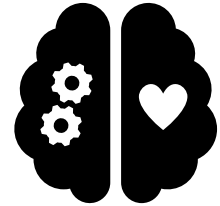


Teacher Toolbox



Teacher Toolbox – November 2023

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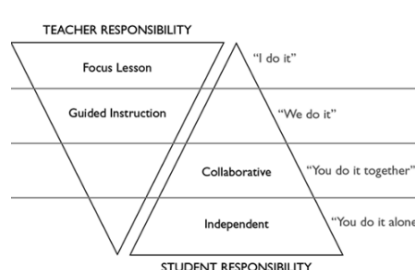


*Setting Students up for LIFELONG Success:
Executive Functioning tools are a worthwhile investment!*

"I have so much on my 'to do' list... but I don't even know where to start!" Have you ever felt so overwhelmed that you froze to a complete standstill and did absolutely nothing? Although we can all probably relate to this occasional struggle, many individuals with brain differences such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit disorders (ADD/ADHD), specific learning disabilities (SLD), and traumatic brain injuries (TBI) are debilitated by challenges with what we have come to know as "executive functioning deficits". These individuals tend to experience these difficulties much more severely and frequently than the "average person", and often struggle academically, socially, and professionally as a result.

Executive functioning (EF) skills are often referred to as "the air traffic control center" of the brain, since this set of skills help us to manage everything that we think, say, and do. These include skills like paying attention, organizing, planning, and prioritizing, starting tasks and staying focused on them to completion, understanding different points of view, regulating emotions, and self-monitoring (keeping track of what you're doing), just to name a few. Basically, executive functions comprise the mental management system that allow us to set goals, plan, and get things done. Although we are not born with executive functioning skills, the roots are established as young as 12-18 months of age and continue throughout the years, until approximately age 25, when our pre-frontal cortex has fully matured.

Adults support is instrumental in helping children of all ages develop their executive functioning skills, which will benefit them throughout their lifespan. The "explicit teaching" model sets students up for success and provides ample opportunity for teachers to monitor students' needs for necessary supports and accommodations. It also provides explicit and immediate, corrective feedback as students move towards independent application. Scaffolded instruction (AKA the gradual release model) is broadly recognized as a successful approach for moving classroom instruction from teacher-centered, whole group delivery to student-centered collaboration and independent practice. Sometimes referred to as "I do it, we do it, you do it," this model includes demonstration, prompt, and practice (Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey 2007). These evidence-based teaching methods are also effective in teaching the critical executive functioning skills that students need to succeed.



Kris, a special educator and creator of www.pathway2success.com, describes how each EF skill "plays an important role in helping to accomplish both daily responsibilities and long-term goals and they often work together in different ways", including the following:

- **Planning** is developing a well-thought-out strategy before starting a task. This involves thinking about what is needed before beginning something and creating a list of steps to help accomplish that goal in an effective way. Strong planning skills can help learners best use their time and complete tasks well, without needing to go back and revise work later.
- **Organization** is using strategies to stay neat and tidy. Being organized includes having a place for everything, developing a plan to keep materials orderly, and cleaning up as we go. Learners with strong organizational skills are better able to find what they need when they need it.
- **Task initiation** means starting right away. That includes not procrastinating, even when it is a less-desired task (like starting homework). Skills with task initiation are critical because they are one of the initial steps in actually getting up and starting a job.
- **Time management** is using time well to complete tasks. This helps us estimate how long tasks will take, prioritize tasks, and use time wisely. Strong time management allows learners to do their most focused work on jobs while also completing assignments on time.
- **Attention** allows us to focus on a person or task for a period of time, ignore distractors, and refocus when needed. Strong attention skills can help to make sure learners hear and understand instructions, focus well during conversations, and concentrate on longer tasks.
- **Metacognition** is thinking about our thinking. Considering what we know and what we don't know about a topic as we learn can be a critical skill when studying for assessments, completing challenging assignments, and even just comprehending new learning material.
- **Working memory** is keeping information in our heads while we use it. We use working memory when we solve complex math problems and juggle numbers in our head, remembering critical details in a story or just thinking back to the directions just given.
- **Self-control** is stopping and thinking to make a more positive choice in the moment. That involves learning how to "hit the pause button," calm down when emotions run high, think through a situation, and make a good choice for now and the future (e.g., short term - raising their hand before asking a question in class; long term - choosing to stay home to finish an assignment instead of going out with friends).
- **Flexibility** is effectively coping with change. This means being open-minded, testing out new approaches, and going with the flow when things do not go as planned. Being a flexible thinker also means being able to see a situation in more than one way, which is critical for problem-solving and perspective-taking.
- **Perseverance** is working through challenges and roadblocks that come up along the way. This means being able to try new strategies, continue working when a task is difficult, and even asking for help, when needed. Strong perseverance skills are necessary for success in all areas of life, as challenges are bound to come up here and there.

Strategies for Supporting Executive Functioning Needs

- ✓ Explicitly teach executive functioning and study skills.
- ✓ Provide clear guidance for routines - directly teach and practice expectations.
- ✓ Post the most used procedures/routines - refer to them often during necessary activities.
- ✓ Provide visual and auditory directions.
- ✓ Ask the student to verbalize their process prior to executing the steps.
- ✓ Break down large tasks into manageable pieces.
- ✓ Utilize memory devices (e.g., mnemonics, songs) for complex concepts.
- ✓ Write homework down in the same spot every day.
- ✓ Give an extra 3-5 minutes to organize before transitions.
- ✓ Schedule a weekly organization time (and a daily check-in for individual students) .
- ✓ Incorporate movement during instruction.
- ✓ Create an end-of-the-day checklist to remember materials.
- ✓ Provide brain breaks during and after instruction.
- ✓ Clearly explain academic and social expectations (verbally AND visually).
- ✓ Use countdowns and time checks during work periods (check out <https://www.online-stopwatch.com/>).
- ✓ Set up and guide students use of a homework agenda and homework binders.
- ✓ Provide visual supports, such as a daily schedule. Posting clear and consistent routines and procedures offer structure to students and decreases anxiety.
- ✓ Maintain a clean and visually organized class environment.
- ✓ Minimize clutter and create clearly defined areas in the classroom.
- ✓ Help kids become aware of their personal distractors and help reduce those distractions.
- ✓ Provide differentiated seating options (e.g., away from windows, standing space, etc.).
- ✓ Teach ways to identify/focus on important information, such as color coding, highlighting, starring, or underlining information, or adding a sound prior to a key idea.
- ✓ Show multiple ways of solving a problem.
- ✓ Model your thought process during direct instruction, have students do this with each other for guided practice.
- ✓ Encourage a growth mindset vs. a fixed mindset as a classroom practice.
- ✓ Prime students for changes in routines or upcoming projects .
- ✓ Set whole-class and individual goals and periodically check-in for progress and reflection.
- ✓ Incorporate creative thinking problems and games.
- ✓ **REMEMBER: Consistent and genuine positive reinforcement is the fuel that keeps the fire burning long enough to achieve any change that you desire!**

Explicitly teaching students sound *executive functioning* tools via modeling, practice, and patience, will significantly improve their ability to function more effectively and independently, setting them up for lifelong academic, personal, and social success! **Visit the TAP Hot Topics Webinar Library at <https://www.ces.org/> and watch the full webinar recorded on 10/19/23 to receive many more Executive Functioning tools to support YOU and your students!**



References

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- <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-executive-function>