

Smart but Scattered: Helping Children and Adolescents with Executive Dysfunction at Home and at School

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Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Response Inhibition:** The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.
- **Working Memory:** The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.
- **Emotional Control:** The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Flexibility:** The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.
- **Sustained Attention:** The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.
- **Task Initiation:** The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.
- **Planning/Prioritization:** The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what's important to focus on and what's not important.

Executive Skills: Definitions

- **Organization:** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.
- **Time Management:** The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.
- **Goal-directed persistence:** The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.
- **Metacognition:** The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself, "How am I doing? or How did I do?").

DEFINITIONS/ CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

- Frontal lobes decide what is worth attending to and what is worth doing. *Impairments manifest as distractibility, poor sustained attention and effort, perseveration, and confusion.*
- Frontal lobes provide continuity and coherence to behavior across time. *Impairments are manifested in the inability to plan and execute a sequence of behaviors needed to meet a goal.*
- Frontal lobes modulate affective and interpersonal behavior so that drives are satisfied within the constraints of the internal and external environments. *Impairments are manifested as emotional lability, flatness and indifference, irritability and belligerence, and childishness.*
- The frontal lobes monitor, evaluate, and adjust. *Impairments are manifested as rigidity, lack of insight, and an inability to profit from experience.*

BARKLEY' S THEORY OF ADHD

CONTINGENCY-SHAPED/CONTEXT
DEPENDENT SUSTAINED ATTENTION
VERSUS
GOAL-DIRECTED PERSISTENCE

CONTINGENCY-SHAPED/CONTEXT-DEPENDENT SUSTAINED ATTENTION

A person's sustained response depends on:
Novelty
Intrinsic Reinforcement (Interest) Value
Extrinsically Provided Consequences

Therefore, if the task is:
Fun
Interesting
Immediately Rewarding

on-task behavior can be sustained (e.g., TV, video games, hands-on activities).

Goal Directed Persistence

- Requires the individual to—
- Generate and hold a mental representation of the goal in mind (*working memory*).
 - Formulate a plan and set of rules to follow (*self-directed speech*).
 - Inhibit and regulate negative affect (i.e., disappointment and frustration) associated with self-deprivation.
 - Kindle self-motivated or positive drive states in support of the plan (*self-regulation of affect*).
 - Experiment with multiple novel approaches toward goal achievement before selecting one to perform (*reconstitution*).

THE INDIVIDUAL WITH ADHD HAS DIMINISHED SELF-REGULATION

...therefore sustained attention is highly context and contingency dependent. Without rewards or interest in the immediate context, work is cut short.

THE INDIVIDUAL WITHOUT ADHD HAS ADEQUATE SELF-REGULATION

therefore s/he requires no source of reward or motivation in the immediate context for performance.

Biological underpinnings

A recent study published by the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) has found differences in dopamine processing in the reward pathways in the brains of subjects with ADHD compared to non-ADHD controls. The study focused on the nucleus accumbens (a brain structure involved with reinforcement and reward) and suggests that people with ADHD may release dopamine at a lower rate compared to normal controls or might have a net dopamine deficit.

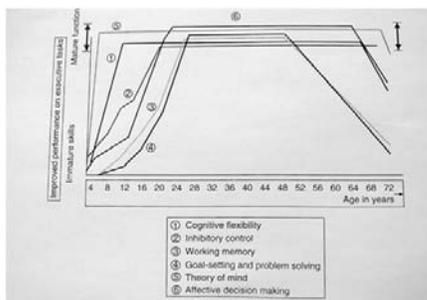
Biological underpinnings

Because dopamine enhances the level of interest a person attaches to a stimulus, people who release dopamine at a lower rate might find it more difficult to work up the enthusiasm to act on stimuli they don't find naturally appealing.

Implication: students with ADHD find it much more difficult to apply themselves to tasks that are not intrinsically interesting to them.

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/09/15/health/20080915-brain-development.html>

Frontal lobes take time to develop...



What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Students?

- Acts without thinking
- Interrupts others
- Overreacts to small problems
- Upset by changes in plans
- Overwhelmed by large assignments
- Talks or plays too loudly
- Resists change of routine
- Doesn't notice impact of behavior on others
- Doesn't see their behavior as part of the issue
- Easily overstimulated and has trouble calming down
- Gets stuck on one topic or activity
- Gets overly upset about "little things"
- Out of control more than peers
- Can't come up with more than one way to solve a problem
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Acts wild or out of control

What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Students?

- Doesn't bother to write down assignment
- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring materials home
- Keeps putting off homework
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Chooses "fun stuff" over homework or chores
- Passive study methods (or doesn't study)
- Forgets homework/forgets to pass it in
- Leaves long-term assignments or chores until last minute
- Can't break down long-term assignments
- Sloppy work
- Messy notebooks
- Loses or misplaces things (books, papers, notebooks, mittens, keys, cell phones, etc.)
- Can't find things in backpack

What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Younger Students (K-2)?

- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring materials back and forth between home and school
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Chooses "fun stuff" over homework or chores
- Leaves a trail of belongings wherever he/she goes
- Sloppy work
- Loses or misplaces things (books, papers, permission slips, mittens, lunch money, etc.)
- Messy desk/cubby areas/backpack
- Leaves a "paper trail"—scattered around the room

3 Key Strategies for Managing Executive Skill Weaknesses

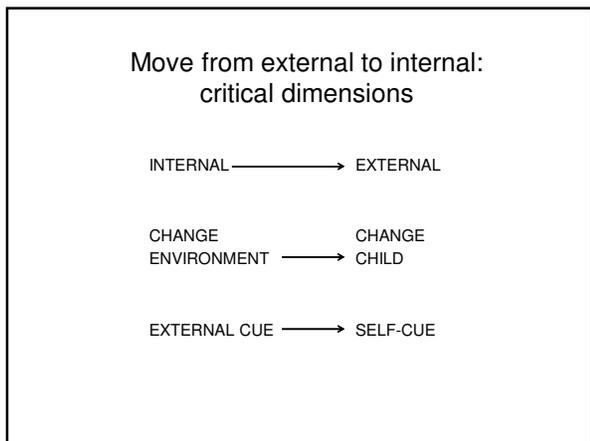
- Intervene at the level of the environment
- Intervene at the level of the child by—
 1. Teach the child the weak skill
 2. Motivate the child to use the skill

Begin by modifying the environment

What do we mean by "modify the environment?"

Environmental modifications are any changes we make that are external to the child.

We can modify the environment for *individual children* or for *whole classrooms*.



- Strategies for modifying the environment for individual children**
1. Change the physical or social environment
 2. Modify the tasks we expect the child to perform
 3. Change the ways adults interact with the child

Environmental Modifications

Task domain/Executive skills	Classroom support
Change the physical environment <i>Response inhibition</i> <i>Sustained attention</i> <i>Task initiation</i> <i>Organization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add barriers (e.g., to avoid runways) Seating arrangements (e.g., place distractible kids near teacher, away from windows) Reduce distractions (e.g., music as white noise) Use organizing structures (e.g., clear plastic containers with labels; bins for homework; consistent space on blackboard for writing homework)

Environmental Modifications

Task domain/Executive skills	Classroom support
Change the social environment <i>Response inhibition</i> <i>Emotional control</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce social complexity (e.g., fewer kids, more adults; supervision on playground; structured play vs. free play) • Change the "social mix" (seating arrangements in class; special table in cafeteria)

Environmental Modifications

Task domain/Executive skills	Classroom support
Modify tasks <i>Sustained attention</i> <i>Task initiation</i> <i>Working memory</i> <i>Flexibility</i> <i>Metacognition</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make tasks shorter or build in breaks along the way. • Make steps more explicit. (expandingexpressions.com)

Make steps more explicit
 Example: How to listen

LISTENING	
Face Speaker	
Pay Attention & Show Interest	
Keep Body Still	
Do not Interrupt	

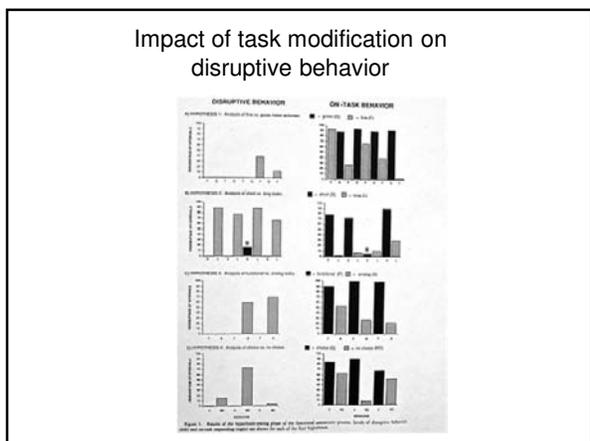
Environmental Modifications

Task domain/Executive skills	Classroom support
Modify tasks <i>Sustained attention</i> <i>Task initiation</i> <i>Flexibility</i> <i>Metacognition</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a schedule, either for a specific event or for a block of time (such as morning work time or the whole day) • Build in variety or choice either for the tasks to be done or the order in which they're to be done. • Make the task closed-ended.

Open-Ended Tasks

An open-ended task is one where:

- There are multiple possible correct answers;
- There are multiple possible ways to achieve the correct answer;
- The task has no obvious starting point; or
- The task provides no feedback about whether or when it is complete.



Environmental Modifications

Task domain/Executive skills	Classroom support
Change the way adults interact with the child <i>Response inhibition</i> <i>Emotional control</i> <i>Flexibility</i> <i>Working memory</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rehearse with the youngster what will happen and how the youngster will handle it. • Use verbal prompts • Embed metacognitive questions into instruction • Remind youngster to use checklist or schedule • Praise youngster for using executive skills—Rule of thumb: 3 POSITIVES for each corrective feedback.

Effective Praise:

1. is delivered immediately after the display of positive behavior;
2. specifies the particulars of the accomplishment (e.g., *Thank you for cleaning off your desk right away after I asked you*);
3. provides information to the child about the value of the accomplishment (e.g., *When you get ready for the first activity quickly, it makes the morning go so smoothly!*);
4. lets the child know that he worked hard to accomplish the task (e.g., *I saw you really trying to control your temper!*); and
5. orients the child to better appreciate their own task-related behavior and thinking about problem-solving (e.g., *I like the way you thought about that and figured out a good solution to the problem*).

TEACH deficient skills

Don't expect the child to acquire executive skills through observation or osmosis.

Example 1:
Goal: A clean room

Directive from parent: *Clean your room*

Response from child with executive skill deficits: *Nothing*

Intervention Plan

Step 1: The parent has to become an external frontal lobe that speaks to the child. It performs the following functions:

- It provides a *plan*, an organizational scheme, and a specific set of directions.
- It monitors performance.
- It provides encouragement/motivation and feedback about the success of the approach.
- It problem solves when something doesn't work.
- It determines when the task is completed.

Intervention Plan

Step 1: Sample statements:

- *Let's start now.*
- *Put your trucks in this box.*
- *Put your dirty clothes in the laundry.*
- *Put your books on the bookshelf.*
- *There are two toys under the bed. It doesn't look like all those toys will fit in that one box; we'll need to get another box.*
- *When you finish, you can play with your friends.*
- *I know you hate doing this, but you're almost done and then you'll feel great!*
- *Isn't it nice to have all your work for the day done?*

Intervention Plan

Step 2: Provide the same information without being the direct agent: create a list, picture cues, audio tape, etc. to cue the child.

Parent says to child: Look at your list.

Step 3: Parent begins to transfer responsibility to child:

Parent says to child: What do you need to do?

Step 4: Transfer complete.

Child now asks himself/herself. What do I need to do?

Example 2: Teaching students how to pay attention

1. Explain that paying attention is an important skill for doing well in school because information cannot be understood or remembered if it isn't heard in the first place.
2. Ask the class how teachers know when kids are paying attention (eyes on teacher or on the focus of the lesson, raising hands to answer questions, visibly engaged in seatwork, etc.).

Example 2: Teaching students how to pay attention

3. Talk about what might be acceptable behavior during classroom instruction (e.g., there's some evidence to suggest that doodling or having something to do with one's hands while listening makes it easier to retain information).
4. With the class, develop a brief description of what *paying attention* looks like.
5. Pick a time of day (or specific class activity) where the student will practice paying attention.

Example 2: Teaching students how to pay attention

6. Determine how the skill will be monitored during the practice sessions. Some options are:
 - Set kitchen timer at random intervals and when the bell rings, each student determines if he/she was attending.
 - Use electronic “beep tape” (available from ADD Warehouse or an iPhone app--IntervalMinder) for monitoring attention.
 - Give each student a checklist and asked him or her to periodically self-monitor and indicate on checklist whether he or she was attending.

Paying attention checklist

Was I paying attention?	
YES	NO

Example 2: Teaching students how to pay attention

7. Begin practice sessions. Remind the class before beginning the session that they will be practicing paying attention.
8. Debrief with the class afterwards to determine how it went.
9. If necessary, set a class goal and add a reinforcer to enhance motivation to practice the skill.

School-wide example:
Teaching Organizational Skills

Salina, Kansas Model

Curtis.Stevens@usd305.com

7 steps to teaching executive skills

1. Identify specific problem behaviors (messy room, not paying attention).
2. Set a goal (child cleans room independently, children pay attention during instruction).
3. Outline the steps that need to be followed in order for the child to achieve the goal.
4. Whenever possible, turn the steps into a list, checklist, or short list of rules to be followed.

7 steps to teaching executive skills

5. Supervise the child following the steps.
 5. Prompt the child to perform each step in the procedure (e.g., *Put dirty clothes in laundry, Put books on bookshelf; Look at teacher while he/she is talking*).
 - Observe the child while s/he performs each step, providing feedback to help improve performance (*You missed 2 toys under the bed*).
 - Praise the child when s/he successfully completes each step and when the procedure is completed as a whole (*Great job tidying your desk! I like the way you kept your eyes on me while I was explaining how to do the math homework*).

7 steps to teaching executive skills

- 6. Evaluate the program's success and revise if necessary (e.g., change checklist to drop things that aren't needed or to add new items)
- 7. Fade the supervision. (e.g., cue child to start task, look at their checklist, check in periodically rather than being with the child the entire time)

Case example: Managing Behavioral Excesses

Max is a 3rd grade student who, when given an assignment requiring some kind of production (math, writing) does one or more of the following more than 50% of the time:

- Complains loudly or refuses to do the task (*I don't know how to do this! Or I'm not doing this stupid paper!*)
- Pushes paper off desk or crumples it
- Roams around room and doesn't respond to teacher directions

Case example: Managing Behavioral Excesses

Behavior happens whether or not the task is within his independent ability. The more difficult the task, the more disruptive the behavior.

Interventions were designed after obtaining input from the student.

Managing Behavioral Excesses— Interventions

- A social story describing how he feels and what his options are for helping himself.

In my classroom, our teacher, Mrs. Smith gives us math and writing papers to do. Sometimes when I get one of these papers I get upset. It is important for me to do my schoolwork so I can learn. When Mrs. Smith gives me a paper to do, if I start to get upset I can look at my hard times board. Picking one of the choices will help me to feel better and help me get my work done. If I forget to look at the board, Mrs. Smith will help me remember.

- A “hard times” visual board with his options listed.

HARD TIMES BOARD



Triggers: What Makes Me Mad--

1. When I get a math or writing paper to do



“Can’t Do’s”

1. Complain in a loud voice.
2. Crumple or tear up my paper.
3. Not listen to my teacher.



When I’m Having a Hard Time, I Can:

1. Ask for help.
2. Take a break for 2 minutes and look at a book or draw.

Managing Behavioral Excesses— Interventions

- Shorter tasks with check-in breaks at end of each section with teacher or paraprofessional.
- After work or directions are given, an adult checks with him immediately to ask if he understands or needs help.
- His agreement that if he begins to get upset and does not remember to use his hard-times board, he will accept a cue from an adult to make a choice from it.

Managing Behavioral Excesses— Interventions

- A rule that if his behavior disrupts class, he will take an out-of-class break for at least two minutes and whatever time after that until he is able to resume his in-class plan.
- His agreement that uncompleted work will be finished during free time or, if needed, at the end of school.

Managing Behavioral Excesses— Interventions

- An incentive system allowing him to earn points which he can use to buy computer time, a highly preferred activity, at the end of the morning and at the end of school. Points are awarded in descending value with 3 points awarded for independent work completion, 2 points given for some initial complaining but his initiation of using the hard-times board, 1 point for his needing an adult to initiate use of the board and 0 points for leaving class.

Managing Behavioral Excesses— Intervention Training

The components of this plan were rehearsed with him in the classroom with the paraprofessional and teacher role-playing 1st and then walking him through the procedure with cues until he could independently demonstrate how it would work. He and staff agreed on a starting time for the plan and at the beginning of the day and on returning from lunch, the plan was reviewed by his reading the social story.

Helping Children Learn to Manage Behavioral Excesses

1. Help the child identify the "triggers" for the problem behavior. It may be that the behavior of concern happens in a single situation or it may pop up in several different situations.
2. Determine if any of the triggers can be eliminated. Technically, this is an environmental modification, but it's a good place to start in understanding the problem behavior and working to reduce it.
3. Make a list of possible things the child can do instead of the problem behavior (i.e., replacement behaviors). This will vary depending on the nature of the trigger and the problem behavior.

Helping Children Learn to Manage Behavioral Excesses

4. Practice the replacement behaviors, using role-playing or simulations. "Let's pretend you...Which strategy do you want to use?"
5. Begin using the procedure in minor situations (i.e., not ones involving big upsets or major rule infractions).
6. Move on to situations where more intense behaviors occur.
7. Connect the use of the procedure to a reward. For best results, use two levels of reward: a "big reward" for never getting to the point where replacement behaviors need to be used and a "small reward" for successfully using one of the agreed-upon replacement behaviors.

Use incentives to augment instruction.

Incentives make both the effort of learning a skill and the effort of performing a task less aversive.

Furthermore, putting an incentive after a task teaches delayed gratification.

Two Kinds of Incentive Plans:
Simple and Elaborate

Simple Incentives

- Give the child something to look forward to doing when the effortful task is done (we call that Grandma's Law).
- Alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities (use simple language: First...then, e.g., *First work, then play*).
- Build in frequent, short breaks (depending on the child's attention span, breaks could come every 10 minutes and last 5 minutes).
- Use specific praise to reinforce the use of executive skills: Rule of thumb: 3 positives for each corrective feedback.

A few additional pointers...

Modify task demands to match the youngster's capacity for effortful work

Some tasks are more effortful than others-- this is as true for adults as it is for children.

Provide the minimum support necessary for the youngster to be successful.

Two equally weighted components:

- *Minimal support necessary*
- *For the youngster to be successful*

If too much support is provided, the youngster won't become independent. If too little support is provided, the youngster won't be successful.

Provide supports and supervision long enough for the youngster to achieve success.

A general rule of thumb is that it usually takes longer for a youngster to master a task or skill than people think it should.

The desired end point: the youngster can perform the task independently without reminders. If the end point has not been reached, then some support and supervision will be required.

COACHING

An intervention strategy in which a coach (either an adult or a peer) works with a student to set goals (long-term, short-term, or daily) designed to enhance executive skills and lead to improved self-regulation.

Key components of coaching

- Correspondence training
- Goal-setting
- Daily coaching sessions to make daily plans to achieve goals
- Teaching students self-management strategies

Correspondence training

Correspondence training is based on the notion (well-documented in research) that when individuals make a verbal commitment to engage in a behavior at some later point, this increases the likelihood that they will actually carry out the behavior.

Correspondence training

What the research says	Guidelines for practice
"Say-Do" is more effective than "Do-Say"	Have the student state what he/she intends to do prior to performing the promised behavior (e.g., "I will raise my hand during circle time;" "I will spend 1 hour studying for my social studies test tonight.")
Reinforcing the youngster for performing the behavior they've promised to do works better than reinforcing them for making the promise.	Praise the student <i>after</i> he/she has performed the target behavior ("I saw you raised your hand 4 times during circle time—you did what you said you would do!")

Correspondence training

What the research says	Guidelines for practice
For youngsters who lack verbal skills, verbalization of intent can be replaced by rehearsal or demonstration of the desired behavior.	This approach could be used with students with autism—for example, having them point to a picture of sitting with another student in the cafeteria to show that they will initiate social contact.
Correspondence training may be particularly effective when the youngster is allowed to choose the behavior to engage in.	Whenever possible, involve the youngster in selecting the target behavior, either using free choice or providing options to choose from.

Goal-setting

Extensive empirical research has documented the value of goal-setting in promoting high levels of performance—in both adults and children.

Goals serve 4 primary purposes

- They *direct behavior* (toward task-relevant and away from task-irrelevant behavior)
- They *energize*
- They encourage *persistence*
- They *motivate* people to discover and use task-relevant knowledge and skills

In the first stage of coaching, we ask students to set goals

- Goals may be academic, social, or behavioral depending on individual students' needs.
- We may ask students to set long-term goals, or we may focus on more short-term goals (marking period goals, weekly goals, daily goals).
- Throughout the coaching process, we remind students of the goals they have set—and we help them track their progress toward achieving their goals.

In the second stage, coaches meet with students to make daily plans linked to their goals.

Basic Format: R.E.A.P.

- *Review*: go over the plans made at the previous coaching session to determine if the plans were carried out as intended.
- *Evaluate*: how well did it go? Did the student do what he said he would do? If not, why not?
- *Anticipate*: Talk about what tasks the student plans to accomplish today--be sure to review upcoming tests, long-term assignments.
- *Plan*: Have the student identify when he plans to do each task, and, when appropriate, *how* he plans to do each task.

Who Can Be a Coach?

- A school psychologist
- A special education teacher
- A favorite teacher
- A guidance counselor
- An intern
- A paraprofessional (classroom or personal aide)
- A volunteer who's been trained

Characteristics of Good Coaches

- They like kids and relate to them in a natural way
- They are empathic and good listeners
- They're reliable, organized, and have good planning skills
- They teach more through questions than lectures
- They have training in coaching

Coaching Ground Rules

- Must be voluntary with teenagers (exceptions apply to younger students)
- Coaching sessions can be brief but must occur daily in the beginning
- Provide lots of support up front; fade gradually with success
- Build in ways to verify student reports

Coaching with Younger Students

- For students receiving special education services, build into resource room time
- Incorporate into end-of-day routine
- Omit long-term goal setting, but consider marking period goals

Coaching Alternatives

- Group coaching--use during homeroom period or in advisor groups
- Peer coaching--train honor students to coach at-risk students
- Reciprocal coaching--have students work in pairs to coach each other
- Train older students to coach younger students

Daily Coaching Sessions

- Build in mini-lessons where appropriate:
- How to study for tests
 - How to organize a writing assignment
 - How to break down a long-term assignments
 - How to organize notebooks
 - How to manage time (resist temptations)

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