

Executive Functioning 101

For Parents

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Learning Goals:

- Understand the fundamentals of executive function and its effect on education and learning
- Recognize the signs of possible executive functioning difficulties in your child
- Identify strengths and areas of support in your child's learning journey
- Build useful and adaptive routines to support their education
- Learn strategies to implement the routines more effectively

Unit 1:

What Actually is Executive Functioning?

Core Components:

Executive functioning is a broad term that applies to the range of abilities normally involved in setting and carrying out goals or other processes requiring planning. Some of the key cognitive processes that are outlined by the APA include planning, decision making, problem solving, prioritization, organizing tasks, working towards goals, and cognitive flexibility. All of these processes and more have been sorted into three primary categories:

Working Memory:

- Remembering multi-step instructions
- Holding information
- Utilizing new knowledge

Cognitive Flexibility:

- Adjust to changing demands
- Change priorities
- Alter perspective when introduced with new information

Inhibition Control:

- Resist temptations or distractions
- Utilize delayed gratification (delaying short-term gratification for a more satisfying reward later)

Although not specifically falling in one of these categories, time management is also a large part of what allows individuals to complete tasks and meet goals.

How Executive Functioning Difficulties May Show Up in Children:

Executive functioning are skills that are built throughout childhood and well into adulthood. Some children may struggle with executive functioning and require additional support to complete tasks and goals. Children who are neurodivergent have been found to have additional likelihood of executive functioning challenges.

Some possible signs that your child may benefit from some additional support around executive function includes:

- Challenges starting on homework, chores, or other tasks
- Challenges planning larger projects or carrying out complex school assignments
- Challenges understanding or implementing the benefit of studying (regardless of grades)

Please note that these signs are not meant to diagnose any medical condition and if your child's quality of life is severely impacted by any of the above, it is recommended to seek professional care.

Unit 2:

Executive Functioning and Education

Neuroplasticity & Executive Functioning:

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to form new connections and alter behavior based on the introduction of new information and stimuli. Neuroplasticity is important because it is a lifelong skill and includes the ability to build cognitive processes linked to executive functioning. As neural pathways are reinforced, they become stronger, whereas unused pathways begin to lose connection.

School-Based Challenges:

For children, executive functioning is called upon to complete assignments, engage with school and learning environments, and carry out academic-based goals. Here are some ways that learning requires strong executive functioning:

- Prioritizing which assignments to complete first
- Planning out a large project or essay
- Planning adequate time to complete homework
- Remembering multi-step instructions (especially when provided verbally)
- Engaging in studying or other “boring” tasks over impulsive wants (like playing video games) to meet a more meaningful and goal-aligned outcome (e.g. scoring high on a test)
- Starting on an assignment (task initiation), especially tasks that are not exciting or fun
- Shifting viewpoints or expanding on previously held beliefs when introduced to new information

Task Initiation:

Task initiation refers to starting on a task. In a school setting, these tasks are often homework or some type of assignment. Task initiation can be a particularly challenging skill since it's a skill that is repeated numerous times throughout the day. Self-initiation is important for maintaining autonomy and keeping up with personal and external goals.

Starting on a new task (or resuming a previously paused one) often requires some form of motivation. Motivation can be internal or external. External motivators can be useful for starting on a task, but to sustain something more long-term, internal motivators are usually attributed to being best. External motivators include things like grades, expectations of others, rewards, and consequences. Internal motivators include personal fulfillment, joy, or things that align with someone's personal values.

Sample Task Requirements:

Let's take a moment to walk through all the steps that require executive functioning to complete an essay for school. Take a moment to recognize that these skills may not come naturally to your child since childhood involves the development of executive functioning. Instead, many of these processes require substantial mental energy and effort to complete.

1. Remember multi-step instructions given by the teacher to guide the assignment
2. Plan ahead and accurately determine how long each section of the essay will take and make a time management plan. Schedule enough time to work on each chunk.
3. Find the motivation, energy, and focus to start on the essay
4. Pick a theme actively following said instructions
5. Sort through information to determine what the most valuable key points are
6. Decide prioritization of information and outline what paragraphs should go where.
7. Don't forget to remember all the guidelines given by the teacher!
8. Start writing the essay

Although it may seem easy from the outside to "just start working on it", there is actually a lot of thought and planning that goes into even a single assignment.

Now imagine if you had a hard day, struggled to focus, or was assigned to do this over and over for 30 different assignments throughout the day. It adds up, especially for a child. That's why supporting executive functioning is so valuable! It allows some of these steps to be done more comfortably and reduces cognitive load.

Unit 3:

Strengths and Supports Identification

Strength-Based Approach:

The strength-based approach is all about recognizing and utilizing natural strengths. It's primary goals are to:

- Recognize what comes naturally, easily, or successfully with minimal effort
- Build systems that work with their natural strengths to accomplish challenging tasks
- Celebrate where they thrive and meet goals

Using a strength-based approach is key to building systems and routines that last and focus on supporting an individual where it's needed most. Strength-based approaches can also be beneficial to building self-confidence, advocacy and self-esteem.

Here are some common examples of struggles and strengths among some different neurodivergent identities:

ADHD → struggles with time management → strong problem-solving abilities

Autism → struggles with social cues → strong pattern recognition

Dyslexia → struggles with written language → strong oral communication skills

These are just some examples of how neurodiversity is a broad spectrum that encompasses many struggles, but also many strengths. Choosing a strength-based approach is about learning to work with what already feels accessible and natural instead of brute-forcing through challenges. It isn't about dismissing an individual's struggles, but rather recognizing "just do better" isn't usually the most effective way to respond to difficulties (for neurodivergent and neurotypical people alike).

Identifying Strengths & Room For Support:

There are many different strategies to identify the strengths and challenges your child faces. Some things to explore with your child may include:

- What environments feel the easiest to complete work? Do they do better with quiet? Dimmer lighting? Someone in the room with them or alone?
- What types of assignments feel easy? Hard? Take note of what kinds of learning these types of assignments support and look for patterns (are reading assignments challenging while video lectures feel easy? This may show a more auditory and visual learning strength)
- Do they prefer visual, auditory, or interactive (kinesthetic) learning?
- What makes an assignment feel challenging? Are instructions confusing/unclear/only given verbally? Is focusing long enough to complete the assignment difficult? Does it just feel like getting started is impossible (task initiation)? Explore where the breakdown in the routine is happening

These questions are easiest for middle school and high school students. Be mindful that they may not have an easy answer and approach the conversation with an open-mind and willingness to learn about their experience. Struggles in schoolwork related to executive functioning are not laziness. They reflect a system that isn't giving them the support they need to carry out tasks that might look easy from the outside (remember our sample task breakdown in the previous module?). For younger learners or students who struggle with self-awareness, adapt these questions to meet your child's needs and utilize your own observations to notice patterns.

Celebrate Accomplishments:

One final aspect of the strength-based approach is celebrating what they are good at, what they accomplish, and encourage self-advocacy. Celebrating small goals and achievements can go a long way in supporting the big goals. It can also help build internal motivators to keep progressing even when a task is challenging. Celebrate turning an average of 10 missing assignments into an average of 5. Celebrating a win doesn't have to mean the work is done. Remember that hard work is no fun for anyone without the small wins!

Unit 4:

Building Supportive Routines

Sensory Needs:

Sensory needs and supports can completely make or break an environment. It can mean the difference between comfortably finishing an assignment and a meltdown. This is especially true for children with sensory sensitivities, ASD, and ADHD.

Sensory factors in an environment can include:

- Visual: bright lighting, movement, flashing or flickering lighting
- Auditory: loud noises, overlapping sound, high pitches, unexpected noises
- Olfactory: strong smells, unpleasant smells
- Tactile: uncomfortable seating, textures, clothing

Availability of regulatory tools and sensory supports can also effect the environment. Environments that limit or shame movement, fidgeting, or breaks can add to sensory stress.

Here are some strategies for making more sensory friendly spaces:

1. Create a designated “school zone” that is quiet, has supportive lighting, comfortable textures, and other supports that help with focus
2. Create sensory zones throughout your home (e.g. a sensory calm space in the bedroom and an active movement zone in the living room for sensory seeking behaviors)
3. For children that struggle to verbalize discomfort, offer a visual chart or cards as an alternative
4. Build a portable sensory kit with tools to use at school or other spaces. What you put in this kit is entirely up to you and your child’s needs. It can include things like fidget toys, headphones or earplugs, sunglasses, communication cards, or a comfort item
5. Normalize taking breaks. A good starting point is a 5 minute break for every 25 minutes of focus time. You can also try pairing movement with these breaks.

Visual Supports:

Visual supports can help lessen cognitive load and are especially helpful for students who are visual learners or struggle with working memory and/or time management. Visual supports are ways to externalize reminders and make accessing skills easier. Some examples may look like:

- A homework steps chart with pictures to represent each step of completing homework
- A visual timer to keep track of time and remind them when to switch tasks
- A color-coded block calendar that makes it easier to visualize a schedule
- Create mind maps to visualize goals or explore complicated topics
- Use graphs/diagrams/charts to organize information

Routine Anchoring:

Building new routines and habits can be challenging, especially when time management and time blindness are additional struggles. A way to help build stronger routines and reduce the cognitive load of remembering everything is to use anchors. Anchors are used to connect new tasks or routines to already existing or easily accessible cues. They can also be useful for building new cues to signal when it is time to transition to a new task.

- Visual Cues: you can anchor tasks to visual reminders like the sun setting to remember when it is time to start a routine. You can also use visual checklists, charts, trackers, or other methods to visually see each step of a routine
- Existing Habit Cue: build upon an already existing task. Ex. I brush my teeth after my morning shower
- Transition Cues: assign a cue like stretching, taking three deep breathes, or sitting in a particular chair to signal when it's time to start a routine. For example: I listen to my favorite song and light a candle to signal when it's time to study

Other considerations when building habits:

- Start small: building habits, especially mentally draining tasks like schoolwork, are best built in small obtainable pieces. Start with 5-10 minutes of studying paired with a start and end cue. Gradually increase to longer intervals (but don't forget to build in breaks!)
- Link new habits to already existing goals, values, or interests. Internal motivators are a good way to help maintain new habits

- Have multiple versions of a routine to meet daily energy or time availability. Have a short and long version of a routine so time and energy constraints are less likely to impact the routine

Unit 5:

Adaptive Implementation

Non-Linear Tracking:

Tracking progress is not always linear. This is especially true for individuals with neurodivergent traits. It's important to view progress through multiple modes, celebrate smaller wins and adapt routines and supports regularly.

Non-linear tracking can look like:

- Noting what about certain tasks/routines felt good and energizing. What aspects of your child's routine seems to recharge their energy?
- Evaluating what areas they show improvement (even if not consistent)
- How did certain life events/environments/changes impact their progress? Keep the focus on where the routine seemed to fall apart. Was it when they had longer school days? Loud band practice after school? These are clues to where supports can be bridged.

Celebrating Progress:

Celebrate where they made progress, where they allowed their strengths to take the lead, and situations where they self-advocate. Again, this is about recognizing that progress, even if inconsistent or not meeting the larger goal, is still valuable.

Adapting Routines:

Take note of where the routines seemed to struggle or were less effective. Using the above example: your teen has started to make progress in completing homework on time; however, they struggle to complete their homework on Wednesdays. They are more fatigued and less motivated. After some thinking, you notice they have band practice after school on Wednesday. You can explore ways to adapt the routine such as an additional "quiet recharge

hour” after practice before starting homework, looking into supports to make band practice less sensory demanding, or creating a visual checklist to take some mental load off of starting their work. Revisit routines regularly and after any large changes (such as taking on a new extracurricular or changing grades).

Unit 6:

Review and Conclusion

You Did It!

Executive functioning can impact your child's ability to keep up with demands associated with academics. Tasks may require excessive cognitive load or require accessing skills that aren't easily accessible to your child. Evaluating where they are their strongest and where they seem to struggle most can be an important clue when developing support routines. Routines should be mindful of sensory needs, learning styles, and personal values/interests. Progress should be tracked non-linearly and routines should be evaluated regularly to determine if they are still effectively meeting their needs. If not, it's okay to adapt the routine to better serve them.

Other Notes:

- If your child displays signs of emotional/mental/or behavioral challenges, it is recommended to speak with a medical professional
- These tools don't require a diagnosis to utilize. Use what is helpful no matter where in their educational support journey they are
- You as a parent know your child best and what will be of benefit to them
- These tools do not guarantee any set outcome. They were designed to be helpful resources and to educate you as a parent in some possible ways to aid your child. This resource cannot guarantee outcomes such as grades or academic performance
- Finally, consider this your gentle reminder that you are doing great!

What's Next?

Next steps for supporting your child's executive functioning needs

Neurodiversity-Affirming Support:

Consider booking a free consultation for tutoring or coaching. I specialize in educational supports for students who are neurodiverse. I work on building their academic understanding through tutoring with integrated executive functioning skills. For deeper supports, I provide coaching that works on building functional and supportive routines that work with them, not against. I recommend coaching for students who struggle with completing school work, studying, and focus.

Other Resources:

- Check your local library for resources
- Follow me for regular educational posts and resources
- Follow neurodiversity-affirming content creators and individuals
- Utilize resources provided by the National Autism Association, National Dyslexia Association, Association for Autism and Neurodiversity, and other similar organizations

Resources

References I Used to Help Build This Guide

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[APA Dictionary of Psychology](#)

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[Signs of Executive Dysfunction in Kids - Child Mind Institute](#)

[Neuroplasticity - Cross-Modal Reassignment | Britannica](#)

[Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation: What's the Difference?](#)

[What is a Strength-Based Approach? \(Incl. Examples & Tools\)](#)

Created by Grace Lorntzen

No AI Statement:

This resource was made without the use of AI. All information used to create this guide is from my knowledge and experience in the field of psychology, coaching, education, and the above listed resources.