

CORNERSTONE  
DAY SCHOOL

# Parents Matter

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## Executive functioning: recognizing problems and identifying helpful actions for parents

### What is executive functioning?

Executive functioning is a collection of essential abilities that work together to allow academic achievement and positive mental health. It includes three main skills: 1) resisting urges and thinking before you act (inhibitory control), 2) holding information in your mind (working memory), and 3) switching your thinking depending on what the situation requires (mental flexibility). These abilities are necessary for us to plan ahead, focus attention, multitask, remember instructions, and exert self-control. Executive functioning problems are often discussed in the context of ADHD. While it is often a key feature of ADHD, it's also associated with other developmental disorders and mental health difficulties.

### Executive functioning development in school-aged children

The part of the brain involved in executive functioning (the frontal lobe) develops across the lifespan, and is not fully developed until about age 25, with peaks in development at ages 7-10 and 16-19, followed by flattening of these changes. This means that middle schoolers will have just had a peak in development of executive functioning areas of the brain, but these improvements subsequently lag, especially given increasing school demands.

Though executive functioning skills are not fully developed even in typically developing middle and high schoolers, some children may struggle more than others and need extra assistance. Kids may need extra help if they show difficulties in the following domains:

- 1) Organizational Difficulties (such as incomplete assignments, forgetfulness, losing belongings)
- 2) Behavioral difficulties (such as interrupting others or acting impulsively), oppositionality or tantrums related to homework, and more difficulty following directions compared to same-aged peers.
- 3) Emotion Regulation Difficulties (such as low frustration tolerance, disproportionate emotional responses, frequent shifts in emotions).

If you note these difficulties, or receive repeated calls from teachers about these difficulties, consider taking your child for further assessment.

### How can parents help?

#### • Activities:

- Parents can practice executive functioning activities to help children with their executive function.
- This includes things like card games and board games in which children must track, those that require monitoring and fast responses, and those involving planning strategy.

- Dance, singing, and learning musical instruments also requires honing of executive functioning skills, as these activities challenge working memory and require self-monitoring and mental coordination.
- In addition, kids may develop these skills by doing brain teasers such as Sudoku and crossword puzzles.
- In older children, this may extend to things like yoga and meditation, which can help the development of sustained attention.
- **'Self-talk,'** in which adolescents and children talk themselves aloud through the steps of a complex tasks or multistep processes, is an instrumental tool for self-monitoring and compensating for executive functioning difficulties.
- **Mindfulness and multitasking:** Encouraging kids to become more mindful of interruptions, such as social media notifications, is also an important self-monitoring tool. Multitasking divides attention and impairs our ability to do any one of the tasks effectively. Being aware of interruptions and deciding how to prioritize and sequence activities are key skills, and parents may wish to brainstorm strategies to do so with kids.

### Further help and resources

#### • Books:

- The Organized Child: An Effective Program to Maximize Your Kid's Potential--in School and in Life By Richard Gallagher, PhD, Elana G. Spira, PhD, & Jennifer Rosenblatt, PhD (also see edition for teens).
- Smart but Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential By Peg Dawson, EdD, & Richard Guare, PhD
- The Executive Functioning Workbook for Teens: Help for Unprepared, Late, and Scattered Teens By Sharon A. Hansen, MSE NBCT

#### • Therapy/coaching:

- Executive Function Coach
- Therapist specializing in ADHD and/or EF difficulties



(908) 543-0220 • [cornerstonedayschool.com](http://cornerstonedayschool.com)

*Parents Matter is published regularly throughout the school year as a service to the parents of students enrolled at Cornerstone Day School. Each issue highlights an important topic for parents with practical suggestions for helping their child continue to grow and overcome their emotional challenges.*