Executive Functioning

How Do I Get My Child Organized??

**What is executive functioning?** Executive functioning is the self-regulation skills that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully.

**Frontal Lobe:** Executive functioning is controlled by the frontal lobe of the brain.

Executive Functioning is responsible for these five skills:

1. Paying attention
2. Organizing and Planning
3. Initiating tasks and staying focused on them
4. Regulating emotions
5. Self-monitoring (keeping track of what you are doing)

Executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function:

1. **Working memory**: governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time
2. **Mental flexibility:** helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or apply different rules in different settings
3. **Self-control:** enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses

**Terms Related to Executive Functioning:**

**Hot Executive Functioning:** This skill comes into play in situations that aren’t emotionally “neutral”. It helps kids manage their emotional reactions so that they can use their executive skills to perform a task. A child might rely on hot executive functioning during a spelling bee to keep his excitement or anxiety in check. Kids use it to resist temptation in order to get a larger reward.

**Reflection:** Reflection is a process that allows kids to notice challenges, pause, think about their options and put things into context before they respond. This skill is central to solving problems, and kids can build it. The more they practice reflection, the easier and faster the process becomes.

**Processing Speed:** Kids need to go through the reflection process quickly and efficiently to solve problems on time. That’s where the processing speed comes in. Some experts view this skill as the engine that drives how well kids can use their executive skills to solve problems and achieve goals.

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Children are not born with these skills- they are born with the potential to learn them.**

**Warning signs** that a child may be having problems with executive functioning include trouble in:

* Planning projects
* Estimating how much time a project will take to complete
* Telling stories (verbally or in writing)
* Memorizing
* Starting activities or tasks
* Remembering
* Regulating emotions
* Problem solving difficulty

**Teaching Executive Functioning and Organizational Skills to Your Child:**

**Five Tips to Support Organization of Time:**

1. Use a calendar: Display a monthly calendar in a prominent place, and use it to provide your child with a sense of “big picture” time
2. Practice approximating time: Encourage your child to estimate time in real life. Simple questions: How long have we been eating dinner? How long did your bath take? How long did you play with your shopkins?
3. Use a timer: This will help your child externally track time, as he or she works on improving estimation of time.
4. Manage homework together: Use a daily assignment manager that lists: what assignments are, when they are due, what materials are needed, and in what order your child will complete them (then, use this as a checklist). Initially your child will need help with setting up this system.
5. Create new systems: Be creative about how your child tracks their assignments. Find what works for both your child and you. Allow them to use technology (google calendar, google docs, tasks) to list assignments.

**Five Tips to Support Organization of Materials:**

1. Use the right school supplies: If your child only has one class, a regular two pocket folder may help (make an inbox and outbox, or keep home and return to school section). If there are multiple classes and teachers, an accordion style folder may really help.
2. Use the right backpack or messenger bag: Get a bag with compartments. It’s easier to stay organized if there is a place for everything. Label the sections if your child needs that visual.
3. Create a backpack list: Have the child check the list daily to see if he or she has gathered what is needed in the backpack.
4. Keep track of progress together: Do frequent (at least once per day) check ins, in which your child may get a score for how successful he or she has been at organizing that day. Have your child graph these results and maybe have them earn rewards for predetermined criteria for success. Sometimes a little extra motivation is a great way to get started on the right foot.
5. Take some pictures: Provide visuals of what organization looks like: Take a photograph of her desk or backpack when it is organized and in the “ready to work” stage. This could work for a bedroom, locker, binder and etc.

**Tips to remember:**

1. Behavioral change is gradual: Don’t expect a large change right away! Tracking is a great way to recognize and map progress.
2. Team approaches are the best: It is too much for you to do yourself. Get the team your child works with on board as well.
3. Fewer, accomplishable goals are essential: Keep in mind your long term goals, while planning two to four shorter, more readily achievable ones.
4. Praise is necessary: Punishment may stop behavior, but it will not change behavior. Praise your child’s effort and progress.
5. Children need to receive new strategies or approaches to change: Remember that saying about the definition of insanity being the act of doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result? Well children will NOT change if you continue to provide them with the same stimuli.

**Overall:**

Growth promoting environments provide children with “scaffolding” (building blocks) that helps them practice the necessary skills before they must perform them alone. Adults can help children develop these skills by establishing routines, modeling social behavior, and creating and maintaining supportive, reliable relationships. It is also important for children to practice those developing skills though activities that foster creative play and social connections, teach them how to cope with stress, involve vigorous exercise, and over time, provide opportunities for directing their own actions with decreasing adult supervision.

References:

Child Mind Institute

Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University