

The RIGHT Definition of Executive Function

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SPEAKERS

Seth Perler

S Seth Perler 00:01

What is up? Parents and teachers, in this video, I'm gonna tell you a little bit about some definitions of executive function because it can be really confusing and it can be very inaccessible, the way a lot of people describe executive function. So parents and teachers, you do not have to be confused. Any students who are watching, you do not have to be confused. I'm going to make this very, very, very, very, very digestible. What's up? My name is Seth Perler, I'm an executive function coach, and I help struggling students navigate this thing called education so that they can have a good life now and in their future. If we don't figure out this executive function thing, a lot of them are going to struggle. We don't want that, I certainly don't. That's why I do what I do. So hello, good morning, what's up.

S Seth Perler 00:41

So basically, here's what we need to know as far as definitions of executive function are concerned. The first thing that I want to mention to you is that if you do a search on the internet of 'executive function,' you're going to find many expert definitions. So you can go ahead and look those up. The problem that I have with a lot of those definitions is that they're very clinical sounding, and they're very inaccessible. And we parents, and teachers just want to know what the heck to do to help our kids. So that's what I'm going to do for

you here. So you're going to look at a bunch of these clinical definitions, and you're gonna find out that a lot of these experts, they're phenomenal. I mean, these people have poured tons of research, and time, and energy into defining these things. So they're definitely valuable. They're just sometimes hard to access. But what you're going to notice is, it's very confusing, because all experts define it differently. Some experts say there are three aspects to executive function, some say there's one main one, some say there are five, some say there are eight. Those are the main things that I see. I see about 20 things. And I'm not going into those in the video today, those are aspects or executive function skills. It can be very confusing not only see the definition, but to see how they break down their definition, because they break it down into different amounts of aspects. So basically, you can go ahead and search that if you want, you don't need to, because I'm going to give it to you right here.

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Seth Perler 01:57

Here's how I define it in plain English in a way that hopefully will be helpful to you. It just means to get stuff done. Why the word executive? It's how the brain helps us execute tasks, to do stuff. We execute tasks, that's it. Keep it simple. Now, it is more complicated than that. The brain is doing a lot to help us get stuff done. And research on the brain also shows that there's a lot of misinformation about the brain. For example, I will often even say, you know, "Executive function takes place in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the front third part of the brain." Well, really, the entire brain is activated all the time to different extents, but we speak in that kind of language just to give a simple way of understanding. Generally speaking, the front part of the brain helps us to execute tasks and does all sorts of cool things to do that. Well, you the parent and teacher who are watching this, what are you concerned with? What tasks need to be done that you're concerned about that, you're concerned about with the students who care about? Schoolwork and responsibilities. Keep it simple. They are two very broad categories, but that's really what it comes down to when we're really concerned. We're watching a kid and we're like, "Wow, how do we help this kid? They're struggling." Let's keep it simple. With schoolwork, tasks, executing schoolwork type of things, and executing responsibilities. "If they don't figure this out, I'm concerned."

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Seth Perler 03:36

What are some examples? Here are some real examples of things that our brain helps us execute. "I want to lose 10 pounds." That is a complex series of many tasks. "I want to get a job." Doing the application, getting to the applications, finding the information for them, doing the interview. There's a lot that needs to be executed to just get a job. It's not just getting a job. Getting a driver's license, writing a paper, playing video games. Playing

video games requires executive function, even though that's something that our kids want, might want to be doing. Making a phone call, cleaning a room, doing laundry, moving to a new place. Of course, that requires a lot of executive function. Taking a trip requires a lot of planning executive function. Going to an appointment, turning in homework, organizing folders. So what are the right words? Should we say executive functions? Executive function, executive function name? What the heck should we say here? Who cares. I really don't care and I'm considered an expert in this field. I'm just another guy. I just like this stuff. I just like helping people. That's really all there is to it. I don't really care what we call it. What I really care about is whatever term you like, I use executive function usually, but whatever term you like, all we're really concerned about is, do we have have actionable ways to help human beings have better lives? That's it. So call it whatever you want. I don't really care. I don't think there's a right way to do it. I think that we just try to help people. So what's the problem then with executive function?

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Seth Perler 05:14

Well, the number one problem that I talk about is resistance. It isn't a problem to execute, let's use the video gaming example. To execute on video games because if you like video games, there's no resistance to it. If it's something you want to do, there's no resistance. If you're a reader, there's no resistance to reading. If you don't like messes, there's no resistance to cleaning. So those types of things. The resistance problem means we don't feel like doing something. We have excuses, or self talk excuses, we procrastinate, we put it off, we have any strategy we can think of to avoid execution on things that are in our own interests. That is a problem. If there is something that is in our own interests, for example, if I'm 16 years old, and I want a job at this really cool place and I meet the owner, and they're like, "Yeah, you'd be perfect!" and I can't execute to do the things that I need to do to even get to the interview and get the application in. Then I'm not going to get a goal that matters to me. If I want a driver's license, but I can't get through it and I'm a teenager, and I can't get through the tasks to get the driver's license, I'm not accomplishing my goal. If I want to lose 10 pounds, and I can't self-regulate to do the things that I need to do that, I'm not accomplishing my goal. I'm not executing. So I have resistance around those things that are non-preferred, non-preferred. So when it comes to something I want to do, let's say the video games, or playing guitar, or hanging out with my friends or whatever, whatever this student is into and it's preferred, then execution is not a problem. But when it comes to the non-preferred parts of a goal, or a task, or a complicated task, or long-term planning task like getting a driver's license, or getting a job, or if a kid wants to go to college and get their own apartment, or something like that. These things take a lot of, a lot of executive function to be able to do things they don't want to do. To be able to override the resistance. So that's the whole problem. I want to make this really simple for you watching. The whole problem in one way or another comes

down to resistance. How do we work with that? How do we help somebody? I'll talk about that next.

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Seth Perler 07:46

So how do we help? How do we get stuff done that we should do but don't want to do? Well, the way that Seth breaks it down, is the way that I help my students, is with system, mindsets, habit, habits and routines. What the heck does that even mean? Meanwhile, excuse me, I'm so mellow. Today, I just woke up, it was a time change. And I'm up pretty early today. So hello, good morning, got my mellow Seth attitude on. Systems, mindsets, habits and routines. If you want to help your child, or if you're a teacher, or a para, or tutor, or a coach, and you want to help somebody to learn to work with resistance, and to get the things done that they need to get done in their own self-interest and they're struggling with that. What do we do? Well, we need to teach systems. When I say systems, I mean systems for execution. What is a system for executions? Organizing, systems for organizing. Organizing papers, like for kids, their papers, their files, their folders, their school papers. That's important. If they don't have school papers, then they have online files. How do they organize their online world? Their inbox? How do they organize their thoughts in their mind? How do they organize their thoughts to put them on paper when they're writing papers? Different from organizing papers in a folder, but when they're writing paper, how do you organize? How do you organize your study space? Your bedroom, your materials, the things in your life, your hobbies? How do we organize? Those are systems. Using a planner, planning, long-term planning, short-term planning, daily planning, those are systems of planning. And there's all sorts of systems, but how we teach somebody systems? They don't just magically appear in the brain of someone who doesn't have strong executive function. I struggle with executive function. I am not a 'systems thinker.' It is very, very, very hard for me. Now I've learned to compensate and do it. But it doesn't come naturally. To some people it comes very naturally. So for those of you who it comes naturally to, please understand that our brains are different. We aren't systems thinkers. We tend to be very global big picture, creative thinkers, and a lot of times systems, thinking in a non-preferred area is hard. Because you might have that argument "Oh, well, my kid has great systems when it comes to Legos or this that or the other." Yeah, I'm talking about the non-preferred. Remember, that's the problem. Keep it simple people.

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Seth Perler 10:13

We need systems. We need mindsets. What's a mindset mindset? As Carol Dweck says, it's a growth mindset that we can do something, instead of the resistance mindset. "I can't do this. This is too hard. It's too overwhelming. It's too big. This is stupid. This is annoying. My

mindset is this is dumb. I'm never going to use this. I'll do it later. I'll do it tomorrow," I get a mindset that it's not that important. So we have resistance mindsets. We have to have mindsets to work with that and be realistic that if we don't get these important things done, it impacts our life.

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Seth Perler 10:48

We need habits and routines. What good are systems and mindsets if you don't have habits and routines to implement them. So a lot of times, we'll be like, "Oh, well, my kid knows how to do that, I've seen him do it before." Yeah, maybe they know how to do it, but they don't have a good habit and routine around being able to do it or they don't have it down as well as we thought they did. And the key into how to help is you got to understand this as a baby step game. How do you get an elephant? One bite at a time. I hate that metaphor, but love that metaphor. One bite at a time. A journey of 1000 miles begins with, that's right, one step. This is baby steps, baby steps are everything. They are so important. And we want to see all the homework done, all 20 missing assignments done, blah, blah, blah. Look, you can't climb a mountain in a day. I mean, you got to really be realistic. This is baby steps. In my work, I'm telling you patient, persistence, and baby steps is everything in helping a human being change. Everything. So hopefully, that message came through. How do you help? Systems mindsets, habits and routines, and baby steps. And here's the brain, human brain here again, where it's believed that the prefrontal cortex is the main place for executive function. Fortunately, this is developmental. So students who struggle with executive function, students like who I was as a child, like I really struggled to get these things done. Fortunately, the brain the front part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex is thought to be the last part of the brain that is developing and it continues to develop until you're 25 or 30 years old. So there's plenty of hope. Do not give up. Patiently, persistently, baby steps, helping these kids get systems mindsets, habits and routines compassionately, empathetically very mindfully, and thoughtfully. We can help people, this is what we do. We can help people learn these things so that they can have a good life. Keep your eye on the prize. This is so that they can have a good future.

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Seth Perler 12:51

My name is Seth Perler, I'm an executive function coach. I've got a bunch of freebies and goodies. Support my stuff if you like it, subscribe. My site if you subscribe, you get a bunch of freebies my Sunday update, and I got a Youtube channel. TEPOS, the executive function online summit, my summit, is coming up in August. It's amazing, parents love it. Have a fantastic day. I hope you have peace of mind today, some joy and some connection. Take care.

