

A Note From the School Counselor

Nurturing Executive Functioning Skills in Children: A Parent's Guide

Executive functioning skills are a crucial set of mental processes that enable individuals to plan, organize, initiate tasks, manage time, regulate emotions, and adapt to changing situations effectively. These skills are essential for success in various aspects of life, from academic achievement to personal relationships. While executive functioning skills continue to develop throughout one's lifetime, parents play a vital role in fostering their growth during a child's formative years. Below are some relatively simple practices that parents can implement at home to help instill executive functioning skills in children.

- **Create a Structured Environment:** One of the fundamental ways parents can support the development of executive functioning skills is by creating a structured and predictable environment. Children thrive on routines and consistency. Establishing clear daily schedules and routines can help children learn to manage their time effectively and begin to plan their own study schedules and daily activities.
- **Teach Goal Setting and Planning:** Parents can encourage goal-setting and planning by involving their children in setting achievable objectives. This can be as simple as helping a child plan a weeknight dinner menu or a weekend outing. Eventually, children can translate this skill into a more academic realm by planning their own study schedules and long term project timelines. Encourage students to break tasks into small, manageable steps and to break long-term projects into smaller parts. These practices foster goal-oriented thinking and organization.
- **Develop Time Management Skills:** Time management is a critical aspect of executive functioning. Parents can help children learn time management by introducing concepts like prioritization and using tools like timers or calendars. Teaching them to allocate specific time blocks for different activities can instill the importance of efficient time usage. For instance, you can discuss with your child the importance of accomplishing homework assignments in relation to extracurricular activities. A conversation could develop like this: "Jack, you have soccer practice today at 5:00, it's 3:00 now. You have homework in math and ELA, and you have a quiz in Science tomorrow. It might seem like a lot, but let's make a plan to get some things done before practice and some things done after practice. Which assignment do you think is most important? Which one should you start with? How much time will you need for each? Let's make sure to build time in for a snack and a few breaks..." Solid time management skills can help a child feel a sense of confidence in his or her ability to accomplish their goals and fulfill their responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed.

- **Encourage Decision-Making and Provide Opportunities for Independence:** Supporting a child’s decision-making process is vital for developing executive functioning skills. Encouraging independence helps children learn responsibility and self-sufficiency. Parents can gradually delegate age-appropriate tasks and responsibilities, allowing children to develop skills like self-control, task initiation, and organization. For example, involve your child in making age-appropriate choices. This can be as simple as having younger children select their outfits or decide a family activity to do on the weekend. For older children, it can be more cerebral like discussing the consequences of their decisions and encouraging critical thinking about everything from their day to day interactions to their thoughts on real world current events. These types of discussions enhance their problem-solving abilities and their sense of independence. In addition, allow older children to advocate for themselves in social interactions and in communications with their teachers. Hold them accountable when they have made the wrong choice or have not fulfilled a responsibility. Discuss how things could have been done differently, and develop a plan for making things right. Allowing a child to feel the natural consequences of a poor decision or an unmet expectation is often the best teaching tool when it comes to developing decision-making skills and a sense of independence.
- **Promote Emotional Regulation and Limit Distractions:** Emotional regulation is closely linked to executive functioning. Parents can assist in this area by teaching children strategies to manage their emotions, such as deep breathing, counting to ten, or taking short breaks when feeling overwhelmed. Modeling healthy emotional expression also plays a significant role. In addition, in today’s digital age, distractions from phones, computers, and video games can hinder the development of executive functioning skills. Parents should set clear boundaries on screen time and create distraction-free study or work environments to help children concentrate and stay on task.

The development of executive functioning skills is essential for success in life. Parents play a pivotal role in nurturing every aspect of their child’s life. Implementing some basic strategies at home can aid in the development of executive functioning skills such as creating structured environments, teaching goal-setting, planning, and time management skills, as well as encouraging independence and fostering good decision-making skills. In this way, parents can empower their children with the tools needed to thrive academically, socially, and personally. Investing time and effort in fostering these skills early in a child’s life can lead to long-term benefits and help them become confident and capable individuals.

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