

Executive Functioning Deficits by Grade Level and Helpful Strategies

Pre-School

What you might observe:

The child may become frustrated easily and tantrum over “small” problems. Simple, everyday routines become challenging, especially if the context or environment is changed (such as hanging up a jacket/backpack and coming to the carpet). Sometimes answers to questions are unrelated or the child forgets what the question was.

How to help:

Providing visuals for important routines will allow the child to reference something without asking an adult for help, therefore promoting independence. In addition, giving explicit cues for how to complete activities, while using as little language as possible, will promote quick and efficient mastery of tasks. Teaching frustration tolerance strategies, such as manageable ways to push through tough activities, as opposed to leaving the activity, will help build resilience.

Elementary school

What you might observe:

The child may become distracted easily and struggle to complete tasks, even if the task is preferred or simple. The child may forget to bring permission slips home for trips or lose them in their belongings. The child may struggle to filter out irrelevant information in word problems during math. Shifting between methods or generating new ideas for how to complete/solve a problem is challenging.

How to help:

Provide sensory tools that can help with self-regulation and attention. Create habits and routines regarding organization of materials (for example, the child puts all papers at the end of the date in the side of the folder that has the sticker until a parent sees it at night). Utilizing color coded materials for organizing subjects and papers may be helpful as well. Checklists for writing,

routines, and completing work independently can be structured ways to promote independence with self-monitoring.

Middle school

What you might observe:

Children this age may struggle to make concrete plans with peers or organize their time appropriately, either over-committing or refusing to commit. Children may be struggling to initiate large projects and it may feel daunting, causing them to shut down or procrastinate. Demonstrates poor time management and believes adults are being “unfair” when time runs out.

How to help:

Utilization of a simple, day-to-day, or weekly planner with small rewards for completing daily goals can help children manage their time more effectively. Assisting the child in breaking down big projects into small steps, by way of a graphic organizer, will teach valuable skills for managing difficult/overwhelming projects. Utilization of timers, both visual or otherwise, or utilizing technology to structure time will make timing external. Teaching the child how to use a combination lock prior to school beginning will prevent panic during transitions. In addition, the utilization of color-coded materials will help the child organize their backpack.

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