Executive Function: Initiation, Planning, and Emotional Regulation in Elementary School Children

For Burbank Elementary School, Belmont MA
Rachel Kalinsky, Northeast Outreach Manager and Senior Coach
February 5th, 2018
Overview

- Intelligence and Executive Functions: How They Differ
- How Does Anxiety Affect Executive Function Skills
- Executive Function Profiles: Specific Skills - How to regulate emotions and get started on tasks.
- How to Apply Tools and Strategies
Sound Familiar?

• Can’t get started on homework: too hard, too much, too….

• Quits easily because they appear overwhelmed and have no strategy

• States “I feel nervous before writing”

• Gets stuck in a “I can’t” cycle
Intelligence and Executive Functions

Intelligence is *what you know*, but...

Executive Functions help you *apply* that knowledge

*Why might a bright student struggle academically?*
When students are given the message
➢ “You should be successful because you are smart,”

They tend to interpret it as
➢ “This should be easy if I’m smart, I’m not that smart after all.”
EXECUTIVE FUNCTION DEVELOPMENT
When do skills typically emerge?

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Emerging Skills
Learning to pay attention
Learning to control behavior & impulses
Shifting behavior to follow rules
Following 2-3 step directions

MIDDLE SCHOOL
Emerging Skills
Learning to think ahead to plan actions & to solve problems
Managing & following a daily routine
Modifying behavior in changing environments

HIGH SCHOOL
Emerging Skills
Learning to think & behave flexibly
Organizing & planning projects or activities with friends or classmates
Adapting to changing rules
Deepening self-awareness
EXECUTIVE FUNCTION DEVELOPMENT
When do skills typically emerge?

**COLLEGE**
Emerging Skills
Using Executive Function skills to be independent and productive
Self-monitoring of productivity & performance
Consistent impulse control across different environments

**ADULT**
Refining Skills
Using Executive Function skills to balance work & personal life
Effectively managing multiple schedules & projects
Using strategies to set & achieve meaningful goals

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When Life’s Demands Outpace Executive Function Development

- School content = the “what” – what must they learn?
- Executive functions = the “how” – how do they get it done?
IS IT "LAZINESS" OR EXECUTIVE FUNCTION WEAKNESS?

Children who appear lazy, defiant, or unmotivated often lack important self-management skills.

**SYMPTOM**
- Refuses to do homework

**REASON**
- Doesn't know how to get started

**SKILL NEEDED**
- Initiation

**SYMPTOM**
- Runs late, passes in work past due date

**REASON**
- Doesn't have strategies for being aware of time

**SKILL NEEDED**
- Time Management

**SYMPTOM**
- Procrastinates, then last minute panic

**REASON**
- Doesn't know how to break tasks into chunks and sequence the work

**SKILL NEEDED**
- Planning

**SYMPTOM**
- Forgets or loses materials

**REASON**
- Doesn't have systems to keep track of papers, binders, and books

**SKILL NEEDED**
- Organization

**SYMPTOM**
- Easily distracted

**REASON**
- Doesn't have strategies to maintain focus and resist distractions

**SKILL NEEDED**
- Attention
# Executive Function Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-regulation</strong></td>
<td>• managing feelings, impulses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task initiation</strong></td>
<td>• starting that which is difficult or unpleasant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention</strong></td>
<td>• sustaining focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prioritizing/planning/time management</strong></td>
<td>• choosing what matters, allocating time appropriately</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Function Skills

**Organization**
- memorable, right size boxes for “stuff” and for ideas

**Cognitive flexibility**
- shifts from big picture to detail & back

**Memory**
- over various time frames (working, short-term, long-term)

**Metacognition**
- self-monitoring & deciding to adjust

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# 5 Point Rating Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rating</th>
<th>triggers</th>
<th>strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>panic reading in front of the class</td>
<td>practice with mom or dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>overwhelmed work hanging over my head</td>
<td>-update Habitica daily to track progress toward schoolwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>anxious taking tests</td>
<td>-attend after school help&lt;br&gt;-setting weekly goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>stressed writing a few sentences or a paragraph</td>
<td>1 small step/break down work&lt;br&gt;accomplish a few steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>calm exercising/yoga</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Worry Statement #1

“I have to read tonight and I hate reading. I am a terrible reader”
Why might productivity suffer?
What Executive Function Skill is at Play?

• Self-Regulation, plus...

• Task Initiation
What can you do to help your child?

Three things we can do to help when a child is feeling frustrated:

- Distract them and talk about one of their interests (i.e. baseball or soccer)
- Take a break and eat a snack
- Ask - Why do you think you do not understand the words?
Self-Regulation Tools

Elementary: worry box, 5 point scale
Worry Statement #2

“I’ll never get my homework done!”
What Executive Function Skill is at Play?

• Self-Regulation

• Task Initiation

• Time Management
1. What are some things you often tell yourself that might not be so helpful?

2. What are some ways you can shift them so that they are more encouraging/helpful?

3. When might you need to use this self-talk? In what situations? How will you use it?
Tool for Task Initiation

Fast Break

A quick plan for the evening’s homework that is created as soon as a student gets home.

Lists the sequence of tasks, estimated time for each, start time, when and what breaks will be, *in order to manage distractions and minimize procrastination*
Tool for Task Initiation and Time Management

Fast Break: Example

3:00-3:30 Relax, eat snack
3:30-4:15 Reading and ?s
4:15-4:20 Play a game
4:20-4:55 Science facts
5:00-5:30 Finish HW and Read
5:30-6:30 Dinner, Chat with friends
6:30-7:00 Write sentences
7:00 --> Done! Watch TV
Your Inner Coach - Positive Self-Talk

In your brain you have an inner voice.
What does it sound like?

The Critic

OR

The Coach
Case Study: Mark
Profile and Priorities

5th grade boy
Procrastinates and “just can’t get started”
YouTube and online games, and friends are big distractors

Executive Function challenges:
Task Initiation,
Planning and Self-regulation
What we do as coaches

- **Reach:** With our clients we reach them by figuring out what the problem is. We understand what mindset they are in.

- **Teach:** We teach them tools and strategies related to their Executive Function challenges and mindset.

- **Reflect:** We reflect in each session and follow up about tools they use. Reflection is a very important aspect.

- **Release:** The goal is to release the clients when they have maintained the skills.
5 Minute Goals

- What can you get done in 5 minutes?
  - *Helps child buy-in & establishing quick wins!*
  - “Ok, we are going to take 5 minutes, do these math problems
  - Write down your homework in your planner
  - Revisit and make a new 5 minute goal
Task initiation for Homework and Test Prep

30/30 Task Manager

- Set short goals (5-10 minutes)
- Helps with time management
## Decisional Balance Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1 — Benefits/Advantages of things staying the same:</th>
<th>Step 2 — Costs/Not so good things about things staying the same:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· helps me relax</td>
<td>· hard to stop playing most of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· something to do with friends</td>
<td>· don’t want to try other things or meet new people (like to stay in)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3 — Costs/Not so good things about changing:</th>
<th>Step 4 — Benefits/Advantages of changing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>· won’t have a way to de-stress</td>
<td>· probably get more sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· hard to hang out with friends if I don’t play</td>
<td>· easier to get to school if I don’t play in morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>· I’ll be bored</td>
<td>· get out of my room more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· could meet new people?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Planning and Prioritizing

To-do list

Elementary: First, next, then, last

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The Final Tally- 9 Tools for 3 Executive Function issues

- Self Regulation - Worry Box, Rating Scale, Self-Talk, Decisional Balance Sheet
- Task Initiation - Fast Break, 30/30 App, 5 minute goals
- Planning/Prioritizing - To do list

- More tools
  Habituca, Habit List, Wunderlist
Final Thoughts

Thank you! If you have any questions about tactics to use, I’m happy to answer.
Executive Function Coaching

Helping students meet today's challenges with tools that last a lifetime.

Questions?

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