

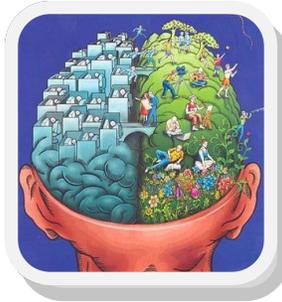
# MOVING FORWARD

News and information about the education of special  
needs students for teachers and parents

Winter 2015

## UndErstandinG ExecuTivE FunCtionIng Life's Essential Brain-Based Skills

Elizabeth contributed great ideas during a class discussion on creating an environmentally-friendly classroom, but lost her homework assignment somewhere between home and school. Kendra's artwork is beautiful, but she is constantly disturbing other students while her art teacher is giving instructions for their class assignments. Andy loses his temper whenever his teacher asks him to get back to work. Kristina had the highest math and language arts scores on her state standardized testing, yet earned poor to failing grades in all academic areas. Patti had an hour to write a short paragraph based on a writing prompt, but was only able to write two sentences that were unrelated to the assigned topic.



maintain mental control and regulate one's own behavior. Executive functioning includes the following skills:

- \* Managing time, space and attention
- \* The ability to switch focus
- \* Planning and organizing
- \* Remembering essential details
- \* Refraining from inappropriate speech or behaviors
- \* Integrating past experience with present actions

What all of the above students have difficulties with are tasks related to **executive functioning**. Children and adolescents with executive functioning problems are often mistakenly viewed as lazy, unmotivated, forgetful or disorganized. When executive functioning is not working properly, behavior becomes poorly controlled. This can affect a person's ability to function independently, maintain social relationships, complete work, or perform well academically.

**What is executive functioning?** The term "**executive function**" refers to a group of brain-based skills that are essential for completing all of life's tasks, and that involve the ability to

Executive functioning is a hot topic in educational circles, as these brain-based skills are crucial for student success, as well as for the pursuit of their future career goals. This newsletter will address some strategies for enhancing the continued development of executive functioning skills, along with intervention strategies for students that have executive functioning difficulties.

Sources: "Late, Lost & Unprepared: Executive Dysfunction & the Disorganized Child/Adolescent" workshop brochure by Laurie Ehlert, Psy.D (2015); "What Is Executive Functioning?" by Joyce Cooper-Kahn & Laurie Dietzel, LD Online (2008); "Executive Function Fact Sheet" National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (2008); "Executive Functioning Skills and Disorders", WebMD (2014).

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**THE SECRET OF ALL VICTORY LIES IN THE  
ORGANIZATION OF THE NON-OBVIOUS.**

[Marcus Aurelius](#)

# Skills Affected by Executive Functioning Deficits

- ◇ Ability to stop behaviors, thoughts and actions at the appropriate times
- ◇ Ability to shift smoothly from one thought to another (shift gears)
- ◇ Ability to think logically when overcome by emotions
- ◇ Ability to figure out how to start a task (initiation)
- ◇ Ability to weigh options and make decisions
- ◇ Ability to describe things using abstract details
- ◇ Ability to focus or do more than one thing at a time
- ◇ Ability to recognize and change a faulty plan
- ◇ Ability to assess and manage time needed to complete tasks
- ◇ Ability to effectively use constructive feedback
- ◇ Ability to quickly complete tasks using an organized approach



## Disorders Associated With Executive Functioning Deficits

A number of symptoms of Executive Functioning Disorder (EFD) are also frequently associated with other types of disorders, including Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Bipolar Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with these types of disorders may all have executive functioning skill deficits, including any difficulties with sustaining focus, concentration, organization, regulating thoughts and behaviors, initiating and completing activities, and/or transitioning between activities. However, depending on the specific type of disorder, the functions and root causes of these shared brain-processing symptoms are very different.



al difficulties due to sensory processing overload, while a child with ADHD may have difficulties with selective attention. A child with bipolar disorder may have attentional or behavioral difficulties due to fluctuating moods or intrusive thoughts that compete for their attention. A child with a learning disability may have attentional difficulties due to problems with sequential processing and auditory memory.

For this reason, the overlapping symptoms make the diagnosis of Executive Functioning Disorder very complex, and therefore, diagnosis of EFD (as well as for SLD, ASD, ADHD or Bipolar Disorder) must be done strictly by trained medical or mental health professionals who have specialized knowledge, training and experience in these specific areas.

For example, children with autism may have attention-

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS ACCORDING TO DEVELOPMENTAL RANGE

Harvard University

### 3 to 5 Years Old

**Imaginary Theater.** Child creates a play based on everyday occurrences. They can use props, formulate a simple plot and decide what role they are going to play. This activity involves imagination, planning, sequencing and allows them to think before acting.

**Storytelling.** Try to encourage children to tell their stories but with a set structure. Adults can help by writing the elements of the story down so that the child can rework it as needed. The story should follow in a logical sequence with a beginning, middle and end. Also, children can tell group stories with each child adding to the plot.

**Movement and Physical Challenges.** Memory games, balancing, obstacle courses, rock climbing all require a great degree of concentration which enhances focus.

**Matching and sorting.** Use a set “rule” to sort objects or pictures and then frequently change it. “Find all the square chips” or “Circle all of the black objects.” Puzzles are also great for noting details and planning.

### 5 to 7 Years Old

**Card games** such a *Go Fish* or *Old Maid* that require memory, taking turns and interactive play. Board games that involve very basic strategies are also effective.

**Quick Response.** Games such as *Musical Chairs*, *Red Light Green Light*, *Simon Says*, *Catch Phrase* or *20 Questions*.

### 7 to 12 Years Old

**Card or board games** that involve more complex strategies, matching and memory (*Spades*, *Rummy* or *Chess*).

**Fantasy Play.** *Dungeons and Dragons* or fun travel games.

**Sports.** Quick decisions, coordination, strategy, timing, focus and planning. Some examples are soccer, football, jump rope, paintball, and age-appropriate video games.

**Brain Teasers.** Puzzles, riddles, *Sudoku*, *Rubik’s Cube*, *Legos*, and computer games.

### Adolescents—13 years and older

**Any activities** that involve step-by-step planning, goal setting, social issues, behavior monitoring, utilizing feedback, emotional control, problem-solving, focus and independent living skills.

**Self-Talk.** Thoughts turn into action, confidence booster, mental play-by-play and problem-solving.

**Keeping a journal** for thoughts, insight, recognition of patterns and self-reflection.

**Emotional Awareness.** Understanding the intentions and motivation of peers. Encourage teenagers to discuss their thoughts or ideas on what others could be thinking.

**Great for all age groups: Sports, yoga, self-defense, art, music, theatre, meditation, positive computer games, social stories, picture vocabulary, activities that require using imagination.**



# How Is Executive Functioning Diagnosed?

Diagnosing executive functioning issues involves analyzing specific criteria that must be met in order to make a clear diagnosis. Once all other relevant medical factors have been ruled out, a trained professional will begin the process of gathering key information from multiple sources. It is like detective work.



The first step in the process is assessing how long the symptoms have been present. At minimum, at least six months of observable behavior is significant. Anyone can exhibit certain dysfunctional behavior at any given time. Finding long-standing patterns of behavior is crucial for an accurate diagnosis.

The next step in the process of diagnosis is obtaining an evaluation from a qualified medical or mental health professional. The evaluation may involve the following types of assessments:

- ◆ Questionnaires and Screeners. The parents, teachers and even the child rate certain skills. A common tool used to assess this area is known as the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning (BRIEF). This inventory consists of 86 questions based on a child's developmental age group. The rating responses are analyzed and compared to one another. Genuine disabilities are present across

settings so the results should illustrate some consistency across raters.

- ◆ Cognitive Testing. This assessment gives the examiners an idea of a child's cognitive processing profile. Generally, this test measures verbal skills, visual perceptual skills, memory, fluid reasoning, and processing speed.

- ◆ Observations and Interviews. The evaluating professional will need to get a good look at the behaviors to make certain they are consistent with the results of the testing. Observing a child in a school setting is vastly different than watching him/her in a quiet doctor's office. The interview is a chance for the diagnostician to gather more information about the child, and ask informal questions.

After all of the information is obtained and analyzed, the professional reviews the results with the parents. The assessment process should clearly uncover the child's unique set of strengths and weaknesses. The results should also include constructive strategies to help the child to be successful both in and out of the classroom.

The degree in which executive functioning deficits affect a child's performance in the classroom varies to a wide degree. Many students just need gentle guidance in the right direction, while others cannot succeed without more intensified support.

With or without a formal diagnosis, there are many resources available to help guide parents and teachers in addressing the academic needs of a struggling child. Keep in mind that a diagnostic label is far less important than a cohesive, individualized intervention plan that targets weaknesses, and provides consistent support. Building skills is the key to positive outcomes.

## **Moving Forward**

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## **ONLINE RESOURCES**

- ◆ Harvard University–The Developing Brain
- ◆ Cognitive Connections Resource Center
- ◆ Scholastic–Parent and Child Magazine
- ◆ UNDERSTOOD–Learning and Attention Issues