



Public Site

Executive Functioning

For children with executive functioning difficulties, this disruption to the normal routine is likely causing a great deal of stress for everyone involved. Children who tend to have more difficulty with executive functioning may have Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism, a Learning Disability, or even a mood disorder like depression. In addition, anxiety can also cause difficulties with executive functioning, so maybe just the fact that we are in uncertain times right now may be causing struggles for you and your family.

Executive Functioning (EF) can be compared to an air traffic control system. The air traffic control system at a busy airport is required to manage the arrivals and departures of a host of planes on various runways. When working well, EF allows us to focus on multiple streams of information at the same time and revise plans as necessary. EF is also involved in focusing, holding and working with information in mind, filtering distractions and shifting between tasks. When it is not working very well, I'm sure that you can imagine the mess that would occur at the airport.

What you might already be noticing is:

- Struggling with unstructured times by doing things that get them into trouble or making poor decisions about behaviour, requiring more adult supervision
- Difficulty tolerating transitions or changes to routines as noted by temper tantrums, difficulty sitting still, becoming argumentative, or falling apart emotionally
- Trouble remembering things, losing track of what they are doing, or being unfocused or easily distracted
- Having difficulty understanding the concept of time, such as taking longer than reasonable to do things or trying to do too much in a short time
- Struggling to be organized, often losing things or taking a really long time to find what they are looking for
- Not appearing to notice how their behaviour is affecting others

Once there is an added expectation of your child beginning some type of schoolwork you may notice even more concerns such as:

- Struggling to shift between tasks, especially from ones that are preferable to ones that are not
- Difficulty with taking initiative to begin schoolwork or get caught up in the small details, not knowing where to begin or how to break the problem down into smaller parts
- Rushing to finish school related tasks, not attending to errors in work or if they are completing the task appropriately
- Waiting until the last minute to start things or struggling to create a plan of attack



EF skills continue to develop into adulthood so, with your help, your child can learn skills and strategies that can assist and build their EF. While the following list is not intended to be comprehensive, it's usefulness may vary depending on your child's age and stage of development. Please refer to the resources at the end for more assistance on this topic.

- Young children can benefit from playing games where they have to pay attention and follow rules such as card games (Uno, memory, slapjack), board games (Monopoly, Battleship, checkers), or other strategy games/puzzles.
- Break tasks into smaller chunks with short breaks in between. During the breaks you can do something physical (jumping jacks, sit-ups, chores) or other preferred activities with a timer to ensure that they get back to work and manage shifting difficulties
- Use a clock to track activities in blocks of time and work with your child to plan the day in advance so that they know what to expect
- Use visual checklists (with pictures for the younger ones) to lay out the step required to complete a specific task (e.g. the morning routine may include pictures of brushing hair, brushing teeth, making bed, and eating breakfast)
- For older children checklists can be helpful in tracking steps to complete assignments, or the steps involved in proofreading an assignment before handing it in
- Keep some type of routine. While we may be out of sorts at this time it is important to create a routine in order to keep some semblance of normalcy
- Keep a box with school supplies in an easy to find place so when it is time to work your child won't have to look everywhere to collect needed supplies
- Provide warnings to upcoming activity shifts in order to give your child time to mentally prepare for what is coming next
- Remember to get a variety of activities into the day including exercise, fresh air, imaginative play, and rest. Ensure that your child doesn't spend too much time with screens
- Coach your child through difficult situations with self talk. Show them how you would solve the problem and ask them to think about what different options they may have to deal with difficult situations

For more information or resources check out:

- www.smartbutscatteredkids.com
- www.understood.org
- www.childmind.org
- www.ldonline.org
- www.ldao.ca
- www.caddac.ca
- www.developingchild.harvard.edu/resources
- www.cadra.ca

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