

What are Executive Functioning Skills?

Students with Attention Disorders or who are on the Autism Spectrum often lack Executive Function Skills. These skills help us plan, organize, make decisions, shift between situations or thoughts, control our emotions and impulsivity, and learn from past mistakes. That means a student without good executive function skills struggles with tasks that involve analyzing, planning and organizing, among others. Following are some definitions associated with executive function:

Response Inhibition The capacity to think before you act – the ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

Working Memory The ability to hold information in memory while carrying out complex tasks. It combines the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the current situation or to project into the future.

Emotional Control The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Flexibility The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. It relates to being able to adapt to changing conditions.

Sustained Attention The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.

Task Initiation The ability to begin projects without procrastination, in a timely fashion.

Organization The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.

Time Management The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

Goal-Directed Persistence The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of it and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.

Metacognition The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring/evaluative skills (Asking yourself, “How am I doing?” or “How did I do?”).

What does Executive Function Skill weakness look like in students?

- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring back materials back and forth between home and school
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Leaves trail of belongings wherever they go
- Sloppy work
- Loses or misplaces things (books, permission slips, cell phone, lunch money, etc.)
- Messy desk/cubby areas/ backpack/room
- Acts without thinking, Interrupts others
- Overreacts to small problems
- Upset by changes in plans
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Does not see their behavior as part of the issue

3 Key strategies for managing executive function skill weakness

Intervene at the level of the environment:

- 1) Change the physical or social environment (seating arrangements, fewer kids- more adults, class helpers, fewer distractions).
- 2) Modify the tasks we expect the child to perform (shorter tasks, break task down into smaller steps, more breaks, visual schedule, give choices of topic, turn in date, change the order, give a start and end point).
- 3) Change the way adults interact with the child (role-play situations and their response, use verbal prompts, use checklists, effective

praise - 4 positives for each corrective feedback).

Teach Executive Skills

Example 1) Clean room: Parents act as an external organizational system to help the child perform the following functions and gradually turns control over to the child as he/she demonstrates readiness:

- 1) Develop a plan, an organizational scheme, and a specific set of directions (clean clothes are folded in drawer, toys in toy box, shoes in closet, dirty clothes in hamper, etc.)
- 2) Provide the same information without being the direct agent; create a list, picture cues, audio tape, checklist to cue child.
- 3) Parent begins to transfer responsibility to child (Parent asks “Where do you want to start in picking up your room? Toys? Clothes?”)
- 4) Positive re-enforcement when emerging skills are used.
- 5) How to know transfer is complete. (Child can ask himself, “What do I need to do? Check my list.”)

Example 2) Teaching student how to pay attention.

- 1) Explain that paying attention is the most important skill for doing well in school because unless what is expected is heard, it will not be understood, acted upon or remembered.
- 2) Talk about how the teacher can tell that a student is paying attention (eyes on teacher, raises hand if has a question or knows an answer, takes notes when something important is shared with class verbally/written on board).
- 3) Talk about what appropriate behavior during class looks like: hands & feet to self, raises hand to answer questions, does not blurt out

answers, waits for teacher to acknowledge them, uses an indoor voice.

- 4) Give the student a checklist and ask him or her randomly to self-monitor and indicate if the items on list were present or not.
- 5) Practice and debrief: set a goal and add a reinforcer to increase motivation to practice the skill.

Example 3) Teaching children to make homework plans.

- 1) Write down homework subjects/assignments.
- 2) Put on the top of the desk everything that needs to go home to complete the assignments.
- 3) Put materials in backpack, and use a checklist.

Note to parents: having a set time to complete homework and someone available for questions is important for supporting the success of your child.

Using Incentives to Encourage Practice

- Make incentives simple.
- Give the child something to look forward to doing when the hard task is done.
- Alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities (use simple language: First...then, e.g., first work, then play).
- Build in frequent, short breaks (depending on attention span, breaks could come every 10 minutes and last 5 minutes).
- Use specific praise to reinforce the use of executive skills (4 positives for each corrective feedback).

Sources: Peg Dawson, Ed D. *“Smart, but Scattered”*
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www.childmind.org

How do executive skills develop?

Executive function skills develop through a process called myelination. Myelin acts as insulation, increasing the speed with which nerve impulses are transmitted. The faster the impulse, the better the skill. All skills, including executive skills, improve with practice. Parents--Be Patient! The brain doesn't become fully mature until children are in their mid-20's.

Evaluation

No child struggles or fails on purpose. There is always a reason. Parents who suspect their child is having trouble learning should take notes on the types of errors their child makes, keep copies of their child's work, and talk with their child's teacher to find out how the child is doing in the classroom. Parents who want their child evaluated should make the request in writing to the local school district. See PIC Disability Brochure "Initial Evaluations" at www.wpic.org.

For more info contact:



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How to Support Your Child Who is Lacking in These Skills

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