

Strategies to Support Executive Function Skills



	Metacognition	
Impulse Control		Initiation
Planning and Organization		Shifting
Working Memory		Self-monitoring

Metacognition - The ability to stand back and look at oneself in a situation, knowing when choices might bring a certain result or when another approach is needed.

1. Comment about what others are thinking or interested in learning about.
2. Encourage “healthy mind-reading”, e.g. why do you think the principal wants to hold a special assembly?
3. Anticipate the feelings of others.
4. Frequently ask why, e.g. why is the character trying so hard to figure it out even though it’s hard?

Impulse Control - The ability to stop and think before acting. Individuals with weak impulse control need help with the “braking” function.

1. Provide external structure, in the form of general guidelines and specific rules, to teach acceptable behavior.
2. Offer support (e.g., visual cues, verbal prompts) to bolster the “stop” function.
3. Plan in advance for potentially problematic times by identifying what leads to loss of control and providing extra support in those situations.
4. Teach alternatives to negative behaviors. For younger students, teach specific tricks in the form of behaviors that interfere with impulsive physical responses. For older students, work with them to brainstorm more positive responses to the situations.
5. Build on the older student’s desire for more freedom by directly connecting this to the behaviors needed to maturely handle the desired privileges. Align yourself with your child’s strong developmental urges, and take a teaching rather than a punishing role. Speak to your child’s wishes and use these as a natural spur toward better impulse control.
6. Use rewards (tangible, verbal, or otherwise) to motivate desired behavior. If rewards alone do not work, you may also need to take away privileges or allow the natural consequence to occur. Be sure to let your student know in advance that he may lose privileges.
7. Ensure the student’s safety. If the student’s impulsive behavior puts him at risk of physical harm, develop a clear protocol for potentially dangerous situations.

Planning and Organization - The ability to manage current and future oriented task demands in a systematic, efficient manner. Individuals with weaknesses in planning and organization have trouble independently imposing structure and order on tasks and on ideas.

1. Break down tasks into component parts and provide a checklist for each component
2. Offer organizational frameworks in advance that help students organize new material in their heads
3. Teach the use of tricks and technology that help to compensate for organizational weaknesses
4. Develop templates for repetitive procedures
5. Walk through the planning process with the student, and help him plan an approach to the task at hand
6. Provide accommodations at home and at school

Working Memory - The ability to temporarily hold information in one's head in order to use it to complete a task.

Working memory is best understood as an internal "scratch pad."

1. Modify the presentation of information so that it is more easily remembered.
2. Use multisensory strategies such as pairing verbal instructions with visual cues.
3. Teach strategies and techniques to aid recall, such as mnemonics.
4. Provide templates for procedures or routines that are repeated.
5. Teach the use of concrete storage systems that create an external "scratch pad" and so take the burden off the weak internal storage system.
6. Accommodate working memory weaknesses by providing reasonable supports.

Initiation - The ability to independently recognize when it's time to get started on something and mobilize one's resources to do so. Problems with initiation can be understood as failures of the start function.

1. Provide external structure, in the form of general guidelines, cues and support.
2. Develop schedules and routines. Once an activity becomes automatic, the need for the initiation function is significantly reduced.
3. Use technology. Alarms, timers, and other external aids can help cue the "start" function.
4. Start the task with the student.
5. Use rewards and natural consequences for desired behavior.

Shifting - The ability to change gears. It allows one to think and problem-solve in a flexible, dynamic manner. This includes the ability to adapt to changes and to flexibly generate a variety of ways to view a situation or solve a problem.

1. Create a consistent, predictable environment as much as possible
2. Create visual cues for routines and schedules
3. Highlight changes to the routine and help the child build a bridge from what he knows to what he does not know.
4. Provide additional support during transitions and when new concepts, tasks, or environments are introduced.
5. Allow additional time to adjust to changes in routine.
6. Try to teach the child a framework for "walking through" new situations and changes. This includes teaching self-talk (e.g., "This is different but that doesn't mean it is bad", "I need to figure out the best thing to do even though this is new") as well as determining when to seek external assistance.
7. Model a range of ways of approaching a single task or situation. Provide lots of reinforcement and encouragement.
8. Provide a place for self-calming during stressful times and teach self-soothing techniques.

Self-Monitoring - The ability to observe one's own behavior and track progress toward a goal. Self-monitoring can be viewed as the brain's quality control system.

1. Provide external structure and feedback. This needs to be done in a sensitive, developmentally appropriate manner.
2. Teach the use of tools and techniques to improve monitoring, including checklists for repetitive tasks.
3. Highlight the process of self-review and analysis of behavior. Many students with these weaknesses don't engage in the crucial step of analyzing failures in order to improve future performance.
4. Teach the use of technology to help a student monitor her performance.