

Executive Functioning



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Principles for Improving Executive Skills

- ▶ Nature vs. Nurture
- ▶ Don't assume that a struggling child has executive skills and is not using them.
- ▶ It's our responsibility to help children learn these skills. You may find this lecture mundane...but do your kids have these skills?
- ▶ Consider the child's developmental level and capacity to exert effort.
- ▶ Provide just enough support for the child to be successful= Zone of Proximal Development.
- ▶ When you do stop the supports, fade them gradually. Never abruptly.
- ▶ Understand the child's EF abilities, objective vs. subjective.

Strategies for Getting Ready in the Morning

- ▶ It starts the night before (bag, food, clothes, etc.)! Planning ahead makes all the difference.
- ▶ Sit down with your child and make a checklist of the things to be done to review before leaving for school.
- ▶ If necessary, rehearse or role-play the process, walk through each step.
- ▶ Determine what time the whole routine should be finished, use a timer, etc.
- ▶ Put the system to work: cue your child to begin the first step and prompt to check off the step on the checklist. They need to feel empowered.
- ▶ **CONSISTENCY IS KEY!**
- ▶ Assumption: PARENT HAS GOOD EF. WHAT IF HE/SHE DOESN'T?

Strategies for Homework

- ▶ Modifications/Adjustments:
 - ▶ If your child tends to forget assignments that may not be written down, list every possible subject and talk about each one to jog his or her memory about assignments
 - ▶ Create a separate calendar for long-term projects
 - ▶ Build in rewards for starting/ending homework on time
 - ▶ Ask the child to estimate how long each assignment will take helps train time management skills
- ▶ Executive skills addressed: task initiation, sustained attention, planning, time management, metacognition
- ▶ Do you let them fail?

Strategies for Homework

- ▶ As soon as the child gets home for school, he or she needs to make a homework plan. The steps the child should follow:
 - ▶ Write down all assignments
 - ▶ Make sure he or she has all materials
 - ▶ Determine whether help is needed for each assignment
 - ▶ Estimate how long each assignment will take
 - ▶ Write down when he or she will start each assignment
- ▶ Cue your child to start homework at the time listed and monitor performance throughout.
- ▶ Reward? Computer time, snack, dessert, show?

Strategies for Inhibition and Transition

- ▶ Use of Visual Cues can be helpful for this deficit
 - ▶ E.g. traffic light, stop sign, hand signals, etc.
- ▶ Use of a fidget toy/object (e.g. Velcro, squishy ball, therapy putty). Fidget Spinner?
- ▶ If your child interrupts, ask them to write questions/comments and self-control. Have a Question/Comment folder.
- ▶ Provide warnings that are clear and concise (e.g. in 10 minutes I need you to stop playing, clean up and begin HW).
- ▶ Schedules can be used to see the next event.

Strategies for Initiation

- ▶ An adult must provide assistance to ensure child understands the task.
- ▶ For writing, use graphic organizers (it structures information, main ideas, compare/contrast, pyramid graph-summary on top and details on bottom).
- ▶ Have a brief discussion prior to the task, how to approach a writing assignment, etc.
- ▶ Incentives to be known before task.
- ▶ Like Nike say's "Just do it." Starting is the hardest part.

Strategies for Attention Concentration

- ▶ Repeat orally presented information.
- ▶ Simplify the language and directions.
- ▶ Break down multi-step directions.
- ▶ Use mnemonics for memory.
- ▶ Use visualization strategies.
- ▶ REPETITION, REPETITION, REPETITION.

Strategies for Planning/Organization

- ▶ Checklists to keep track of tasks completed/uncompleted.
- ▶ Use of calendars for upcoming events, assignments.
- ▶ Color coding folders, books for subjects.
- ▶ Break down long-term assignments into smaller parts. Teach to pace.
- ▶ Quiet space for HW. Need to learn to deal with silence.
- ▶ Double check work.
- ▶ Checkpoints during HW, writing. “When you get to paragraph 3 let me know.”

Marshmallow Test

Walter Mischel, Professor
Columbia University, NY

- ▶ 45 years research on Executive Functioning (self-control/will power) and implications for their lives.
- ▶ Child is given **one** of his/her favorite snacks. At any time they can eat the snack, or wait until the examiner comes back to eat **two** of the preferred snacks.
- ▶ Results- the average child held out for a bit shorter than three minutes, but about 30% of them held out for 15 minutes and received two marshmallows.
- ▶ Mischel found children as young as 19 months old could be reliably tested. Delayed gratification. Those children had better academic performances, SATs, Emotional Reg, etc.

Self-Control, the CORE of EF

- ▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo4WF3cSd9Q&feature=youtu.be>

Academic Supports

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Academic Support

- ▶ At school, supports should be implemented at the:
 - ▶ Level of the **person**
 - ▶ Teaching children executive skills.
 - ▶ Motivating children to use executive skills.
 - ▶ Level of the **environment**
 - ▶ Changing the *physical or social environment* to reduce problems.
 - ▶ Changing the way *cues are provided* to prompt a child to perform tasks or behave in certain way
 - ▶ Changing the *nature of the task*.

Changing the Physical or Social Environment to Reduce Problems

- ▶ Are there impediments to executive functioning that can be removed or added to the environment?
- ▶ Front versus back of the class.
- ▶ Moving them away from the window or near their friends or talkative students.
- ▶ Placing a student with weak skills with a very structured teacher.
- ▶ For impulsive children, placing them in smaller settings or under more adult supervision.

Changing the Nature of the Task

- ▶ Make the task shorter
- ▶ Make the steps explicit
- ▶ Make the task close-ended instead of open-ended (e.g., fill in the blanks, T/F, rather than essays, providing word banks)
- ▶ Build in variety or choice with respect to the tasks to be done or the order in which the tasks are to be done
- ▶ Offer feedback and opportunities to revise writing assignments
- ▶ Offer students choices for ways to demonstrate content knowledge
- ▶ Offer praise for all efforts to correct work
- ▶ Offer multiple ways to participate in classroom activities, not just oral expression
- ▶ Teach note-taking, memory strategies, and study skills when necessary

Conclusion

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Can't Versus Won't

- ▶ Remember rewards will not work if the child does not have the skill. Reward programs imply that a child can do it if he/she wants to or is motivated enough to.
- ▶ This often leads away from the realization that many children who do want to change their behavior don't know what to do to change it.

Not Just Being Lazy

- ▶ Parents, teachers and others involved with a child with executive function difficulties must be careful not to attribute the particular production deficits they observe to character flaws or consciously chosen states of mind, such as laziness, lack of motivation, apathy, irresponsibility, or stubbornness.
- ▶ Rather, these behaviors are the result of inadequate activation of executive function capacities that are necessary for regulating perceptions, feelings, thoughts and actions.

Last Thoughts

- ▶ We need to emphasize responsibility, time management, attention to detail and other important qualities.
- ▶ Parents need to communicate the behavior to change/work on and set a plan.
- ▶ Avoid over parenting. Rewards work better than consequences.
- ▶ Try to align external demands with internal desires to maximize motivation as much as possible.

Last Thoughts

- ▶ Don't give up too soon, but revise plan if needed. It takes a varying amount of time (depending on the child) for new habits to form.
- ▶ Your child/student didn't fail, the *strategy* failed.
- ▶ If your child continues to struggle, seek out a clinician (social worker, psychologist, academic tutor, etc.) that is trained in teaching and implementing EF skills.
- ▶ Lastly, diagnostic clarity is essential in order to create an effective plan that is tailored to your child's unique cognitive profile.

Q & A

Thank You!