

What is Executive Functioning?

Joan Falcigno, School Psychologist

“Executive function” is a term you may have heard lately. It is currently a “buzz word” in education. Executive functions refer to the collection of skills necessary for effective and efficient functioning in almost everything we do. Your executive functioning is an important factor in how effective you are at work, at how you develop and carry out goals, at how you plan and follow through with routines and how you handle and solve life’s problems. One article I came across defined executive functioning as *“The group of essential mental tasks including planning, strategizing, organizing, setting goals, and paying attention to the important details that will help to achieve those goals.”* The article finally condensed the definition to the following: *“Executive function is what gets us down to business even when we’d rather just hang out.”*

The development of our executive functions begins in infancy and develops throughout our lives. Some people develop very effective executive functioning skills on their own, others need them explicitly taught. Some children require patient, encouraging instruction in the process, which can begin before grade school. However, we usually don’t recognize a child’s problem with executive functioning until he/she enters school and is engaged in the “formal” learning process.

The following is a list of executive functions that I found. It was compiled from several different sources, and it incorporates all those included in most formal lists of executive functions while offering practical examples for them. Executive functions include:

- *inhibition of impulses, stopping to choose an appropriate response*
- *previewing likely consequences of action (both short- and long-term)*
- *holding and manipulating information in working memory (the process that requires you to manipulate information while holding it in memory)*
- *sustaining attention despite distraction or fatigue*
- *planning, both short- and long-term*
- *saliency determination, figuring out which details are important*
- *task initiation – getting started on a chosen task*
- *depth of processing, choosing a level that is not too superficial or too consuming*
- *tempo control, maintaining an appropriate speed and rhythm for work*
- *development of automaticity, making a skill routine so it takes no conscious effort*
- *satisfaction, perceiving and deriving pleasure from reinforcers*
- *organization, both internal (thoughts) and external (materials)*
- *time management – predicting how long things will take, planning, and acting*
- *flexibility – adapting strategies or plans in response to mistakes or new information*
- *self-monitoring – observing one’s own performance and comparing it to standards*
- *emotional self-regulation – being aware of and managing feelings*

I have also learned from my reading that it is important to recognize the developmental nature of these skills and that they often develop through years of learning from our experiences. So it is important to know what skills may be developing well in your child while others may need to be taught and reinforced over time. Parents should know that the establishment of executive functions can take place by working with a child at his/her developmental level and by accepting that it will take time for any particular skill to develop.

As indicated above, there are different facets to executive functioning and a child may have strong skills in one area, but struggle in others. Parents can encourage the development of executive functioning skills by establishing routines and schedules, by dedicating a specified space in the house for homework completion, by allowing your child to make choices, by acknowledging your child's appropriate behavior, by finding out what motivates your child in order to reinforce his/her good behavior and by letting your child experience natural consequences to the choices they make. Remember you are your child's first and most important teacher.

The following list of tools and activities may be useful to you in developing your child's productivity, improving time management, and enhancing his/her successful completion of goals, in short, improving his/her executive functioning skills. I would encourage you to try some of these at home and watch your child's executive functioning skills grow.

- 1.) **Sequence steps for chores.** List the daily duties your child must complete and include clear, sequential instructions on what must be done. For example, "doing the dishes" may include collecting cups and plates, rinsing them, putting them in the dishwasher, running the dishwasher and putting the dishes in their designated spots when everything is clean.
- 2.) **Clean up together.** Set a time every night for you and your child to "clean up." Put him/her in charge of his/her play space. Offer suggestions on how to approach the task (pick up like items at the same time... Books, blocks, papers). Make sure to observe and offer advice on where things should go.
- 3.) **Inspect.** Hold surprise "inspections" from time to time. This could include examining your child's room, ensuring the completion of chores, or simply making sure your child's backpack and school materials are all in order. Consider giving a small reward for exemplary efforts.
- 4.) **Make a master calendar.** Work with your child to fill in dates and important events on a big family calendar. Check with your child after school, adding in any new obligations. Make sure to display the calendar prominently in a family common area.
- 5.) **Establish a homework routine.** Ensure your child has a neat, quiet place to get school work done, and schedule a time for your child to study or complete work every night. If there's no homework one night, make it a reading hour.
- 6.) **Make a homework supply box.** Fill a box with common school supplies such as pens, paper, tape, rulers glue, paper clips, etc. Post a checklist on the cabinet so your child can mark when an item has been taken and returned.
- 7.) **Post checklists.** Help your child establish helpful routines by posting some simple checklists around the house. These could include a nighttime routine before bed, steps for getting ready in the morning and a last minute check by the door to make sure nothing important for the day is forgotten.
- 8.) **Prepare for the day ahead.** Have your child get ready for the next day before going to bed. This could include gathering homework and class supplies, organizing a backpack and picking out an outfit for the following day.
- 9.) **Use organizational apps.** Help your child jot down notes, make lists, set reminders and plan out his activities using **to-do list apps** and **note-taking apps**.
- 10.) **Learn from cooking.** Cooking a meal involves the kind of step-by-step process with which many kids with poor organizational skills struggle. Use dinner time as an opportunity to model organization skills. Ask your child to help gather ingredients, measure out quantities, set cooking times and follow directions from a cook book. Consider taking on a unique or challenging meal to prepare once a week.
- 11) **Model problem-solving strategies.** Explain the steps you might take to get a broken appliance repaired or a checkbook balanced.
- 12) **Be flexible.** Model behavior that can accommodate changing circumstances, especially when problem solving.

Resources: <http://learningworksforkids.com/2014/01/how-to-improve-organization-in-children-10-strategies-every-parent-should-try/>,

[http://www.northrupandassociates.com/upload/CHADD%20Presentation%20Sept%202011%20\(Handout\).pdf](http://www.northrupandassociates.com/upload/CHADD%20Presentation%20Sept%202011%20(Handout).pdf)

<http://www.childmind.org/en/posts/articles/2012-8-20-helping-kids-executive-functions-organization>

<http://www.scholastic.com/parents/resources/article/disabilities-special-needs/explaining-executive-function>

http://www.daidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10523.aspx