

Executive Functioning Skills

Executive skills help us decide what activities or tasks we will pay attention to and which ones we will choose to do. These skills allow us to organize our behavior over time. When we are successful in using executive skills, we can plan and organize activities, sustain our attention, and persist to complete a task. In addition, executive skills enable us to manage our emotions and monitor our thoughts so we can work efficiently and effectively. Most children with ADHD exhibit executive functioning skills deficits. Specific executive skills are defined as follows:

1. **Inhibition** - this is the capacity to think before you act. To resist the urge to say or do something. To “apply the brakes”, evaluate a situation and know how our behavior might impact it. Children with impairments in inhibiting responses are often referred to as “impulsive” or “hyper”. They choose a piece of cake now as opposed to waiting a week to get the whole cake. Also subsumed in here is something referred to as “goal-directed persistence” – this is the capacity or drive to follow through to the completion of a goal and not be put off by competing demands or interests.
2. **Shifting or flexibility** – this is the ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. Involves adaptability to changing conditions. Sometimes we refer to this as the ability to “shift”. Aspects of shifting include: making transitions, tolerating change, problem-solving, flexibility, switching or alternate focusing, and changing focus from one mindset or topic to another.
3. **Self-regulation of affect or emotional control** – this is the ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control or direct behavior. Can the individual control or modulate his or her emotional responses? Can they react to events appropriately? Do they display outbursts, sudden and/or frequent mood changes, or excessive periods of emotional upset?
4. **Initiation** – this is the ability to get to a task without procrastination or in a timely fashion. Can the child begin tasks and independently generate ideas, responses, problem-solving strategies? Are they a self-starter? Do they need to be told to begin a task even when they’re willing to work? Do they have difficulty getting started on homework, in-class assignments, or a chore?
5. **Working memory** – this involves the capacity to hold information in mind, allowing one to complete a task, encode information, and generate goals, plans, and move through sequential steps to achieve goals. Working memory is essential to carry out multistep activities, complete mental manipulations such as mental arithmetic and follow complex instructions.
6. **Time management** – the ability to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines.

7. **Planning** – this is the ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal and complete a task. Doing things today as one prepares for tomorrow or the following week. It also involves the ability to focus on what’s important and ignore things that aren’t as important.
8. **Organization** – this involves the ability to arrange or place things according to a system. How orderly is one’s work and storage space (e.g. desks, lockers, backpacks)?
9. **Metacognition or monitoring** – this is the ability to stand back and take a bird’s eye view of oneself in a situation. This includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking oneself “how am I doing?”). Sometimes we also call this “self and interpersonal” awareness.

These executive functioning skill deficits are the “Achilles heel” of the individual with ADHD. Many of those who live and work with individuals with ADHD will tell you that if you ask them to do anything that *does not* involve the above mentioned skills, they will do as good or better than a child without ADHD.

Over the next few months, I will be posting some suggested strategies for children who exhibit executive functioning skills deficits.

Reprinted from Effective Strategies for the Child with ADHD: The Pathway to Success which was adapted and compiled by Clinical and School Psychologist Joseph S. Volpe, PhD.