

Teaching Executive Function Skills = Decreased Stress and Anxiety

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Tips and
techniques to
help
students!

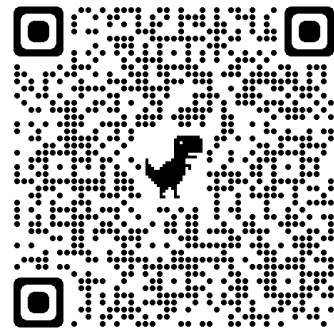


Table of contents!

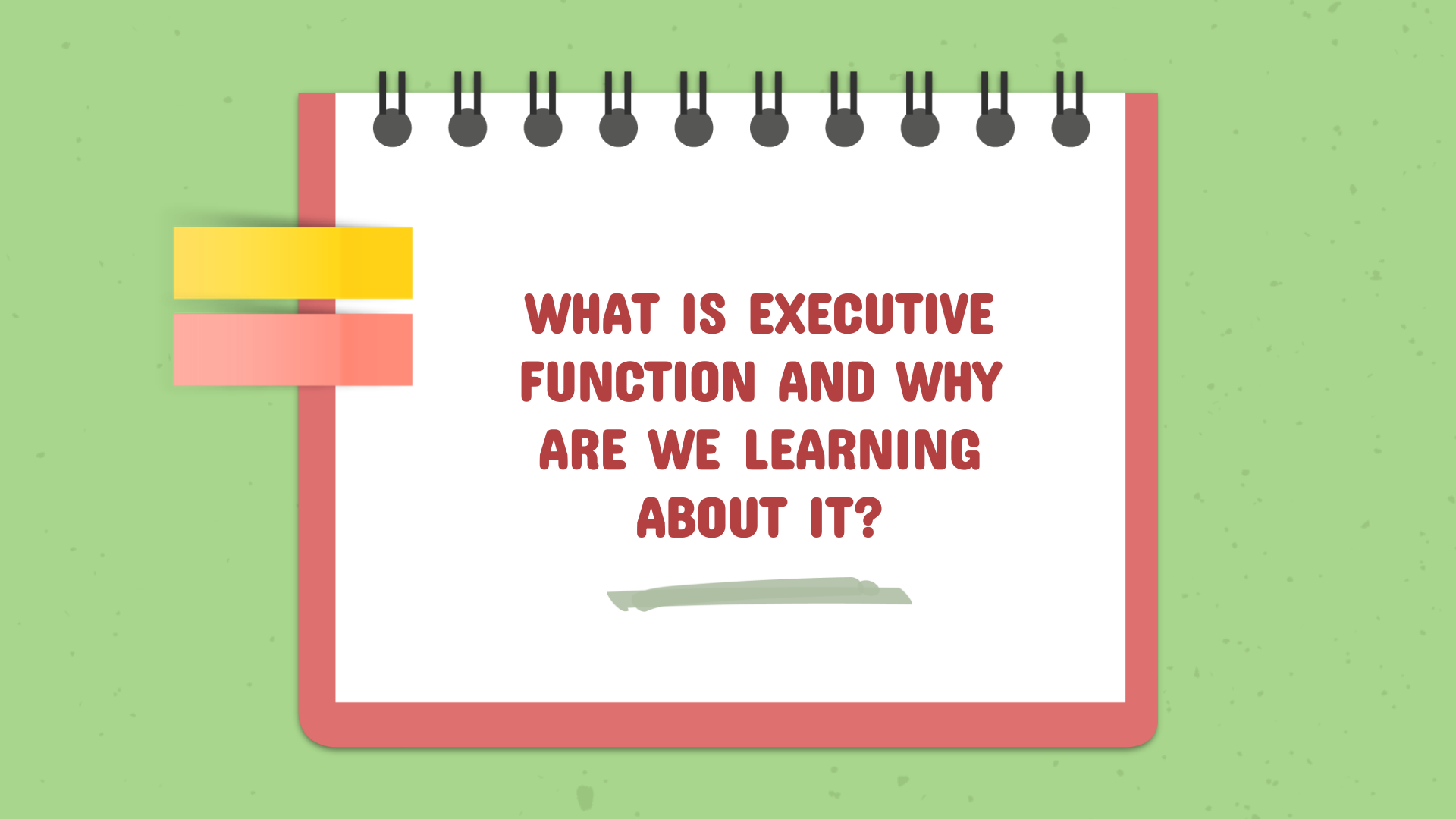


What is Executive Function?


Executive Functioning Skills List

How Can Parents, Teachers, and Counselors Help Address These Issues?

Tips and Strategies



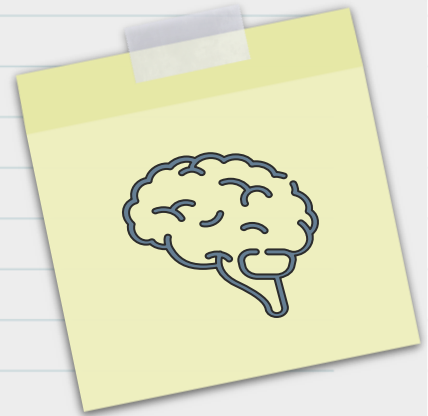
**WHAT IS EXECUTIVE
FUNCTION AND WHY
ARE WE LEARNING
ABOUT IT?**



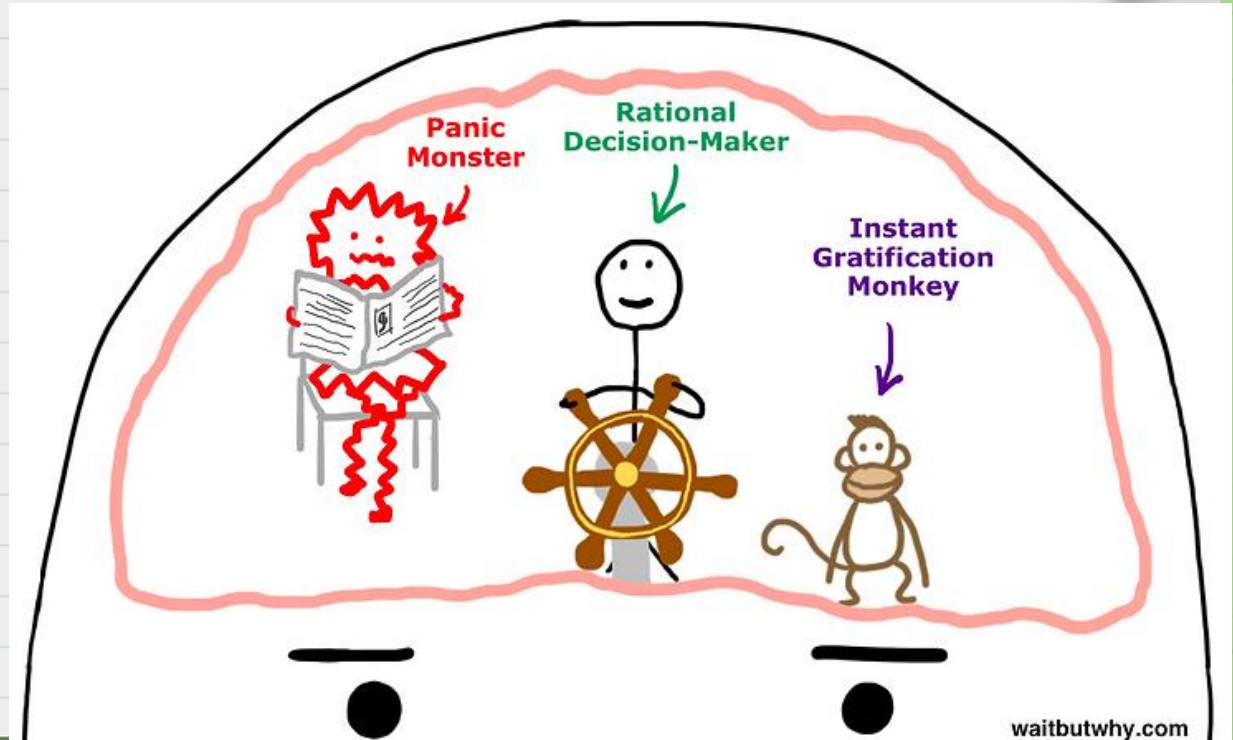
**Rational
Decision-Maker**



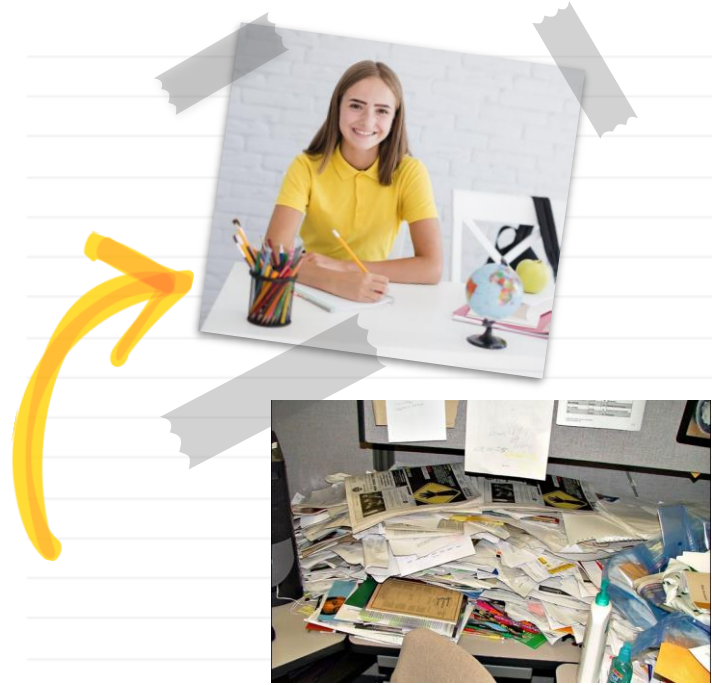
“Executive functions are a set of processes that have to do with self-management and exerting mental control and self-regulation. The skills of executive function are often needed to study well and succeed in school and include, for example: focusing, paying attention, organizing, starting and finishing schoolwork, flexible problem solving, and prioritizing.



Why are we discussing this?



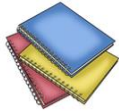
- The ability to develop executive function skills can mean the difference between a successful student and a struggling student.
- Virtual learning impacted students' ability to concentrate, complete assignments, and turn things in. We are still catching up!
- If school has always been easy for you, you probably have not had to develop these skills.



Executive Functioning Skills



Planning is the ability to figure out how to accomplish our goals.



Organization is the ability to develop and maintain a system that keeps materials and plans orderly.

Time Management is having an accurate understanding of how long tasks will take and using time wisely and effectively to accomplish tasks.



Task Initiation is the ability to independently start tasks when needed. It is the process that allows you to just begin something even when you don't really want to.



Working Memory is the mental processes that allow us to hold information in our minds while working with it.



Metacognition is being aware of what you know and using that information to help you learn.

Pathway
2 SUCCESS

Self-Control is the ability to regulate yourself, including your thoughts, actions, and emotions.



Attention is being able to focus on a person or task for a period of time and shifting that attention when needed.



Perseverance is the ability to stick with a task and not give up, even when it becomes challenging.



Flexibility is the ability to adapt to new situations and deal with change.

www.thepathway2success.com

Additional/related executive function skills:

- Task completion
- Asking for help
- Following instructions (with multiple steps)
- Handling criticism/
- Learning from mistakes

**WHICH SKILL DO YOU
SEE STUDENTS
STRUGGLING WITH
MOST?**


- Time Management
- Organization
- Planning/Prioritization
- Task Initiation
- Sustained Focus/Task Completion
- Working Memory/Following Step-by-Step Directions
- Perseverance/Goal-Directed Persistence

HOW MIGHT THESE DEFICITS MANIFEST THEMSELVES IN THE CLASSROOM?

- Unfinished homework.
- Homework completed but not turned in.
- Students who are stressed/anxious/agitated.
- Messy areas – backpacks, desks, lockers, rooms
- Blurting out answers
- Rushed or sloppy homework
- Not able to follow multi-step directions

AND WHY DO YOU THINK STUDENTS STRUGGLE WITH DEVELOPING THESE SKILLS?

- Some students may experience asynchronous development. They may have stronger academic, social, or emotional skills, but the executive function skills may not be at the same level.
- For students entering middle school or high school, they may face executive function expectations that are a big jump from what teachers have expected in the past.
- Since the part of the brain responsible for EF develops until the mid-20s, some of these skills may just still be a work in progress.



**HOW CAN WE
EFFECTIVELY ADDRESS
THESE CONCERNS?**

WHAT HELPS?

- Help families assess where they struggle – questionnaires for parents and students.
- Get buy-in – where do you want to improve? What do you want to achieve? Set achievable short-term goals.
- Work on addressing one area at a time. Success breeds success.

Executive Functioning Development

Age

Executive Functions

6-12 mo

- Attends to things for longer amounts of time (still minimal)
- Behavior is reflexive (not flexible)

1-2 yr

- Inhibits some reflexive behaviors inconsistently
- Shifts attention to new things in environment

3-6 yr

- Increases impulse control, attention, and concentration
- Resists some distractions
- Follows 2-4 step tasks
- Demonstrates knowledge of rules

7-9 yr

- Performs self-talk (talking to themselves to work through a task)
- Processes new information faster and more accurately
- Resists more distractions
- Develops goals
- Learns from mistakes and creates alternatives
- Switches between tasks

10-12 yr

- Increases impulse control, attention, and concentration for longer periods of time
- Switches between multiple tasks
- Learns from mistakes and creates alternatives more often
- Plans and organizes tasks more effectively

Teens

- Increases working memory capacity
- Increases cognitive flexibility
- Able to plan and organize more complex tasks
- Demonstrates better decision making and goal selection skills

SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Inhibit (Recognizing the need to stop your own behavior and resist impulses)

I rush through things.	N	S	O
I have problems waiting my turn.	N	S	O
People say I am easily distracted.	N	S	O

Shift (Easily transition and change focus)

I have trouble changing from one activity to another.	N	S	O
I am bothered by having to deal with changes.	N	S	O
After having a problem, I don't get over it easily.	N	S	O

Emotional Control (Modulating your emotional response)

I have emotional outbursts for little reason.	N	S	O
My mood changes frequently.	N	S	O
I get emotionally upset easily.	N	S	O

Self-Monitor (Awareness of the impact of your behavior on others)

I talk at the wrong time.	N	S	O
I don't think about consequences before doing something.	N	S	O
When people seem upset with me, I don't understand why.	N	S	O

[N = Never | S = Sometimes | O = Often]

Initiate (Independently beginning and continuing a task)

I have trouble getting ready for the day.	N	S	O
I have problems getting started on my own.	N	S	O
I lie around the house a lot.	N	S	O

Working Memory (Holding on to multiple pieces of information in order to solve a problem or carry out a task)

I forget instructions easily.	N	S	O
I have a short attention span.	N	S	O
I forget what I am doing in the middle of things.	N	S	O

Plan/Organize (Managing current and future task demands)

I have trouble prioritizing activities.	N	S	O
I don't plan ahead for future activities.	N	S	O
I have trouble organizing my time to accomplish tasks.	N	S	O

Task Monitor (Keeping track and identifying and correcting mistakes)

I don't check my work for mistakes.	N	S	O
I misjudge how difficult or easy tasks will be.	N	S	O
I have problems completing my work.	N	S	O

Organization of Materials (Easily locate and maintain orderliness of belongs)

I am disorganized.	N	S	O
I have trouble finding things in my room, bag, desk.	N	S	O
I leave my room/home a mess.	N	S	O

Another way to think about it ...

It can be helpful to think of developing executive functioning skills as collecting “experience points” (usually called “XP”) in video games. Getting XP isn’t necessarily fun and exciting, but having enough XP unlocks harder challenges, specific opportunities, and special abilities.

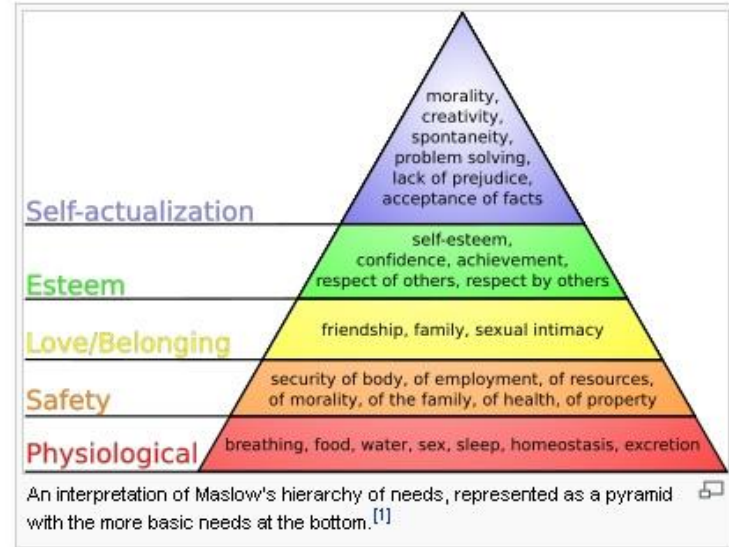
~ Dr. Matt Zakreski, Psy.D.,
School Counselor, The Grayson
School

A quick side note...

What did COVID do to our students' sense of safety, love, and belonging?

If they are still struggling with the needs at the bottom of the triangle, they won't be able to focus on issues like EF, which falls under self-actualization at the top.

If they can't make progress, check back on their other needs.



TIME MANAGEMENT

Most common
manifestation:
homework not
completed/
rushed

- Daily/Weekly Time Management Charts (depends on age of student)
- Virtual calendars
- Estimating how long projects take
- Practicing Backwards Planning

PAT'S SCHEDULE

	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	
1:00	Yellow	Green			Grey	Blue	Green	
1:30								
2:00								
2:30								
3:00								
3:30					Purple Dotted			
4:00			Pink					
4:30		Orange				Large Orange		
5:00	Orange							
5:30	Orange							
6:00		Red		Red				
6:30	Grey		Grey			Red		
7:00		Orange				Large Orange		
7:30		Orange						
8:00	Orange							
8:30	Orange					Large Orange		
9:00								
9:30								
10:00								

Most common manifestations:
homework not submitted/lost,
unprepared for class

ORGANIZATION

Find the one
that works for
you!

Pen & paper?
Phone?

**Color
Coding**

**Reminder
Systems**

Timers

Checklists

Not just for
elementary
school!

Old school but
effective!

More Organizational Tips

- Pack all bags the night before and have them sitting by the door ready to go so they can be grabbed on the way out the door. Ask an adult to help you double check.
- Lists in lockers/mirrors
- Folders in order in backpack
- Locker/desk/backpack cleanouts if necessary – once a week?
- Sticky book flags are great for helping with note taking

Planning and Prioritizing

Sometimes students struggle with getting started because they don't know what to do first.

Most common manifestation:
procrastination/rushed
or sloppy homework/
unprepared/overwhelmed

1

What are your daily/weekly homework goals?

2

What needs to happen first? Second? What can wait?

3

Are there steps to this assignment or project that need to be followed precisely?

Monday Homework To-Do List Example

English

- Read X. Be prepared to discuss in class tomorrow.
- Write a one-page paper based on X. Due Thursday.
- Vocabulary quiz on Wednesday.

Math

- Complete all “2” problems in chapters 8. Due tomorrow.
- Review last week’s assignment and make corrections.
- Prepare for unit test on Friday.

Social Studies

- Read chapter 6.
- Watch documentary on the Space Race by Wednesday.
- Man on the Moon Project – outline due Thursday.

Science

- Complete group assignment on gravity by Friday.
- Read chapters 7 and 8. Quiz Thursday.

A spiral-bound notebook with a yellow sticky note on the left side. The notebook is open to a page with light blue horizontal lines. The spiral binding is on the left. The yellow sticky note is on the left edge of the page. The text is written in black on the page.

Another way to think about this is the A-B-C Method

- Make your weekly to-do list, and then break that down into what you think you need to accomplish each day.
- Think about what **must** happen that day or are **due that day**. Those items get marked with an “A”. You can also mark as an “A” items that really should happen that day if you’re going to stay on track to get things done over the course of the week.
- You can mark as “B” anything else that keeps you on track for the week, or items that are due the next day so you can stay ahead of the game.
- Mark as “C” items that need to get done sometime that week but aren’t urgent yet – they are on the list so you don’t forget to do them. If you get to “C” items you are really on top of things!

Putting it into action...



How do you make this process work for you?

1

Once you have labeled the items with an A, B, or C, then determine what you should do first, second, third, etc.

2

Start at A1 and work your way through the list.

TASK INITIATION

Why do we
procrastinate?

Why is it so hard
to stop?

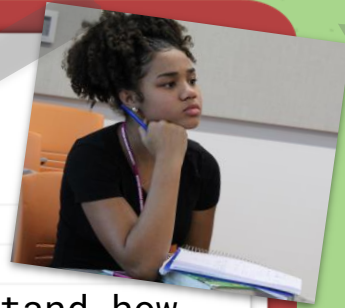
Most common
manifestation:
homework not started
until the last minute,
rushed and sloppy

Doesn't everyone
procrastinate?

How can you change
this habit?

Anti-Procrastination Tips

1. Make your environment as conducive to taking action as possible.
2. Arrange some immediate reward that you'll receive if you manage to get started.
3. Ask yourself "if I were to take action right now, what's the smallest possible step I could take?"



If you want to understand how to stop procrastinating in the long term, here is a systematic approach that you could use:

1. Figure out what your goals are.
2. Figure out *when*, *how*, and *why* you procrastinate.
3. Create a plan of action based on relevant anti-procrastination techniques.
4. Implement your plan and monitor your progress.

Most common manifestation:
homework not completed until
the night before its due, or not
finished.

SUSTAINED ATTENTION/ FOCUS

- There are specific skills that can increase the likelihood of completing tasks and creating improved study habits.
- First, we need to determine your starting attention time
- During the next few days, pick a study task that you have been avoiding or find difficult and time how long you work on the task before taking a break or allowing a strong distraction to pop into your head

- Record the stop and end times and complete the exercise a few times.
- Average the amount of time that passed before you became distracted and make this your starting attention time.

NOW:

- Use timers to build your attention span.
- Start with your average time, then add five minutes per day or week until you reach an optimal attention span.

Other top tips:

- Set concrete deadlines for yourself.
- Eliminate distractions – especially digital distractions - from your environment.
- Use the Pomodoro method to avoid brain fatigue.
- Count to 10 before indulging the impulse to procrastinate.
- Get yourself started by committing to work for only 5 minutes.
- Mark streaks of days on which you complete all your tasks.



- Reward yourself for your accomplishments.
- Avoid a perfectionist mindset.
- Visualize your future self.
- Focus on your goals instead of on your tasks.

WORKING MEMORY/ FOLLOWING STEP-BY- STEP DIRECTIONS

- Do students know how to take notes?
- Multiple step directions – how many steps are appropriate for each age group?

Each year should be stretching students one or two additional steps.

Most common manifestation:
Lost details. Homework is
incorrect. Ineffective studying.
Poor quiz/exam grades.

Showing work in math is a great way to help students understand step-by-step directions – because math is about understanding the process by which you got the correct answer, not necessarily the answer itself.

Requiring students to show their work does more than just teach math, it enhances working memory for other subjects.

Perseverance/Goal-Directed Persistence

- SMART Goal Making
 - Specific
 - Measurable
 - Achievable
 - Relevant
 - Time-bound

Most common manifestation:
Don't understand long-term
and short-term strategies.

- Focus on process and not product
- A growth mindset for EF skills is just as important as it is for academics (Carol Dweck)

OTHER EXECUTIVE FUNCTION IDEAS

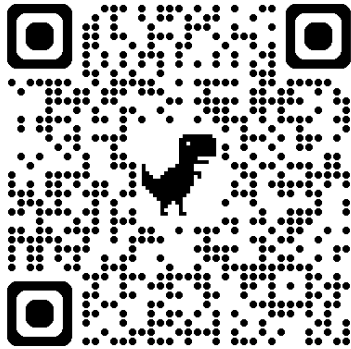
- Good self-care (sleep, healthy food, exercise) helps EF skills
- Routines matter!
- Listen to what kids need to be successful
- Help students to self-advocate
- Look for small micros successes – build on achievements
- Mindfulness is a great tool

<https://sethperler.com/executive-function-holy-grail/>

Thanks!

Do you have any questions?

Contact Dr. Kelly or Ms. Nan at
atyp-info@wmich.edu



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Resources

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