

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

Getting from Point A to Point B

WHAT TO KNOW

- Executive functioning challenges inhibit children from showcasing and understanding the skills needed to complete tasks. There are many possible causes of executive functioning challenges, ranging from traumatic brain injuries to lack of sleep, nutrition to anxiety, and depression to learning difficulties.
- A child's age and stage of development also impact executive functioning. When a child's brain is still developing, their executive functioning skills are also still developing. Positive change can be possible as a child grows and matures.
- Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder is a disorder of executive function, but that's not the only reason a child may have executive functioning challenges. Testing may show any range of ability in working memory or processing speed, and still ultimately indicate different causes for executive functioning challenges.

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A COMMON MISCONCEPTION

While executive functioning challenges are typically identified during junior high years, it is possible they have been part of a child's experience for years. The shift from a nurturing, stable classroom and a supportive elementary teacher to a multi-classroom learning experience means a child has to put their

organizational and independent study skills to work for the first time. As the school environment becomes more challenging, some children experience difficulty staying organized and on top of their new class and homework schedule.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING AND A CHILD'S PATH

Moving from bed to the breakfast table. Remembering information from class through homework time. These executive functioning skills are vital to a child's successful completion of the most basic daily tasks. What many adults take for granted—creating a plan, initiating action, and following through—takes a level of focus that challenges some children even in the best of times. If a child experiences executive functioning challenges, seemingly simple, everyday tasks can seem impossible to accomplish and can affect every part of their life.

THE ROOT OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING CHALLENGES

A child's executive functioning challenges can come from a physical injury such as a concussion; could be an indication of learning difficulties; or could simply be attributed to a child's development. If executive functioning challenges do not seem age appropriate, neuropsychological assessments may reveal a child's strengths and weaknesses through a myriad of executive functioning facets. These facets include: working memory, processing speed, planning, inhibition, cognitive flexibility, and sustained attention.

Done properly, these assessments can identify which interventions may prove most helpful, and would enable parents to take the most effective steps forward. One such intervention includes utilizing a coach who helps build necessary, everyday skills with a child. Executive functioning coaches may reduce friction between parent and child by transferring responsibilities—a.k.a. “bad cop” duties—from the parent to a therapist.

Most importantly, these tests can measure a child's cognitive efficiency—their ability to hold things in their mind, manipulate that information into a plan, and achieve the plan. Parents are often asked to participate in assessments as well, helping identify where the challenges lie. In the end, the collected information is used to ensure an accurate diagnosis and a clear path forward.

THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL ASSESSMENT

Once the roots of the issue have been identified, the essential next step is to create a personalized solution for the child, with an understanding that certain strategies may or may not work.

Each recommended strategy should be phased in gradually through small, step by step implementation, to keep a child from becoming intimidated or overwhelmed.

For example, the use of a whiteboard or a planner to track to-dos helps some children. Others benefit more from technology resources, such as electronic planning software or calendars,

or programs that guide time management or help break large homework projects into more manageable chunks. Exploring multiple strategies will result in an effective, tailor-made solution that helps the child progress.

If a disorder such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is part of the equation, a large-scale resource—such as partnering with a tutor or ADHD coach, attending workshops that help build skills, or working with teachers to develop an appropriate 504 accommodation plan—can help the parent step out of a monitoring role and focus on the consistent emotional support that brings about a better outcome.

JUMP-START RESOURCES

- The ***Smart but Scattered*** book series offers age-specific volumes that help parents understand the unique challenges a child with executive functioning issues faces during everyday tasks. It offers tips and techniques for helping children adopt small steps that lead to greater success.



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