

Understanding Executive Functions

Executive Functions are skills we call upon all day, every day and many of us have never heard of them and do not know how they affect our daily lives. Executive function skills are a “set of mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action” (NCLD Editorial Team). We use these skills to plan and organize, manage our time, control our emotions and impulses, start and complete tasks, and remember details. If these tasks are a struggle for your child, he or she may have difficulties with executive function skills. Difficulties are more apparent in children but fortunately early attention to EF skills can be very helpful to prepare the child as he or she moves into adulthood. Our brain continues to develop and mature as we age and is shaped not only by physical changes in the brain but life experiences and our environment.

Some early warning signs of executive dysfunction may include, but are not limited to, difficulty planning projects, difficulty staying on task with homework or chores, struggles with controlling emotions and not acting on impulsive thoughts, difficulty memorizing and retrieving information, a hard time generating ideas independently, and the inability to provide details and organize. Many of these signs can be recognized at home or at school. It is never too late to receive assistance on guiding your child through the difficulties they face. There are answers for you and your child if he or she is displaying difficulties with any or a variety of these skills.

Children and adolescents with executive function difficulties need more reminders and assistance with organization. They need more cues. The reminders can be in the form of auditory cues, visual cues or cognitive cues. Auditory cues are often the most common for classroom learning and at home. Instructions are spoken regularly, directions are given verbally, and reminders even may be said out loud. However, this form of cueing can be easily overlooked especially by children who are easily distracted or those who can only focus on one thing at a time. It is important to take into account the environment or the child’s mental state when given an auditory cue. They might not be in the best position to receive the information. That is why it can be helpful to provide visual and/or cognitive cues as well.

The visual cues can be writing assignments on the board, keeping homework written in an agenda, having the family schedule on a communal calendar, drawing pictorial chart for a bedtime routine, or having a list of things to bring home placed in his or her locker. Try having your child help color code all school books and folders and see if the organization level increases. However, this form of cueing can be helpful not only for organization but for planning thoughts, brainstorming, and prioritizing. Cognitive cues are helpful when children or teens have difficulty retaining information, remember a sequence, or following multi-step directions. Did you ever use the mnemonic strategy to remember the order of the planets for the science test? Or what about for the notes on the Treble Clef to aid in practicing music? If

your child is taught a general strategy of developing a mnemonic when given a multi-step task, you will have given them a lifelong lesson for remembering sequences.

Simple testing can be administered to assist you in understanding your child's executive function strengths and weaknesses. Also, a questionnaire can be provided for you, as the parent, to understand your strengths and weaknesses related to executive functions in order to better help your child. There is a way to work through the inability to control impulses and emotional meltdowns. There are tools to help you and your child ease through school work and home work with more ease. Just don't be afraid to seek more information and ask for help!

Packer, L.(2014) EDF: Environmental Cues, Supports and Strategies. SchoolBehavior.Com

NCLD Editorial Team. (2014) What is Executive Function? National Center for Learning Disabilities.