Executive Function and Organization

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Do these remind you of your child?
How about this?

- Talks excessively without awareness of “wearing people out”
- Can’t seem to remember routines
- Loses track of belongings, directions, topics
- Midjudges time needed to complete task
What is executive function?

- Self-regulation to accomplish complex tasks
  - Attention
  - Mood
  - Behavior

- Begins to develop in early infancy and continues throughout childhood and adolescence
  - Parallels development of pre-frontal cortex
  - Growth spurts
What is executive function?

• Not “input”
  • Taking in facts
  • Developing skills

• Output
  • Acting on knowledge
  • Organizing papers
  • Writing down assignments
  • Taking notes
  • Studying
Executive Function Skills Help Us To:

- Make plans
- Keep track of time
- Evaluate ideas
- Engage in group dynamics
- Keep track of more than one thing at once
- Ask for help
- Reflect on our work
- Finish work on time
- Wait to speak until called on
- Change our minds & make mid-course corrections while thinking, reading, and writing
What does this have to do with gifted?

- Have asynchronous development
  - High in cognitive abilities, yet struggles with one or more aspects of executive functioning
  - High in some areas of executive function, but lower in others
- Tune out to unstimulating work
- May get intensely focused on projects
- Are involved in many diverse things
What does this have to do with gifted?

• Gifted children find learning and school to initially be very easy, sometimes even boring.

• There really is a downside to school being “too easy.”

• If you are able to easily understand your lessons, memorize the key details, and recall them later, there is no need to develop a set of study skills.
When it becomes a problem

- Students get to a point where it’s no longer “easy”
- Problems with EF lead to difficulties with self-concept, both personal and academic
- Reassurance or praise may be in vain
- Kids get frustrated and have very little tolerance for their own errors
When it becomes a problem

• Have trouble dealing with their expectations of themselves

• Make impulsive decisions and decisions that lack depth

• Don’t know how to establish goals

• Other people in their lives have trouble understanding why these bright kids can’t things done
When it becomes more serious

• The student becomes risk-adverse

• Won’t tackle challenges that are out of their comfort zone

• Underachievement

• Avoidance
Being gifted and asynchronous is not a “blank check” for not learning to get along in the world.
You can help!

• Every EF skill can be broken down, taught, practiced, and mastered.

• EF skills tend to transfer across domains
At a minimum, every child should learn to:

- Organize school papers/materials
- Track and prioritize assignments
- Take notes on a textbook
- Study effectively - not just “look over” the material
- Write organized, thoughtful responses
You can help!

• Target a skill where the child can perform, but with cues or scaffolds

• Develop a system (not a parent) to provide cues, reminders, and a way for the child to determine whether the task has been completed to appropriate standards

• Practice the system

• Set new goals
But, what about behavior?

• Provide structure and support

• Plan in advance for problematic times

• Teach alternatives to negative behaviors

• Model self-review and analysis of behavior

• Work with - not for - a child
But It’s Not That Easy . . .
“I want mom off my back.”

- Kids with trouble setting long-term goals or with setting lofty goals, learn to adopt short-term goals that serve to make their lives easier.

- This strategy tends to be harmful in the long term, often seriously interfering with their learning.

- It is important to be aware of this and to deal with it.
“I don’t think I have to do an outline.”
“...”
“...”

- Your child may try to distract and confuse you about what is required.

- Use persistent but patient, clear, factual, and nonjudgmental questioning.

- Connect directly with the teachers
  - Email, phone (allow time)
  - Remind, Parent Portal, Website
  - Planner, Agenda
“You only told me to pick up my clothes.”

• You do not have to justify everything to a lawyerly kid who argues and insists upon proof or fairness.

• Clearly articulate goals and standards, in terms that the child can measure himself against.

• Establish consistent expectations that you are willing to stick to, despite the child’s attempts to bargain. When you give in on something you have said is important, you:
  • Reinforce the bargaining behavior
  • Send the message that you don’t care that much about the goal
If your child . . .

• Comes up with minimal-effort strategies

• Sets a time-on-task or quantity of work completed goal (where there is little attention to what is being learned)

• Asks you to tell him/her what, or how much, to do

You can . . .

• Establish goals that involve measurable skill mastery

• Have your child practice monitoring his/her performance against standards

• Steer child to set personal goals related to the value of the work
No, It’s Not Easy . . .
Remember

• There is no perfect one-size method for any of this

• Think of it as a lifelong work-in-progress for each of us.

• Don’t forget to recognize strengths and passions
One More Thing
When should I worry?

- Significant EF difficulties could indicate AD(H)D
- Anxiety or depression can impair executive functioning
- Students on autism spectrum almost always have EF difficulties
- Many children with LD have weaknesses in one or more of the EF
Resources


- [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/executive_function/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/executive_function/)

- [http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10523.asp](http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10523.asp)

- [http://nurturingwisdom.com/is-executive-functioning-the-missing-link-for-many-gifted-students/](http://nurturingwisdom.com/is-executive-functioning-the-missing-link-for-many-gifted-students/)
Questions?