



Supporting Executive Functioning Skills at Home

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What is Executive Functioning?

Executive functioning refers to the set of cognitive processes required to plan, organize, and execute life activities. These are the skills that make goal-directed behavior possible. They are the skills required to execute tasks, or the skills you need to *get things done*. Executive skills are housed in the frontal lobe of the brain. They begin to emerge shortly after birth but take 25 years or longer to fully develop. Like any other skill, with enough instruction, repetition, and reinforcement, executive functions can be learned and strengthened.

There are 11 primary executive functioning skills. These include: response inhibition, working memory, emotional control, sustained attention, task initiation, planning and prioritization, organization, time management, persistence, flexibility, and metacognition (see below for a description of each). They generally develop in this order over time.

General Tips for Supporting Executive Functioning Skills at Home

Supporting children's executive functioning skills at home is essential, as these skills are directly related to learning and work productivity. Providing children with a consistent structure and routine is critical. Below are some general tips for supporting the executive functioning skills of children of all ages in the home setting:

- **Put a routine in place.** Create a daily schedule for your children and follow it accordingly. Attached are some examples of daily schedules that you can modify to fit your child's needs. Visual schedules with pictures are especially helpful for younger children. When creating a schedule, try your best to maintain consistency each day. For example, designate a time that children are to wake up in the morning and a chunk of time and place where they can complete their schoolwork. Keep in mind that schedules may vary depending on the age of the child. For example, a younger child might exhibit most optimal work production and alertness earlier in the morning. On the other hand, teens (who are often on a different sleep schedule), may work best later in the afternoon.
- **Allow for flexibility and breaks.** While it is helpful to have a daily schedule, allow for some flexibility and downtime. Remember that flexibility is an important executive functioning skill. Remember that teachers adhere to a very strict structure and routine because they are responsible for the learning of 20+ students. It is okay to make adjustments to your individual child's schedule if you see the need for it. For instance, if your child is engaged in an assignment and needs more time

to complete it, allow for that time extension in the daily schedule. If your child is having a hard time getting started or staying focused on a task, allow for small breaks or implement an **“if, then” strategy** (e.g. “If you finish your math, then you can play on the iPad” or “If you complete your social studies, then you can Facetime with your friends”).

At school, there are natural breaks built in to students’ days (e.g. lunch, recess, transition time between classes, study hall). It may be helpful to recreate these breaks for children at home. For younger children, movement breaks are a great way to reset between activities. Go Noodle (www.gonoodle.com) is a website that contains a variety of short movement breaks, games, dances, and mindfulness activities. Younger children should not be expected to work more than 15-20 minutes straight without a short break, while older children and teens should ideally take a break after 40-45 minutes of working (think about the average length of a period at school). This technique is referred to as “chunking” or “learning bursts.”

- **Adopt a “growth mindset.”** Carol Dweck’s research on “growth mindset” is directly related to how we think about fostering executive functioning skills in our children. A fixed mindset assumes that one’s abilities are static and unable to be changed or improved. A growth mindset, on the other hand, sees abilities as malleable and changing over time through perseverance and hard work. Think of executive function deficits in children the same way. Rather than writing off their struggles completely (“my child can’t ever focus”), ask yourself which of the 11 executive function skills is he/she missing (hint: sustained attention). Which skill does your child not have...yet? When we think of executive functioning issues as missing skills, we can then come up with a plan for how to *teach* those skills to help our children improve.

Steps to Teach Executive Functioning Skills at Home

1. **Assess** and determine which executive functioning skill your child is missing. You can use the Executive Skills Questionnaire to help determine which skills your child is lacking (<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/school-psychology-services/professional-development/2016/materials/dawson-executive-skills-questionnaire.pdf>). If there are more than one, prioritize which skill is most important to work on right now and start with that one first. During the move to virtual learning, task initiation and sustained attention are two important skills to emphasize. Ask yourself, what skill is my child missing in order to get things done? After the skill deficit is determined, **define a behavioral goal** of what you would like your child to do instead (we call this the alternative skill or replacement behavior). For example, if you determine that your child has a skill deficit in the area of sustained attention, your replacement behavior might be for your child to work for an uninterrupted period of 15 minutes at a time. Be as specific as possible!
1. **Directly teach/support** the instruction of the skills that your child is missing. You will need to be explicit in the way skills are taught (just as reading or algebra or a foreign language are explicitly taught to students). Remember, we are operating under the assumption that the child has not learned how to demonstrate these specific skills yet. Modeling, role playing, and visual checklists and supports are all helpful tools to use when teaching the replacement behavior to your child.

2. **Restructure the physical or social environment** so that your child can achieve success. This may mean changing the location of the workspace, reducing distractions at home, and providing organizational structures. Talk to your child's teacher about how the nature of the task might best be altered to meet your child's individual needs (e.g. offering choice, shortening assignments).
4. Finally, **create a plan for reinforcement**. When your child does demonstrate the target behavior and/or reaches the proposed goal, how will you acknowledge and reward his/her effort? Determine what incentives you will use. For some children, specific and labeled praise works well (e.g. "great job staying on task for 15 minutes!"). Other children require a more tangible reward (e.g. Lego time, iPad time, video game time). Consider implementing a simple sticker chart (for younger children) or points system (for older children) to keep track of their success in displaying the alternate behavior. Remember, what you attend to and reinforce will continue to occur. Don't forget to reward children for displaying the behaviors and skills you want to see more of in the future!

Additional Resources

www.childmind.org

www.understood.org

*Use their Tech Finder to find apps, games, and programs that match your child's executive functioning needs <https://www.understood.org/en/tools/tech-finder>

Executive Functioning 101 e-Book – Prepared by the National Center for Learning Disabilities
<https://www.understood.org/~media/040bfb1894284d019bf78ac01a5f1513.pdf>

Smart but Scattered by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare

Smart but Scattered Teens by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare


EF Skills, Descriptions, and Strategies for Home

EF Skill	Description/Example	Strategies for Home
Response Inhibition	The ability to stop an impulsive act and think about the consequences of our actions Example: Raising hand without calling out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach younger children how to “wait” and “stop.” • Build in “wait time” during the day and practice waiting before accessing preferred activities.
Working Memory	The ability to remember something while doing something else Example: Following 1-2 step directions; juggling the expectations of multiple teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use flash cards to practice facts, vocabulary, or sight words. • Use check-lists and post-it reminders to remember important things. • Use technology to support memory (e.g. reminders, alarms, taking pictures).
Emotional Control	The ability to identify the difference between big problems and small problems and not overreact Example: Recovering from disappointment, managing anger or anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help children identify “triggers” and utilize coping strategies (e.g. breathing, taking a break, asking for help). Praise them when they are able to demonstrate these skills. • Help children build an emotional vocabulary and learn to identify how they are feeling. Build in “feelings check-ins” each day.
Sustained Attention	Keeping attention on a task despite boredom or fatigue Example: Attending to homework or classwork without giving up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine how long kids can work on a task before taking a break. Over time, lengthen this amount of time. • Use timers for work time and break time in order to stick to a schedule. • Build in opportunities for planned breaks.
Task Initiation	Getting started on a task right away when it is given Example: Starting a task or chore when it is given; not waiting until the last minute to start a project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify a start time for tasks and stick to it. • Start with an easier task to facilitate work initiation. • Limit access to preferred activities until after academics have been started and completed.
Planning/Prioritization	Creating a plan on how to approach a task or activity and then following through with the plan Example: Formulating a plan to write an essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a visual, written, or electronic schedule each day. Check things off as you complete them. • Post the schedule in a place where everyone can see.
Organization	Creating systems for where things go and then following and utilizing those systems Example: Putting belongings in their correct place and being able to locate them afterwards; tidying up a binder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help kids create and organize their own workspace. Use bins or shoeboxes to hold materials. • For younger children, take a picture of this space when it is organized as a reference tool in order to ensure that the space is neat and organized each day.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For writing, use graphic organizers or written lists to facilitate thought organization.
Time Management	<p>Knowing how long activities take and being able to plan your time accordingly</p> <p>Example: Being able to complete a task within a given time limit; establishing a schedule to meet deadlines</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When making plans for the day, practice estimating how long a task should take before starting. Include this on the daily schedule and try to meet this goal. • Define leisure activities (especially those than can be distracting) and put parameters around them (e.g. iPad or X-Box only after morning academics are done).
Goal-Directed Persistence	<p>Following a task through until completion</p> <p>Example: Completing work in order to earn free time; earning and saving money to buy something special</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a check-list to keep track of your child's progress in completing all of their tasks. • Break larger tasks into smaller chunks. • Reward child with free time after they meet their work goal..
Flexibility	<p>Rolling with changes and being able to transition between activities, topics, and ideas</p> <p>Example: Adjusting to a change in routine or cancelled plans</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To the best of your ability, stick to a consistent schedule, but model and encourage flexibility and coping with unexpected changes (e.g. when there are Wifi or technology problems). • Once kids can establish a routine, "mix it up" (do things in a slightly different order) to promote flexible thinking.
Metacognition	<p>Self-monitoring and identifying things that one is struggling with and using strategies to remedy the situation</p> <p>Example: Changing one's behavior in response to feedback; reflecting on one's own performance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check-in with your child throughout the day and ask them questions to self-monitor (What have you completed? What do you have left?). • Schedule a debriefing time at the end of each day (What went well? What can we try differently tomorrow?).

Sample Daily Schedules

Sample 1

Subject	Sub-Tasks/Estimated Time	Done?
<i>Ex: Reading Workshop</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Read story (10 minutes)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Answer questions (1-5) (15 minutes)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Independent reading (20 minutes)</i>	

Sample 2

Task	How long will it take?	When will you start?	Where will you work?	Actual start/stop times	Done?
				Start: _____ Stop: _____	
				Start: _____ Stop: _____	
				Start: _____ Stop: _____	

Sample 3

Time	Activities
8:00-9:15	Wake up, shower, get dressed, brush teeth, eat breakfast (If extra time, free time)
9:15-10:00	Morning academics *Use a timer, 20 min learning blocks with 5-minute break in between
10:00- 10:15	Snack time
10:15-12:00	Continue with morning academics *Use a timer, 20 min learning blocks with 5-10-minute breaks in between
12:00-12:30	Lunch Time
12:30-1:15	Specials/Electives (PE, art, music, etc.)
1:15-2:00	Play outside, take a walk, hobbies and leisure activities
2:00-3:30	Catch up on unfinished work (make a list!) OR quiet activities (reading, Legos, art, puzzles)
3:30-4:15	Practice instrument
4:15-5:30	Down time, TV, X-box (only if academics are done)
5:30-6:15	Help make dinner, chores
6:15-7:00	Dinner time
7:00-8:30	Family time, TV time, board games
8:30-9:00	Get ready for bed, go to sleep

Sample 4

(visual schedule for younger children)

