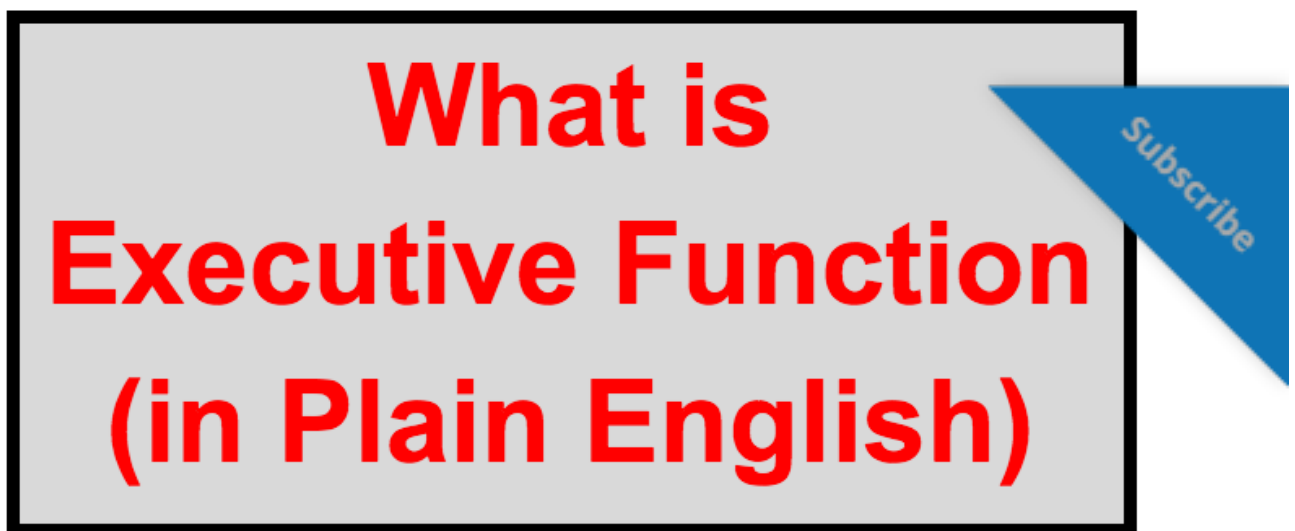


Executive Function & 2e Coach

What is Executive Functioning? How Does it Affect My Child? (In Plain English + Free PDF cheatsheet)

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Why is an article about Executive Function so critical?

70
Shares

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If your child struggles with school (homework, trouble staying on-task, disorganized, problems with time management, avoidant, resistant, forgetful, overwhelmed, etc.), they probably struggle with Executive Function, and this article is literally the most important article I've written for you. You see, *Executive Function is the #1 term parents and teachers must understand in order to help struggling students, **but***

don't. In fact, most parents and educators have never heard the term because schools don't educate people about it.

In this article I seek to demystify EF for parents and educators. I want you to walk away from this article thinking, *"Wow, I now have a pretty good grasp of Executive Functions, I have a better understanding of my child, and most importantly, I have a better understanding of how to help."*

I also created this printable PDF: [**Executive Function In-Depth**](#) – *Your guide to why **Executive Function** is the most important concept we must understand in order to help struggling students succeed.*

Outside-the-box learners need outside-the-box solutions rather than cookie-cutter approaches. They think, learn and process differently, and need strategies that are *tailored to their unique personalities and idiosyncrasies*. They tend to develop asynchronously within the various aspects of Executive Function, and when this is properly taken into consideration, we can **empower** these students with solutions that work.

The big problem for students who struggle with EF is that, by it's very nature, these problems can literally *prevent them from reaching their goals and therefore their potential as adults*. However, with the right support, we can help our children manage, compensate for and get accommodations for EF challenges so they can have the tools needed to build a remarkable future.

If you like this, *please share it* to help more people!

Thanks,

Seth



What is Executive Function? Defining it in Plain English

In simplest terms, Executive Function means the ability to get stuff done (homework, writing a paper or cleaning a room, etc.). In other words, to “execute” complex tasks through to completion.

The brain must do a lot of things in order to accomplish a task or goal. However, adults sometimes take for granted how long it’s taken them to develop their own executive skills, and they can be baffled at how difficult it is for kids to execute. A good example is homework. It’s not uncommon for the parents I work with to say something like this, “I don’t understand why he doesn’t just do his homework and turn it in. It would make everything so much easier! What is going on?!” Because EF is still developing, the student literally doesn’t have the series of skills needed to execute the task to completion. Therefore, it’s not that they *won’t*, it’s that they *can’t*. Of course, as some kids get older and more burnt out with school, there can be more “won’t”.

Things that sound simple to an adult can require more Executive Function than some kids have. Think about the homework example again. Common problems with homework include not knowing or remembering that there is homework, remembering but putting it off, doing part of it and not finishing, doing it and forgetting to turn it in, losing it, forgetting to put a name on it. All of these situations have the

same result: the students grades don't reflect their ability. All of these can be EF issues and as stated above, are often a matter of *can't* rather than *won't*.

Does Executive Functioning impact my child or my students?

Students of all ages, elementary school through graduate school, have to learn many skills in order to navigate school. If they struggle with executive function, they might struggle with the following:

- **Homework** – Not remembering what is for homework, not understanding homework requirements and details, forgetting to do homework, procrastinating, forgetting to turn it in, incomplete homework, missing or lost homework, not putting name on homework.
- **Planners** – don't use them effectively unless they are forced to, don't understand long or short term planning strategies, don't like planning.
- **Grades** – Grades are surprising low and do not reflect potential or ability, missing and late assignments affect grades, ineffective studying results in low test scores, forgetting to study affects grades.
- **Organization** – school materials, papers, folders, desk, locker, backpack, bedroom.
- **Time management** – often late, unrealistic perception of how long something takes to accomplish, procrastination.
- **Details** – not noticing important details about assignments, not hearing teacher expectations on school work, not reading directions carefully, not checking math work and getting wrong answers even when they know how to do the work.
- **Preparation** – not being prepared for class, don't have materials they need, forget pencils, homework, planner, books, not prepared to leave the house for school, sports, family activities.
- **Advocacy** – don't ask for help, don't know what to ask for help with, don't understand that a teacher is a resource, don't raise their

hand for clarification, don't email teacher when they have questions, don't go to office hours.

- **Overwhelm** – they don't even know where to start because they are so overwhelmed with details, stressed, avoidant, procrastinate because they are overwhelmed, homework fights, resists help from parents.
- **Focus** – can't pay attention to one thing at a time, incomplete work because they don't follow through, distracted easily, trouble concentrating, can't focus on reading a passage effectively.
- **Writing papers** – trouble organizing writing, ideas go in countless directions, inability to edit effectively, trouble clarifying ideas, takes longer than it should, they may be able to verbally communicate ideas but can't write them clearly.

Why most parents and teachers aren't aware of Executive Function

Unfortunately, most of the literature on Executive Function is not in layman's terms, thus making it challenging for parents and educators to learn about. For example, if you search the internet for Executive Function, here are some of the confusing definitions you'll find:

- "Executive functions (also known as cognitive control and supervisory attentional system) is an umbrella term for the management (regulation, control) of cognitive processes."
- "Executive function is a set of mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action."
- "Executive function refers to a set of mental skills that are coordinated in the brain's frontal lobe. Executive functions work together to help a person achieve goals."

So let's keep it simple with one of the definitions I listed earlier:
Executive Function means *being able to get stuff done*.

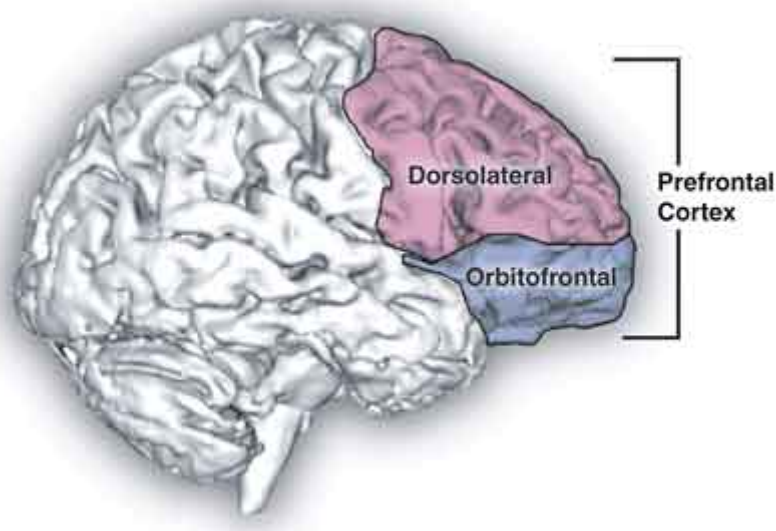
In order to get stuff done, you need to be able to do things like plan effectively, organize, focus, self-start, stay on task, avoid distractions, make good decisions, have a realistic perception of time, persist when

you don't feel like it, and do several other things in order to execute. These are some Executive Functions in plain English. You must be able to "regulate" your thoughts, emotions, and actions in order to accomplish these goals and in order to get your needs and wants met in the long term.

When speak about EF with language that relates directly to the problems these kids are experiencing, we can do a much better job of helping them.

EF in the brain

The prefrontal cortex is where EF takes place. This is a whopping $\frac{1}{3}$ of your brain and is located behind your forehead. The brain develops from the back to the front, so for kids who struggle with EF, the prefrontal cortex is still developing. The good news here is that it continues to develop well into our 20s, and EF skills can get better with time, practice and proper guidance. Unfortunately, most schools don't teach EF skills effectively, so the ones who struggle are often misunderstood and shamed.



The Pre-frontal Cortex, the center for Executive Function

The Aspects of EF

How do we help someone do what they need to do, in their own best interest, when they seem like they can't or won't do it? We don't give up. Babysteps work. The brain DOES change. EF continues to develop well

into your 20s. The following are my interpretation of the aspects of EF, aka the things your brain must do in order for you to “execute” complex tasks. (Note: Various experts break down EF differently. I choose my words in order to make the concepts more relatable to relevant problems your child may be having.)

1. **Plan** – The ability to have a realistic perception of the steps necessary to accomplish a goal or task.
2. **Time management** - The ability to manage time or to have a realistic perception of how long things take. Important in planning and scheduling too.
3. **Organize** – The ability to create systems of doing things or keeping track of things, that are organized enough so goals can be met effectively.
4. **Prioritize** - The ability to know and do what is most important at any given time.
5. **Inhibit** – This refers to one’s ability to hold back, to pause, to think before you act, to not be too impulsive, to have self-restraint. Inhibit thoughts, emotions, behaviors that are inappropriate or that go against long term goals and wellbeing. When we do not inhibit well we are thought to be impulsive or hyperactive.
6. **Focus** – The ability to manage and sustain attention, focus, concentrate, be “on task”, stick to it. Resisting temptation to shift when trying to focus, avoid distractions, redirect thoughts.
7. **Task initiation** - Self starting or activation. Getting the ball rolling, getting the train moving.
8. **Task persistence** – Continuing to try until finished, working to completion.
9. **Transition** – The ability to shift from activity to activity effectively.
10. **Working memory** – Verbal and visual strategies that help us keep things in mind as we work through things. It’s like juggling balls, being able to track the important details during a process. Includes self-talk and visual imagery.
11. **Details** – Remembering and managing important details.
12. **Reflection** - Reflection is all about self-awareness, consciousness, mindfulness, introspection. It refers to one’s ability to take a step

back and reflect in order to problem solve. A lot of people with EF problems have trouble *learning from their mistakes*. They don't connect the dots well and continue to repeat self-defeating behaviors. Reflection also involves to self-checking details schoolwork (think checking work in math for example or checking to see if your name is on the paper).

13. **Emotional regulation** – Having tools to truly regulate and work through challenging emotions.

Executive Function Lies

Unfortunately, kids with Executive Function problems often internalize these negative messages:

- I'm dumb, stupid.
- I'm not smart enough.
- I'm lazy.
- I don't care about school.
- I'm a failure.
- I can't do anything right, so why try?

Teachers and parents don't intend for kids to get these messages, but nevertheless, many do. How can we help? The first step is to be very aware of the words we use and how they affect kids. We need to understand that these kids are struggling with legitimate Executive Function challenges. Therefore, beware of saying things like this:

- You aren't trying your best.
- You have so much potential.
- I know you're smart, you just need to care more about school.
- Motivate yourself.
- You need to be more disciplined.
- Just focus.
- You're making bad choices.

How do we change these harmful messages? This is a big topic, but generally speaking, we need to reframe the entire dialogue to take EF into consideration and build upon strengths. Of course this is very challenging when our kids are experiencing compulsory schooling which is dire need of massive reform and rethinking. Our schools tend to do very little to value their unique interests, curiosities, learning differences, strengths and idiosyncrasies. Instead, our systems have been designed to reward compliance rather than true critical thinking, personal growth and personal choice. We teach what to think rather than how to think. But I digress... here's a [video](#) I made that will help with communication.

Finally, one practical tip I use with parents is to research "attachment theory" and "somatic therapies". Understanding these will help you to understand how to create safe and healthy emotional attachments with your children as well as how our minds and bodies influence behaviors. Here are two books to get you started: [Attached](#) and [The Body Keeps The Score](#).

A word about diagnosis

I work with a lot of families, and there is a lot of misunderstanding about having a diagnosis of some sort. There are several possibilities here:

- Some students who struggle with Executive Function are not tested for anything
- Misdiagnosis, or some are tested but with bias (example: a gifted child without adhd is tested for adhd by a family doctor who does not have much training about learning issues. The symptoms look like adhd, so the diagnosis is made, meds are prescribed, and it doesn't work or causes harmful consequences, like anxiety problems.)
- Underdiagnosis – some kids are never diagnosed, but there is something going on that needs to be diagnosed. If the correct diagnosis were made, it'd be a positive game-changer for this child.
- Overdiagnosis – Child is diagnosed with more than is actually there.

While a diagnosis may be helpful, it's not always necessary. What is necessary is that a student get the support they need – executive function strategies (coaching, tutors, books, my videos and blog), emotional support (therapists for kids who are dysregulated or when family dysfunction runs deep), physical support (restful sleep, healthy diet, substantial exercise and movement are critical)

Ways to help kids who struggle with Executive Functions

There are countless ways to support your child, and this is a list I made to give you a good starting point. Read through it and apply what you like. It should give you a few nuggets.

1. **Foundations** – Here's the foundation of strong EF: Restful sleep, food that nourishes the body, adequate exercise.
2. **Routines** – Effective routines, predictability, groundedness (routines for updating planners, overhauling backpacks, homework, studying, transitions, waking up, bedtime, fitness, etc.)
3. **Metacognition** – Metacognitive understanding of emotional needs and implementation emotional regulation practices.
4. **Systems** – Personalized systems to effectively manage backpack, folders, planners, sacred study space, homework, etc.
5. **Ownership** – Ownership and buy-in are critical if your child is to be engaged. Too often we just tell kids what to do and don't give them any say in the process.
6. **Listen** – Compassionate support.
7. **Hacks** – Visual and auditory tips, tricks and tools.
8. **Organizing papers** – If binders don't work for you, replace with simple color coded folder system.
9. **Visuals** – Flag books with stickies. Flag and label important papers so they stand out visually in backpack.
10. **Labels** – Outta sight, outta mind. Therefore, label everything BIG AND BRIGHT.
11. **Alternative note-taking** – Draw your notes. Great for visual kids. Use an audio recorder to study creatively.

12. **Archive** – Make an archive (see blog). Do not keep every paper in your folders and backpack. Only keep currently relevant items, archive the rest (the truth is that you probably will never need it anyhow).
13. **Study groups** – Study partners work wonders.
14. **Chunk** – Chunking assignments down into bitesize pieces. Chunk by time or by task.
15. **Plan** – Make a plan even when you don't want to. These kids do not know how to plan, and it's one of the most important skills.
16. **Advocacy** – Self advocacy and advocacy from supportive people (Know your rights. Start with IDEA.)
17. **Microsuccesses** – Look for all small successes and build upon them. Make goals reachable. It all counts.
18. **Timers** – Use timers and alarms to calibrate time management skills.
19. **Mindfulness** – The BEST tool ever: Mindfulness. Meditation works wonders. Period.

What makes Executive Functioning worse?

1. Processed foods.
2. Sleep problems, electronics interfering with sleep.
3. Lack of exercise.
4. Stress, overwhelm, dysregulation, adrenal fatigue.
5. Sensory issues, sensory overwhelm.
6. Useless busywork, meaningless assignments and misinformed adults.
7. Unclear expectations.
8. Shame.
9. Fear Resistance, avoidance, procrastination, unwillingness.
10. Inability to articulate systems. Lacking ownership and buyin with system development.

Systems Self-assessment Checklist – what systems do kids need?

I use this regularly with my students (see my free course for a complete breakdown of how to use this successfully). This serves as a guide to explore important areas to problem solve within. Feel free to cut this out and keep it handy:

1. **Foundations** – Sleep? Nutrition? Fitness?
2. **Backpack** – Overhaul completely once a week, folders, papers, etc.
3. **Planner** - How well is it working and being used? Update long term and short term. Need planner routine or it won't work.
4. **Routines** - Is study routine/workflow optimal? Manageable? How to make it more focused and less distracted?
5. **Grades** - Check online grades at least once a week? Make a to do list of missings and incompletes.
6. **Advocacy** - Who do you need to communicate with? Be proactive not reactive when possible.
7. **SSS** - How effective is your Sacred Study Space? How well can you focus there?
8. **Relationships** - Family, friends, how's it going? What do you need? How's your relationship with yourself?
9. **Stress** - What are your biggest stresses lately? What is overwhelming or frustrating? Minimize? Reframe? Breathe. What are solutions?
10. **Beliefs** - Limiting? Scarcity? Abundance? Growth or fixed mindset? Self-talk, defaults, reframe.
11. **Technology** - Is computer optimized for school? Page blocker? Distraction free? Tabs/bookmarks for all relevant school links? Online calendar set up?

Executive Function Resources

- Dr. Russell A. Barkley video, 12 min: [The Five Executive Functions](#). I'm a huge fan of Dr. Barkley, and although his work might be highly academic, I strongly recommend diving into it.
- Here's a good little [Executive Function Fact Sheet](#) from the LDOnline site (Learning Disabilities Online)

- [Understanding Executive Functioning Issues](#) – Heres a good article by Amanda Morin of understood.org
- [Executive Functions](#): Here's an in-depth manuscript by Adele Diamond on the US National Library of Medicine site. It includes a discussion of how EF can improve with practice.

Conclusion

The point of this article isn't to teach you everything about the Executive Functions. My real hope is that you walk away from it thinking:

1. Wow, I now have a good grasp of Executive Function.
2. I have a much better understanding of my child.
3. Most importantly, I have a much better understanding of how to help my child.

I hope this helps you. Good luck,

Seth

Here's the printable PDF: [Executive Function In-Depth](#)

Please [click](#) below to share my work. Thanks! Seth

9 Comments

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Holly Mahan · Quality Assurance at The Dow Chemical Company

Finally, all the information I need to understand this is found in one place. Plain english, yahoo! This is an invaluable tool and I will share with the school so that they may have a better understanding and can see a more practical approach for helping these kids. Thank you, Seth!

Like · Reply · 1 · 31w



Seth Brian Perler · Works at Seth Perler .com - Helping Struggling Students Shine

If this helped you, PLEASE leave a comment and tell us YOUR THOUGHTS!

Thanks so much -Seth

Like · Reply · 28w · Edited



Cathy Biamonte · Hospital Programs Coordinator at CHD Coalition - Congenital Heart Defect Coalition

Seth, finding your blog has empowered me as a mom and as my son's advocate. Thank you!!!

Like · Reply · 1 · 26w



Elena Bohman · Works at Waconia School District

As a speech language pathologist I work with students that have EF difficulties. I enjoyed reading your article. It is always good to get a refresher and hear about EF in different terms. Thank you for writing an article that I can pass on to parents so they can better understand their child and how EF work.

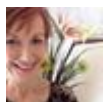
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Jen Logan · Loganbill

how can a mild TBI affect EF?

Like · Reply · 1 · 3w



Roslyn Jan · Works at St. Mark's Anglican Community School

I wish we had known about this when our son was at school. He is now 36 with ongoing issues and still living at home. Getting and keeping a job is so very difficult. A key is having an understanding, tolerant employer and colleagues but they are as scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth. I would like to know what can be done to really help as in a program to follow, or is it, as we have found, a day to day management situation?

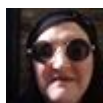
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Melissa Sornik · Fordham University

Thanks for putting this together Seth. Great, comprehensive explanation of a concept so many folks struggle with. I am passing along to clients and schools I work with!

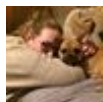
Like · Reply · 2w



Julia Morgan · Underlord at Titan Quest: Immortal Throne

I wish that there was some literature aimed at adults who have problems with executive function and want to do something about it. As it is, I'm having to adapt suggestions aimed at "normal" adults who are trying to help their kids. On the plus side, I'm motivated, I know what I want to achieve and why. And even better, I know it isn't just "Julia is crap" and that it is possible to improve; I'm not powerless.

Like · Reply · 1w



Rachel Herring-Smith · Oxford Brookes University

I found this really helpful, thank you so much. At the moment I am torn between paying privately for my son to be diagnosed (I am 99% sure he has ADHD) or just leaving it and helping him myself. It's a tricky one as there are pros and cons to having a label.

Thank you for this article

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Hi, I'm Seth. I help struggling students get the skills to become happy & successful. [READ MORE](#)

"I am not a teacher, but an awakener." - Robert Frost