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# Executive Functions

Helping your child organize, plan and follow through for a better school year

By Mara Berke, J.D., M.S.W. and Holly C. Knight, Psy.D.

Do your children lose notebooks, books, sweatshirts, cell phones or school handouts? Do they forget books at school that they need for homework, or forget to turn in homework assignments even though they have completed them? Are there piles of paper stuffed in the pockets of their notebooks? Are you shocked when you see their school lockers with crumpled papers in disarray? Do your children wait until the last minute to start on projects? Have they told you the night before that they are supposed to bring something – such as a book, costume or food item – to school the next day?

If you answered “yes” to some of these questions, your children might be struggling with executive functions.

You might feel frustrated and concerned. You have done all you are able to help them, but the planner sits blank despite the upcoming test that should be listed (along with a plan for daily study). The new pencil box is long gone. What to do? You can't continue to manage everything for your children, but you can't stand to sit by and watch them flounder.

## What Are Executive Functions?

Executive functions are responsible for directing and managing thinking, emotions and behavior, particularly during problem solving. Executive functions work together to help a person achieve goals by giving them the ability to manage time and attention, switch focus, plan and organize, remember details, curb inappropriate speech or behavior and apply lessons learned from past experiences to new situations.

Sheldon H. Horowitz, Ed.D., director of professional services at the National Center for Learning Disabilities, offers a description that reflects the views of many experts: “Executive functioning involves activating, orchestrating, monitoring, evaluating, and adapting different strategies to accomplish different tasks. It requires the ability to analyze situations, plan and take action, focus and maintain attention, and adjust actions as needed to get the job done.” If the brain were an orchestra, executive functions would be the conductor, making sure our thinking, behavior and emotions work together in harmony to get the job done.

Learning to organize and build upon tasks, and how to prioritize and follow-up, are life skills necessary for any career path. Without these skills, it is often difficult to highlight one's strengths and it often appears as if the person is less than capable. Executive functions allow us to put our best foot forward.



## What Can Parents Do To Help Children Struggling With Executive Functions?

There are many things parents can do to help their children with executive functions. "Even though executive function skills may not be automatic for some children, they can be taught," says Helaine Thau, Ph.D., a Santa Monica-based clinical psychologist specializing in neuropsychological assessments. It is important to be aware of executive function skills, and areas where your children might need additional support from you or a professional. Here are some useful tips from the experts:

**Identify the underlying issue.** Darryl Sollerh, L.A.-based academic coach and co-author of "How to be the Loving, Wise Parent You Want to Be ... Even with Your Teenager!" stresses the importance of understanding children's driving forces, the motivators behind the apparent executive dysfunction. For example, a child might turn in a paper late because they are afraid it isn't good enough and want to avoid having their work judged. In that case what might appear at first to be executive dysfunction could actually stem from a lack of confidence, or a lack of adequate knowledge or skills to accomplish a given assignment. Attempting to remedy the late paper through punishment will only create further resistance and stress for both parent and child. Using an academic coach in this case would help reduce power struggles between parent and child over school work, and help build the child's skills and confidence.

**Organize schoolwork.** One binder might be best. Divide the binder into sections for each subject with colored dividers, and include a folder for each subject to help organize papers. Create a "homework out" folder at the beginning of the binder that your child checks at each class so she or he remembers to turn in assignments. Packing up materials the night before will help ensure that all completed work is in its proper place and ready for submission.

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**– Sheldon H. Horowitz, National Center for Learning Disabilities**

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**Find a planner that fits.** If your child works well with technology, you might suggest that he or she use an organizational app for assignment due dates and reminders. Otherwise, a written planner that you check daily – offering rewards for keeping the planner up to date – might help. To figure out how much time to set aside for long-term projects, first list all the steps required to complete the project. Next, estimate how much time is needed to finish each step and count backward from the due date. Always allow more time than your child thinks is needed for each step. If your child isn't sure about the project's requirements, she or he can speak to the teacher about the steps involved and what each step entails.

**Remove distractions.** It is important to have a clean, quiet study space and establish homework routines without distractions. If your child is working on a computer, you might want to consider using parental control software, such as the free version of Norton Online Family, to help reduce distractions. Children can easily switch from homework to searching the internet, playing games, YouTube, social networking, music, etc.

**Teach your children some simple test-taking and memory strategies.** These skills include using mnemonics, acronyms, or content-based songs to help with memorization, spending more time on the part of the test worth the most points first, and brain dumping at the start of the test (writing formulas

and other pertinent information on the top of the test for reference). Learning to budget test time is also a valuable skill. Teaching students to allot a certain amount of time for each section of a test, as well as time to review and check answers, slows down the test-taking process and builds in the practice that could ultimately lead to better marks.

**Build a study routine.** Select a preferred time and place to study. Have your child study for short periods of time and plan rewards after completing a predetermined amount of reading, writing or reviewing. Build in frequent breaks, with a plan for reentering the study environment without distraction or delay.

Organization and follow-through does not come naturally to everyone, but that does not mean it can't be learned through practice. Once good habits and routines are in place, your children will experience the freedom to use the skills they have without the worry of not making the grade or meeting the deadline.

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