

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

This handout provides general functional strategies to support executive functioning in children.



WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING?

Executive functioning is the process of brain functioning that is needed for goal directed activities. This includes making decisions, staying on track with a task, planning tasks and prioritizing tasks. Executive functioning skills are needed for learning, behaviour and development. Executive functioning skills include:

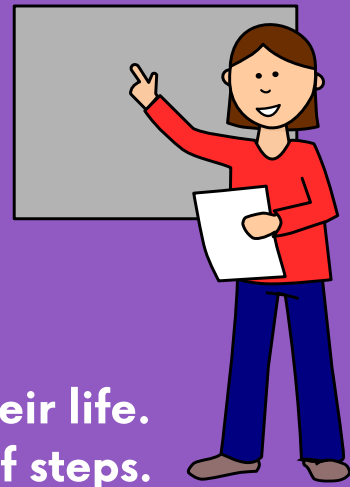
- **Initiating tasks.**
- **Inhibit:** not acting on an impulse or stopping an inappropriate behaviour.
- **Shift:** moving from one task to another.
- **Plan:** including anticipating future events and setting goals.
- **Organize.**
- **Self-monitor.**
- **Working memory:** holding information in our minds to complete a task or related task.
- **Emotional control.**

Using one's executive functioning skills is usually done unconsciously and will often improve as children mature.

However, children may require guidance to develop strategies to improve their executive functioning skills.

CHILDREN WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING DIFFICULTIES MAY...

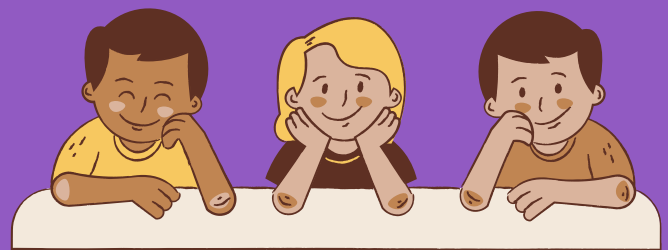
- Have trouble setting goals.
- Have a hard time starting a task.
- Not think about the future and potential consequences.
- Have difficulty adapting to any changes in their life.
- Have difficulty putting together a sequence of steps.
- Have a hard time shifting perspectives.
- Need someone to prompt them to consider the feelings of others.



These are just some challenges children may have when they have difficulties with their executive functioning skills. These executive functioning difficulties can also impact how your child does in school.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING DIFFICULTIES AND SCHOOL

In school, children may have difficulty starting schoolwork, staying focused, completing the work and remembering what to do or that they have to do the work. Executive functioning is required to perform the following components of handwriting in school/other settings: processing information, recalling information, planning what they need to write, initiating the writing task, performing the motor tasks to move their pencil and forming letters, organizing what they are writing, managing their paper/posture/pencil, realizing if they have made an error and being flexible to accept and correct mistakes.



STRATEGIES TO HELP CHILDREN WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING DIFFICULTIES

1. **Checklists:** using checklists are a great way to help your child keep track of what to do and check off items after they have completed them. Checklists can minimize the mental and emotional strain children may experience when trying to make decisions. Often children can get wrapped up in making decisions that they may not start the task or are constantly starting and restarting the task because they have thought of better ways to complete it. This can be an exhausting process for them that by the time they actually have to complete the whole task they are unable to do so. Using a checklist can allow a child to focus their mental energy on the task. An example of a checklist to complete a writing task at school is (1) get out a pencil (2) get out paper (3) write name on paper (4) put date on paper (5) read instructions to complete writing task.
2. **Rationale:** providing your child with a rationale when learning a new skill can help them understand why they are doing the task.
3. **Outline Steps:** outlining steps in a task will allow your child to know what to do to complete the task which can make it less daunting for them and more achievable.
4. **Visuals:** using visual schedules are a great way to show your child what to anticipate and allow them to follow the steps of a task.

Some strategies are presented here that can be used to help children who are experiencing executive functioning difficulties but there may be other strategies that are better suited for your child. It is important to work with your child and consult your Occupational Therapist to determine what works best for your child.

ACTIVITIES TO HELP IMPROVE EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS IN CHILDREN

1. **Recall games** are a great way to get your child to practice recalling information. For example, you can say a list of 5 grocery items and have your child practice recall by writing or saying the grocery list. As a parent you can grade the activity to make it harder by saying more grocery items or make the activity easier by saying less grocery items if needed. During this activity encourage your child to come up with strategies to help them recall the grocery items, such as using repetition.
2. **Block building games** are a great way to get your child to copy block designs. This activity can be done by showing your child a pattern of blocks made into different shapes and patterns and having them copy the design. You can start off this activity by allowing them to copy the design as they see it and then progress to showing them the design for a few seconds and then hiding it so they have to recall the pattern they saw. You can print a photo to have them copy with the blocks as shown below.

