

**RAISING MOTIVATED,
SELF-SUFFICIENT,
ORGANIZED KIDS WITH
EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS**

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This guide is for you if ANY of the following sound familiar:

- You have to repeat yourself multiple times before your child follows your directions.
- Your child is constantly running late and seems to have no sense of time.
- Your child can't seem to work through the simplest disruptions in their daily routines and apply basic problem-solving skills OR they get extremely anxious when unexpected things happen.
- Your child can't seem to get homework turned in on time and keep their work organized.
- Your child needs constant reminders and hand-holding to get things done.
- Your child struggles to stick with tasks that have multiple steps and sometimes seem like they have no idea where to start (this could include day-to-day tasks, or it could present in academic tasks).
- Your child has a hard time getting "the gist" of what they've read or completing length written responses, even though they're pretty intelligent and know the content.
- Your child seems to make careless mistakes and sometimes acts like they aren't putting forth a good effort (in school, chores, etc.). For example, you ask them to clean their room and you find a complete mess when you check it later.
- They are starting to show signs of anxiety or low self-esteem or worry that they're not very smart.
- They procrastinate or delay work, even if it causes more stress for everyone in the long run.
- Sometimes they flat out refuse work or have a low-tolerance for frustration and tasks that require any sort of effort.
- Your child is easily distracted and has a hard time controlling impulses (e.g., interrupting, wanting to get up frequently while doing homework, not having a "social filter").
- Your child seems unmotivated and unconcerned about the future or anything beyond the present moment, no matter how many times you've explained consequences to them.

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As parents, all we really want is for our children to grow up and lead productive, healthy, successful lives. The problem is that our kids don't come with an owner's manual.

It can be easy to lie awake at night wondering if you're "doing it right" and if you're giving them enough help that they feel adjusted and cared for, but not so much help that you enable them.

It can be particularly frustrating if you have a child who struggles with skills that came easily to you, or if they have difficulty with tasks you think they should be able to do for their age or intelligence level.

Maybe they seem like they're behind the other kids their age. Maybe they struggle with things that came easily to their siblings.

Either way, you might feel like there is something that's just not connecting.

When I talk to parents about their concerns when it comes to their children, there are usually a couple key areas of concern:

- *Behavior, compliance, and motivation*
- *Emotional regulation, socialization, and mental health*
- *Performance on specific academic tasks such as reading or writing (or other areas)*
- *Overall problem-solving, functioning, and organization*

These all seem like separate things, but there is actually ONE key skill area that can impact all of them.

This is especially relevant if you have a child with a diagnosed disability or medical condition (such as autism, ADHD, other learning disabilities); however there are many kids who need work in this area who do not have any diagnosis.

This particular set of skills is known as "executive functions".

Learning about these skills that will help your children (and you!) become an independent and self-sufficient people.

What are executive functions?

Executive functions are a set of skills that allow us to self-regulate and successfully engage in goal-directed behavior (Fahy, 2014; Obermeyer, Shlesinger, & Martin, 2020).

Children who have strong executive functioning skills are likely to pay attention to important details, do work without reminders and put forth a good effort, and overall show a sense of responsibility and reliability.

They are self-motivated, adaptable, and likely to have strong social and academic skills. They are likely to be high-achievers in a lot of the activities they do.

Executive functions enable us to read situations and know how to act accordingly, problem-solve and make adaptations to our own behavior based on feedback from the environment through self-reflection and evaluation. They allow us to think ahead and make strategic plans using predictions, so we can tell up front what behaviors are going to help us be successful with whatever we're trying to do.

Someone with strong executive functioning skills knows how to handle situations without needing explicit directions. They know how to deal with changes to routines or unplanned events. They know how to “think ahead” and come up with multiple options for working through situations (for example, coming up with a “plan B”). They easily monitor their own behavior to evaluate whether or not they are succeeding, and make adjustments to their plans with their end goal in mind. They also know how to break complex tasks down into steps so that they know where to start, how long a task may take, and what things they may need to do in order to get to their end goal (Turkstra & Byom, 2010).

On the other hand, someone who does not yet have well-developed executive functioning skills may appear disorganized and overwhelmed. It may take them way longer than expected to complete tasks that may seem simple on the surface. They may avoid getting started on a task or not do them at all. This may cause them to need a lot of support completing tasks that have multiple steps and require them to “think on their feet” and make adjustments along the way (Singer & Bashir, 1999).

This could include tasks difficult academic assignments like writing essays, studying for exams, or even comprehending paragraphs. It could include keeping work organized or remembering to turn in assignments and getting to class on time. It could also include activities of daily living like cleaning their room, making a meal, remembering to do chores, or even basic hygiene like taking a shower or brushing their teeth.

In some cases, executive functioning challenges can impact relationships if the individual has difficulty reading social cues or predicting the impact of their actions on others. In other cases, the individual may be an “underachiever” who is very capable,

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but just can't quite seem to perform at a level they're capable of functioning. As a result, they may appear emotional, stressed, and defiant; not because they're lazy, unmotivated, or uninterested preserving the feelings of others, but because they're avoiding failure. They may have a lot of anxiety about certain tasks because they feel overwhelmed and want to avoid a struggle (Obermeyer, Shlesinger, & Martin, 2020).

Executive functioning skills are a “metacognitive” process.

“Meta” refers to the conscious thinking about a certain task. “Cognitive” refers to our own thought process. That means if we are using a “metacognitive” strategy or skill, we are literally “thinking about our own thinking” (Fahy, 2014).

People who have strong executive functioning skills are very “meta”. They have the ability to reflect on their own thought processes and behaviors. This gives them the ability to develop their own set of strategies that allows them to self-monitor and be productive. For example, they think to themselves, *“I tend to take an hour to get ready for school. I have to leave the house at 8:00 AM, so I should probably get up at 7:00 AM,”* or, *“I always do better on my tests when I study my notes with a friend, so I’m going to take really good notes and schedule a time to study with someone.”* It could even be as simple as, *“It’s easier to clean my room when I don’t have dirty laundry all over my floor, so I’m going to pick up my clothes first.”*

People who struggle with metacognitive skills may not have this internal self-talk that allows them to think through a situation and make good decisions. The good news is that we can improve these skills with practice (Fahy, 2019b). That means if you have a child that is struggling with any of these skills, there is a lot you can do to help them become more independent and successful.

One important thing to note: Executive functioning skills are not necessarily correlated with IQ. In other words, if your child is struggling with executive functioning, it does NOT mean they aren't intelligent and capable of improving (Fahy, 2019a)

The first step to helping your child is understanding the types of executive functioning skills. This will allow you to start to think about whether or not your child, in fact, has an issue with executive functioning skills. To be honest, most people could benefit from working on their executive functioning skills! Secondly, if you suspect there is an executive functioning issue, you want to be able to figure out which skill it is so you know how to start working on it.

One of the biggest mistakes that people make when trying to improve executive functioning skills is oversimplifying the process and not fully understanding the little bits and pieces.

They think that executive functioning is just “being more organized and motivated”, so they do superficial tasks that don’t get to the root of the issue and work on building the right skills.

This often leads to more frustration and overwhelm because it’s not strategically addressing the area where your child needs work.

Some common “quick fixes” people often try are planners, productivity apps, or different positive reinforcement techniques like sticker charts or other rewards. There is nothing wrong with any of these things, but they are unlikely to be effective if you don’t have an understanding of the specific executive functioning skills you’re teaching as you’re using them.

Let’s start by answering these two questions:

Does an executive functioning issue exist?

If so, what specific executive functioning skills should I strengthen?

To do that, we can start by understanding the 8 executive functioning skills (Learning Success, 2020):

1. Attending
2. Working Memory
3. Strategy Planning and Organization
4. Initiation
5. Inhibition
6. Fluency
7. Shifting
8. Self-monitoring and regulation

On the following pages, I’m going to describe each of the 8 executive functioning skills to help you determine if your child is showing any red flags that indicate they might need work in that skill area.

Red Flags of Attending Difficulties

Attending difficulties are common in individuals who struggle with executive functions (Leonard, Weismer, Miller, Francis, Tomblin, & Vail, 2007). Here are some common signs of attention difficulties:

- ✓ Not finishing tasks to completion.
- ✓ Poor attention to detail.
- ✓ Makes mistakes on things they should know how to do.
- ✓ Restlessness when doing certain tasks; stalling behavior such as “needing” to keep getting up to do something (get a drink, go to the bathroom, etc.).
- ✓ May only be able to attend to high stimulating tasks or high interest tasks (may be able to sit with a device for hours, but unable to attend to a book or pencil and paper tasks).
- ✓ May be able to complete work more easily with environmental adaptations, but sensitive to environmental changes (e.g., may only be able to do with someone sitting near them, may be sensitive to noise or visual distractions-these visual distractions may seem minor to others).
- ✓ May need to be fidgeting with something or moving in order to sit still (although for others, this can be a distraction and can decrease attention).
- ✓ May appear to space out, even if there aren’t a lot of environmental distractions.

Red Flags for Working Memory Difficulties

There are various types of working memory: auditory and visual-spatial. Some people may struggle with both of them, but some may be strong in one but weak in another (Leonard, Weismer, Miller, Francis, Tomblin, & Vail, 2007; Martin, 2020).

Working memory is the ability to retain novel information for a short period of time and then apply it to an immediate situation. For example, following directions for an assignment in class or dialing a phone number immediately after you’ve heard it without writing it down.

When using your auditory working memory, you are recalling information you’ve just *heard* and using it for an immediate task. With visuo-spatial memory, you’re using information you’ve recently *seen* and using that information.

Individuals with working memory difficulties may appear to be intentionally not complying at times, simply because they don’t remember what they’re supposed to. They may need to be told several times to do certain tasks.

They may also have a hard time imitating tasks they’ve seen someone else doing because they have a hard time picturing the motion in their heads and reproducing it (for example, having difficulty mimicking some type of exercise during gym class).

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Red Flags for Strategic Planning and Organization Difficulties

Strategic planning and organization involve thinking about a particular goal or outcome and determining steps needed to take in order to get to that goal in a reasonable amount of time (Fahy, 2014). It's important to note that all "planning" is not strategic.

Saying "*I plan to watch TV right now*" may not be strategic if it's not aiming towards a specific outcome. On the other hand, taking a lunch break could be strategic because it requires the individual to estimate the time they have to achieve the outcome of eating and being back to work/school at a specific time.

Individuals who struggle with strategic planning and organization may:

- ✓ Frequently be late or miss appointments/assignments.
- ✓ Make mistakes on said assignments/tasks or do work that appears careless.
- ✓ Avoid starting difficult assignments or tasks or take longer than needed to get going.
- ✓ Get started on tasks but get distracted or not complete them.
- ✓ Take way longer than is necessary to complete tasks.
- ✓ Do superfluous tasks that don't get them towards their end goal.
- ✓ Expend a large amount of effort to complete a task but have poor performance or not meet their end goal.
- ✓ Spend a lot of time procrastinating and ruminating OR spend a lot of time appearing busy without a clear finished product.

Red Flags for Initiation Difficulties

Initiation can be impacted by one's ability to engage in strategic planning, which means that some of these symptoms overlap with the red flags of strategy planning and organization issues. People who struggle with initiation have a hard time getting started with tasks. This is often because they're overwhelmed or anxious due to repeated failures, or they're simply struggling to break the task down in to "chunks" or steps (Fahy, 2019a; Fahy, 2014; Learning Success, 2020). As a result, they don't know what the first "step" is.

This means they may be likely to:

- ✓ Avoid or procrastinate.
- ✓ Have emotional outbursts or show other undesirable behaviors when asked to do certain tasks.
- ✓ Take way longer to get started on a project (sometimes they procrastinate longer than it actually takes to complete the task).
- ✓ Come up with excuses or "work arounds" to avoid doing work.

Red Flags for Inhibition Difficulties

There is a lot of overlap in attending difficulties and inhibition difficulties; but inhibitory control is a more specific skillset that involves being able to refrain from doing certain activities in order to be more successful in a given situation (Fahy, 2019a; Fahy, 2014; Fahy, 2014). They may struggle to pause, consider their choices, and choose in the moment whether to do a certain action or not.

Individuals who struggle with inhibition may:

- ✓ Appear impulsive or restless, as if driven by a motor.
- ✓ Struggle to stay in their seat, sit still, or wait their turn.
- ✓ May blurt responses out in class without waiting to be called on, and during a conversation may frequently interrupt others.
- ✓ May say things that appear inappropriate or insensitive, and may have “no filter”.
- ✓ May talk or move excessively compared to what’s typical for that situation.
- ✓ Have a hard time sticking with one task for an extended amount of time.
- ✓ May jump from one task to another because they aren’t able to resist the urge to task switch when a distraction present itself (e.g., something they see or hear in the environment, a thought pops in to their head).

Red Flags for Fluency Difficulties

Fluency is the ability to generate options (Obermeyer et al., 2020). As we move through our day, sometimes unexpected things happen. We may have a “plan B” in the back of our minds so that we know what to do should our current routine be disrupted. Fluency is the ability to come up with multiple ways to get to the end goal. This is a skill that enables us to be adaptable to our environment.

Individuals with fluency difficulties may:

- ✓ Not finish tasks if something unexpected happens.
- ✓ Struggle to find an alternate way of doing something.
- ✓ Get frustrated if their routine is disrupted.
- ✓ May appear to be dawdling, goofing around, or willfully not complying (because they’ve gotten stuck and aren’t sure what to do next).
- ✓ May not be able to modify their behavior in the moment if their current plan isn’t working.

With fluency, it’s sometimes helpful to explain this with some practical examples. One example would be that someone goes in to the bathroom to brush their teeth, but the toothpaste is almost empty. They squeeze the tube the way they normally do, but no toothpaste comes out. As a result, they either don’t brush their teeth, or they just sit in the bathroom and do nothing (or distract themselves with something else that’s not

goal-directed) until prompted by someone. They don't consider other options like rolling the tube of toothpaste from the bottom, looking in the cabinet for more toothpaste, or even asking someone where they can get more toothpaste.

Red Flags for Shifting Difficulties

When we use our "shifting" skills, we stop what's not working and course correct in order to meet a specific goal. While fluency has to do with coming up with multiple options for completing a task, shifting has to do with knowing when it's time to consider alternative options (Fahy, 2019a; Fahy, 2014). This could include knowing when something is just plain NOT going to get a task completed (for example, getting the wrong answer on a math problem). It could also include knowing when to speed up and condense steps in order to finish something more quickly, or draw them out in order to prolong the task.

The red flags for "shifting" difficulties may look similar to the ones for "fluency", they just happen for a different reason. This is why if any of those symptoms present, it's really important to talk to your child to figure out WHY they are stalling or stopping in the middle of a task. Is it because they didn't realize that what they needed to change the plan (shifting)? Or is it because they couldn't think of other options (fluency)? Or is it a little of both?

A great example of this would be if you're stuck in traffic or late for an appointment. Do you recognize that you won't get there on time because there's more traffic than you expected? Is there a way you can cut out an errand you were planning on running to get there in time? Do you need to call and reschedule or let the office know you're running behind?

It may be difficult to distinguish between shifting and fluency, but the important part is knowing that these skills exist so you can work on both of them if your child presents with any of these signs.

Red Flags for Self-Monitoring and Regulation

Self-monitoring and regulation refer to the ability to evaluate our own behavior and determine if it's getting us closer to our goal (Obermeyer et al., 2020). It impacts other executive functioning skills like shifting or inhibition, but it also covers other areas where we might need to be aware of the impact our behaviors have.

There are many times when we need to self-monitor our performance within an activity to see if we're getting closer to our goal in order to shift our behavior and complete a certain set of tasks in a given amount of time.

However, there are other times we might need to self-monitor, such as when we've completed a finished product and we're evaluating the quality of our work (sometimes things might be "done" but they might not be done well or to the best of our ability).

A big part of self-monitoring has to do with building relationships with other people. There might be situations where we might not be completing a task that has clearly defined steps; but we still need to regulate our behavior; such as when we're socializing. The rules of social engagement are fluid and have a lot of nuances. Some rules may apply to certain people and situations; and in another situation with another group of people there may be different expectations.

Even within one social circle, unexpected things may happen. For example, you have a friend who is normally goofy and joking around, but today they seem a little off. You start to make jokes and tease them like you normally would, but they aren't responding like normal. Do you know how to monitor your impact on your friend and change your behavior?

What if you're the one who is feeling a little "off"? Do you know how to manage your emotions so you don't blow up at one of your friends? Are you aware of your emotions and how they might impact your performance? For example, would it be a good idea to avoid certain people today?

All of these things have to do with our ability to self-monitor.

Now that we've walked through the 8 types of executive functioning skills, you can use this information to see which skill areas you can start to address.

For more information about how to build strong executive functioning skills needed for independence and success, [follow me on Facebook here.](#)

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