

### **What is Executive Function?**

The brain's frontal lobe is the body's command center. Executive Function processes occur primarily in the frontal lobe. Adults and children use Executive Function skills to plan, organize, prioritize, strategize, and pay attention to and remember details.

The brain continues to mature and develop connections well into adulthood. A person's Executive Function abilities are shaped by both physical changes in the brain and by life experiences including the classroom and in the world at large. Early attention to developing efficient skills in this area can be very helpful. As a rule, direct instruction of these prerequisite skills with frequent reassurance and explicit feedback is strongly recommended.

Executive Function skills are prerequisite to effective learning. Your child's fourth grade teachers are working on shifting learning/work/task responsibilities from adults' shoulders to students' shoulders via instruction and support of Executive Function skills...in baby-steps! Teachers model all Executive Function processes with direct, explicit verbalization and visualization. If you have questions about this information, please contact your child's teacher.

### **How does Executive Function affect learning?**

In school, at home or in the workplace, we're called on all day, every day, to **self-regulate behavior**. Features of Executive Function/Self Regulation are seen in our ability to:

- Focus and sustain attention to task
- Make plans
- Prioritize
- Initiate tasks
- Keep track of time
- Finish work on time
- Keep track of more than one thing at once
- Evaluate ideas, problem-solve, think flexibly, as needed
- Reflect on our work (self-monitoring)
- Change our minds and make mid-course and corrections while thinking, reading and writing (self-monitoring)
- Ask for help
- Meaningfully include past knowledge in discussions
- Engage in the dynamics of group work
- Inhibit impulsive responses (e.g. wait to speak until we're called on)
- Seek more information when we need it.

## Strategies to Build Executive Function Skills

### Model, Model, Model and Think Aloud

- Lend your frontal lobes or executive skills to your child while his/her own skills are developing. Set limits and boundaries and control the environment until they become more independent.
- Constantly model and practice explicit strategies or techniques for managing tasks more efficiently and automatic.
- Provide constant encouragement, motivation and feedback. Model problem solving when something doesn't work out.
- **Remember it takes 30+ days to build a habit. Children must be taught the skill in the same way, every day.**

### Help With Organization and Attentional Skills

- Keep it Real...embed Executive Function skills in every day tasks....**model, model, model.**
- Provide positive everyday routines: **Set a Goal, Plan, Do, Review.**
- Use visual cues/signs/charts/checklists for AM and PM routines and any tasks or directions. For example, a child's checklist could include: get out pencil, put name on paper, put due date on paper, read directions, etc. Better yet, have the child make his/her own list!!!!
- Use of a "launch pad"/command center where all of the child's materials and calendar are kept.
- Teach child to clean out his/her folder or backpack. Practice and check every day.
- Teach child to use assignment books and folders. Practice and check every day.
- Color code folders, book covers.
- Have a routine for completing homework and packing up backpack (model) after work is completed.
- Provide gross motor activity/brain break before doing a seated task and/or every 20-25 minutes of work. Movement helps!!!
- Allow child to work standing up or seated at desk/table.

### Help With Working Memory Skills

- Mnemonics or other strategies to remember a series of steps or other information.
- Teach visualization strategies to enhance recall.
- Ask your child, "How are you going to remember that?" and have him/her come up with a strategy, if possible.

### Help With Planning and Time Management Skills

- Use timers (auditory, visual). Try, "you must be finished in \_\_\_ minutes OR you must work for \_\_\_ minutes." Have your child tell you how long s(he) thinks it will take AND set the timer.
- Calendars! Use them. They work!!!

- Break assignments down into reasonable parts, then set deadlines and detail what needs to be done for each step. Over time, have your child plan the assignments. Monitor your child's progress.

### **Help With Self-Monitoring Skills**

- Think about his/her actions and/or work. What worked, what did not work?
- Highlight math operation signs until your child can highlight the sign him/herself!
- Use numbered lists or the agenda that your child can cross off after completion.
- Teach underlining/highlighting of key words.
- Require child to highlight key words, number steps, and then go back and check this/her work.
- **Model meta-cognitive thinking by thinking aloud. "Let me show you how I would think my way through that problem."**
- **Expect improvement in self-monitoring over time.**

### **Help With Homework**

- Provide a quiet environment but don't be afraid to experiment with background music.
- Set aside a well-lit, organized workspace with minimal distractions (both auditory and visual). Use this area for homework only, if possible.
- Have an adult physically present to answer questions.
  - Have your child read directions, and explain what he/she thinks he/she is being asked to do.
- A parent (and/or teacher) may need to ask a child/student for their homework and/or stand with them when they are packing/unpacking their backpack until routines are established.
- Your child has a visual in his/her binder to assist taking homework and papers home from school, and then the reverse of taking homework to school. Ask to see the visual, and coach, as needed.

Adapted from:

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## Providing Feedback/Reinforcement to Your Child

### We want to enhance our child's use of Executive Function skills. What do we tell the kids?

You have a bright child, and you want her to succeed. You should tell her how smart she is, right? That's what 85 percent of the parents Carol Dweck surveyed said. Her research on fifth graders shows otherwise. Labels, even though positive, can be harmful. They may instill a fixed mind-set and all the baggage that goes with it, from performance anxiety to a tendency to give up quickly. Well-meaning words can sap children's motivation and enjoyment of learning and undermine their performance. While Dweck's study focused on intelligence praise, she says her conclusions hold true for all talents and abilities.

Here are Dweck's tips from *Mindset*:

- Listen to what you say to your kids, with an ear toward the messages you're sending about mind-set. Instead of praising children's intelligence or talent, focus on the processes they used.  
**Example:** "That homework was so long and involved. I really admire the way you concentrated and finished it."  
**Example:** "That picture has so many beautiful colors. Tell me about them."  
**Example:** "You put so much thought into that essay. It really makes me think about Shakespeare in a new way."
- When your child makes a mistake, give constructive criticism—feedback that helps the child understand how to fix the problem, rather than fixing the error for the child.
- Pay attention to the goals you set for your child; having innate talent is not a goal, but expanding skills and knowledge is.

Don't worry about praising your children for their inherent goodness, though. It's important for children to learn they're basically good and that their parents love them unconditionally, Dweck says. "The problem arises when parents praise children in a way that makes them feel that they're good and love-worthy only when they behave in particular ways that please the parents." Praising your child's effort in turn builds character, and has a long-term payoff.

Adapted from:

[http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2007/marapr/features/dweck\\_side\\_bar.html](http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2007/marapr/features/dweck_side_bar.html)