

Set Up for Success in 2017 by Identifying Executive Function Difficulties

Impaired Executive Function can impact significantly on children with autism spectrum disorder's ability to learn and engage in busy learning environments. "The psychological term *executive function* includes: organisational and planning abilities, working memory, inhibition and impulse control, self-reflection and self-monitoring, time management and prioritising, understanding complex or abstract concepts and using new strategies." (pg 234 *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* by Dr Tony Attwood). (Note: This can apply to children without a diagnosis as well.) Students may not struggle with all of them to the same degree. It is important to identify which areas the child needs supports. If the child has had assessments by a Psychologist it is worth checking, if areas were identified in the testing to help guide you.

Executive function skills include difficulty with:

1. *Emotional Control* – i.e. struggle with emotional control, often have trouble accepting negative feedback. May overreact to little injustices. Often struggle to finish a task when something upsets them (i.e. mistakes).
2. *Impulse Control* – i.e. calling out, rushing through activities without checking, inconsistency with following rules.
3. *Planning and Prioritising* – i.e. difficulty deciding the steps needed to reach a goal order of importance. May not know how to start planning a project and become easily overwhelmed trying to break tasks into smaller chunks. Often may have trouble seeing the main idea and easily go off topic.
4. *Organising* – i.e. ability to keep track of information and things. Organisational issues are constantly losing or misplacing things. They can't find a way to get organised even when there are negative consequences to being disorganised.
5. *Task Initiation* – i.e. struggle with issues with planning and prioritising too. Without having a plan for a task, it's hard to know how to start. Can come across as lazy or as simply procrastinating. But often they're just so overwhelmed they freeze and do nothing.
6. *Flexibility* – i.e. inflexible thinking in very concrete ways and take things literally. They don't see other options or solutions. They find it difficult to change course.
7. *Working Memory* – i.e. inability to hold information in their mind and use it to complete a task. Struggle with multi-step tasks, remembering directions, taking notes or understanding something you've just explained to them.

What to do:

- Visuals (the more the better) – colour code, visual plans for assignments, mind maps, take photos to show them how their desk, locker should look.
- Picture sequences or write down steps and directions – get them to tick off as they do each one.
- Transition supports – pre-warn about change using a timer, use transition cues like a bell or announcement, use transition objects (something to carry to remind them where going can be a visual or object or sensory tool).
- Modelling or guiding the child what to do – show and use assistance to support the child to do the actions of what is required.
- Routines – packing bag, pencil cases, book marks in books, diary for homework.
- Systems – i.e. put notes in plastic sleeve in same part of bag every time.
- Minimise – reduce clutter by having containers, drawers, extra shelving. Ensure labelled so return to correct place.
- Stop, Check, Reflect. It is very important when using this strategy they know what to "check," this is where visuals can be helpful.
- Time management (Time Timers, Digital Schedules).
- Scheduling with timer – break routines into steps or tasks to complete in certain times (see Time Timers).
- Limit choices.

What doesn't work:

Withholding favourite activities or punishment. These children have a genuine problem with executive functioning. It's not a choice. They need to be supported to accomplish the challenges they face. (Adapted from pages 70-75 of *Executive Function "Dysfunction"*). For example: I had a parent contact me who was frustrated as her daughter kept forgetting her homework, so she took away her daughters iPad if she forgot to bring her homework home. It made no difference, she still forgot her homework.

Looking for more information on ADHD, ADD or ODD? See *The Ultimate Guide to School and Home* by Sue Larkey and Anna Tullemans

Recommended Resource

Executive Function "Dysfunction"

By Rebecca Moyes

Containing a wealth of helpful information as well as tried-and-tested strategies, this is the perfect book for parents and educators of children with executive function difficulties. Using real examples, the author describes how difficulties in these areas may manifest, and offers practical hints, tips, and accommodations for supporting children both in and out of school.

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