

Executive Functioning Skills: **What Are They & Can They Be Improved?**

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Introduction to Executive Functions

Do any of your children or students experience difficulty with the following skills?

- Time Management
- Planning
- Organization
- Completing Tasks
- Focus and Attention
- Reaching Goals
- Meeting Deadlines

All of the skills listed above are part of executive functioning skills. Children and adults alike are often seen as “lazy” when they have problems in these areas. Often times, these individuals are also known as procrastinators. They are chronically late, lack an internal sense of time, struggle to stay organized, miss deadlines, get distracted, and can’t meet goals.

When a person has executive functioning deficits, 90% of the time there are also problems with motivation, depression, anxiety, or some other disabling force such as a learning disability or attention deficit disorder. Left unchecked, these deficits can be debilitating as a child grows into their teen years and becomes an adult. The pressure and stress created by executive functioning deficits can lead to anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. This is a recipe for low self-esteem and underachievement. The silver lining is that there is hope! Most often, problems with time management and organization (executive functions) are created by a lack of skills. These skills can be identified, taught, and supported.

What are Executive Functions?

Research has shown that executive functions are often a better predictor of academic success than IQ. Yet, when most people hear the term, “executive functions” they think it refers to some sort of business training. This is not the case, unless you are talking about the business of getting things done and accomplishing goals. All of us have and use executive functions everyday. Some of us use these skills masterfully while others really struggle.

There isn't one definitive definition of executive functions. In general, executive functions are the set of mental skills that help us complete daily tasks. These skills are primarily found in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. This is the portion of the brain right behind the forehead. The prefrontal cortex is often referred to as the conductor or CEO of the brain. This is because it is in charge of directing and managing how we complete, organize, and manage daily tasks. This is similar to an orchestra conductor because they are in charge of managing how the orchestra plays and works together. Another analogy is that of a chief executive officer (CEO) of a company. CEO's are in charge of how a corporation is run just like the prefrontal cortex is in charge of how we manage our day-to-day tasks.

What does it feel like to have executive functioning deficits? Try to picture white water rafting without paddles. You'd probably have a real sense that things were spiraling out of control. You'd be confused about how to direct the boat. This is what life can feel like for a person who has poor time management and organizational skills. It can feel like a swirling mess - like things are getting out of control and you're constantly trying to keep your head above water. There are 11 different executive functions. They include:

1. Metacognition
2. Goal-Directed Persistence
3. Flexibility
4. Sustained Attention
5. Response Inhibition
6. Working Memory
7. Planning & Prioritization
8. Time Management
9. Organization
10. Task Initiation
11. Controlling Emotions

Improving Executive Functions

Improving executive functioning skills begins with increasing self-awareness, also known as metacognition. Metacognition is a technical term that means - the ability to be reflective and think about one's own thoughts and actions. Self-improvement is only possible when a person is able to identify areas of weakness and employ effective strategies to support those areas. When working with children who struggle with executive functions, they will need a lot of guidance, someone to hold them accountable, and buy-in. "Buy-in" means they need to understand why they struggle, in what areas they struggle, and that there



is hope. Essentially, they need to be taught the connection between learning and behavior.

Let's compare being time challenged with vertically challenged. If you're a short person and can't reach something on the top shelf of a pantry, you have four options. You can give up and not reach it, rant and rave about how unfair it is that the shelf is so high, ask for help, or use a step stool (a tool).

The time challenged have the same four options. What sounds like the smartest option to choose? While it may be more entertaining to rant and rave, hopefully you've decided it's smartest to ask for help and/or use the step stool. Likewise, when assisting a child with executive functioning deficits you will need to use visual strategies and tools/resources on a consistent basis. Some of these tools may include visual daily schedules, drawing your week or month in picture, using elapsed time timers, using time estimates for activities, choosing a tangible reward, etc. The point is that it's essential to use visual strategies and tools for support until the desired behavior is learned. Even then, tools may always be a necessary accountability piece.

Remember executive functions are different from intelligence. To have challenges in life is to be human. Everyone has challenges, but not everyone responds to challenges in the same way. To learn more about executive functions, and how to support executive functions, you might be interested in checking out one of my parent workshops entitled, Executive Functioning Success. Please see the attached flyer or contact me for more details.

About Kelly

Kelly Steinke, M.A. Ed., NBCT is the founder of READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. Kelly taught special education, primarily to students with learning disabilities, for over 15 years in the Midwest, East Coast, and Pacific Northwest. During this time she became a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) in Exceptional Needs, earned a Master of Arts Degree in Education (Administration and Leadership), and founded her company, READ Learning Educational Services, LLC. For the past six years, Kelly has served the community as a dyslexia specialist. Kelly is also the creator of Silver Moon Spelling Rules™ instructional materials.

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