Calming the Chaos: Essential Skills that Help Smart but Scattered Students Reach Their Full Potential

smartbutscatteredkids.com

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Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Response Inhibition**: The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

- **Working Memory**: The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.
Executive Skills: Definitions

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- **Working Memory:** The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.

- **Emotional Control:** The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.
Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Flexibility**: The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.

- **Sustained Attention**: The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.

- **Task Initiation**: The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.
Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Planning/Prioritization:** The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what’s important to focus on and what’s not important.
Planning is a skill that takes time to develop
Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Planning/Prioritization:** The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what’s important to focus on and what’s not important.

- **Organization:** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.

- **Time Management:** The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.
Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Goal-directed persistence:** The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.

- **Metacognition:** The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself, “How am I doing? or How did I do?”).
How do executive skills develop?

Through a process called *myelination*. Myelin acts as insulation, increasing the speed with which nerve impulses are transmitted. The faster the impulse, the better the skill.
All skills, including executive skills, improve with practice...

The more you practice, the better the skill. Practice also makes the task less effortful.
Frontal lobes take time to develop...
Cognitive Decline Begins In Late 20s, Study Suggests

ScienceDaily (Mar. 20, 2009) — A new study indicates that some aspects of peoples' cognitive skills — such as the ability to make rapid comparisons, remember unrelated information and detect relationships — peak at about the age of 22, and then begin a slow decline starting around age 27.

"This research suggests that some aspects of age-related cognitive decline begin in healthy, educated adults when they are in their 20s and 30s," said Timothy Salthouse, a University of Virginia professor of psychology and the study's lead investigator.

His findings appear in the current issue of the journal Neurobiology of Aging.

Salthouse and his team conducted the study during a seven-year period, working with 2,000 healthy participants between the ages of 18 and 60.

Participants were asked to solve various puzzles, remember words and details from stories, and identify patterns in an assortment of letters and symbols.

Many of the participants in Salthouse's study were tested several times during the course of years, allowing researchers to detect subtle declines in cognitive ability.

Top performances in some of the tests were accomplished at the age of 22. A notable decline in certain measures of abstract reasoning, brain speed and in puzzle-solving became apparent at 27.

Salthouse found that average memory declines can be detected by about age 37. However, accumulated knowledge skills, such as improvement of vocabulary and general knowledge, actually increase at least until the age of 60.
What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Students?

- Acts without thinking
- Interrupts others
- Overreacts to small problems
- Upset by changes in plans
- Overwhelmed by large assignments
- Talks or plays too loudly
- Resists change of routine
- Doesn’t notice impact of behavior on others
- Doesn’t see their behavior as part of the issue

- Easily overstimulated and has trouble calming down
- Gets stuck on one topic or activity
- Gets overly upset about “little things”
- Out of control more than peers
- Can’t come up with more than one way to solve a problem
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Acts wild or out of control
What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Students?

- Doesn’t bother to write down assignment
- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring materials home
- Keeps putting off homework
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Chooses “fun stuff” over homework or chores
- Passive study methods (or doesn’t study)
- Forgets homework/forgets to pass it in
- Leaves long-term assignments or chores until last minute
- Can’t break down long-term assignments
- Sloppy work
- Messy notebooks
- Loses or misplaces things (books, papers, notebooks, mittens, keys, cell phones, etc.)
- Can’t find things in backpack
What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Younger Students (K-2)?

- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring materials back and forth between home and school
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Chooses “fun stuff” over homework or chores
- Leaves a trail of belongings wherever he/she goes
- Sloppy work
- Loses or misplaces things (books, papers, permission slips, mittens, lunch money, etc.)
- Messy desk/cubby areas/backpack
- Leaves a “paper trail”—scattered around the room
What’s the population we’re talking about?

What concerns you most about this pupil?

That he is lazy and not working his potential.

Please describe the best things about this pupil:

He is sweet and has a good sense of humor.
Until they are fully developed in children, parents and teachers act as “surrogate” frontal lobes for children.
There are 3 primary ways parents and teachers can help kids with weak executive skills:

1. Change the environment to reduce the impact of weak executive skills.

3. Teach the youngsters executive skills.

5. Use incentives to get youngsters to practice skills that are hard for them.
Ways to modify the environment

1. Change the physical or social environment

3. Modify the tasks we expect children to perform

5. Provide prompts or cues
Change the physical or social environment

- Add barriers
- Reduce distractions
- Provide organizing structures (clean desk, storage bins)
- Provide supervision (homework, parties, recess)
Modify the tasks we expect children to perform

- Make the task shorter--reduce the amount of work required or divide it into pieces with breaks built in along the way.
- Make the steps more explicit.
- Create a schedule.
- Build in variety or choice either for the tasks to be done or the order in which they’re to be done.
Change the way adults interact with the child

- Rehearse with the child what will happen and how the child will handle it.
- Use prompts (verbal or nonverbal).
- Remind the child to check his list or schedule.
- Praise the child for using her executive skills.

Rule of thumb: 3 POSITIVES for each corrective feedback.
Effective Praise:

1. is delivered immediately after the display of positive behavior;
2. specifies the particulars of the accomplishment (e.g., *Thank you for getting your toys out of the living room right away after I asked you*);
3. provides information to the child about the value of the accomplishment (e.g., *When you get ready for school quickly, it makes the morning go so smoothly!*);
4. lets the child know that he worked hard to accomplish the task (e.g., *I saw you working hard to control your temper!*); and
5. orients the child to better appreciate their own task-related behavior and thinking about problem-solving (e.g., *I like the way you thought about that and figured out a good solution to the problem*).
TEACH deficient skills

Don’t expect the child to acquire executive skills through observation or osmosis.
Goal: A clean room

Directive from parent:  Clean your room

Response from child with executive skill deficits:
Goal: A clean room

Directive from parent: Clean your room

Response from child with executive skill deficits: Nothing
Intervention Plan

**Step 1:** The parent acts as an external frontal lobe that works with the child to perform the following functions:

- Develop *a plan*, an organizational scheme, and a specific set of directions.
- Develop a way to monitor performance.
- Problem solve when something doesn't work.
- Provide encouragement/motivation and feedback about the success of the approach.
- Decide when the task is completed.
Step 1: Sample statements:

• Are we ready to start? OK, let’s get started.
• Where did you decide your trucks would go? Was it the box?
• How about your dirty clothes? In the laundry?
• And we decided you could put your books on the bookshelf.
• There are two toys under the bed. It doesn’t look like all those toys will fit in that one box; Where did the other trucks go? What do you think we can do?
• You’re almost finished. Is your plan to play with your friends?
• This is a hard job but you’re almost done! Great work!
• You’ve finished your job for the day
Step 2: Provide the same information without being the direct agent: create a list, picture cues, audio tape, etc. to cue the child.

*Parent says to child: Look at your list.*

Step 3: Parent begins to transfer responsibility to child:

*Parent says to child: What do you need to do?*

Step 4: Transfer complete.

*Child now asks himselfherself. What do I need to do?*
# Teaching Kids to Make Study Plans

## STUDY PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>How long will it take?</th>
<th>When will you start?</th>
<th>Where will you work?</th>
<th>Actual start/stop times</th>
<th>Done (√)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
## Study Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Which strategies will I use? (Write number)</th>
<th>How much time for each strategy?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 days before test</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 days before test</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Use incentives to augment instruction.

Incentives make both the effort of learning a skill and the effort of performing a task less aversive.

Furthermore, putting an incentive after a task teaches delayed gratification.
Simple Incentives

- Give the child something to look forward to doing when the effortful task is done (we call that Grandma’s Law).
- Alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities (use simple language: First...then, e.g., *First work, then play*).
- Build in frequent, short breaks (depending on the child’s attention span, breaks could come every 10 minutes and last 5 minutes).
- Use specific praise to reinforce the use of executive skills.
Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Task initiation (getting started). Have your child—

- Make a plan; put it in writing and tell someone what your plan is.
- Stick to a routine--start your homework at the same time every day whenever you can.
- Start with the easiest task--or have him/her work on a hard task for only a short time before switching to something else.
- Figure out when your child’s high energy times are and work then.
Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Sustained Attention (sticking with something long enough to finish).

- Give your child something to look forward to when you’re done.
- If it takes more than 30 minutes to do, build in brief breaks to do something fun (e.g., play 1 level on a video game).
- Switch off between several tasks so your child doesn’t have time to get too bored with any one.
- Teach your child to use self-talk to motivate himself/herself (“You can’t walk away from this”).
Strategies for Building Executive Skills

*Working memory (keeping track of everything you need to keep track of).* Help your child—

- Find a memory aid that works for him or her (assignment book, subject notebook, smart phone apps, post-its, writing on the back of your hand).
- Create a checklist of things he/she need to remember to bring to school or bring home.
- Put stuff by the front door where the child will trip over it.
- Find someone or something to remind him/her of what needs to be remembered.
Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Time management (getting done everything that needs to get done). Help your child—

- Make a written plan; decide when you plan to start each task on your plan.
- Estimate how long it will take you to do something (and then compare your estimate to the actual time).
- Take advantage of small periods of “down time.”
- Figure out what the common distractions are and try to get away from them.
Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Organization (keeping track of important stuff). Help your child—

- Find the simplest system (e.g., 2 folders, one for completed homework and one for unfinished homework).
- Spend 5 minutes everyday keeping the organizational system going.
- Set priorities—If organization is not your child’s strength focus on one or two areas where there will be a big pay-off (e.g., keeping the science notebook in order if the science teacher includes this as part of the grade).
Key Strategies for Parents to Use (the biggest bang for the buck)

- Keep tasks and chores brief or build in breaks.
- Give your child something to look forward to when the effortful task is done.
- Use lists and checklists as reminders.
- Create and follow routines
- Have your child help you problem-solve —use brainstorming to find good solutions.
Keep your eye on the biggest prize: building goal-directed persistence!

- Model this yourself—if you’re child sees you persisting over time to achieve a goal, that can make an impression.
- Help him/her set and achieve little goals—they add up over time.
- Praise effort—“Wow, you stuck with it!” “You figured it out.” “I can’t believe how hard you worked for that!”
- Emphasize your child’s goals, not yours.
Tips for working with teenagers

- Understand that everybody has to work harder (parents, teachers, student).

- Work on positive communication skills.
## Communication Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If your family does this...</th>
<th>Try to do this instead:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Call each other names.</td>
<td>Express anger without hurt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put each other down.</td>
<td>“I am angry that you did __________”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupt each other.</td>
<td>Take turns; keep it short.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticize too much.</td>
<td>Point out the good and bad.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get defensive</td>
<td>Listen, then calmly disagree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture.</td>
<td>Tell it straight and short.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk in sarcastic tone.</td>
<td>Talk in normal tone.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dredge up the past.</td>
<td>Stick to the present.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read others’ minds.</td>
<td>Ask others’ opinions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Command, order.</td>
<td>Request nicely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give the silent treatment.</td>
<td>Say what’s bothering you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make light of something.</td>
<td>Take it seriously.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From *ADHD in Adolescents: Diagnosis and Treatment* by Arthur L. Robin. Copyright 1998 by The Guilford Press.*
Tips for working with teenagers

- Seek help if you need it--therapists often act as 3rd party mediators that help parents and teenagers communicate better.

- Set goals that are realistic--sometimes the best you can do is keep your kids “in the game” until their frontal lobes mature enough for them to take over.
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Additional Resources

The Springer School and Center  
(http://www.springer-ld.org)

Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center  
(http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/default/)

Follow-up Discussion  
Tuesday, April 14, 7:00 – 8:30 pm  
Springer School and Center  
2121 Madison Rd.  
Cincinnati, OH