

Executive Functioning In Your Child: What It Is and How To Build Skills for a Successful School Year

Noelle Pontarelli, M.S.

The Pediatric Consultation Center

Agenda

- * What is executive functioning?
- * How does executive functioning change with my child's growth and development?
- * How does executive functioning impact my child's social and emotional well-being?
- * What interventions or strategies can I use to improve my child's executive functioning?
- * Questions and answers

What Is Executive Functioning?

- * Working Memory
 - * Holding information in memory while performing other tasks
- * Planning/Prioritization
 - * The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal
- * Organization
 - * Creating and maintaining systems to keep track of information and materials
- * Response Inhibition
 - * Thinking before acting

What Is Executive Functioning?

- * Affect Regulation
 - * Controlling emotional responses in order to complete tasks
- * Task Initiation
 - * Beginning tasks in a timely manner
- * Cognitive Flexibility
 - * Revising plans and adapting to changing conditions
- * Goal-Directed Persistence
 - * Following through on task until completion despite distractions

What Is Executive Functioning?

- * Time Management
 - * Estimating how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits
- * Metacognition
 - * Self-monitoring and self-evaluating
- * Sustained Attention
 - * Maintaining attention to a situation or task in spite of distractions, fatigue, boredom

How Does Executive Functioning Develop?

- * The development of EF starts at birth and continues through young adulthood.
- * EF Tasks: Preschool
 - * Follow 1 step directions
 - * Perform simple chores with some assistance/reminders
 - * Inhibit simple behaviors (hitting/biting, touching hot stove)

How Does Executive Functioning Develop?

- * EF Tasks: Kindergarten
 - * Follow 2-3 step directions
 - * Inhibit more complex behaviors with reminders (e.g., look both ways before crossing a street)
- * EF Tasks: 1st and 2nd Grade
 - * Tidy bedroom/playroom without assistance
 - * Bring papers to/from school
 - * Complete 20 minute homework assignments without extensive monitoring
 - * Decide how to spend money (saving allowance) with asst.

How Does Executive Functioning Develop?

- * Grades 3 through 5
 - * Plan simple school project (select book, read book, write report); Complete 1 hour of homework
 - * Keep track of changing daily schedule (different activities after school)
 - * Plan how to earn money and save it for desired objects
 - * More complex behavioral inhibition: continue to behave when teacher leaves room, don't make rude comments, inhibition of temper tantrums
 - * Complete tasks after time delay
 - * Keep track of belongings when away from home

How Does Executive Functioning Develop?

- * Grades 6 through 8
 - * Complete regular chores around house along with occasional tasks (raking leaves) for 60-90 minutes
 - * Babysit younger siblings
 - * Independently use system for organizing schoolwork, including assignment notebook
 - * Follow more complex school schedule
 - * Plan & carry out long-term schedules for projects, including tasks to accomplish and timeline
 - * Manage time, including afterschool activities, homework, and chores, by estimating time needed to complete each task and making adjustments along the way

The Role of EF in Social/Emotional Functioning

- * Affect Regulation

- * Does every emotion escalate to a tantrum?
- * Do emotions often get in the way of completing tasks (i.e., low frustration tolerance)?
- * Is my child able to distinguish between a minor setback and the end of the world?

The Role of EF in Social/Emotional Functioning

- * Cognitive Flexibility

- * Is my child's world black-and-white, or are there shades of gray?
- * Does my child realize there is more than one way to solve a social problem?
- * Is my child able to “roll with the punches” if things don't go her way?

Examples of Executive Functioning Difficulties

- * Loses or breaks things often
- * Yells out answers in class
- * Difficulty sitting in seat
- * Messy room, desk, locker, backpack
- * Often forgets lunch, water bottle, permission slip
- * Takes things from others without asking
- * Does not read directions
- * Forgets that practice is canceled
- * Leaves front door open, lights on, etc.

How to Assess Executive Functioning

- * Interview teachers regarding:
 - * Working independently
 - * Planning and executing tasks
 - * Behavior management, especially when stressed
 - * Impulsive behavior

How to Assess Executive Functioning

- * Evaluate work samples
 - * Poor work quality (messy, careless errors, etc.)
 - * Check organization in backpack
 - * Consistency in completing assignment notebook
 - * Procrastination?
- * Formal assessment

Executive Functioning Strategies

- * Make changes in the environment
 - * Ask teacher for preferential seating
 - * Increase supervision (check-in, check-out)
- * Change the nature of the task
 - * Make steps more explicit
 - * Make the task close-ended (e.g., give fewer choices)
 - * Build in variety to maintain attention

Executive Functioning Strategies

- * Change the way you provide reminders/directions
 - * Verbal prompts with explicit steps (“I want you to do 3 things after school. First, I want you to....”)
 - * Visual cues/schedules
 - * Lists

Executive Functioning Strategies

- * Teach EF Skills

- * Provide organizational scheme
- * Monitor performance
- * Provide feedback and encouragement
- * Assist with problem solving
- * Model good EF strategies (think out loud)

Executive Functioning Strategies

- * Use a behavior plan to motivate your child to practice skills
 - * Set up a system with appropriate goals
 - * Decide on a reward ahead of time for meeting goals
 - * Positive reinforcement > punishment!
 - * Rewarding the behavior you want to see again works better than punishing the behavior you don't want to see
 - * Reward system = skills more rapidly acquired

Specific Homework Tips

- * Set a specific time and place for homework and limit distractions
- * Increase self-monitoring for time management: time how long it takes to read 5 pages of book, estimate how long it will take to complete entire assignment
- * Do most difficult assignment first
- * Alternate between 20 minutes of studying and 5 minute break
- * Alternate between tasks to increase arousal (read for 20 minutes, 5 minute break, math for 20 minutes)

Final Thoughts

- * Executive functioning is involved in most daily activities, and developing strong EF skills is essential for managing stress associated with schoolwork
- * As a parent, your goal is to coach your child towards functioning independently

Resources

- * Smart but Scattered: The Revolutionary “Executive Skills” Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare
- * Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents: A Practical Guide to Assessment and Intervention by Peg Dawson, Ed.D. and Richard Guare, Ph.D.
- * SOS! Help for Parents by Lynn Clark, Ph.D. is useful for obtaining additional ideas for the behavioral point system parents use at home