The Road Trip without a Map: Parenting and Teaching Disorganized Students

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Executive Functioning: Informal Definition

Do you recognize this child?

- She completes work but “forgets” to hand it in
- He has difficulty transitioning from one situation or task to another
- He doesn’t seem to catch “careless” errors
- She needs more external support and reminders than peers
- He can’t seem to keep track of directions, possessions, and assignments
- She is very inconsistent in her performance
What is Executive Functioning?
(Formal Definition)

- An umbrella term covering related yet distinct neurologically-based skills that serve as the foundation for mental control and self-regulation.
- Refers to processes that have no specific content.
- Contributes to work efficiency and regulation of impulses and behavior.
Executive Functions in Everyday Language

(Adapted from the BRIEF model of Gioia, Isquith, Kenworthy & Guy’s Approach)

- **Inhibit** - putting on the brakes (from Quinn & Stern)
- **Shift** - changing gears
- **Emotional Control** – using the thinking brain to reason about feelings
- **Initiate** – flipping the switch
- **Working Memory** – internal scratch pad
- **Plan/Organize + Organization of Materials** – having a map and the tools
- **Monitor** – a personal GPS or quality control manager
WITH SO MUCH TO ACCOMPLISH, JÉRÔME MASTERS THE ART OF MULTI-TASKING
Developmental Considerations: Don’t All Kids have Executive Dysfunction?

☐ NO!!!

☐ The executive functions follow a developmental course like all cognitive skills

☐ Most children develop EF at the expected pace
Nature AND Nurture

- It is important to remember that even children who have been provided with enriching experiences may still experience delays in aspects of brain development.

- Children who experience abuse or neglect may have very weak EF due to these early experiences and inadequate modeling.

- Some kids with delays will require specific intervention while others will “catch up” with continued maturation.
EF Weaknesses at School

- Most kids with EF weaknesses have increasing difficulty with each new grade.
- May have particular difficulty making the transition to middle school, high school, or college.
- May not “learn from mistakes” or generalize from one task or situation to another.
EF at Home

☐ Completing chores
☐ Getting up, ready, and out the door
☐ Self-care/Hygiene
☐ Keeping track of possessions
☐ Following time limits
☐ Tolerating uncertainty and change
EF and Social Interaction

- Kids who are impulsive often have trouble waiting for their turn and are too talkative.

- Children with cognitive rigidity may be overly judgmental and insensitive in peer interactions.

- Kids with EF weaknesses may appear “one step behind” peers.
“Gifts” that tilt the balance

- High IQ
- Other strengths (e.g. social, athletic, musical)
- Well adjusted caretakers/teachers with good executive skills who are knowledgeable and compassionate toward those with weak EF
Homework can become a battleground between parent and child. Adolescents (appropriately) want to work more independently but may actually need more external support than in earlier grades.

“A lot of homework?”
In order to complete homework successfully...A student needs to:

- Know what assignments are due
- Know when assignments are due
- Have the appropriate books or materials
- Complete the work according to the directions
- Finish all parts of the task with adequate care
- Review work for accuracy and completeness
- Transport the work from home to school
- Turn in the work on time
Impact on Parents

- Parenting a kid with EF weaknesses can be a chronic stressor

- Parents may feel that family and friends don’t understand the nature of their struggles
  - “You are enabling him”
  - “She will never learn to do that if you keep helping”
Challenges to Understanding and Empathy

- “Hidden Disability” as they may be very capable in many areas
- Significant variability makes it hard to differentiate between skill deficits and poor effort or motivation
- Natural consequences and other “tried and true” behavioral principles sometimes don’t work

"Your mother and I are feeling overwhelmed, so you’ll have to bring yourselves up."
Impact on Siblings

- Siblings may feel irritated, resentful, or forgotten in response to the level of attention and energy focused on their disorganized sibling.
Impact on Couples

- It is not unusual for couples to disagree about the causes of their child’s underachievement or variable performance.

- One parent may blame his/her partner if they share the child’s executive weaknesses.
Special Situations

- When the apple does not fall far from the tree
- Single parents
- Divorced or separated parents who share custody
SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
Set Realistic, Individualized Expectations

- Developing executive skills and compensatory strategies takes most kids a considerable amount of time.
- For most students with delays in executive functioning, it will take years not months for them to develop improved functioning (this happens due to an interaction of experience and brain maturation).
Where Do You “Set The Bar?”

- Lots of people are worried about setting the bar too low.
- We should be equally concerned about setting expectations that exceed a student’s current functional skills.
At School

- Teachers and parents may be concerned that accommodations and modifications are unfair to other students.

- Reframing these supports as *equalizers* may be helpful...just as we wouldn’t expect a child who is nearsighted to see without glasses, it is not realistic to expect a student with EF delays to manage tasks independently without support.
How To Help
Behavior Change: *What we know*

- Strong research evidence that children with AD/HD need a high intensity of reinforcement to positively affect task performance. They also appear to be “less sensitive” and to respond differently to reinforcement compared to controls (Luman, Oosterlaan, & Sargeant, 2005; Nigg 2006; Aase & Sagvolden, 2006)
Behavior Change: *What the research and clinical experience suggest*

- Use real life to teach skills (real life tasks vs. isolated study skills)
- Take a teaching vs. a punishing approach
- Collaborate with the student to develop goals and strategies
- Focus on the desired outcome
- Use behavior management strategies to encourage new habits and to provide consistent feedback about the effectiveness of performance (e.g. concrete rewards, points systems)
Other Important Findings

Effects of physical activity (see *Spark* by John Ratey)
How Does Change Happen?

- Brain maturation
- Incidental learning
- Learning from direct instruction
- Scaffolding
When should you use natural consequences?

- Consider the following guidelines:
  - Is the student within reasonable reaching distance of the necessary skill set?
  - What is the cost of experiencing negative consequences?

Intervention: What Works?

Two-Pronged Approach

- Short-term: individualized expectations, support and accommodations
- Long-term: building independent skills
Short-term interventions

- Build a “prosthetic” environment
  - Adapt the environment
  - Adapt the task
  - “Lend” executive competence
“Short-Term” Interventions

☐ Short-term interventions (e.g. external supports, limits, supervision) are designed to lighten the load on the executive system.

☐ Although we call these “short-term,” they *may need to remain in place for years.*
Going the Distance

- The Long-term Vision: Build Independence
  - Strengthen the executive system and build a repertoire of effective self-management skills.
  - Allow individuals to be competent to manage life on their own.
Long term interventions

- Generally focus on developing habits and routines that eventually become automatic. (Repetition, repetition, repetition...).
- Build toward self-knowledge and self-advocacy.
- Require as much active engagement as possible.
Transitioning from Short Term to Long Term Goals

The aim of intervention is to gradually shift responsibility to the child. Steps on the continuum toward independence may include:

- Teaching
- Modeling
- Use of guided practice
- Prompting, as needed
- Monitoring and help with troubleshooting
The Critical Role of Professionals

- Monitor the balance between teachers’ and/or parents’ tendency to do too much or not enough for the student
Challenges to Intervention Planning

- Brain maturation and learning take time and life keeps coming at us.

- Unknown upper limits on executive ability for a particular individual mean that the ideal balance between “remediation” and accommodation is unknown for any individual.
Designing Interventions

- Define the goal with specificity
- Build in the support/accommodations needed until the student masters the skills
- Build in teaching/modeling/guided practice that will help build long-term skills and/or compensatory techniques
- How will progress be measured?
Teaching Strategies/Building EF

- Can be done by a teacher, parent, tutor, academic coach, or therapist

- Involves reviewing, modeling, and practicing explicit strategies or techniques for managing tasks more efficiently
Build Routines and Habits

- Kids with EF weaknesses need to overlearn skills and behaviors until they become automatic

- Once they don’t have to think about how they are doing something, their EF weaknesses play less of a role (but they will still probably need reminders)
Building Habits

- For example, for a student who has trouble remembering books and materials, she may need a teacher or parent physically present at the end of the day at her locker (for many weeks) until she can then independently complete this task effectively.
A rule of thumb (for kids and adults without ADHD or other neurodevelopmental conditions) is that it takes at least **30 days** to build a new habit (make a behavior automatic)
Ongoing Evaluation

☐ Keep assessing whether or not a student needs the current level of support being provided

☐ You can experiment with reducing (fading) accommodations or supports but expect to put them back in place if the student cannot independently manage demands
Framing Impulse Control Problems

**Impulse control** = The ability to stop and think before acting. Individuals with weak impulse control need help with the braking function. (Quinn & Stern, “Putting on the Brakes.”)
General Strategies to Help a Student Control Impulses

1. **Provide external structure**, in the form of general guidelines and specific rules, to teach acceptable behavior.

2. **Offer support** (e.g., visual cues, verbal prompts) to bolster the “stop” function.

3. **Plan in advance** for potentially problematic times by identifying what leads to loss of control and providing extra support in those situations.

4. **Teach alternatives** to negative behaviors. For younger students, teach specific tricks in the form of behaviors that interfere with impulsive physical responses. For older students, work with them to brainstorm more positive responses to the situations.
General Strategies to Help a student Control Impulses (2)

5. **Build on the older student’s desire for more freedom** by directly connecting this to the behaviors needed to maturely handle the desired privileges. Align yourself with your child’s strong developmental urges, and take a teaching rather than a punishing role. Speak to your child’s wishes and use these as a natural spur toward better impulse control.

6. **Use rewards (tangible, verbal, or otherwise) to motivate desired behavior.** If rewards alone do not work, you may also need to take away privileges or allow the natural consequence to occur. Be sure to let your student know in advance that he may lose privileges.

7. **Ensure the student’s safety.** If the student’s impulsive behavior puts him at risk of physical harm, develop a clear protocol for potentially dangerous situations.
Framing Problems with Cognitive Flexibility

**Cognitive Flexibility** = The ability to shift gears. It allows one to think and problem-solve in a flexible, dynamic manner. This includes the ability to adapt to changes and to flexibly generate a variety of ways to view a situation or solve a problem.
General Strategies To Help A Student Shift Gears

1. Create a consistent, predictable environment as much as possible

2. Create visual cues for routines and schedules

3. Highlight changes to the routine and help the child build a bridge from what he knows to what he does not know.

4. Provide additional support during transitions and when new concepts, tasks, or environments are introduced.

5. Allow additional time to adjust to changes in routine.
6. **Try to teach the child a framework** for “walking through” new situations and changes. This includes teaching self-talk (e.g., “This is different but that doesn’t mean it is bad”, “I need to figure out the best thing to do even though this is new”) as well as determining when to seek external assistance.

7. **Model a range of ways of approaching a single task or situation.** Provide lots of reinforcement and encouragement.

8. **Provide a place for self-calming during stressful times and teach self-soothing techniques.**
Other Interventions/Techniques

- Social Stories
- Use of relaxation breathing during times of change
- Use of self-talk
- Use of peer buddy to help during transitions
Framing Problems with Initiation

**Initiation** = The ability to independently recognize when it’s time to get started on something and mobilize one’s resources to do so. Problems with initiation can be understood as failures of the start function.
General Strategies to Help with Initiation Problems

1. **Provide external structure**, in the form of general guidelines, cues and support.

2. **Develop schedules and routines.** Once an activity becomes automatic, the need for the initiation function is significantly reduced.

3. **Use technology.** Alarms, timers, and other external aids can help cue the “start” function.

4. **Start the task with the student.**

5. **Use rewards and natural consequences for desired behavior.**
Framing Problems with Working Memory

**Working Memory** = The ability to temporarily hold information in one’s head in order to use it to complete a task. Working memory is best understood as an internal “scratch pad.”
General Strategies for Problems with Working Memory

1. **Modify the presentation of information so that it is more easily remembered.**

2. **Use multisensory strategies** such as pairing verbal instructions with visual cues.

3. **Teach strategies and techniques to aid recall**, such as mnemonics.

4. **Provide templates for procedures or routines that are repeated.**
General Strategies for Problems with Working Memory (2)

5. **Teach the use of concrete storage systems** that create an external “scratch pad” and so take the burden off the weak internal storage system.

6. **Accommodate working memory weaknesses** by providing reasonable supports.
Other Ideas

- Use of technology
  - web-based calendars
  - cell phone
  - voice recorders
  - smart pens/pads
  - Voicemail
  - Texting
  - PDAs
Framing Problems with Planning and Organization

Planning and Organization = The ability to manage current and future oriented task demands in a systematic, efficient manner. Individuals with weaknesses in planning and organization have trouble independently imposing structure and order on tasks and on ideas.
General Strategies to Help Students Organize and Plan

1. Break down tasks into component parts and provide a checklist for each component
2. Offer organizational frameworks in advance that help students organize new material in their heads
3. Teach the use of tricks and technology that help to compensate for organizational weaknesses
4. Develop templates for repetitive procedures
5. Walk through the planning process with the student, and help him plan an approach to the task at hand

6. Provide accommodations at home and at school
Other Ideas

☐ Email assignments to self and/or teacher
☐ Use of flash drive or web-based storage
☐ Landing pad/Launching pad
Framing Problems with Self-Monitoring

**Self-Monitoring** = the ability to observe one’s own behavior and track progress toward a goal. Self-monitoring can be viewed as the brain’s quality control system.
General Strategies to Help With Self-Monitoring

1. **Provide external structure and feedback.** This needs to be done in a sensitive, developmentally appropriate manner.

2. **Teach the use of tools and techniques to improve monitoring,** including checklists for repetitive tasks.

3. **Highlight the process of self-review and analysis of behavior.** Many students with these weaknesses don’t engage in the crucial step of analyzing failures in order to improve future performance.

4. **Teach the use of technology** to help a student monitor her performance.
Other Ideas

- Highlight math operation signs
- Proofread aloud or use software that reads to you
- Proofread by reading backwards – start with last sentence (for single paragraphs)
- 10 minutes before in-class test or assignment is due, remind students to look through the whole document to make sure there are no unintentional blanks
General Recommendations

- Describe the type of teacher with whom the student will likely do best

- Be explicit – don’t assume that student has “common sense knowledge” (“Clean your room”)
SUMMARY AND WRAP-UP
No Easy Answers

- Executive Dysfunction poses very real challenges for parenting and teaching

- These kids are at high risk for developing secondary social, emotional, and behavioral problems
There *is* Hope!

- Parents and teachers may begin to wonder if these children will ever be independent

- Kids often feel very inadequate and overly dependent

- We need to remind ourselves that most children can be successful with appropriate supports and that using supports and accommodations is a smart way of managing brain-based weaknesses
Going The Distance

- Parents and teachers need to take a long-term perspective

- What are the long-term goals for the child?
Not an Excuse

☐ Just because EF weaknesses are brain-based, we do not want children and adolescents to use them as an excuse to avoid work or not attempt tasks

☐ It is important to expect students to attain realistic goals with adequate support
Final Thoughts

- Executive Dysfunction contributes to academic underachievement, behavior problems, social difficulties, and variable performance more than teachers, parents, and medical and mental health professionals may realize.

- We must educate all of these groups so that students can be provided with the supports they need to be successful.
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