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Executive Functioning: What is it? What Role Does it Play? And How to Support EF Development

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Executive Functioning or Executive Skills is an umbrella term used to describe the cognitive processes required to plan, organize and complete tasks. They make goal-directed behaviours possible, they help kids 'get things done'

Executive skills are **emerging** in childhood, but aren't fully developed until adulthood, at approximately **25 years old**, or later!

Executive Skills are considered the **Brain Boss**, the **CEO**, or **General Manager!**

Executive Skills **are complex**, and **need to be taught!** Lots of children need adult support. For example, adults often set time limits, and provide reminders!

Executive skills are developing throughout childhood and adolescence. Children and teens often need support in some, or all of these areas. Executive Functioning consists of many different skills, such as:

- **Response Inhibition** (thinking before acting)
- **Working memory** (hold information in memory while performing a task)
- **Emotional Control** (managing emotions to control or direct behaviour)
- **Flexibility** (to revise plans, adapt to changes)
- **Sustained attention** (maintain attention to a task)
- **Task Initiation** (begin a project in a timely manner)
- **Planning/Prioritizing** (create a roadmap to reach a goal or complete a task)
- **Organization** (keeping track of information and/or materials)
- **Time Management** (Estimate time, allocate time, stay within time limits)

General tips for supporting Executive Skills in children of all ages:

1. **Daily routines!** Include the following: What time should your child get up, what time the 'work' will begin, expectation about how much time OR how much work will be done during the day.
2. **Daily Visual Schedules!** Visuals can be words, or pictures. Knowing what your day consists of helps to stay on track, and have a successful day. It also helps children know expectations and what is coming up rather than wondering about 'what's next?' or 'when's break/snack time?'
3. **Schedule Breaks!** Work time should last for 15-20 minutes for elementary aged students. Middle school and High School students typically don't spend more than 25-30 minutes on one task. Breaks can consist of movement breaks, snack breaks, colouring, etc.
4. **Create Lists!** For older children, they may want to write down the assignments they have to do for the week, or month and prioritize them based on how long the task will take, and when it is due. For younger children, keep the list for shorter periods of time, for example, morning tasks and afternoon tasks.

A number of strategies are provided below that target skills that are often difficult for children who are learning at home. If you want strategies or support for different areas of executive functioning (listed above) please contact your student support team!

Area of Executive Function	What it looks like	Strategies to try:
<p>Task Initiation</p>	<p>ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.</p>	<p>Create a daily schedule to break down the day into smaller parts.</p>
		<p>Break tasks into small parts to help students who may be overwhelmed by large tasks. Asking students to do only one piece at a time may make them more likely to start on it.</p>
		<p>Walk through the first step of an activity to build momentum.</p>
		<p>Provide reminders to start. Visual reminders (e.g., set a timer, have a visual schedule), verbal reminders (e.g., you verbally tell the child to start), gestural (e.g., point to their work, or their schedule).</p>
		<p>Have students plan for when or how the task will get done. Let them choose what work to complete when.</p>
<p>Planning and Prioritizing</p>	<p>the ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what's important to focus on and what's not important.</p>	<p>Allow choice for the order of activities.</p>
		<p>Use paper or online graphic organizers/project maps.</p>
		<p>Use a checklist to record steps required.</p>
		<p>Provide examples of chunking assignments (i.e. dividing a reading assignment into pages per day).</p>
		<p>Work on one task at a time</p>
		<p>Encourage students to use the "snooze alarm" on their phone to break down a large task into smaller pieces.</p>
		<p>Involve students as much as possible in the planning process.</p>
<p>Organization</p>	<p>the ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.</p>	<p>Set up a binder or filing system that facilitates a student's learning needs (i.e. colour-coded binder system, folders, labels or sticky notes).</p>
		<p>Encourage student to work in the same room.</p>
		<p>Keep a consistent schedule for course work.</p>
		<p>Have a routine in place for homework (i.e. time to ask questions, materials required, consistent schedule for homework submission). Encourage students to set reminders for these routines.</p>
<p>Time Management</p>	<p>the capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.</p>	<p>Use an agenda, calendar, or daily timetable to identify project deadlines.</p>
		<p>Give students a guideline on how long each task should take.</p>
		<p>Encourage students to set a timer to help them manage their time efficiently.</p>

References

FLIPP THE SWITCH: Strengthen Executive Function Skills (Sheri Wilkens, PhD & Carol Burmeister, MA)
 SMART BUT SCATTERED (Peg Dawson, EdD, Richard Guare, PhD)