

## Brief Strategies to Support Children who have Executive Functioning Struggles

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The following are general suggestions for supporting some of the dimensions of executive functioning. In general, executive functioning skills are skills that we learn throughout our lifetimes. Children with executive functioning challenges are not doing these behaviors on purpose. What appears to be a child's lack of motivation, laziness, or defiance, may be anxiety about performance, shame about not knowing how to get started, or an inability to regulate a cognitive set or emotion. Take time to train. Seek help if the strategies that you are using are not working.

### Suggested Supports for 6 of the dimensions of executive functioning:

1. Organization
  - a. Teach children how to develop and utilize organizational systems and routines (Arthur E. Jongsma et al., 2006). Collaborate together with the use of organizers, calendars, routine charts, and checklists. Lend your child your executive functioning skills, as you teach them helpful skills (Dawson & Guare, 2009).
  - b. Once an organizational system or routine has been agreed upon, follow through. Create a "when you" rule (Pincus, 2014) with logical consequences, or remind them of the agreed upon plan.
2. Planning/Prioritization
  - a. Teach the process of planning (Epstein, 2011; Pincus, 2014). Help children identify their goals and consider options for achieving them.
  - b. Use what/where/when/how questions.
  - c. Break down tasks into smaller parts and guide children to focus on one part at a time.
  - d. Use planners, lists, or responsibility boards. Create structure in routines and work areas.
  - e. Recognize problems and brain storm solutions to them.
  - f. Talk about and generalize what was learned and how these skills can be applied to other tasks and situations.
3. Time Management
  - a. Posted routines and developmentally appropriate checklists at home and at school, when used with training and consistency, can assist children in learning not only time management, but also responsibility (Nelsen, Foster, & Raphael, 2011).
  - b. Keep a time log. Have your child write down how much time each homework assignment takes during the first few weeks of starting a new academic program. Write down how much time studying for each subject takes to successfully prepare for a test. Use the time logs to organize and plan. Block out time on computer aided organizational systems.
4. Emotional Control
  - a. Keep a positive relationship that is open and respectful (Greene, 2010; Lott & Nelsen, 2013). When parents stay connected and invite a child into the problem solving process, they are much more effective and influential. Find empathy with the child that is having a problem, and reassure that child that their problem and concerns are being heard. Identify the problem by repeating the child's concern, or using reflective listening skills, and invite the child to find a solution to the problem with you.
  - b. Teach mindfulness, relaxation, and stress management techniques (Arthur E. Jongsma et al., 2006; Hooker & Fodor, 2008; Rabiner, 2013).

- c. Further training from professionals on self-regulation, relaxation techniques, communication skills, and positive coping skills may be necessary for children who have explosive behaviors, who have medical or mental health symptoms, or who are unable after repeated attempts to separate their emotions from problem solving (Jongsma, Petterson, & McInnis, 2006).
5. Flexibility
    - a. Support flexible thinking by removing the emotion from the equation, and by focusing on solutions. Instead of focusing on what went wrong, ask what can be done differently to fix the problem.
    - b. Teach effective problem-solving skills such as naming the problem, brainstorming alternative solutions, and choosing solutions that are both respectful to self and others (Arthur E. Jongsma et al., 2006; Nelsen, 2006; Nelsen et al., 2011). Highlight taking responsibility for one's action during the problem solving process, without shame or blame, and utilize encouragement (Arthur E. Jongsma et al., 2006; Nelsen, 2006).
    - c. Brainstorm like a scientist. Come up with lots of ways to approach an issue and then allow them to choose one that might fit; follow-up later to see how the solution worked. If they struggle with creating solutions, offer them a framework for seeking solutions. Three frameworks to find solutions to problems are asking for help, compromising, or doing the task differently (Greene, 2010).
  6. Goal-directed persistence

Support perseverance by allowing children to learn cause and effect, by encouraging effort, and by creating opportunities for success.

    - a. Natural and logical consequences help children learn cause and effect. If guidance is needed with problem solving after a natural consequence, talk about the consequences of actions, without shame or blame, and invite the child to find solutions to the problem with you.
    - b. Process praise supports growth mindsets (Dweck, 2006). Focus on encouraging the effort and successes of preparing, planning, and organizing that resulted in successful completion of a task.
    - c. Create opportunities for success. Matching the child to the task is very important.
  7. Other Helpful Resources:
    - a. Smart but Scattered by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare (2009)
    - b. Late, Lost, and Unprepared by Joyce Cooper-Kahn and Laurie Dietzel (2008)

### **When to Seek Help**

- In general, if you've tried different techniques and they are not working, ask for help.
- If a child has explosive feelings or heightened problems with regulating emotions, response inhibition, sustained attention, flexibility, or in a number of the dimensions of executive functioning, and these problems are interfering with their relationships at home and school, and interfering with their ability to function at home and at school, consider seeking help from a pediatrician, a child psychiatrist, a child neurologist, or mental health professional familiar with gifted children and executive functioning issues.