass of water."

**Emily Hawe:**

You know, you can even give them this list of coping skills. So, you know, depending on the child, maybe you even work out- what are some things that you commonly see? I call it an "if, then chart". So if I'm having trouble sitting still, then I can and give them a few options that they can pick from that they've come up with collaboratively with you. Or if I'm getting frustrated with, playing this new piece, then I can, and what are some techniques that they can do. So instead of always relying on you to come in with the solution and telling them what to do, they're starting to take more ownership and more autonomy over their choices because ultimately they know their mind better than anyone else can. And that's our job is to help them learn what works for them.

**Christine Goodner:**

Yeah. I love that. And I think for professional musicians or, you know, teachers who are practicing on their own, we probably have that if then lists just in our brain, like, okay, I can tell I'm just repeating this without improving anything. I'm going to get a drink of water or I'm going to do...whatever. And so I think it can feel as a parent or a family member coaching, a young child through that. Maybe we're wasting time if we get off task, but you know, adults are doing that too. I would say it's just picking things that you know are not going to derail you. Like I know if I pick up my phone when I'm not focusing in practice, like, okay, practice is not coming back together. So if it's like, if you let your child go get a drink of water and then you know, that practice is just never going to get back on track maybe you have the drink of water before, if that's a real need and you just kind of learn, I think, by trial and error, okay, this is going to help with the focus and it's not going to derail practice and just waste all of our time. I think finding the balance might be good for the families who are listening or parents who are listening, thinking about how do we do this without just wasting all of our time.

**Emily Hawe:**

Right. Definitely. And I see the same thing for homework too. Some kids do great doing homework right after school. Some kids need that break. They need that glass of water or the snack. So instead of the parents saying, this is when you have to practice, you know, your practice time is at four o'clock every day or your homework time is at four o'clock every day, have your child help figure that out? You know, when do you think would be the best time for you to practice? Let's look at our schedule and actually like take it out. A lot of us are visual. You know, this is when you get home from school. This is when we have dinner. This is when you have soccer practice, where in this day would practice work for you. When do you think you'd feel most alert, most relaxed. Do you need to go run around the yard a few times before you're able to sit down or, do you need to do some focusing and some meditation and listen to some quiet music to help you get in the zone? It really depends on each of us. Everyone is going to respond differently. I wish I could say, "this is the formula to have a perfect practice session", but it's going to vary just like it varies for adults.

**Christine Goodner:**

Right. And I think it's never a waste of time to try something and realize like, oh, that did not work, but that's information. And then in the future, we don't have to repeat that again.

Emily Hawe:

Exactly. And have your child reflect on that, "Hey, I noticed today, you, you played in the yard with the dog before practicing piano and it seemed to help you sit, feel better. What do you think?" Or, you know, maybe it was the opposite. "It seemed like you had a hard time calming down. What could we do differently next time?" So instead of you saying, you know, this is what you must do, guide them to take control of that.

Christine Goodner:

Yeah. I like that a lot. So I teach students as young as three or four. What age do you think is appropriate to have the child be or not even appropriate, but to expect them to be able to make those observations about themselves? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Emily Hawe:

I think that there's no harm in starting early. The younger child is the more support we have to provide, but being very conscious of the language we use and the prompting, you know? I have a three-year-old and I'll say things like, "you look really wiggly right now, what do you think we could do to help with that?" Or "you seem really tired right now, how's your body feeling, let's check in". So just building that, self-awareness that self-monitoring through the languages we use and modeling ourselves. I might say "I didn't sleep that well last night, I'm having a tough time focusing today, here are the things I'm going to do to try to help myself", or "I'm getting really frustrated know I'm, I'm having a hard time figuring this out. I'm going to walk away and take a little break." Our children need to see us working through these skills to do the more it becomes commonplace in your homes and in your classrooms. Then, you know, it just becomes the internal monologue that our children have. Of course, you can't expect a three-year-old to be able to do this independently, but, it's like, hold their hand, guide them. And then, you know, as you see them taking this on more and more, you can start to pull back.

Christine Goodner:

Great. I think that's important to keep in mind. Absolutely. I had a parent of a preschooler this past week, we were talking about how practice was going. And they had tried doing some sort of high energy activity before the practice so that the student could focus and say still, and then just said they couldn't get their child to come back down from that. And so we just talked about, okay, that's just information for us now that at least at this stage in her development, we want to do something maybe more calming before practice. Now we know.

Emily Hawe:

Right. Or maybe a combination of both, you know, I think people hear about brain breaks and you got to get the kids moving. With some children, we see this in the classroom, they'll be jumping around for these wonderful brain breaks, but then to ask them to go from that, to sitting down in their desk, that's a level of flexibility and, shifting that they just oftentimes can't manage. So we need some kind of transition piece there. So, maybe developing some core kind of focusing routines. So you've maybe need some high energy activity with them before we sit down to practice and what are we going to do? Are we going to take some deep breaths? Are we going to do some yoga poses? Are we going to listen to some calming music and give them the light? You know, there's so many breathing exercises and child friendly meditations that you can find out there, are so many opportunities for us as parents to figure out what works for our kids.

Christine Goodner:

Right? I think those are some great examples to think about what we might do, because I think it's easy to think about action activities, but the calming activity is especially, I don't remember anybody doing calming activities with me as a child. It would have been wonderful, but I, I don't have this- nothing comes to mind to me without really thinking about it for a while. So thanks for sharing some of those. I think some students really could benefit from that.

Christine Goodner:

I think a big, common frustration for families trying to help young children practice is just the focus piece, and I think it's really easy just to say to a young child, like focus and then, but they don't really know what we mean, nor can they really yet. And so I think some of those calming activities are a great way to build focus. Do you have any other ideas about helping students build focus? Because that's clearly an executive function skill as well?

Emily Hawe:

Yes. You know, I think that's one of the trickiest one because it's so individual for each of us, what works, you know, to be able to maintain attention on a task that might not be that interesting. It might be frustrating to us. That's a real skill. A lot of children, we see them hyper-focused on some activity. So I have a lot of parents say, well, why can't my kids sit still for homework when they can sit still for four hours playing a video game. That doesn't mean that they're faking or not trying with their homework. That's the way attention works, is that we can hyper focus on activities of interest to us. But our attention really gets tested when it's a task or activity that's less interesting, less immediately gratifying. So I think immediate gratification is a big part of it. Younger children. They need that immediate gratification. To say, oh, well, you're going to perform in a recital six months from now. That might as well be never. They don't see beyond really the present moment for, for really young children.

Emily Hawe:

So how can we build in some elements of immediate gratification to setting small goals? And I mean, really small, like, can you sit still for maybe even two minutes and practice this song and having some way to keep track of that visuals charts, maybe every time they do something, they put a pompom in a jar. Something very tangible. I have parents asking me if they should pay their child to do homework or to practice music. No, no, I don't think we should do that because we do ultimately want it to be intrinsic motivation. But for a lot of children who struggle with executive function skills, intrinsic motivation, isn't always there. And we have to give them that to make it more tangible. We have to be able to track their progress. You know, while we, as teachers or parents are tracking their progress in our mind, we want them to be a part of that. So do they have some kind of practice schedule where they're checking it off, they're giving themselves a sticker each time they do something. And then that can kind of build some momentum there because you can say, Hey, look like you practice four days in a row. Do you think you can go for five days? So that they're really seeing it. Even just that little sticker, sometimes is all it takes because it's this tangible representation of what they've done. But ultimately, I think that you have to have really realistic goals. Some children really can't sit still that long.

Emily Hawe:

I taught seventh grade and I found like the sweet spot for a lesson was honestly about six minutes, six minutes. And I would talk to them. I would say, you know, I'm expecting six minutes of intense concentration and then that's it. Then you can go back to your desks and you can apply this on your own

because I know that's the limit of your attention. So I mean being really upfront about that saying, "this is what I need from you. I need you to really give me 100% focus. What does that look like for you? I'm going to ask you for that for two minutes, three minutes, five minutes, whatever it might be. And then we can take a break or then you can try it". You know, I don't think you can expect a three-year-old to sit still for, for an hour. I'm sure you know that. So how can we make it really realistic for that specific child so that they experienced success. We want to set our kids up for success.

**Christine Goodner:**

I like to say at first it's just finding very small moments of focus and just stringing them together with that little break you're talking about in between. And that's really what it's going to look like till they get older. Yeah. I think it can feel like, well, my child really says they want to play the piano or the violin, but then I see in the practice that they look like they don't want to do it at all. And I think that's what you were talking about is like, you can be interested in playing some piece on the violin, but the actual practice of over and over repeating something or playing scales or whatever it is that more can feel like, okay, this is just hard work. So I'm not very motivated right in this moment to do this.

**Emily Hawe:**

Right. Yeah. It comes back to growth mindset. Um, you know, I'm sure you you've done work on that. Like this idea of, I can't do this yet. So always helping our children put in that yet part, you know, I'm struggling with this right now, but with hard work and practice, I can do this and reminding them of other things, other musical experiences or non-musical where they struggled with something at first, they put in that practice, that hard work, and then they were able to overcome it. And how great that feels, you can do that also with music, you keep practicing this piece with time and practice. You're going to get better at it. And what's that going to feel like when you do that!

**Christine Goodner:**

And I think as adults supporting young students, we need our own growth mindset about, okay, right now it looks like we can only practice two minutes, but that doesn't mean it's forever and this is quite normal and it will improve. I think that's really important for the adults too, because we're often the ones deciding are we going to continue with this activity? And we have maybe some worry, like, am I pushing them too hard or not enough? Or is this the right activity? All those things. So just realizing it's a process.

**Emily Hawe:**

Yeah. Yeah. And I think kids don't realize that either, you know, they expect to be able to sit down. I know my son started piano lessons and I think he honestly expected to sit down and just, you know, be able to play. And I think, you know, we often have this idea, like, are you going to be a prodigy or not? Most of us aren't. So, you know, talking to kids about that, that people who are successful at anything they put in the work, no one just sits down and is able to do something perfectly. Everyone has to put in work and really talk to them about how our brain works. There's some really fantastic books that you can read about growth mindset. I love, I think its called "My Fantastic Elastic Brain". And it really gets into the brain science of it, where it shows your brain is like a muscle. And every time you practice something, those connections between the neurons grow and they get stronger. So there's an actual physical change that's happening through process. That's helping you get better at it. Just like you have to practice soccer to get better at kicking that ball. You have to practice anything, whether it's music or reading, or spelling, whatever it might be, these skills take time.



**Christine Goodner:**

Absolutely. And I think learning a musical instrument, a complicated musical instrument, does not feel like I go to art class and paint on the paper and whatever comes out, you know, I'm happy with as a start, like you can, it takes a long time. It's sort of a marathon more than a sprint. All important things to keep in mind.

**Christine Goodner:**

Well, I wonder if you could tell a little bit about the work you do and how parents and teachers can connect with you, especially, I know you have some great resources just about this whole topic that people can, can find and get access to us. I wondered if you could share a bit about that.

**Emily Hawe:**

Sure. Thank you. I'm most active on Instagram. I also have a Facebook page, but it's @mindlauncher. So I try to post pretty much daily, some tricks that are really brain-based, help children thrive in school and out so often as, as homework, but other things like music they might be interested in. And then I also have a weekly email that I send out with a free executive function, skill boosting principle. So anyone is welcome to sign up for that. That's on my website, which is [www.mindlaunchers.com](http://www.mindlaunchers.com). Put in your email, and then you'll get an email from me once a week with a principle that can really be adapted for children as young, as preschool through teenagers. So I try to hit on all the different executive function skills in more of a fun appealing way for kids to start to think about some of these skills.

**Christine Goodner:**

I really appreciated your work because of course I've heard and learned about these concepts, but I think you're putting them in really accessible terms and ways of thinking about how could we apply this in a really accessible, logical way that doesn't feel like I'm learning theory, that's way up over my head, but it's like, you know, okay, this is how I can make this work in my family or my studio or with my students. So I encourage people if this conversation made you think, oh, I need to learn more about this. And this could help me to connect with your resources because I think, yeah, it was a really, really helpful way to think about this stuff.

**Emily Hawe:**

Thanks so much. I really appreciate that. I'm trying to combine, you know, the teacher role and now I'm a mom, so I try to really come at it with those perspectives. So I appreciate your feedback on that.

**Christine Goodner:**

I hope it will help a lot of people that connect and start to learn more about this. I think as a teacher, I've shared about some of these ideas, but I've thought of them more as this is what's going to help students develop ownership. And, you know, I guess in the back of my mind, I understand that it's tied into executive function, but it's helpful to hear you talk about it and to think about we're also just building life skills, I think with learning some of this.

**Emily Hawe:**

Right. Yeah. It's kind of like a reframe- shifting from thinking, oh, this child is lazy and motivated to what are the skills that we can develop?

Christine Goodner:

I like to end our conversations with a tip that families and teachers could take with them and use this week. So, you know, it could be related to executive function and not directly to music, but I didn't know if you had something that you could think of that people could put into practice

Emily Hawe:

I think coming up with some way to visually track practice or performance. So what kind of chart or system can you make? You know, with young children, like I mentioned, maybe pompoms into a jar every time they practice. As children start to get older, you know, maybe each time they play a piece, they can rate their performance so that they start to really be able to provide that self feedback, self-monitoring. You know, today I felt like my performance or my focus, maybe it's not even their actual performance maybe it's just their focus level was at a three. Tomorrow maybe my goal is to make it at a four or five. And so each day, they're actually tracking that. So we start to give them a real visual, tangible way of seeing how they improve over time. Like you were saying, it's a marathon for learning music. So how can we break it down and make their progress more visual, more tangible to them? Cause we as a teacher or a parent might say, be able to recognize that you're getting better, but for that child in the moment, it feels like they're never going to get it. So how can we help them celebrate those small successes along the way?

Christine Goodner:

Great. I love that. Yes. And I think practice becomes more fun when you do notice like, oh, I'm making progress. It's just becomes more motivating all around.

Emily Hawe:

Definitely it's like a video game. Like you need that feedback, you level up. So how can we turn music into leveling up.

Christine Goodner:

Exactly. Well, wonderful to speak with you. I hope we get a chance to do this sometime in the future or connect in other ways. And I hope people will check out your resources and have them help them in the practice room. Thanks so much for being here.

Emily Hawe:

Thank you much for having me. I'm so glad we were able to connect.