



EXECUTIVE FUNCTION

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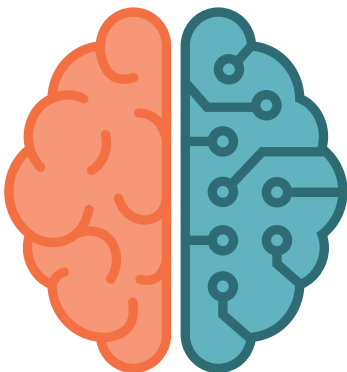
WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?

The term 'executive function' comes from the CEO or business executive; everyone has executive functioning, and it develops over the course of childhood and adolescence. Executive functioning (EF) is an umbrella term referring to the ability to initiate, break



down, and follow through on multi-step tasks. EFs develop in the prefrontal cortex over the course of adolescence and are typically fully mature by the mid-twenties.

The following are definitions and descriptions of what is referred to as EF:



- The management functions of the brain
- The covert, self-directed actions individuals use to help maintain control of themselves and accomplish goal-directed behavior
- The variety of functions within the brain that activate, organize, integrate, and manage other functions
- A set of mental skills that help you get things done

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THE EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS INVOLVE THE FOLLOWING:



Organization of
thoughts, time, & space



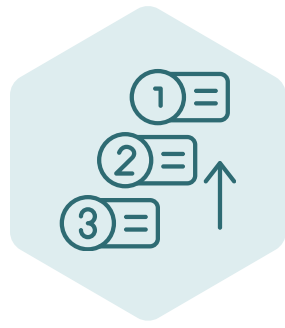
Planning &
activation



Sequential
thinking



Cognitive flexibility



Prioritizing



Self-regulation

When discussing difficulties associated with ADHD, many of them center on the ability to employ the “executive functions” of the brain. Not all people with low EF have ADHD, but most students with ADHD also have low EF. Learning differences and anxiety can also negatively impact EF.

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WHAT TO EXPECT

Because we adapt the EF skill-building program to each student's needs and existing skill set, the program duration varies. Some students see improvement in 8-10 weeks, while others need a semester or an academic year to see significant gains. We analyze the student's progress at the four-to-six week mark to ensure there is sufficient engagement. We check to see that the student has established the following:



*Calendaring
System*



*Task Management
System*



*Targeted Skills
& Goals*



*Communication
Plan*



*Organization
System*

When starting the EF skill-building program, student buy-in is crucial for success. If your student is not part of the intake process, we recommend a 20-minute Zoom with the student to discuss coaching and determine their level of engagement.

Consistency, repetition, and regular feedback are key to a successful program. A team approach is always the most effective for students to reap the benefits of EF skill-building. We strongly recommend that a school advisor or teacher and parents receive email communication, weekly task lists, and biweekly session notes.

We recommend starting with twice-weekly EF skill-building sessions, reducing as systems and habits develop. If only one weekly session is possible, a parent must check in during the week to ensure the student stays on track and accountable.

In addition to the four-to-six week check in, a formal progress report will be provided at the semester or 4-month mark to assess progress and discuss next steps.



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A TYPICAL EF COACHING SESSION

A STUDENT AND THEIR EF COACH MAY:

- Check the school's online portal.
- Problem solve workarounds when the portal is unclear or not updated regularly.
- Update calendar and task list.
- Email or share the task list according to the family's plan.
- Briefly cleanup if physical organization is an ongoing problem.

Many students need help with task initiation and application of EF skills within the context of actual assignments so, if time allows, a student and their coach can work on study skills and/or homework support (1.5 hour sessions are often necessary to have time for all of the above and to work on assignments).



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HOW TO DEVELOP EF SKILLS

1

Describe the problem behaviors

Examples of problem behaviors include: not following morning routines on school days, forgetting to submit homework assignments, losing important papers, etc. Be as specific as possible when describing the problem behaviors.

2

Establish a procedure or set of steps to reach the goal

Goals should directly address problem behaviors. For example, if the issue is forgetting homework materials at school, the goal could be, "Mary will bring home all necessary materials to complete her homework." SMART goals must be specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound.

3

Set a goal

We believe in creating a task list that outlines the procedure to be followed. Examples of lists include morning routine, end of day routine, homework planner routine, project planning, writing planning, study planning for tests, organizing notebooks, and note-taking.

4

Supervise the student following the procedure

Initially, the student will need guidance through the process, including: 1) reminding them to start; 2) prompting each step; 3) observing each step as it's performed; 4) providing feedback to help improve performance; 5) praising the student for completion of each step and the entire procedure.

5

Evaluate the process and make changes as necessary

At this step, the EF coach continues to monitor the student's performance to identify areas of improvement, often by adding cues or a refined breakdown of the task into subtasks. When possible, the coach will involve the student in the evaluation process to tap into their problem-solving skills.

6

Fade the supervision

Gradually reduce prompts and supervision until the student follows the procedure independently. For example: 1) prompt student between steps; 2) start the student and making sure they finish, without supervising the task; 3) cue the student to start, utilize the checklist, and report back when done.

Six-step process excerpted from "Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents," Peg Dawson & Richard Guare, The Guilford Press, 2004.

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ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS

CALENDARING

A calendaring system is the core of the EF skill building process and should ideally be established within the first two sessions. It is the primary tool for developing EF skills and will be utilized to keep track of homework, projects, assessments, and extracurricular activities. It will also help cue the student to manage time and prioritize what needs to be done. The student should be involved in choosing and designing the calendaring system. When a student refuses a calendaring system beyond the school portal calendar, do not despair. We can still make headway with a task list and/or paper planner!



The calendar should include: short and long term assignment due dates; exam dates; extracurricular and personal commitments. Digital, paper, and wall calendars will be considered based on student preferences, school requirements and efficacy.

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ESTABLISHING SYSTEMS

TASK MANAGEMENT

A task list should be created each session. It should be broken down by day, subject, and task, specifying how every component of an assignment will be completed. Each task must be granular, have a time estimate, and a planned window for completion. A vague directive such as “study for history test” does not indicate how the task will be completed. Students should understand how to approach and complete each task before the EF coach leaves.



Students can utilize paper or digital task lists. Like the calendaring system, a student should be involved in deciding what task management system or product is best for them. The student should also actively participate in creating their task list.

In some cases, the task list should be shared with tutors, parents, advisors or teachers. Task list reminders are key for students who struggle with initiation. Examples of reminders include:

- Phone reminders/alarms (if phone is allowed during school)
- Watch alarm
- Computer pop-up alarm reminders (if laptop is out during each class)

Sometimes, for a short term, students receive reminders via text, phone call, and/or email from their EF coach throughout the week while building toward autonomy.

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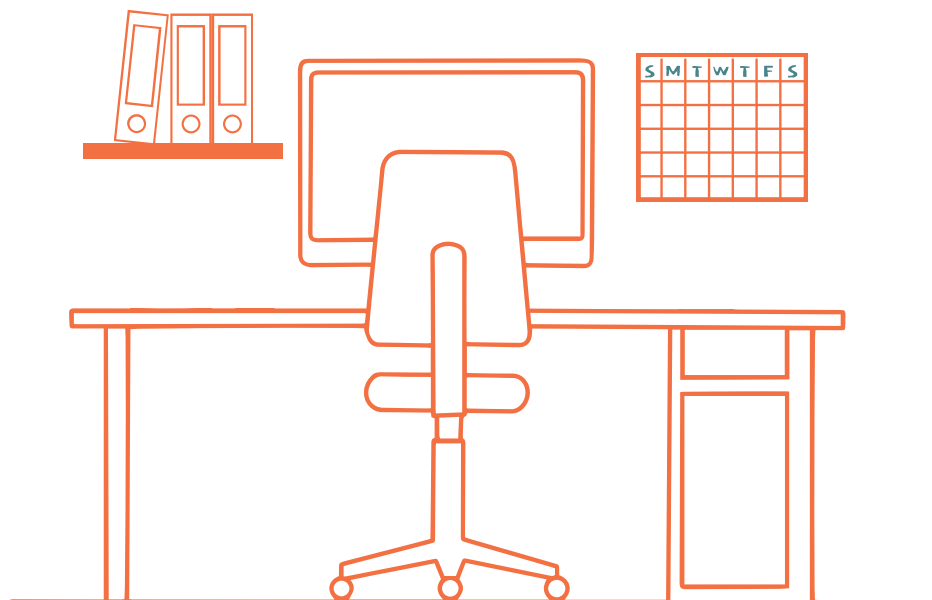
ESTABLISHING A TASK MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

PHYSICAL ORGANIZATION

When physical organization is an issue, evidence of the struggle will be abundant.

- Backpack is a mess
- Papers are everywhere
- Homework station is a disaster
- No organization of school materials
- Missing books, assignments, handouts
- Forgets to turn in completed work

Like with any other system implemented in the EF process, the student should be an active participant in designing the system, taking into consideration their preferences and school requirements. The student, parent, and EF coach should discuss what has and has not worked in the past. The EF coach should offer suggestions but not make the decision without an initial discussion. Brainstorm, make a plan, and follow through with it. There is no “right way” and trial and error is sometimes needed. Once the system is established, most students need help maintaining it. Weekly check-ins should include cleaning the student’s backpack, study area, and binders. Gradually, responsibility needs to shift to the student.



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MEASURES OF PROGRESS

EF skill-building progress varies from student to student. Their EF coach will routinely address progress and obstacles to achieving the goals identified at the beginning of the EF journey. As students develop EF skills and become autonomous learners, grade improvement typically follows.

Common measures of progress include if the student:

- Makes it through 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month (progressively) without...
 - Turning in a late assignment
 - Forgetting to bring home needed books, binders, and/or handouts from school
 - Forgetting to submit work
 - Being alerted by a teacher to a problem
- Noticeably improves their physical organization
- Achieves SMART goals, as set in beginning sessions
- Maintains calendar and task list on a regular basis without assistance, eventually internalizing calendaring and task list management
- Completes homework and study tasks independently after cued to start (eventually independently)
- Can reduce the number of weekly EF coaching sessions without regression

