

Executive Functioning: Helping Your Child Succeed in School

What is Executive Functioning?

Executive function refers to the thinking processes that allow individuals to engage in goal-directed or problem-solving behaviors. They affect learning, behavior, and emotions, social relationships, and self-esteem. Children are not born with these skills, they are built through practice but will not fully mature until adulthood.

There are many executive functions

- **Core functions** are the building blocks of executive functioning: Inhibition, Working Memory, Mental Flexibility, and more.
- **Complex functions** are more specialized and self-directed: Organization, Time Management, Planning, Prioritizing, Task Initiation, Sustained Attention, Emotional Regulation, Working Memory, Response Inhibition, Metacognition, Flexibility, Goal Directed Persistence, and more.

Each of us has executive strengths and weaknesses. The development of these could be linked to genes, biology, or disabilities and disorders, or environmental stressors such as lack of sleep, lack of exercise, hunger, emotional distress, or others.

Signs of Executive Functioning Difficulties

Depending on which skills your child struggles with and the particular task attempted you may see signs such as:

- Difficulty retaining information
- Trouble paying attention, easily distracted, or loses train of thought
- Forgetful / has difficulties retrieving information
- Troubles with planning, organizing, and time management
- Difficulties memorizing
- Sticks with a plan even when it isn't working
- Difficulties making decisions
- Unable to think of or do more than one thing at a time

Strategies not Solutions

There is no magic fix or single solution, instead there are strategies to implement and try. It may take time and repetition to find the strategies that work best for you and your child.

To best support the development of new executive skills, be beside your child every step:

Before: Rehearse what will happen / Review what is expected

During: Coach, remind, and monitor as they practice the skill

After: Praise, reward, and debrief about how it went

General Strategies

- Have an organized home
- Create consistent daily routines
- Post reminders and prompts around
- Use checklists, agendas, and sched
- Plan for emotional times
- Work towards clear and consistent communication
- Find ways to model your own skills for your child



Remember! Most strategies work best when **taught during calm times** and then are **called back on** during times of **high stress**.

Strategies for Increasing Inhibition

Inhibition enables us to focus despite distractions, choose how we react/behavior, and engage in self-control.

- **Teach them to “press the pause button”** – imagine there is a pause button on their chest. Once pressed they need to stop and think out what's happening before continuing
- **Practice replacement behaviours** – get your child to re-do an action with the appropriate behaviour. This can also be practiced during playtime
- **Encourage regular physical exercise**
- **Teach breathing and mindfulness activities**
- **Use positive self-talk to counteract the discomfort of inhibition** – Ex. I'll be okay, it will be my turn soon”



Strategies for Increasing Working Memory

Working memory connects past experience with present and future actions. Ex. Translating instructions into actions or listening to the sequence of a story while trying to understand what the story means.

- **Give instructions/ information in brief, clear chunks** - Write them down if need be, creating lists can often be helpful
- **Use games, songs, or stories that promote working memory** – Share stories that use repetition (ex. Robert Munsch), listen to / sing songs with verses that build upon one another (ex. *The Hole in the Bottom of the Sea*), or play games where memory skills are engaged (ex. matching games)

Strategies for Increasing Mental Flexibility

Mental flexibility allows for alternate strategies or plan revisions when conditions change. Mentally inflexible children have trouble when a routine is disrupted or a familiar task needs to be done in a new way.

- **Give choice** – give options on how to handle situations, coach them through how to make a decision *if they need it*
- **Rehearse upcoming changes** – walk through or talk through upcoming changes in advance. Discuss what they will do / say in those situations, and identify possible solutions / strategies
- **Play games that show different perspectives** – Ex. follow the leader, theatre games, or video games where you play different characters

Resources

- Executive Functioning Success: www.executivefunctioningsuccess.co
- Centre on the Developing Child: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/re>
- Child Mind: www.childmind.org
- Caregiver Education: www.cyfcaregivereducation.ca
- Call Health Link Alberta: 811
- AHS Mental Health Intake: 780-342-2701



Video Resources

Executive Function by Alberta Family Wellness:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIT73VpSEUA>

Executive Functioning Skills for Life:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efCq_vHUMqs

Why are Executive Functions so important:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZ7ZPm3g13w&list=PLF3653A64888C991A&index=40>