

FEBRUARY IS PSYCHOLOGY MONTH

Psychology is for Everyone



“Needs Improvement” ...? Learning Skills, Work Habits and Executive Functioning

PSYCHOLOGY PROMOTES SUCCESS



ONE GOAL...MANY PATHS
HELPING STUDENTS REACH THEIR INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL

This article was prepared by TCDSB Psychology staff based on the latest scientific research in the fields of psychology and child development

Does your child struggle with everyday tasks such as planning, time management, problem solving and keeping track of multiple assignments? Despite their best intentions, do they do their homework but forget to turn it in, lose or forget things, or have a room or desk that is a mess? Are their “Learning Skills and Work Habits” evaluated as “needing improvement” on their report card? If so, it may be that your child has weaknesses in executive functioning.

What is executive functioning?

Executive functioning (EF) is a term used to describe a set of abilities that play a “command role” with regard to guiding, directing and managing thoughts and behaviours successfully. These skills enable one to plan, organize, remember things, prioritize, pay attention, get started on tasks and control behaviours. Just as a railroad conductor at a busy rail station safely manages the arrivals and departures of many trains on multiple tracks, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses.

How do executive functioning skills develop?

While children are not born with these skills, they are born with the potential to develop them. Co-ordinated in the brain’s frontal lobe, these abilities emerge as the child interacts with supportive adults and when provided with skill-building environments. In this regard, adults can facilitate the development of these skills by establishing routines, modeling behavior, and creating and maintaining supportive and consistent relationships. These opportunities in turn will allow children to develop and practice necessary skills before they must perform them alone. When children have opportunities to develop these skills, the benefits can promote success personally and academically. Executive functioning skills continue to develop throughout adolescence and early adulthood.



What do executive functioning skills ‘look’ like?

Given that executive functioning skills are involved in higher order and goal-oriented behaviours, challenges in these areas may lead to significant difficulties with school work and with social situations. Below are examples of how underdeveloped executive functioning skills might impact a child in various areas:



EF Areas	How underdeveloped EF skills may cause difficulties in:			
	Writing an Essay	Math	Reading	Social
Planning/ Organizing	Picking topic, planning, sequencing material	Dealing with multistep problems	Finishing reading a book from beginning to end	Scheduling/coordinating activities
Self-Monitoring	Editing , staying on task	Staying on task	Accuracy	Following social norms
Emotion Regulation	Dealing with frustration, excitement, anger, anxiety, etc.			
Inhibition/ Impulse Control	Editing, accuracy, following structure	Accuracy, ignoring distracting information	Controlling pace, accuracy	Taking turns, following rules and social norms
Initiation	Getting started	Getting started	Getting started	Approaching friends
Sustained Attention	Completing essay, editing	Attention to details, Completing work	Accurate decoding, recalling details	Attending to what friends are saying

While parents may observe some of these challenges while their child is completing homework, it is likely that other signs of executive functioning challenges will be noticeable at home. Parents may see that their child has difficulty starting or finishing a task, following multistep directions, controlling their temper, breaking rules, and keeping their room tidy. It is important to keep in mind that a child may not be intentionally defying the parent, but that they may be unable to complete the task due to executive functioning challenges. It may be necessary to alter your approach when making requests of your child. For example, you may need to give one-step directions so that tasks are remembered, or break down the task into manageable parts to ensure the child is not overwhelmed.

How can Technology Help?

In a world of multi-tasking, executive functioning difficulties can affect one's ability to function effectively in daily life. There are many tools that can help manage executive functioning difficulties.

TIPS: Low-technology tools, such as **checklists, day-timers, post-it notes, use of a highlighter, and calendars** can help with organization and prioritizing tasks. A **sturdy 3-ring binder** to separate school subjects, along with colour coded tabs, and a translucent page holder for important assignments, can help keep paper and study materials in one, organized location.

Higher technology tools are becoming increasingly popular in helping people with executive functioning challenges. E.g., Smartphones can act as an external "executive functioning aid". Students can take a picture of the notes, use the voice recorder or notepad app to help them remember and store important information.

TIPS: Organizational apps for iPhone/iPad include: **MyHomework, Awesome Note, Dropbox, and Evernote**. Software is also available to help organize writing, notes, instructions (i.e. **Inspiration, Kidspiration, Webspiration, XMind, Free Mind**). **Tools4Students** has graphic organizers to help students with chapter notes, writing, and comprehension skills, which can then be saved to personal devices and emailed. In order to increase independence with note-taking, students can use apps such as **AudioNote** or **SoundNote**, which records audio for later reference. Other tools include **Smartpen** by Livescribe, which allows students to combine handwritten notes, and drawings, with audio recording.

Assistive technology, both low-tech and high-tech can be essential in helping children and young people deal with executive functioning challenges.

