

Executive Functions: Getting Organized for Success

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To be successful at school, from the primary grades to university, you have to be able to organize yourself and work independently. Many students, including those with attention and learning disorders struggle because they lack organization, time management skills, and goal directed persistence.

Executive Functions are the brain functions that act as a central controller to manage these behaviors, such as planning, setting priorities, starting to work, sustaining focus, monitoring work quality, and managing frustration. The role of *Executive Functions* can be compared to the conductor of an orchestra. The musicians may be able to play their parts individually, however when the orchestra is together the conductor must organize and integrate the musician's individual efforts, or there would be chaos.

Difficulties with *Executive Functions* show up in a wide variety of developmental, psychological, and psychiatric disorders including ADHD, learning problems, brain injury, depression, and anxiety. Executive functions can be broken down into two main areas:

- Behavioral inhibition or the ability to think before you act, resist the urge to say or do something, and manage emotions such as frustration associated with self-control, in order to complete tasks or goals.

- Metacognitive skills which help to achieve goals by planning, organizing, initiating tasks, managing time, maintaining attention in spite of fatigue or boredom, self-evaluating, and utilizing working memory or drawing on past learning to apply to the task at hand.

Students with executive skill weaknesses forget or miss instructions, don't bother to

with the student's developmental level, and consider what is normative at that age. If the student's executive skills are delayed you would begin with the child's skill level, and then work from providing external support to gradually develop the ability to internalize these metacognitive skills.

For example with younger



write down assignments or complete homework, or hand it in on time. They leave long-term assignments to the last minute, and will choose 'fun stuff' over work, or give up quickly with challenge.

Executive skills develop with age and younger children need more external structure, control, and support, while older adolescents gradually learn to make their own plans and decisions. To improve executive skills you have to start

children you would start with teacher interventions such as modifying tasks, making them shorter, or dividing them into smaller steps. Teachers can create schedules for task completion, rehearse the steps involved, provide verbal prompts to begin, provide encouragement for attention to task while working, and finally provide positive feedback for effort and task completion. After the work is done the parent or teacher can review the schedule and the

various steps and discuss with the child how he/she accomplished each step to achieve the goal.

An approach that has been successful with older students is coaching, or working closely with the student to teach executive skills such as organizational strategies through individual support and modeling. A first step may be to set long-term goals, and then work on a regular basis to help him/her achieve these goals. This could involve learning how to develop realistic schedules for homework and assignment completion, reviewing how well the goals are being achieved and identifying barriers to success such as procrastination, frustration, or feelings of incompetence. Asking questions such as "How did you manage to finish that report?" can encourage effective strategies. A coach might also help to identify what external supports are needed such as extended time limits for tests, or getting a tutor. The student may also need to learn effective study and test taking skills, and how to break down tasks. For many adolescents a period of daily coaching sessions is necessary. Above all the coach can act as a supporter and cheerleader.

Executive Functions develop over time and through interaction with real experiences, and remedial efforts must match the needs of the student.

For more information on *Executive Functions* contact the psychological consultant at your school. □