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Executive Functioning: What's the Buzz About?

By: Rollo Jones, Ph.D.

Improving your child's executive functioning does not involve buying them a new three piece suit and brushing up on microeconomics for a position in a Fortune 500 company. Although Executive functioning has been described as the brain's CEO it represents something much bigger! Executive Functioning represents a set of brain-based skills necessary to complete any goal directed behavior or task. Now that is a big job!

In a practical sense, our brain executive is similar to the coach of a football team. Although the players (mental functions) can function on their own accord, they are much better when directed, coordinated and cued by the coach. Executive Functions direct other cognitive processes and behavior so that a child may plan, organize and execute their goals in an efficient manner. This can include schoolwork completion, socializing, controlling emotions, solving problems, memorizing information, maintaining attention, even cleaning a room! The list of tasks that require efficient executive skills seems endless. We often take for granted the high level processes required to complete the most basic abilities such as maintaining attention, conceptualizing verbal and visual information, initiating, completing simple tasks and memorization.

As an example, to effectively clean a bedroom one may have to:

- Account for the amount of time it will take to clean the room
- Create a plan of attack
- Find the motivation to initiate the clean up
- Conceptualize how the toys will be organized
- Readjust your organization plan to deal with the toy overflow
- Maintain attention for the extended time it takes to complete the clean up
- Effectively fight boredom
- Resist the distraction of friends playing outside
- Inhibit the impulses to play with the toys
- Self-monitor well enough to know whether the job was well done

If it takes this much work to simply clean a room imagine the complexity of independently completing a long-term science project or appropriately dealing with a challenging class! Executive functioning represents a web of interrelated strengths, weaknesses and occasionally deficits that may hinder children from demonstrating their true capabilities in school and around the house. Due to the sheer scope and components of executive functioning, it may be a little deceptive to suggest that a student has "poor executive functioning" without examining specific areas of weakness or inefficiencies. Mental Health professionals and a growing number of educators typically address executive functioning in the areas of:

- **Long-term Planning and Anticipation-** Conceptualizing the steps necessary to reach goals, make decisions regarding what is important to focus upon and exhibit the forethought to visualize possible "hiccups" in the process of reaching a goal.
- **Task Initiation and Completion-** Conceptualizing and attacking tasks then seeing them through to the end.
- **Working Memory-** Retaining information, utilize past knowledge and mentally manipulate stimuli in order to perform increasingly complex tasks.

- **Organization-** Designing systems that make goal-directed behavior more efficient.
- **Attention Maintenance-** Staying on task despite distractions, boredom or cognitive fatigue.
- **Self-monitoring-** Accurately evaluating one's own behavior and performance.
- **Self-regulation-** Effectively modulating emotions and motivation in order to remain goal-directed and productive.
- **Inhibition-** Refraining from acting impulsively upon verbal, mental or behavioral impulses and desires. Thinking before acting.
- **Task Shifting/ Flexibility-** Adapting in response to setbacks or abrupt changes then move forward with new goal sets or revised plans.

Strategies for strengthening these areas are to help children and youth become more efficient in their performance. We also know that there are situations that may mimic executive functioning difficulty but do not represent a true deficit. An example of this is with students for whom English is a second language. Language acquisition demands may create difficulties in organizing, encoding and manipulating information in English. These situational considerations are extremely important when considering executive skills training.

Although executive skills training tends to be highly individualized for each person, here are a few suggestions for parents:

- Reject the term “lazy” when describing a child who is struggling with executive functioning problems. Executive Functioning challenges represent frustrating and “real” brain based deficits.
- Assist you child in designing routine systems for initiating tasks. Do not simply send them upstairs to complete their work.
- Utilize step-by-step approaches to everyday tasks. Sequence and prioritization can be difficult for children with executive functioning difficulty.
- Assist your child with time management through checklists, timers, watches, visual schedules and planners.
- Provide frequent feedback, modeling and step-by-step verbal support when your child struggles with self-monitoring or impulsivity.
- Help your child create simple organization systems for managing materials and workspaces, filing old work, and color-coding tasks.
- Recognize when you are becoming too much of an “executive functioning surrogate”. Allow room for your child to learn and practice independent skills.

Frequently described as a comorbid “sidekick” to disabling conditions such as ADHD, Autism, Depression and Anxiety, Executive Functioning is now poised to claim more of the spotlight. Counselors, psychologists, educators and parents alike are taking notice and preparing strategies through IEP goals, accommodations, and executive skills coaching programs. Your child's mental health provider, counselor or school staff should be able to discuss possible interventions related to executive skills enhancement.

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