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Executive Functions—Something to Think About

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Executive functions are thoughts that we carry out or “execute” as actions in order to reach a goal. Another name for executive functions is *critical-thinking skills*. Our brains control our executive functioning. Executive functions include skills such as “maintaining attention, controlling impulses, keeping free of distractions, engaging in mental planning and problem solving, maintaining flexibility, time management, setting priorities, organizing,



and executing a task” (Geffner, 2007, slide 2). Difficulty with any of these abilities can cause academic problems as well as problems with everyday life tasks. Terms for such difficulties are *executive dysfunction* or *executive function disorders*.

Academic Difficulties Related to Executive Functions

Focus, attention, and memory help us to carry out executive functions. In the school setting, a child with executive-functioning problems may...*not turn in* assignments, *miss* parts of assignments, *forget* to take home books, *forget* to write down important information, *not follow* a logical order when completing a task, *not finish* work on time, *not seek out* needed information, *have difficulty* solving problems, *delay* initiating projects, *not be able* to monitor progress, *not plan* next steps, be *unable* to revise plans, *not manage* several tasks at a time, and more. The classroom teacher and any specialists, such as a speech-language pathologist, can work with the child to help him/her learn and use strategies to improve executive functioning.

Strategies to Help a Child Who Has Difficulty with Executive Functions

Each child is unique with his/her own strengths and challenges, and certain teaching techniques and compensatory strategies may benefit one child more so than another. Provide support and assistance as the child needs it, and let him/her be increasingly responsible for organizing his/her thoughts and actions. Acknowledge a child’s attempts to initiate behaviors, complete tasks, and then self-evaluate performance. By recognizing these efforts, you are helping the child learn and grow as well as become more independent!



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Below are some examples of strategies to help a child who has difficulty with executive functions.



In School:



Use timers. Help a child monitor and manage time by having timers in the classroom. Sand timers or *Time Timers* are great ways to let a child “see” how much time is left to complete an assignment, task, or test. Audio timers can beep when time is almost up (five minutes left, for example).



Display to-do lists. Write a daily outline on the board to visually show the structure of the school day. Include subjects and times (e.g., Art – 10:15-11:15).



Provide organizational tools. For example, have a child keep different colored homework folders together — red = due tomorrow, yellow = due this week, green = due in the future.



Encourage self-responsibility. Ask questions to a child to help him/her focus on a task. Have the child generate his/her own questions to extend what you’ve already asked. Ask the child to come up with a plan and follow through with it. Use a checklist to do this.



At Home:



Keep a “reminder” calendar. Mark important dates with specific times and places. You can

color code the calendar (e.g., doctor’s appointments are *red*, sports practices are *blue*, etc.).



Provide organized storage. Have labeled bins for keeping things in their places (e.g., *yellow* bins are for toys, *green* bins are for art supplies, *blue* bins are for sports equipment, etc.).



Give praise and feedback. For example, when your child completes an executive-function task, like pre-planning, you can say: “I like how you put your homework in your homework folder” or “I like how you made yourself a note to put your homework folder in your book bag at the end of the school day.”



Help your child “think through” a problem or project. Ask questions about the problem/project and have your child answer them. Then see if he/she can come up with questions on his/her own. For example, you could say, “What is your science project?” “When is it due?” “What supplies do you need to make it?” Then, you could say, “What other questions do we need to answer about your science project?” Make a list of all these questions and answers together. Refer to the list as your child completes the project. Add in new questions and answers that will help complete the project as you go along.

Resources:

Geffner, D. (2007). *Managing executive function disorders*. Retrieved from http://search.asha.org/default.aspx?q=executive_function

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