

The background features a stylized, light gray illustration of a neuron. The neuron has a central cell body (soma) with a prominent nucleus containing several small, dark, circular structures representing nucleoli. The nucleus is magnified in a circular inset above it, showing more detail of the internal structure. The neuron's cell body is surrounded by a complex network of branching processes, including dendrites and an axon that curves to the right. The overall style is clean and scientific.

Executive Functions

The What, the When, and the How: Caregiver Edition

Jen Rohrbaugh, Ph.D.

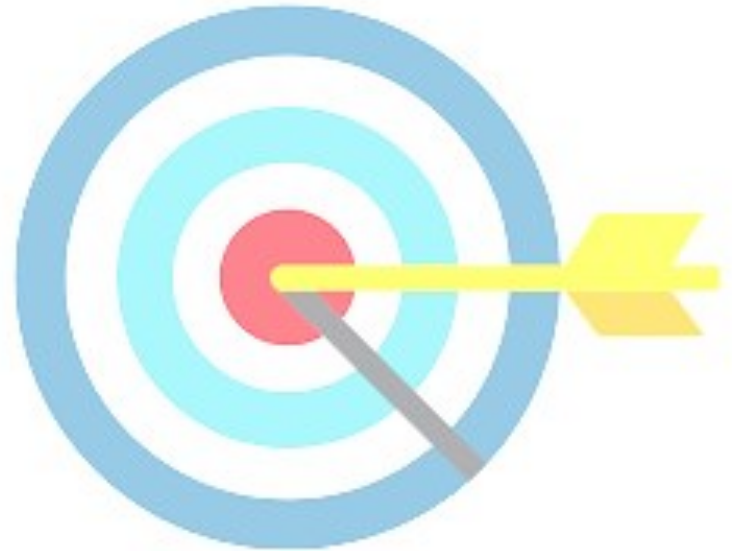
Comprehensive School Mental Health Statewide Coordinator

Learning Outcomes

- Understanding your Child's Mental Engine
- Connecting the Dots Between Skills and Feelings
- What to Expect at Every Age
- Identifying the Executive Function Skills
- Practical Tips for Home



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

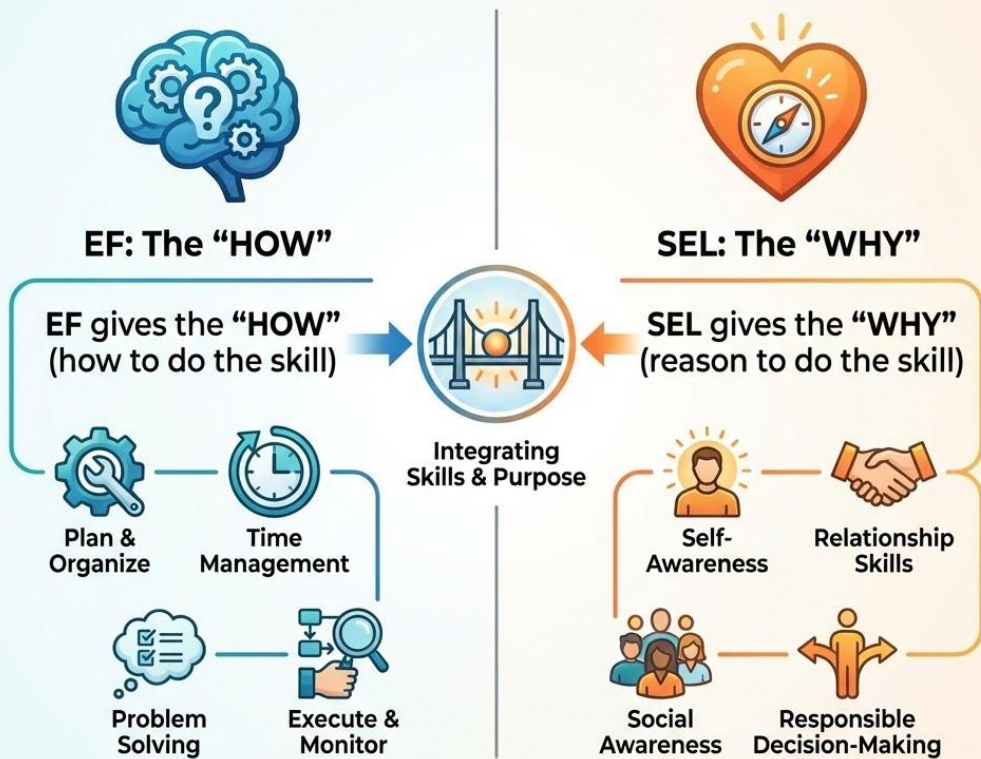


Generally, what are Executive Functions?

- Executive functions are a set of processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal.
- It involves **mental control** (**thinking**) and **self-regulation**.
- Executive functions are housed in the prefrontal cortex.
- Higher-order thinking skills.



Executive Functions (EF) & Social Emotional Learning (SEL): The “HOW” and the ‘WHY’














Together, they empower learning and well-being.

Together, executive functions and social emotional learning skills allow youth to **regulate themselves**, **connect with others**, **engage productively** in learning, and make **positive choices**.

Executive Functioning Development



Executive Functioning Skill Development by Age

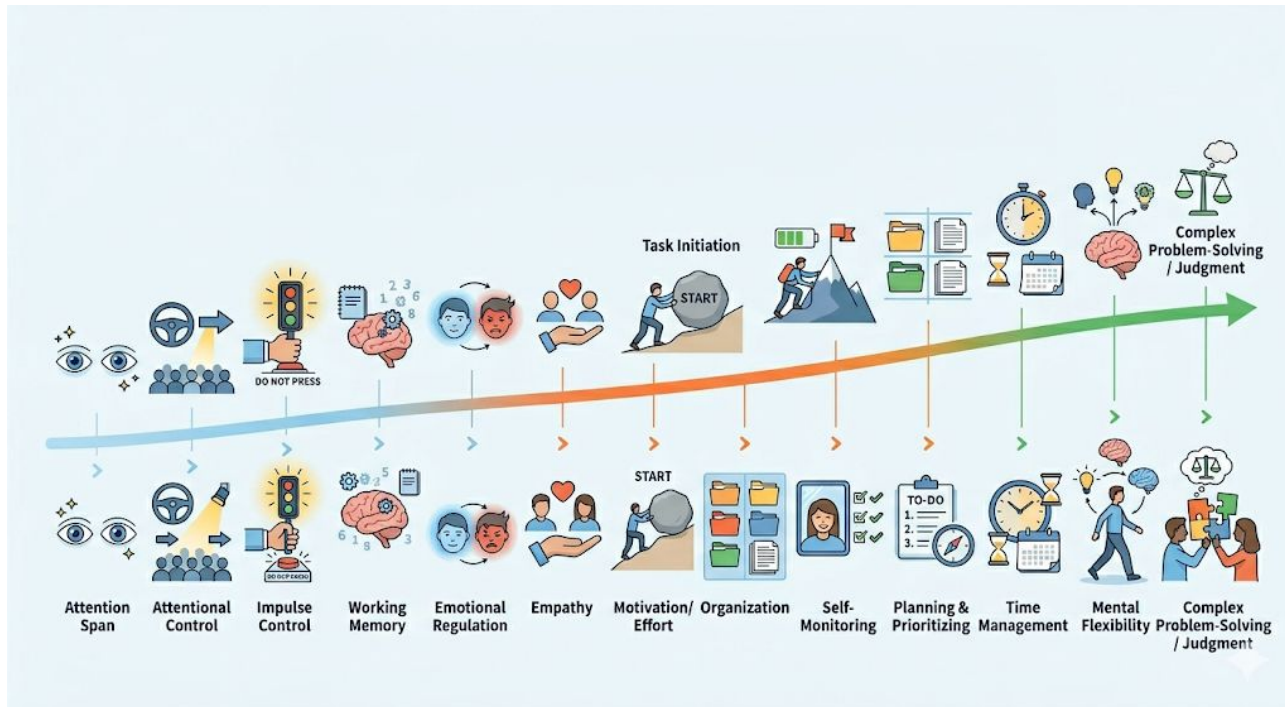
	 PLANNING	 TIME MANAGEMENT	 TASK INITIATION	 ORGANIZATION	 PROBLEM SOLVING	 FLEXIBILITY	 WORKING MEMORY	 EMOTIONAL CONTROL	 IMPULSE CONTROL	 ATTENTIONAL CONTROL	 SELF MONITORING
INFANT (0-24 MONTHS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focusing for objects • pointing & grabbing 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shows interest in color, size, shapes • beginning matching skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engages in cause and effect play • figuring out 'how things work' through simple body movements and basic play skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older children in this age range play simple role play or imaginative play games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plays hide-and-seek and simple recall games • participates and enjoys familiar rhymes and songs 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plays simple games like peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake • imitation and copying behaviors emerge 	
TODDLER (2-4 YEARS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understands simple instructions and can run simple errands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beginning understanding of time concepts including seasons, days, weeks, etc. • follows visual picture schedules to order tasks. • practices waiting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to independently start and complete tasks that take up to 10 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understands categories and patterns • can sort toys and objects by function, form, and class • cleans up toys and belongings with adult assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completes simple puzzles and games that combine language and movement to accomplish a goal • decision making and turn-taking during play promote basic problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning skills to shift between activities. • Sometimes able to manage transitions and unexpected changes without upset. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follows along to songs and fingerplays with many steps and movements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • labels own emotions and the emotions of others • may often have tantrums or upset when frustrated, tired, or overwhelmed requiring adult comfort to soothe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plays active inhibition games like musical chairs, and freeze dance • learns to inhibit safety-related behaviors like touching a hot stove and street safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to direct attention to objects and activities for longer periods of time. • Responds to adult cues and redirections back to 'pay attention' when needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talks about own feelings and connects simple behaviors with emotions. • plays along with other children, directing play and accepting play ideas.
EARLY LEARNER 5-12 YEARS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to follow a planned out set of steps to meet an end goal. • plays fast moving games and games requiring strategy and planning ahead. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing time estimation and a sense of how long tasks will take. • beginning skills to manage leisure time and required tasks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to independently start and complete tasks that take up to 30-60 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organize and sequence stories • can follow simple checklists • gathers materials for familiar routines, often with adult assistance and reminders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifies and defines problems to many simple social and academic tasks; • emerging skills to brainstorm and break apart problems to identify solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates in organized social activities like sports, clubs, and activities where unpredictable events occur. Often uses adult support to dynamically adjust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent with puzzles, logic games, and coordinated group activities. • able to collect information and apply it to new settings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learns to control tantrums and frustrations without adult comfort. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follows safety rules and most social norms for behavior. • behavior maintains when teachers or adults are not around 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to save money for desired objects. • developing note taking, reminders, and planning tools to help sustain attentional control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to complete activities like journaling to reflect on own behavior. • checks own work for simple mistakes.
TEEN 13-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to independently plan out the steps of homework or important project to meet an end goal. • Works in a group of peers to plan social activities and events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • estimates how long it takes to complete tasks and adjusts working speed to fit. • understands and works to avoid the consequences of ineffective time management. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to independently start tasks that take up to 60-90 minutes to complete 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follows complex school schedules combined with home routines. • able to use systems for organizing schoolwork and activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • independently identifies problems at home, work, and with friends. • able to sort out many conflicts and make decisions about complex problems independently, make seek adult guidance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to manage many unpredictable changes to schedules and routines, but may sometimes need adult support to identify strategies to dynamically adjust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to collect information and apply it to new settings. • independent with puzzles, logic games, and coordinated group activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater understanding of others emotions, including empathy and a desire for social change. • may experience 'adult feelings' but not have experience yet in how to manage them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater risk-taking behaviors • may begin to test some adult safety behaviors and social norms • may engage in self-talk to help manage impulses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to save money for desired objects as well as creates and executes plans to earn money for desired items. • Beginning mindfulness of distractions, but may need adult support to avoid them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to monitor performance and adjust/improve. • Uses tools to monitor behavior. • May recruit adult feedback or need reminders from coaches, parents, friends, teachers, etc.
YOUNG ADULT 18+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • able to develop and maintain multiple different plans at one time to meet many different goals • able to establish and meet long-term goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeks out and implements tools and systems to manage time more efficiently • uses routines and modifies schedules dynamically to meet changing demands. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiates and completes tasks despite adverse conditions and distractions. • prioritizing and planning occurs ahead of beginning most activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintains neat and orderly systems for daily living tasks. • when areas of life like email household chores get out of hand, can re-organize as needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generates solutions to complex problems. • persists in developing new and creative strategies to ongoing problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • modifies schedules dynamically to meet changing demands. • Unpredictability causes occasional stress, but able to handle most changes easily. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greatest working memory capacity in early adulthood. • able to collect, store, and synthesize information from multiple sources to accomplish tasks and goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emotional modulation in most settings including controlling outbursts and managing frustration in healthy ways. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manages impulsive behaviors across a variety of settings. • Withholds rushing through things • inhibits reckless and dangerous behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to sustain attention in the face of many distractions • Eliminates or reduces distractions when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • checks work for mistakes. • monitors and compares own behavior to others performance.

Regulation

Processing

Execution

Strategy



Interconnections and Crossover

Natural Development



Varied Profile is Typical



Growth with Strategic Training



Most individuals develop EF naturally, over the course of their childhood and young adulthood, without the explicit teaching by others.

All individuals will have unique areas of strength and weakness. Varied profiles are EXPECTED and TYPICAL.

Strategic skills training can support the growth and development of EF dysfunction/deficit.

Common Mental Health Disorders



Note: Almost all disorders include difficulties with executive functions

The Individual Skills



Attention Span



THE AVERAGE ATTENTION
SPAN OF A HUMAN IN
2000



THE AVERAGE ATTENTION
SPAN OF A HUMAN
NOW

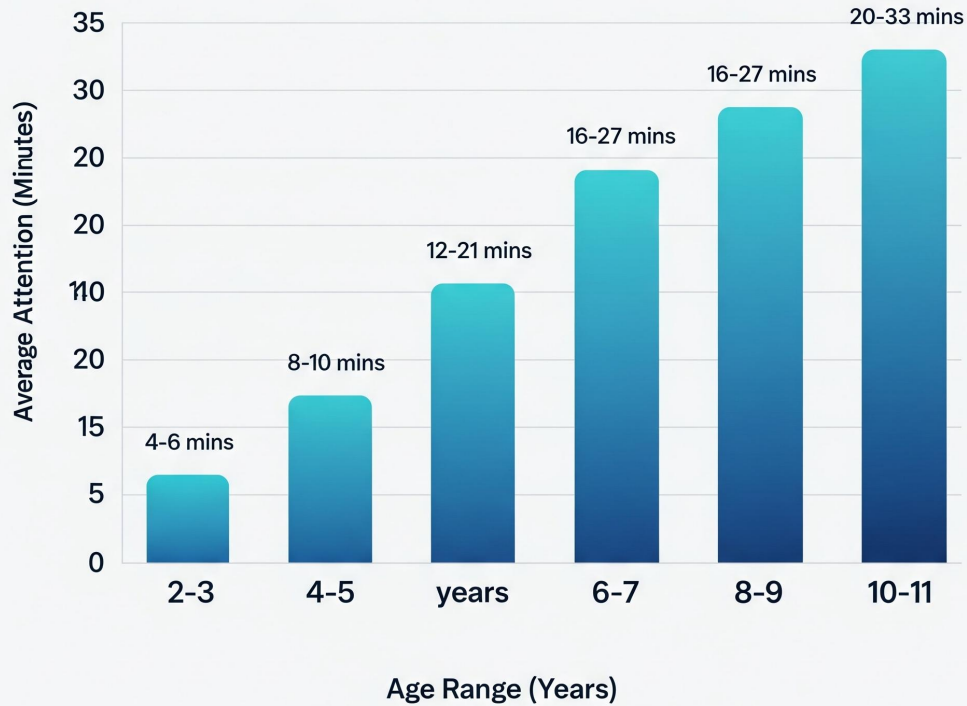
AND...



THE AVERAGE ATTENTION
SPAN OF A
GOLDFISH

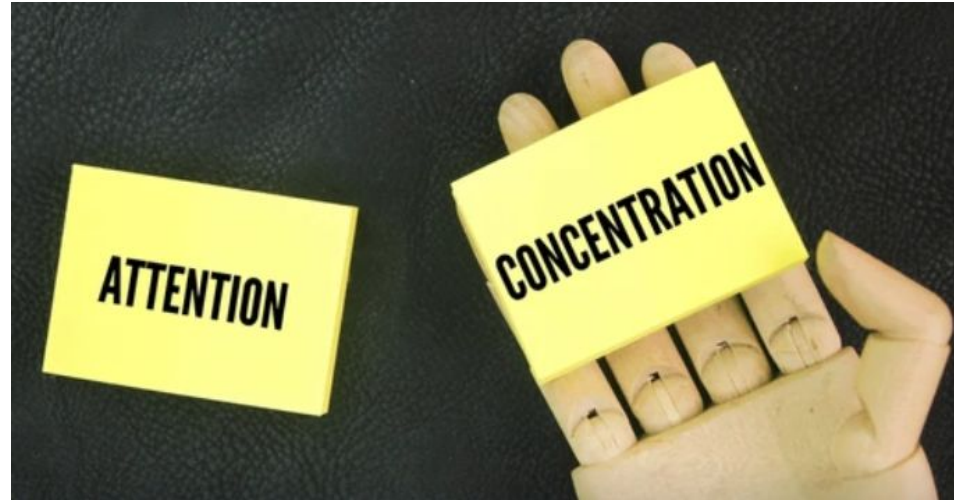
What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
How long the person is able to pay attention	Strictly limited by age and brain development

Average Attention Span Development in Children



Attentional Control

Approx 7 yrs-18 yrs



What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
What the person is paying attention to. Requires persistence and motivation.	External and internal barriers and interference

Attentional Control

Influencing factors

-  • Environment/distractions
-  • Interest/engagement
-  • Fatigue/energy levels
-  • Hydration
-  • Subject matter
-  • Emotional state



Despite what the internet tells you, cognitive attention training does not seem to reliably improve sustained attention! ([research link](#))

Implications for IEP goals

Positive Influencers on Attentional Control



Children

- Break tasks into smaller segments
- Provide structure and routine
- Minimize distractions
- Encourage movement and exercise
- Use positive reinforcement
- Limit technology

Adolescents

- Minimize distractions
- Chunk tasks
- Use active learning techniques (hands on, discussions, interactive learning)
- Promote healthy habits
- Teach time management skills
- Promote mindful technology use

Focused/Sustained Attention

The ability to maintain focus on a task, person, or idea and resist distractions.

- **On-Track:** Your child can finish an entire chore (like setting the table or unloading the dishwasher) without constantly stopping to look at something else. During a conversation, they are "present," showing they are receiving the information.
- **Not-On-Track:** This is the child who is "easily distracted by shiny objects" (or non-objects). A simple chore like "put your toys away" takes two hours because they stop every 60 seconds to play with a newly found item. They seem to constantly miss key parts of a conversation because their focus drifts elsewhere. (*This can mimic memory problems!--Implications for IEP goals*)

Impulse Control & Self-Monitoring

Approx 10 yrs-15 yrs



	What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
Impulse Control	Resisting rapid, unplanned reactions to internal or external stimuli. Consideration for consequences of the behavior ⁽¹⁾	Risky behaviors, blurting out, acting without thinking, etc.
Self-Monitoring	Personal reflection and evaluation on how one is doing	Surprised by negative feedback; unaware of own behaviors ⁽²⁾

Help your child find their Social Rhythm

Think of **Expected Behaviors** as the 'unwritten rules' that help your child fit in, make friends, and feel confident at home and in public. When kids use these behaviors, others feel comfortable and connected to them.

On the other hand, **Unexpected Behaviors** are the ones that can catch people off guard, sometimes making it harder for your child to keep friends or stay focused on the fun things they want to do.

Community and Home Settings

Approx 10 yrs-15 yrs



Expected Behaviors

- **Staying in the designated area:** Staying with your group or family while shopping or walking in public.
- **Respecting personal space:** Keeping a "one-arm" distance from others in line or while sitting on the couch.
- **Using a "situational voice":** Matching your volume to the room (e.g., whispering in a library, using a "level 2" voice at the dinner table).
- **Waiting for a pause to speak:** Waiting for a break in a conversation before sharing a thought, rather than interrupting.
- **Following the "Safety First" rule:** Stopping immediately when a parent or guardian says "stop" or "wait" near a street or parking lot.
- **Asking before taking:** Checking with others before using an item that isn't yours (like a sibling's toy or a snack from the pantry).

Unexpected Behaviors

- **Eloping or wandering:** Walking away from your family in a store or leaving the house without telling anyone.
- **Intruding on space:** Standing too close to strangers or touching items in a store that aren't being purchased.
- **Making "public" noises:** Making loud, repetitive noises or yelling in quiet places like a movie theater or a doctor's office.
- **Interrupting ongoing tasks:** Demanding attention immediately while a parent is on the phone or driving.
- **Body impulsivity:** Climbing on furniture at home, running through store aisles, or swinging arms/legs near other people.
- **Grabbing or "impulse buying":** Taking items off shelves or picking up things that belong to others without permission.

Impulse Control & Self-Monitoring

The combined ability to think before acting (inhibition) and monitor your own behavior (self-monitoring).

- **On-Track:** This is the child who waits their turn to speak during dinner instead of blurt-outing. In play, they can inhibit the urge to knock down a sibling's tower. They are also developing "checking" behavior: noticing they made a mess (e.g., spilling crumbs) and beginning to clean it up without being told.
- **Not-On-Track:** High impulsivity is the hallmark here. The child acts on every passing thought, jumping off high furniture without assessing the risk or interrupting conversations constantly. They also show a complete lack of self-correction: they are genuinely surprised when pointed out that they haven't finished a chore, showing they were not tracking their own progress.

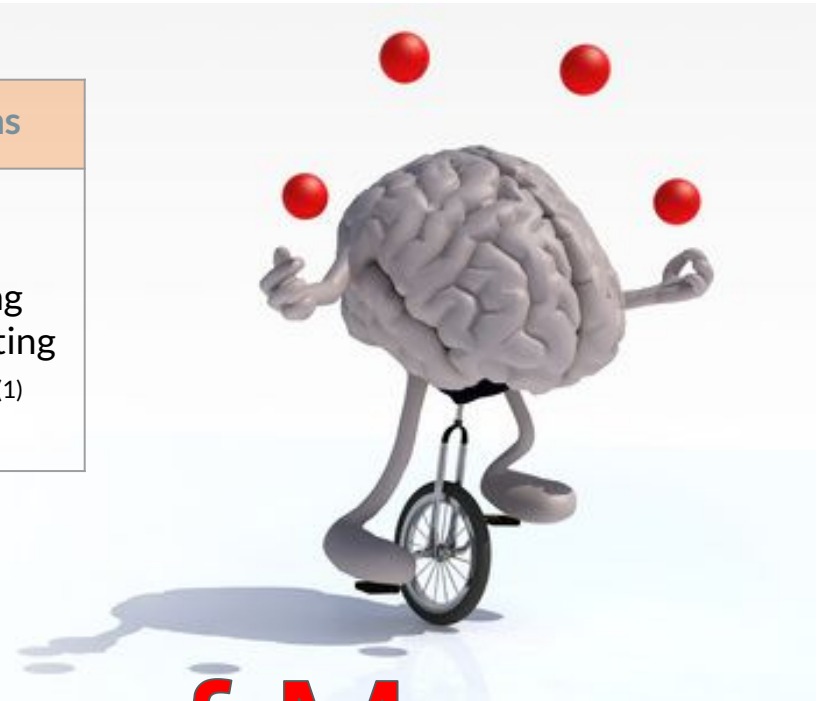


WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Working Memory

Approx 7 yrs-15 yrs

What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
Holding visual/verbal stimuli/facts in one's mind while manipulating information; accessing facts stored in long-term memory	Trouble remembering multi-step directions, difficulty comprehending what is being read, forgetting steps in math problems (1)



Three Kinds of Memory

Working Memory--General Strategies ^(1, 2)

- Highlight key parts of directions
- Simplify and reword directions
- Separate directions into parts
- Chunking parts of directions (i.e., preparation set and implementation set)
- Visual representations of oral directions
- Child to repeat directions
- Child to rewrite directions
- Reduce visual content on the screen and/or page, limiting content to most critical
- Make connections to schema
- Play games to support learning and provide practice
- Mnemonic devices
- Create a song
- Create an illustration
- Checklists
- TEACH IT TO SOMEONE ELSE (3)

(1) http://dyslexia.yale.edu/Edu_memorychallenges.html
(2) <https://www.ldatschool.ca/working-memory-difficulties/>
(3) [Make it Stick](#)

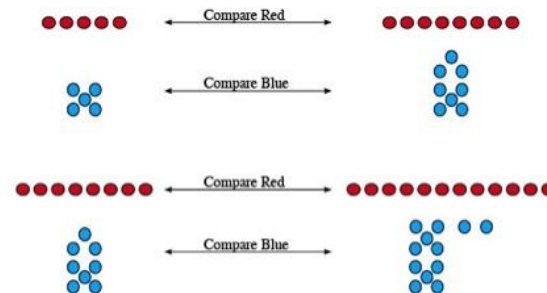
Working Memory ^(1, 2)

Reading Strategies

- Jottings/post-its
- Highlighting
- Sketchnoting
- Pausing to think about what was read
- Use a list of questions to support analysis of text (i.e., who is involved, what happened, what could happen next, what are key vocabulary)
- Creating illustrations
- Retell and recap to someone else

Math Strategies

- Visual representations of directions and vocabulary
- Math process--explicit steps
- Math process--examples
- Graphic organizer
- Child repeats the whole number sentence when answering a question (i.e., $12-8=4$)
- Write problem out--creating written models
- Chunking-- (spatial arrangements)



(1)

http://dyslexia.yale.edu/Edu_memorychallenges.html

(2)

<https://www.idatschool.ca/working-memory-difficulties/>

Working Memory--Mnemonic Devices

1. What are mnemonic devices?
 - a. Memory aids that create an association with something else (i.e., acronyms, songs, rhymes, visual images, etc.)
2. How do they work?
 - a. Helps the brain encode (understand and store) and retrieve information
3. Why are they effective?
 - a. Creates strong connections between new information and existing knowledge, making it easier to remember and recall later on.
 - b. They are fun and engaging, which makes learning more enjoyable and memorable!

Working Memory--Mnemonic Device Examples

Their
There

Eat E Europe
An A Asia
Apple A Africa
As A Australia
A A Antartica
Nice N North America
Snack S South America

Kings play chess on fine glass sets

K P C O F G S
i h l r a e p
n y a d m n e
g l s e i u c
d u s r i s i
o m y e s



Huron
Ontario
Michigan
Erie
Superior

Mnemonic	
Please	P - Parenthesis
Excuse	E - Exponent
My	M - Multiplication
Dear	D - Division
Aunt	A - Addition
Sally	S - Subtraction

C	L	O	S	E
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check for unknown words Check for unusual or foreign language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look for key ideas and details Look for how key details are provided Look for the author's viewpoint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observe book and text features. Is the text written in story form, poetry or factual and scientific information? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study how the sentences and text are structured Seek out signal words (however, still, but, yet) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine author's/illustrator's message or theme Examine the author's use of literary devices
<p>Vocabulary</p> <p><u>Re-read</u> the sentences before and after the unknown word</p> <p><u>Examine</u> the context clues</p> <p><u>Analyze</u> or think about the context clues and connect what you know to what the author has written</p> <p><u>Determine</u> or decide the meaning of the word</p>	<p>Level of Meaning/ Reasoning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> factual data & statistics citations from experts emotional examples narratives connotative meanings definitions vivid descriptions 	<p>Genres</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> narrative explanatory/informative newspaper article magazine article procedural manual historical document poetry/music speech autobiography 	<p>Text Structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sequence/process chronology/time order enumeration/description definition compare/contrast cause & effect problem & solution proposition & support judgment/critique 	<p>Author's Craft</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> simile metaphor idiom imagery tone/mood alliteration personification foreshadowing flashback

Working Memory

Approx 7 yrs-15 yrs

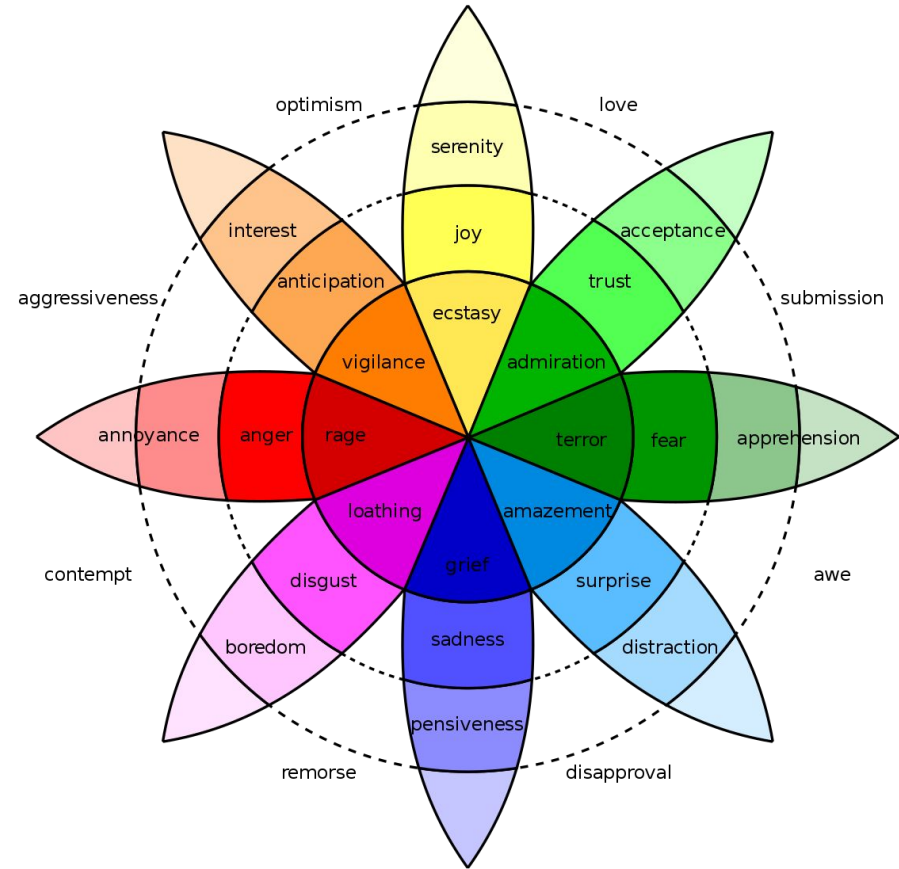
The mental "scratchpad" used to hold information in mind while performing a task.

- **On-Track:** Can follow a three-step direction (e.g., "Put your shoes away, wash your hands, and come to dinner"); remembers the rules of a new game while playing.
- **Not-On-Track:** Forgets what they went into a room to get; loses track of a conversation halfway through; forgets the second or third part of a multi-step instruction.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Emotional Regulation



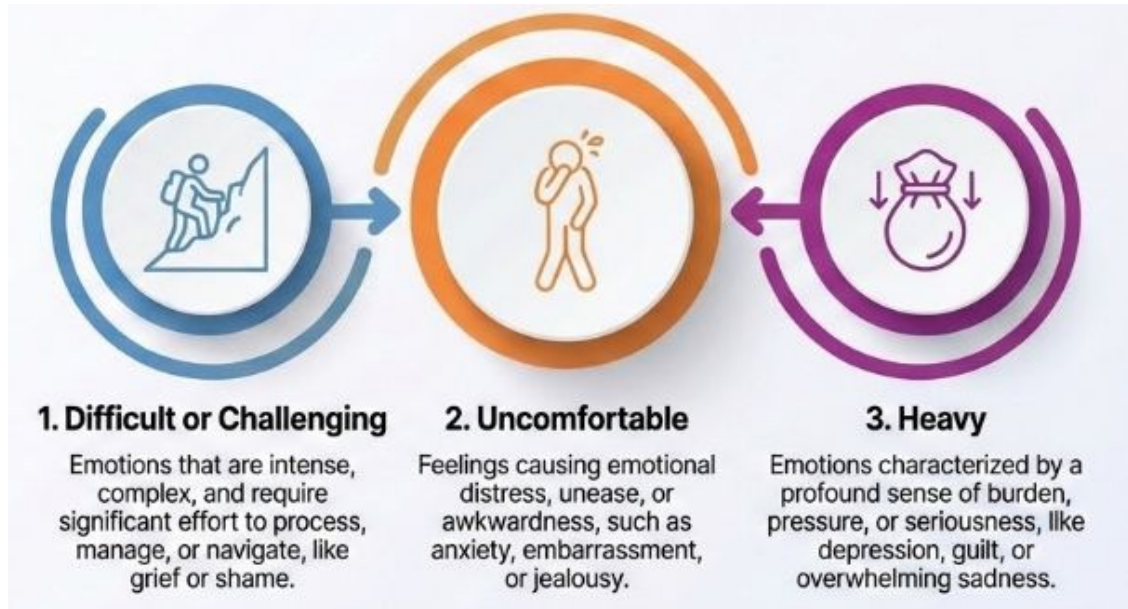
What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
<p>Ability to tolerate frustration, thinking before acting or speaking, regulating emotions (2)</p>	<p>Emotional lability (marked changes in mood, swiftly changing between emotions)</p>

Emotional Regulation


All emotions are natural and normal--including anger, sadness, jealousy, etc.


It is what we do with our emotions that can lead to positive or negative consequences.

Instead of saying “Bad Emotions”... Say:





Teaching Emotional Regulation


1  **Talk about feelings/emotions**
(identify how and where they are felt)


2  Be able to **recognize how others feel**
(teach nonverbal cues of emotions).

3  **Identify coping strategies**

4  **Make a list** (triggers and
subsequent emotions).

5  **Catch the Child in control**—provide
specific **PRAISE**.

6  **Debrief with the Child not in
control**—wait until the Child is calm.
Identify the ABCs. Discuss what the
Child can do differently next time.

7  **Practice, practice, practice**

8  **Lead by example**

Mindfulness

Noticing what is happening while it is happening.

The gap between feeling an emotion and acting on it.

Mindfulness Strategies

Mindfulness of the breath (hoberman sphere/hands)

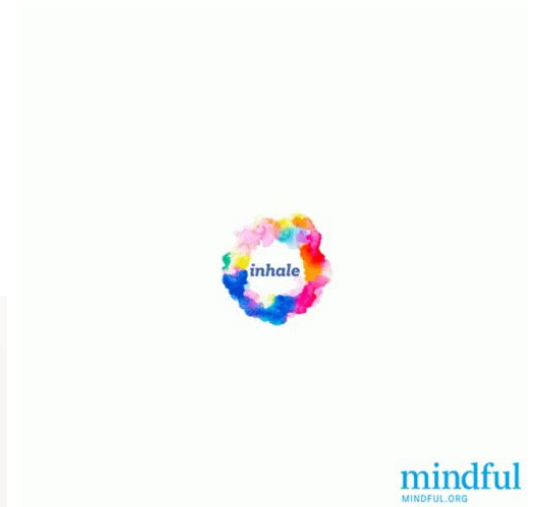
Body Scan

54321

The Bell/Chime Listening Exercise

The Mindful Jar

(1) <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/mindfulness-for-children-kids-activities/>



What Mindfulness Leads to:

Cognitive Outcomes	Social/Emotional Skills	Well-Being
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improved attention and focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emotional regulation ● Improved Behavior ● Increased Empathy/Perspective Taking ● Increase in ProSocial Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reduced test anxiety ● Reduced stress ● Reduced trauma symptoms ● Reduced depression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Higher Grades ● Improvement in Assessment scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Better ability to engage in tasks even when emotions are activated ● Increased helping of others in need ● Greater self-compassion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improvement in reactions to being in stressful situations

Emotional Regulation

The ability to manage feelings to achieve goals or complete tasks.

- **On-Track:** Your child can experience frustration (e.g., losing a family game) without a major outburst. They use coping strategies, like saying "I'm frustrated" or taking deep breaths, and can "bounce back" relatively quickly. They can separate their "big feelings" from the task they need to do.

- **Not-On-Track:** This presents as rapid, intense emotional "explosions" or "meltdowns" over small, unexpected problems. The child has zero frustration tolerance. Small disappointments (like not getting the blue plate) consume them for long periods, making it impossible for them to move on to other activities. The "mental brake" on their emotions is missing.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Empathy



What it means

The ability to take the perspective of another and accurately imagine that person's experience. This is linked with helpfulness, kindness and other prosocial behaviors. It's the type of empathy that translates second-hand suffering into feelings of understanding and caring. (1)

Limitations/Restrictions

Self-interested, driven by own pleasures, down-plays, denial of others' feelings, labeling, put-downs (2)

Empathy

Sympathy

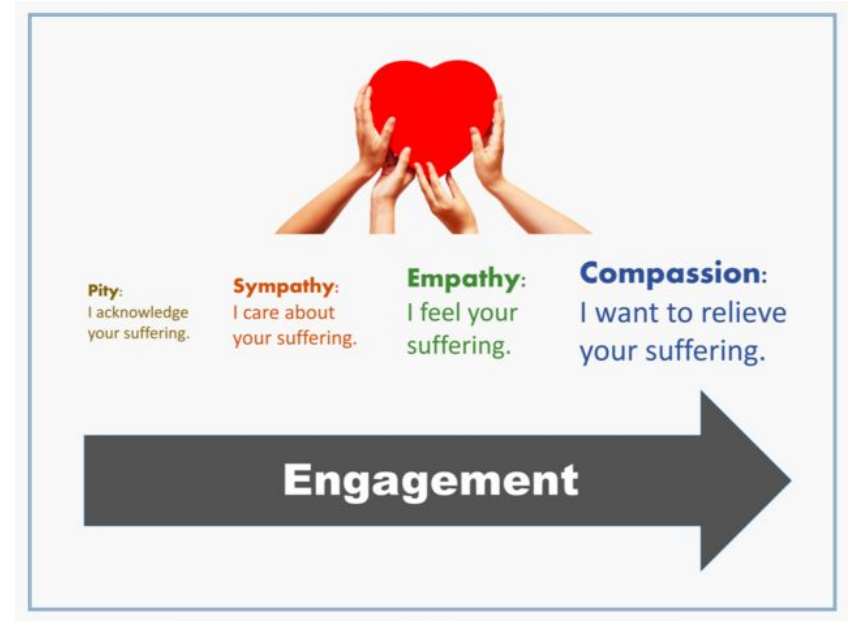
A reaction to someone else's suffering—you feel bad for someone else's trouble. You understand they are having a hard time and you feel sorry for them.

Empathy

The ability to feel what someone else is feeling, and to understand their suffering by putting yourself in their shoes.

Compassion

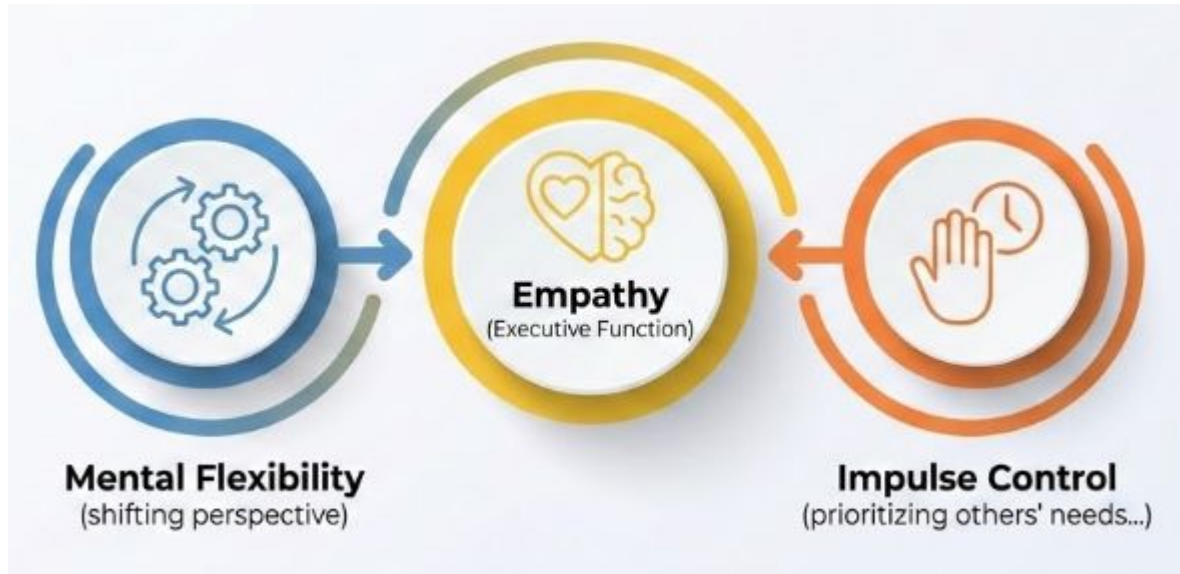
A combination of sympathy and empathy, with the added desire to help relieve the suffering of others. Compassion can involve action, such as helping someone move or doing something to improve their situation. It can also be characterized by love, altruism, and small acts of kindness.



(1) <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-peek/201505/empathy-vs-sympathy>
(2) <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/sympathy-empathy-difference>

Empathy: A note

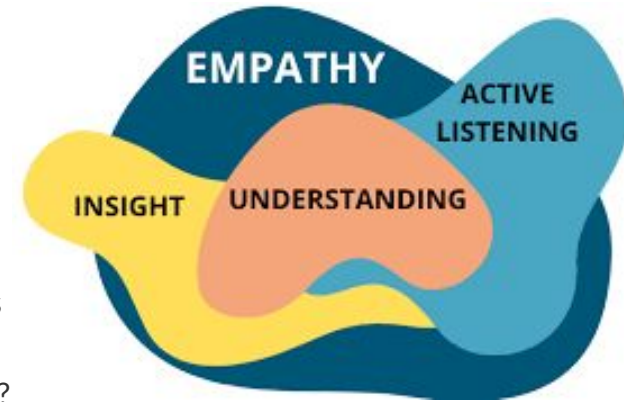
While often considered under social/emotional learning, it is an **executive function** because it requires **mental flexibility** (shifting perspective) and **impulse control** (prioritizing other's needs or views over your own) to work effectively.



Empathy

Teach Children:

- How to find commonalities with others (1)
- Nonverbal behavioral cues (i.e., tone/volume of voice, emotional facial expressions, etc.) (1)
- Others' perspectives--experiences, cultural relevance, spiritual beliefs (1)
- How to be flexible with differences in emotional reactions (2)
- Use role-playing (1)
- Teach the child that listening is to understand, not to respond
- Teach the child how to listen to the entire message that the other person is trying to communicate (2)
 - Listen with your ears – what is being said, and what tone is being used?
 - Listen with your eyes – what is the person doing with his or her body while speaking?
 - Listen with your instincts – do you sense that the person is not communicating something important?
 - Listen with your heart – what do you think the other person feels?



(1)
(2)

<http://www.parentingscience.com/teaching-empathy-tips.html>
<https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/EmpathyatWork.htm>



Empathy

On Track: At this stage, a child is actively learning to recognize and connect with the feelings of others within the family unit.

- **Can Recognize Feelings:** The child notices if a parent or sibling is sad, angry, or happy and may ask "why" or comment on the emotion (e.g., "Mommy looks happy").
- **Shows Spontaneous Kindness:** Without being prompted, the child offers a hug, a favorite toy, or a comforting word to a distressed family member.
- **Respects Boundaries:** The child can understand and respond when a sibling says, "Stop, that hurts," demonstrating a basic grasp of personal limits and safety.
- **Adjusts Behavior:** They can modify their play or volume if a parent is on the phone or if a sibling is trying to rest.
- **Wants to Help:** They express a genuine desire to assist with family tasks, such as helping to clean up a spill or hold the door for someone.
- **Demonstrates Prosocial Skills:** They show early signs of sharing, taking turns during family activities, and showing interest in how others are doing.

Not on Track: These behaviors may indicate a need for more direct support in recognizing or managing social and emotional information.

- **Struggles to Perceive Emotion:** The child may seem oblivious or indifferent when a family member is visibly upset.
- **Reactions seem Misaligned:** They might laugh or become playful when someone is injured or crying.
- **Difficulty Viewing Problems from Another Angle:** They may struggle to understand that a sibling is upset by a shared problem, instead focusing only on their own perspective.
- **Reacts Aggressively to Emotional Triggers:** Instead of offering comfort, they might become overwhelmed or angry when faced with another person's strong emotions.
- **Does Not Actively Cooperate:** They may consistently resist requests to help others in the family or participate in cooperative play.

Task Initiation

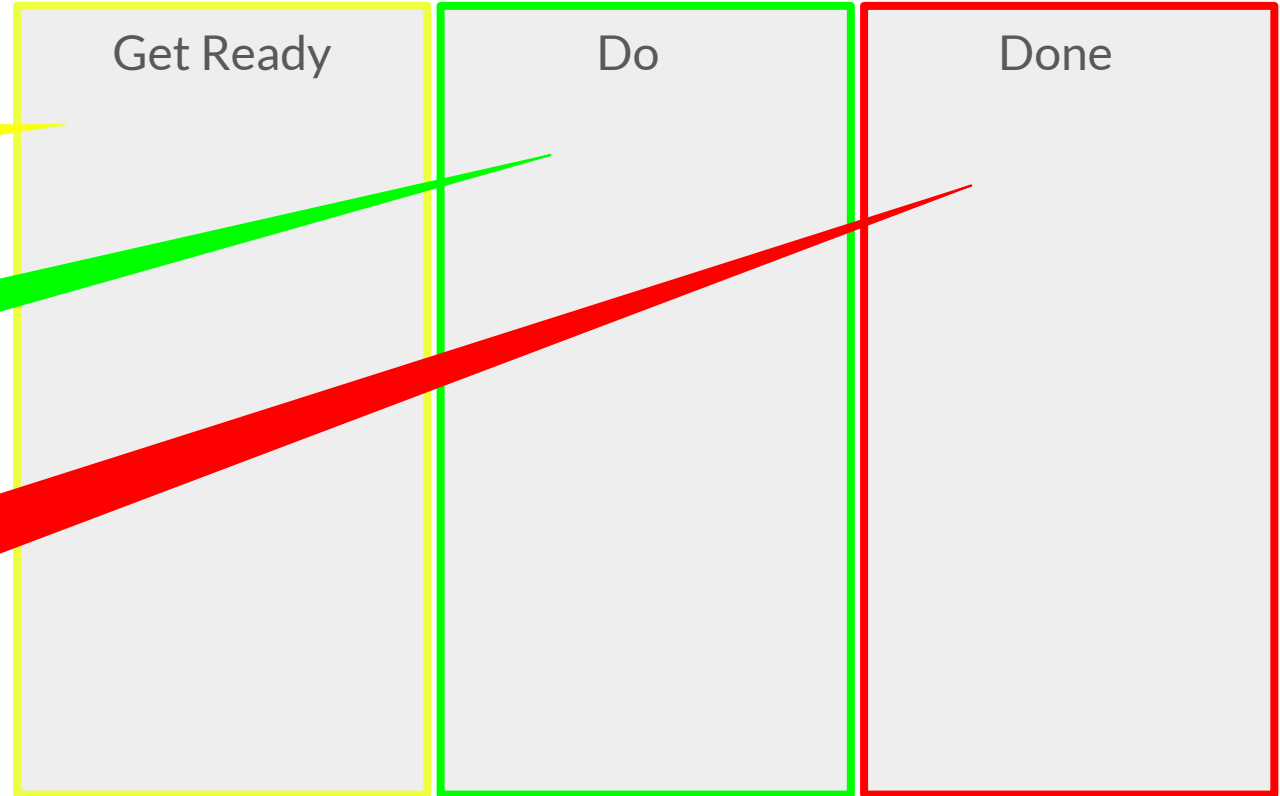


What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
Getting started and sustaining attention to the task	Delays in starting a task, not knowing how to start the task

Task Initiation

Strategy	Why it Works for Kids
Double Directions (Say it and Show it)	It uses two parts of the brain (hearing and seeing) to make sure the message "clicks."
The Countdown (Use a timer)	It removes the "surprise" of a transition, which lowers anxiety.
Checklists (Game Plan)	It builds independence—they check the list instead of checking with you.
The Model (Finished Product)	It provides a clear "target" so they don't feel lost before they begin. It's hard to reach a goal if you don't know what the "win" looks like.
The "What-If" Plan (Practice Plan B)	It teaches them how to handle frustration <i>before</i> it becomes a meltdown. <i>"If you get to a hard question, what's your superpower move?"</i> (e.g., skip it, circle it, or ask for a hint)

Task Initiation: Get Ready, Do, Done!



Materials,
Resources

Task steps,
time to
complete

The task is:

- Something new
- Similar to something I've done before

Task Initiation Tool: Student Self-Assessment Checklist



1. Identify the Task

I know what to do to start and finish the task. If I don't, I've clarified with the teacher or reviewed the written directions.

2. Activate Background Knowledge

(What do I know about this topic already? Have I learned about this in class?)

3. What do I Need

I sought out different resources to complete the task (I referenced my notes. I looked through my text book/reading materials. I asked a peer at an allowable time.)

4. Self advocacy

I asked the teacher for help if I was confused on any parts of the assignment.

5. Mini goals

I created mini goals and added them to my planner/calendar

6. Task Completion

I was able to complete the entire task.

Task Initiation

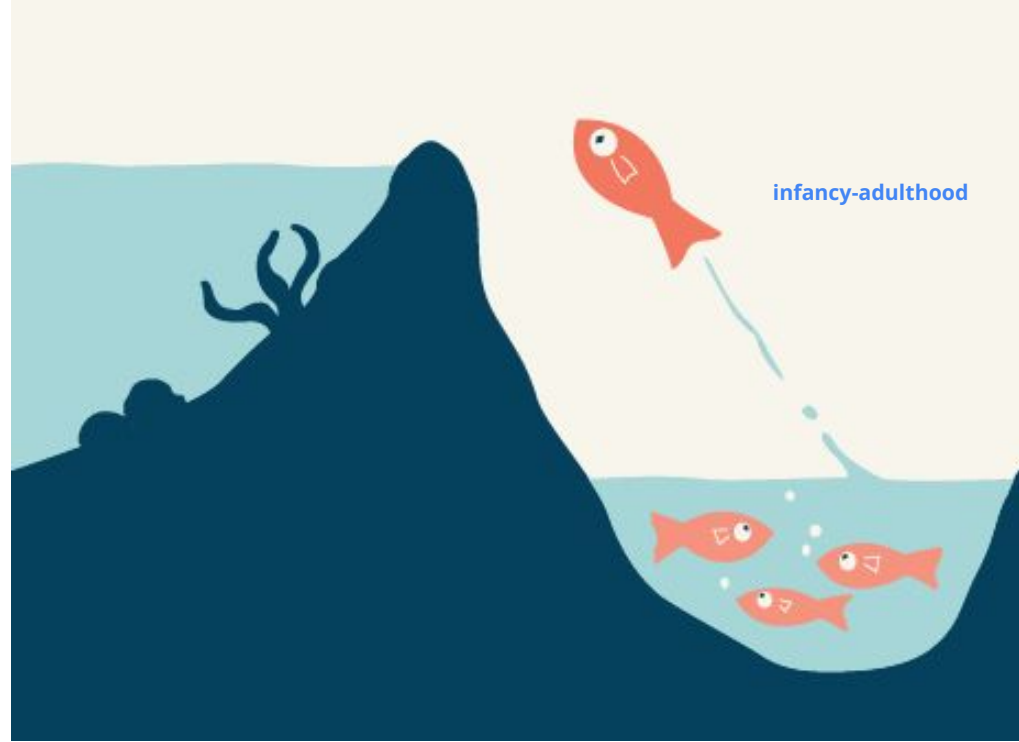
The ability to begin a task without procrastinating.

- **On-Track:** This child can transition from a preferred activity (e.g., watching TV) to a non-preferred activity (e.g., starting homework or a chore) shortly after being asked, without a major battle of wills. They can "get the ball rolling" on their own for daily routines.
- **Not-On-Track:** This looks like chronic stalling and procrastination. They might say, "I'll do it in a minute" repeatedly, or "daydream" while standing next to the chore they were asked to do. Initiation requires multiple, increasingly urgent parental reminders. The parent becomes the external "starter button" for the child.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Motivation and Effort



What it means

General desire and willingness to do something

Physical or mental effort needed to achieve something

Limitations/Restrictions

Inability or difficulty in starting and completing an undesirable activity

Motivation and Effort

- **Personal drive** to achieve; the desire to improve or to meet certain standards
- **Commitment** to personal or organizational goals
- **Initiative** is the readiness to act on opportunities
- **Optimism** is the ability to keep going and pursue goals in the face of setbacks

Developing Intrinsic Motivation and Effort

Give child a sense of control	Give child responsibility	Allow children to work together
Define the objectives	Make goals high but attainable	Give feedback and offer chances to improve
Create a threat-free environment (safe and secure)	Give specific praise when it is earned	Harness your child's' interests
Change your scenery	Encourage self-reflection	Track progress
Offer varied experiences	Be excited/show your enthusiasm	Help child learn what motivates them (i.e., interests)
Use positive competition	Know your child	Make things fun
Offer rewards	Manage child anxiety	Provide opportunities for success

Motivation and Effort (Activation)

infancy-adulthood

The ability to generate and sustain the drive and energy needed to follow through on tasks (often linked to task initiation).

- **On-Track:** When faced with a long-term goal (e.g., saving money for a toy), they can connect the small, repetitive effort of doing a weekly chore to that future reward. They can summon the internal energy to persist on a difficult homework assignment, understanding that the effort has value.
- **Not-On-Track:** The child may seem "lazy" or have "no drive" to start anything, which is often a fundamental gap in executive activation. They only show motivation for high-interest, immediate-reward activities (like video games) and seem incapable of mobilizing effort for multi-step goals, even those with clear, positive outcomes.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE





Organization

What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
Keeping track of things physically and mentally.	Scattered materials, lost materials, difficulty organizing thoughts in spoken and written communications, trouble with reading/math







Organization: Predictability & Managing their own “stuff”

Preschool & Early Elementary (Ages 3–6)

-  **The “Launch Pad” Habit:** Placing their backpack and shoes in the same spot by the door every afternoon.
-  **Visual Sorting:** Being able to put toys away when the bins have pictures on them (e.g., a bin with a picture of blocks, a bin with a picture of cars).
-  **Simple Sequencing:** Knowing the “order of operations” for the morning, like: Toilet → Wash Hands → Get Dressed.
-  **Choosing Ahead:** Picking out an outfit the night before and laying it on a chair.

Middle Childhood (Ages 7–11)

-  **Managing Materials:** Keeping a designated folder for “papers to stay at home” vs. “papers to go back to school.”
-  **Time Awareness:** Using a timer to stay on track during a 15-minute cleaning burst or homework session.
-  **Workspace Maintenance:** Clearing off their desk or kitchen table spot once a task is finished without being asked multiple times.
-  **Planning for Fun:** Gathering all the gear needed for an activity (e.g., finding their shin guards, water bottle, and cleats for soccer) before it's time to leave.

Organization: Predictability & Managing their own “stuff”

Pre-Teens & Young Teens (Ages 12–14)



Digital Organization: Managing a school calendar or a simple to-do list app to track project due dates.



Prioritizing Tasks: Deciding to do the “hardest” homework first while they still have the most energy.



Self-Correction: Noticing they are missing a permission slip and asking a parent to sign it before the morning of the field trip.



Zoning Their Space: Keeping their room in “functional” order—even if it’s a bit messy, they know where their charger, clean clothes, and school books are located.

Organization

The ability to keep track of information and materials.

On-Track: Can find their shoes, backpack, or favorite toy easily; keeps their "spaces" (desk or play area) relatively orderly.

Not-On-Track: Frequently loses personal items; bedroom or backpack is a "black hole" of crumpled papers and old items; struggles to keep track of a schedule.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Planning and Prioritizing



	What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
Planning	Planning is the process of deciding, in detail, how to do something before one actually does it	Break down in setting goals, creating a strategy, managing/organizing thoughts/idea/resources, and/or monitoring progress (1)
Prioritizing	Determine the order for dealing with a series of items or tasks according to their relative importance.	Investing time on the least important task or the task with the highest interest

Prioritizing--Goals in Planning

- Helps children learn how to approach planning--what to tackle first, next, last
- Give children opportunities to prioritize in their own way, allowing for natural consequences to occur without discipline
- Reflect and debrief with the child on how to approach planning and prioritizing next time

Encouraging Planning and Prioritizing Skill Development



Celebrate Strengths

How to do it at home

Ask: “You did great on that last quiz—what was your secret weapon for studying?”



Safe Practice

How to do it at home

Let them rank chores or grocery items by “Most Important” to “Least Important” to practice prioritizing.



Toolbox Variety

How to do it at home

Share that some people use outlines, while others use mind maps or voice memos.



Guided Learning

How to do it at home

Use “Partial Notes” (where you provide the main ideas and they fill in the details) to build confidence.

Planning and Prioritizing

The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal and decide what is most important.

On-Track: A developmentally on-track middle-schooler, when told "Clean your room by 5:00," can create a simple logical plan: "First, I'll pick up the trash. Second, I'll put my clothes in the hamper. Third, I'll make my bed." They prioritize by deciding to do the most critical things first (e.g., clearing the floor) before starting detailed organizing.

Not-On-Track: When faced with the large, unstructured task ("Clean your room"), the child "freezes" or avoids it. They get overwhelmed because they cannot identify the *first step*. Alternatively, they might spend an hour meticulously organizing their colored pencils (low priority) while the rest of the room remains chaotic. They lack a concept of a multi-step checklist.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Time Management



What it means	Limitations/Restrictions
The ability to use one's time effectively and/or productively	Limited reflection on how long one has spent on a task and/or how long different activities take

Time Management: Building the Internal Clock

Stage 1: External Support.

You are the clock. You tell them when to start and stop.

Stage 2: Co-Regulation.

You use a timer together. You ask, "How long do you think this will take?"

Stage 3: Independent Monitoring.

They set their own alarms and check their own schedules.



Stage 1:
External Support

Stage 2:
Co-Regulation

Stage 3:
Independent Monitoring

Time Management

The ability to estimate how much time one has and how to use it.

- **On-Track:** Notices when they are running late; has a general sense of how long a 15-minute task feels; finishes getting ready in time for the bus.

- **Not-On-Track:** "Time blind"—has no idea how much time has passed; underestimates how long a task will take (thinks a 30-minute chore will take 5); is always rushing at the last second.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Mental (Cognitive) Flexibility



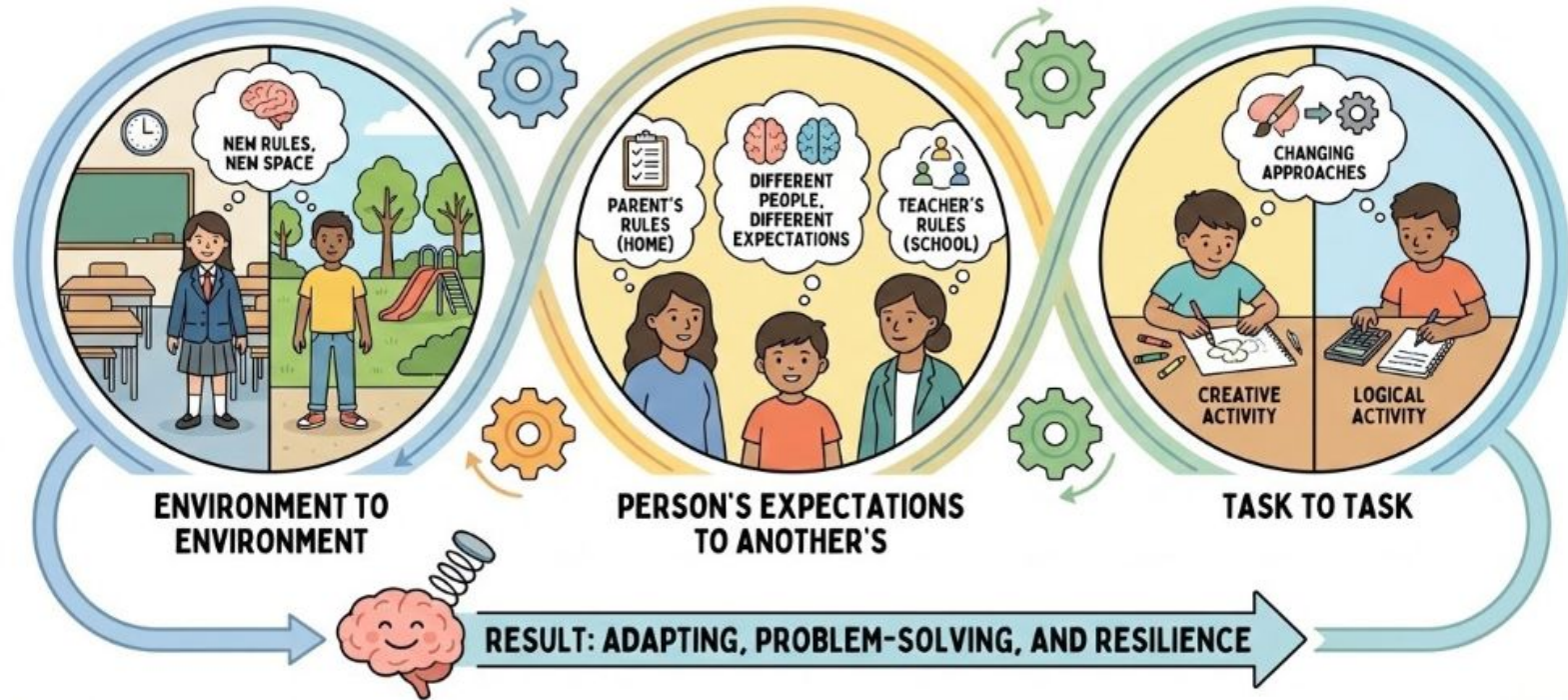
What it means

Changing activities, stopping an existing activity, adjusting to change

Limitations/Restrictions

Rigidity, difficulty with changes to routine or rules, trouble switching from one activity to another

Mental Flexibility: The Brain Shifting Gears



Mental Flexibility: The Brain Shifting Gears

Age Group	What it looks like
Preschool (3-5)	Can switch between simple rules during play (e.g., "Now we are sorting by shape instead of color").
Early School (6-9)	Can handle a "Plan B" when expectations change (e.g., "It's raining, so we are playing inside instead of the park").
Middle School (10-13)	Can see a situation from a friend's perspective, even if they strongly disagree with that friend's choice.
High School (14-18)	Can realize a current strategy isn't working (e.g., a study method) and proactively switch to a new approach.

9 Examples of Inflexibility

1. Not accepting others' ideas
2. Arguing the same point over and over
3. Getting frustrated when even small things go wrong
4. Repeating the same mistakes
5. Not following new schedules
6. Getting anxious when plans change
7. Struggling to take on new, more complicated tasks
8. Having trouble switching from one activity to another
9. Getting upset when others don't follow rules

Mental Flexibility

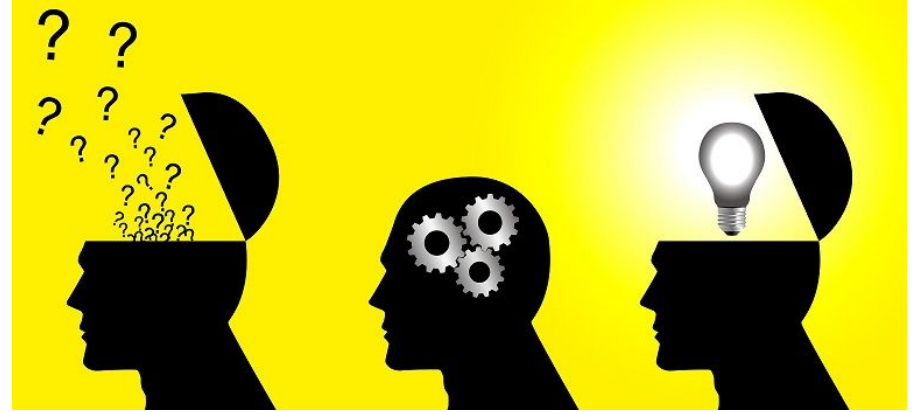
The ability to adapt to new situations or change plans.

- **On-Track:** The child seamlessly adjusts when a planned park trip is cancelled due to rain; they can immediately suggest an indoor alternative (like building a fort). They can try a new approach to solve a problem (like fixing a toy) if their first idea doesn't work. They also understand that an argument can be viewed from a sibling's perspective.
- **Not-On-Track:** This is marked by "rigid thinking". The child gets "stuck" on how things *should* be (e.g., "But we ALWAYS go to the park on Saturday!"). Changes in routine cause immense stress and distress. They cannot easily switch gears, which often looks like defiance or stubbornness to the parent, but is actually a lack of flexibility.



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Problem-Solving (Judgment)



What it means

Taking an issue apart, analyzing the pieces, reconstituting and organizing it into new ideas.

- Perception: What is happening, what is accurate, and what is a desirable outcome of action in this situation?
- Synthesis: What are the key insights of one's own perceptions, and what are the implications for action?
- Action: Now what one must do to stay on track and avoid the traps that might derail as action is taken to reach one's goals?

Limitations/ Restrictions

Risky behaviors,
Misperceiving
others,
Misunderstanding
the outcomes of
decisions

Problem-Solving: Positive Problem Orientation⁽¹⁾

- Being able to see problems as ‘challenges’, or opportunities to gain something, rather than insurmountable difficulties at which it is only possible to fail.
- Believing that problems are solvable.
- Believing that you personally are able to solve problems successfully, which is at least in part an aspect of self-confidence.
- Understanding that solving problems successfully will take time and effort, which may require a certain amount of resilience;
- **Motivating yourself to solve problems immediately, rather than putting them off.**

(1) <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/social-problem-solving.html>

THE FOUR-STEP PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS



Problem-Solving

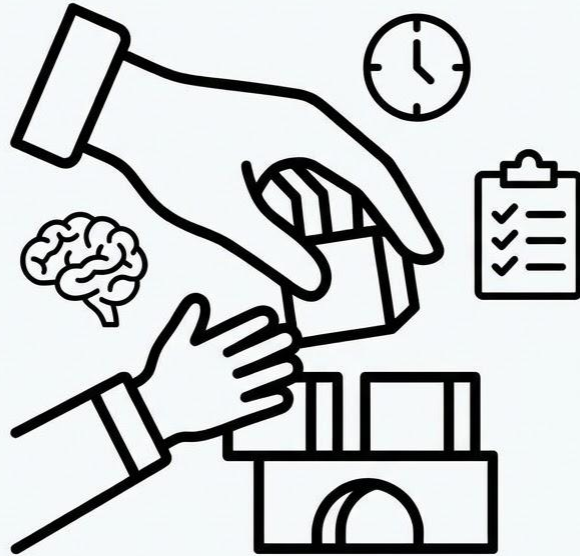
Approx 9 yrs-17 yrs



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Scenario	On Track	Off Track
Lost Items	Pauses to Retrace Steps: Thinks, "Where was I last?" and checks logical spots.	Meltdown as Solution: Becomes overwhelmed by the loss and gives up or reacts with tears.
Conflict	Negotiates & Compromises: Suggests a "you first, then me" deal to settle a disagreement.	Impulsive Reaction: Grabs, yells, or refuses to move until they get their way.
Tough Tasks	Task Initiation: Breaks a big job (like cleaning a room) into small, starting steps.	Freezing or Avoidance: Stares at the mess and does nothing because they can't find a "start" point.
Failure/Mistakes	Adjusts the Plan: If a project fails, they try a new way (e.g., "I'll try a wider base for this tower").	Repetitive Errors: Gets "stuck" trying the same failing strategy over and over with rising frustration.
Reaching Goals	Assesses Risk: Thinks through how to get what they want safely and effectively.	High Impulsivity: Takes dangerous shortcuts (like climbing furniture) to get a goal quickly.

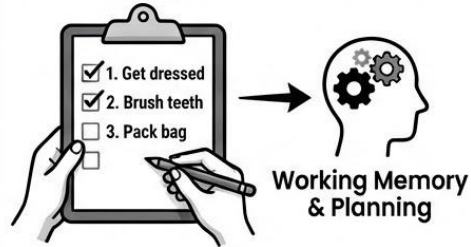
THE CAREGIVER ROLE IN EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING DEVELOPMENT



- Environment
- Co-Regulator
- Scaffolder

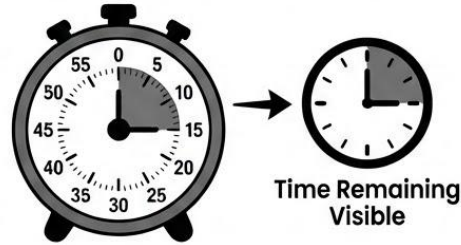
Caregiver Role: Environment

Create "Top-Down" Structures



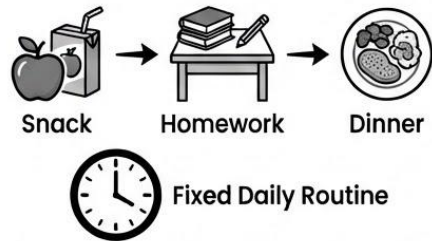
Use visual aids like a simple morning checklist to support working memory and planning.

Visualize Time



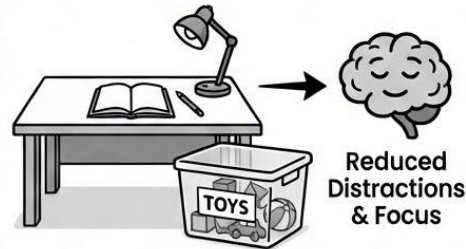
Use a visual timer to make the concept of "time remaining" visible, aiding time management.

Establish Predictable Routines



Create fixed routines to allow the child to use procedural memory for everyday tasks.

"Organize the Space"



Reduce environmental distractions to improve focus. Clear the desk of clutter and use labeled bins for toys.

Caregiver Role: Co-Regulator

Model Emotional Regulation

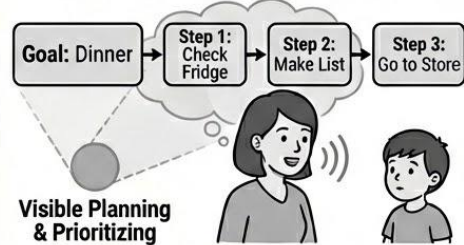


Poor Regulation Model

Coaching the Skill

Children learn by watching. Modeling calm problem-solving coaches regulation; overwhelmed reactions model poor skills.

Use the "Think Aloud" Technique



Visible Planning & Prioritizing

Narrate your planning process out loud to model executive functions like planning and prioritizing.

Validate the Struggle



Focus on Character Flaw

Focus on Skill Deficit

Shift focus from character flaws to skill deficits. Acknowledge the difficulty and help identify the first, smallest step.

Focus on the Process



Celebrate the use of strategies and effort, even imperfect outcomes. Focusing on the process builds motivation.

Caregiver Role: Scaffolder

From “Do With” to “Watch Do”:



Step 1 (Fully External)

Do With, understand understanding with work or implements, and being, notice and presence within holding arms.



Step 2 (Fully External)

Checklist: understand assessment and soft decomposed ronicipalin, guards; and prevent loss of enhancing these cases.



Step 3 (Watch Do”)

Watch Do: Pass out items to someone work, cell mention, buroundhage another caregivers in represents and cause.



Caregiver Role: Scaffolder



Direct Instruction

“Go brush your teeth.”

Clear, explicit command.



Indirect Prompt

“What do you need to do before bed?”

Inviting them to use their own planning skills.



Wait and See

Allow the child to try the routine...

Check in only if off-task (supporting time management & self-monitoring).



Caregiver Role: Scaffolder



Focus on the Process, Not the Outcome

The caregiver's most important supportive role is adopting a **growth mindset**. **Celebrate** when your child uses a strategy (like using a checklist), even if the room isn't perfectly clean. This **builds motivation and effort**, which are key for activation.

Caregiver Tools



1. FOR TIME MANAGEMENT & TRANSITIONS



Visual Timers & Analog Clocks

Make the invisible concept of time passage visible.

How to use: Set for activities (music practice, cleanup, transitions) to show "time remaining" or place analog clocks in key areas to aid time awareness.



2. FOR PLANNING, PRIORITIZING & WORKING MEMORY



Family Calendar & Visual Checklists

The external memory and planning hub.

How to use: Color-code by member, list core daily events. Create laminated checklists for routines (Morning, Bedtime) for child to check off, supporting working memory. Use sticky notes for breaking down tasks.



3. FOR ORGANIZATION & FOCUS



Color-Coded Bins & Folders

Structure to reduce cognitive load.

How to use: Use clear, labeled bins for easy cleanup decisions. Implement a consistent color-coding system for backpacks (e.g., Green=To Do, Red=Completed) to manage materials.

Executive Functioning

Academic Tools

Note to Caregivers: While these resources are academic in nature, they are included to provide a strong foundation for your continued collaboration with educators, tutors, and other practitioners. Please feel free to explore them at your own pace.



Questions?

Contact

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