

EF In-depth

Your guide to why **Executive Function** is *the* most important concept we *must* understand in order to help struggling students succeed.

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Outside-the-box learners need outside-the-box solutions. They think, learn and process differently, and need strategies that are *tailored to their unique personalities*. 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 its very nature, it can prevent them from reaching their goals and therefore their potential. However, with the right support, we can help our children manage, compensate for and get accommodations for EF challenges so they can build a remarkable life.

Some simple definitions of EF

1. Getting stuff done.
2. The brain's ability to take the steps necessary to accomplish a complex task or goal (like homework, writing a paper or cleaning a room).
3. Self-regulating: Ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and actions in order to accomplish goals in order to get your needs and wants met in the long term.
4. To “**execute**” complex tasks.

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.

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 the 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, there is a lot of overlap)

Plan - The ability to have a *realistic* perception of the steps necessary to accomplish a goal or task.

Time management - The ability to manage time or to have a realistic perception of how long things take. Important in planning and scheduling too.

Organize - The ability to create systems of doing things or keeping track of things, that are organized *enough* so goals can be met effectively.

Prioritize - The ability to know and do what is most important at any given time.

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 well-being. When we do not inhibit well we are thought to be impulsive or hyperactive.

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.

Task initiation - Self starting or activation. Getting the ball rolling, getting the train moving.

Task persistence - Continuing to try until finished, working to completion.

Transition - The ability to shift from activity to activity effectively.

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.

Detail - Remembering and managing important details.

Reflect - This refers to one's ability to take a step back and reflect in order to problem solve. It also refers to self-checking (think checking work in math for example). Reflection is all about self-awareness, consciousness, mindfulness, introspection.

Emotional regulation - Having tools to truly regulate and work through challenging emotions.

What works? (See my blog for tons of details and ideas)

1. Foundation of strong EF: Restful sleep, food that nourishes the body, adequate exercise.
2. Effective routines, predictability, groundedness (routines for updating planners, overhauling backpacks, homework, studying, transitions, waking up, bedtime, fitness, etc.)
3. Metacognitive understanding of emotional needs and implementation emotional regulation practices.
4. Personalized systems to effectively manage backpack, folders, planners, sacred study space, homework, etc.
5. Ownership and buy-in.
6. Compassionate support.
7. Visual and auditory tips, tricks and tools.
8. If binders don't work for you, replace with simple color coded folder system
9. Flag books with stickies. Flag and label important papers so they stand out visually in backpack.
10. Outta sight, outta mind. Therefore, label everything BIG AND BRIGHT.
11. Draw your notes. Great for visual kids.
12. Make an archive (see blog).
13. Use digital recorders to help you study.
14. Study partners work wonders.
15. Chunking assignments down into bite-size pieces.
16. Make a plan - even when you don't want to.
17. Self advocacy and advocacy from supportive people (Know your rights. Start with IDEA.)
18. Microsuccesses. Look for all small successes and build upon them. Make goals reachable.
19. Timers and alarms.
20. The BEST tool ever: Mindfulness. Meditation works wonders. Period.

What makes it worse?

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

Systems checklist

I use this often with my students. 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 - How is your sleep (electronics?)? 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.
4. Routines - Is study routine/workflow optimal? Manageable?
5. Grades - Check online grades at least once a week? Make a to do list.
6. Advocacy - Who do you need to communicate with?
7. SSS - How effective is your Sacred Study Space?
8. Relationships - Family, friends, how's it going? What do you need?
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 school? Online calendar set up?