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# Autism Agenda



Linn Benton Lincoln ESD-Cascade Regional Autism Program

## IMPROVING EXECUTIVE FUNCTION By Meghan Barlow, PhD.

People often refer to executive function as the “CEO” of the brain because it is what helps us set goals, plan, and get things done. It is a term professionals and lay people have used for years and it’s likely you have used it or heard it used in reference to people with autism, who often have trouble with executive functions.

How we think about executive function and teach the skills associated with the processes that make up executive function is changing. In fact, we can start by throwing out the metaphor of a CEO. Executive function is, as noted, a set of processes, rather than one overall skill. It is important to recognize how complex, and how involved, our executive functioning is in absolutely everything we do all day, every day in order to provide effective supports and interventions for those with executive function deficits.



For example, getting ready in the morning requires you to plan for how much time you’ll need to accomplish your tasks, remember to set an alarm, and, in the morning, decide to turn off the alarm and get out of bed (as opposed to hitting snooze over and over again). Next, you need to be able to properly sequence and organize the “getting ready” tasks appropriately. You need to monitor your time as you move through each task, remember the next task, and be able to initiate the next task once one task is completed. If someone interrupts you, you will need to be able to shift your attention momentarily and then get back on task. Difficulty with these “meta” skills, rather than the actual act of getting dressed or eating, is what usually gets in the way of a smooth morning routine.

Although our executive functioning is a highly complex system, providing effective interventions doesn’t have to be. Here are some steps you can take to help an individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who has trouble with executive function:

Continued on page 2.

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## IMPROVING EXECUTIVE FUNCTION CONTINUED....

### USE (GOOD) VISUALS

Parents and professionals working in the autism field have been incorporating visuals into their interventions for a long time. Being able to picture and visualize our way through specific tasks as well as into the future helps us plan, organize, and execute larger, more complex tasks.

To make the evidence-based intervention even more effective, use photographs of the materials and spaces your child is actually using and living in rather than clip art or generic photos. For example, instead of listing out pictures for a morning routine visual schedule, take a photograph of the child's bedroom. Next, have your child use their fingers to "tap" their way through their morning routine on the photograph. By using this visual activity schedule, they will actually be rehearsing their way through the morning routine, picturing themselves in the space where they are meant to get ready. They "walk through" all of the steps of getting ready as they point their path from the bed to the dresser to the hamper.

Finally, you can increase the impact of visual activity schedules using social narratives to help guide a child with ASD through the steps of a morning routine. For example, "when I wake up, I get out of bed and put on my clothes for the day."

### GESTURES, GESTURES, GESTURES!

A growing body of literature explores the role of gesturing in executive functioning. One particularly interesting finding from that research is that young neurotypical children who used a lot of gesturing performed better on cognitive tasks than children who did not use much gesturing, even when they were prompted to do so. Because of the core underlying deficits in social communication, many individuals with ASD have difficulty using and understanding gestures. By directly attending to teaching and prompting the use of gestures, parents, teachers, and providers have the potential to help individuals with ASD improve their ability to solve problems, achieve goals, keep information in their working memory, and shift more flexibly between tasks.

For example, tapping out and pointing through the morning routine on the visual map is a form of gesturing. If your child looks at the visual map and speaks aloud their steps without tapping the photograph, then prompt them to show you by pointing. If your child requires it, you can begin with a hand-over-hand prompt to help them move through the process.



### PLAN BACKWARDS, EXECUTE FORWARD

Using visuals, show your child what the finished product (i.e., being ready in the morning) looks like. If your child is able, help them talk about what it would feel like when they are ready in time and prepared for the day. This step helps your child develop their future thinking. Now, work backwards. Help your child go through the steps of what needs to be done to reach the finished product and what they need to have ready in order to go through the steps. Taking photographs of each step along the way and having your child sequence the steps from left to right (as opposed to up and down) will help them to think through the process of getting ready.

While a visual task analysis like that one is commonly used with people with ASD, it's often illustrated with generic pictures, rather than photos. Additionally, the steps are often listed from the top of the page to the bottom. Using photographs of the individual doing those tasks in addition to sequencing the steps left to right are slight modifications to common interventions, that can play an important role in helping an individual develop improved executive function skills. Of course, parents, teachers, and providers will need to design appropriate visual schedules based on their child/student's individual needs.

When focusing on building independence, you should remember this simple phrase "do with, not for; do less, not more." As in the case of the visual activity schedule, interventions should be done with as much engagement from the child as possible, not simply created and then given to a child. Over time, adults can take less of a lead in the process and the child can take on more of the responsibility, having learned a system (planning backwards, executing forward) to rely on.

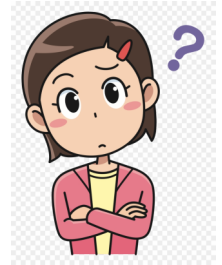
For more information go to: <https://researchautism.org/improving-executive-function/>

## WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING?

# What is executive functioning?

Executive functioning refers to a person's ability to process information. It includes skills such as:

1. Organizing
2. Planning
3. Paying attention
4. Inhibiting inappropriate responses



Many people with autism have difficulty with executive functioning. They may have trouble with certain skills like planning, staying organized, sequencing information, and self-regulating emotions.

Some people pay attention to minor details, but have trouble seeing how these details fit into a bigger picture.

Others have trouble maintaining their attention in the classroom or other settings.

When preparing to do a task, some may find it hard to organize their thoughts and actions in order to figure out what sequence of steps are needed.

Executive functioning difficulties can also be associated with poor impulse control.

Some have difficulty with complex thinking that requires holding more than one train of thought at the same time. For instance, Temple Grandin once said: "I cannot hold one piece of information in my mind while I manipulate the next step in the sequence."

Executive functioning issues can cause challenges in the classroom setting. The book [A Parent's Guide to Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism](#) offers a few tips to help students with autism succeed in the classroom:

- Use a weekly homework log that can be sent from school to home and back, to keep everyone informed of when work is due and progress
- Offer assignment checklists to break up large, often overwhelming tasks into more manageable pieces
- Encourage student to use a day planner to stay organized
- Post classroom schedules to keep all students on track
- Leave enough time to provide instructions, repeat instructions, and then offer individual assistance to students
- Position the student's desk in a place that is near the teacher and away from distractions

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/executive-functioning>

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## FREE VIDEO SERIES-UNSTUCK AND ON TARGET

# Free Video Series Can Help Kids be 'Unstuck and On Target'

<https://youtu.be/cRfGJrhPgJk>

BALTIMORE — Parents know these scenes all too well:

- Their child refuses to get dressed and ready for school.
- A change of plans causes their child to get upset.
- Work-from-home demands prevent attending to their child's question immediately.

What's the best strategy to help the child respond and avoid a meltdown?

Answers to those questions and more are now available in the Unstuck and On Target Parent Support video series of tips and tricks. These tips are especially of use for parents and caregivers of elementary school-age children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).



The [series of free, educational videos](#) is designed to support parents and caregivers tackling common emotional and behavioral topics to help children to stay organized, plan and reach their goals, be flexible thinkers, and regulate their feelings. Behavioral specialists call these skills executive functioning.

By following the tips and skills in the videos, parents can help their children be successful, avoid meltdowns and negativity, and develop a shared language and ways of interacting to achieve calmer, more productive days.

The video series was developed and produced by the University of Maryland School of Social Work's Institute for Innovation and Implementation's (The Institute) Office of Instructional Technology and Media for Unstuck and On Target, a program designed to improve flexible thinking, planning, and self-control of elementary-age children with ASD or ADHD.

It was made possible through The Institute's work with Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C., and the University of Colorado School of Medicine, and funded through a Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute Dissemination and Implementation Award. The videos are available in both English and Spanish.

A core set of parenting skills is introduced throughout the series of videos: seeking to understand a child's behavior, modeling successful behaviors that a caregiver wants a child to emulate, and consistently using key words to remind a child of the executive functioning skills they can employ.

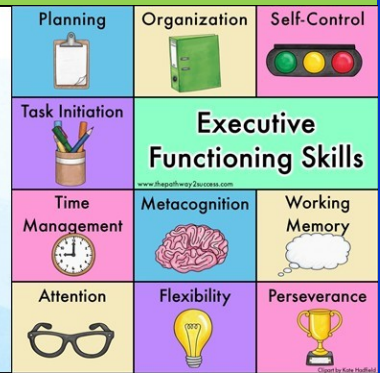
To read the complete article and for more information go to : <https://www.umaryland.edu/news/archived-news/november-2021/parenting-video-series-can-help-kids-be-unstuck-and-on-target-during-pandemic.php>

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## UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

# Understanding Executive Functioning



### What are executive functioning skills?

Executive functioning (EF) skills are the abilities in our brain that help us complete everyday tasks. These skills include planning, organization, time management, metacognition, working memory, self-control, attention, flexibility, and perseverance. Sometimes, it's helpful to think of executive functions like an air traffic controller in our brains. The EF center is assigning tasks to each of the different skills. For example, it tells us to focus and really listen while someone is talking (attention), while reminding us to get started when we have an assignment due at the end of class (task initiation). All of these skills work together to make sure we are working efficiently and effectively while completing daily tasks.

### What do each of the EF skills mean?

Each skill plays an important role in helping to accomplish both daily responsibilities and long-term goals. While reading up on the different executive functioning skills and their jobs, it's important to note that they often work together in different ways.

- **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 after the fact.
- **Organization** is keeping neat and orderly systems in place. Being organized includes having a place for everything, developing a plan to keep materials orderly, and cleaning up we go. Learners with strong organization 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 or doing dishes). 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. With strong time management skills, learners are better able to do their best and 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.

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## UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING CONTINUED...

- **Metacognition** is thinking about our thinking. That means considering what we know and what we don't know about a topic as we learn. This 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. We also use working memory when remembering critical details in a story or just thinking back to what the directions given in class were.
- **Self-control** is stopping and thinking in order 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. Learners use self-control in the moment, such as raising their hand before asking a question in class, and in the long-term, such as 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.

### Why is it important to target executive functioning skills?

Executive functioning skills are in everything that we do. We use them when we plan out a long-term project, when we organize our materials, and when we use self-control to not call out when someone else is speaking. These skills are the foundation for success in and outside of school.

### Can executive functioning skills be improved?

Yes! By explicitly teaching and practicing EF skills, we ensure that all learners have the strong foundation they need to be successful in and outside of the classroom. The idea is that we can train our brains to improve basic skills like organization and self-control.

Kids and young adults can also learn valuable compensatory strategies to help them through their struggles with staying organized, paying attention, and persevering through challenges. Not only does this give learners immediate short-term benefits, but gives support in the long-term as well. Below are some simple, but effective, strategies in teaching and practicing executive functioning skills.



Continued on page 7.

## UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING CONTINUED...

**Embed skills in the curriculum.** Spend time teaching executive functioning skills through your current content and curriculum. For example, teach students how to plan when a research paper is assigned. Spend a few minutes giving organization tips when clearing out an old notebook. Discuss strategies for memorizing words when learning new vocabulary. Embedding EF skills into what you are already doing can be a highly effective strategy for success.

**Problem-solve through scenarios.** Teach learners how to overcome challenges by working through scenarios with them. Ask your students, “If you are headed to class and realize you don’t have a pencil. What can you do?” and “Imagine you are taking a test, but you just can’t focus. What might you try to help yourself?” Come up with your own or use these [executive functioning task cards](#) to get started. Working through these situations when they are not stressful is a huge key. This problem-solving practice can build new strategies, skills, and confidence.

**Use games and play activities.** Use break times to play fun educational [games that can build executive functioning skills](#). For example, play Jenga at the end of the week as a reward to focus on practicing planning and self-control. Use brainteasers in the morning as a warm-up to practice flexibility and perseverance. The options are endless, and kids will have fun while learning.

**Teach skills explicitly.** When learners have significant executive functioning weaknesses, it’s important to teach the skills in an explicit way. That means explaining the skill, discussing the reasons for learning it, and giving students practice. Use this [yearlong executive functioning set](#) to get started with your older learners (or try this [EF set if you work with younger students](#)).

### Which skills should I focus on first?

It’s important to note again that all EF skills work together. For example, learners will be better planners if they stay organized and can manage their time well. With that said, each person has individual executive functioning strengths and weaknesses. That means some learners might struggle with staying organized, while others need extra support practicing self-control.

A great way to know which skills to work on is to use the free executive functioning self-assessment. Join Pathway 2 Success to grab your free copy!

For additional resources and support, and to access the article online go to :

<https://www.thepathway2success.com/executive-functioning-skills/>



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## HOW TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

# How to Improve Emotional Self-Regulation Among Children with Autism and Attention Disorders

Does your child get distracted easily and need to be repeatedly reminded to complete a simple task? Does their room look like it's been hit by a tornado and they are constantly misplacing personal items? Do they have emotional outbursts when plans suddenly change?

For parents, many of these behaviors may seem familiar. But many typically developing children are able to improve their self-management skills, or executive functions, as they grow older and take on more responsibility. Some, including children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, traumatic brain injury and other learning disabilities, have a harder time and may face executive function deficits.

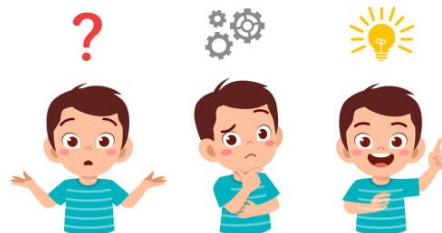
## What Is an Executive Function?

**Traditional definition:** The chief operating system located in the prefrontal region of the brain used to engage in cognitive processes required for goal-directed behavior.

**What this actually means:** Everything that you do every day to manage your own behavior.

**Common executive function processes for goal-directed behavior include:**

- Working memory
- Task initiation
- Sustained attention
- Inhibition
- Flexibility
- Planning
- Organization
- Problem solving



Although executive functions are often thought of as brain functions, Dr. Adel Najdowski, director of the Master of Science in Behavioral Psychology program at Pepperdine University, says all executive functions involve behavior. Therefore, individuals with deficits may be able to learn specific behaviors to improve their executive function performance. In her recently published manual, *Flexible and Focused: Teaching Executive Function Skills to Individuals with Autism and Attention Disorders*, Dr. Najdowski, who also teaches with the [OnlinePsychology@Pepperdine](mailto:OnlinePsychology@Pepperdine) program, outlines principles, procedures and activities that practitioners, educators and parents can use to improve the executive function skills of learners with deficits. This lesson is an adaptation of one section in her book on emotional self-regulation. For more detailed explanations on each lesson, read *Flexible and Focused: Teaching Executive Function Skills to Individuals with Autism and Attention Disorders*.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9.

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## HOW TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION CONTINUED...

### What Is Emotional Self-Regulation and Why Is It Important?

Emotional self-regulation is the ability to adapt behavior when engaged in situations that might provoke emotions such as stress, anxiety, annoyance and frustration. A person with strong emotional regulation skills can:

- Notice when they become emotionally charged.
- Consider the consequences of their response.
- Engage in activities that move them toward their goal, even if they are feeling negative emotions.

**Alternatively, a person who lacks emotional self-regulation may:**

- Overreact to situations when compared to same-age peers.
- Experience negative emotions for a longer amount of time than same-age peers.
- Have a short temper and engage in emotional outbursts.
- Have mood swings.

### LESSON: TEACHING EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

Before beginning the lesson, it's important to note that the child should already be capable of identifying and labeling emotions. The activities should be initiated when a child is in a good mood. This lesson is also meant to be taken in stages with the child moving to the next step after they have successfully developed a mastery of the preceding step.

#### 1. Create an emotional levels chart.

Emotional Level	I feel this way when...
 feeling good	
 a little upset	
 upset	
 very upset	

Create a visual aid that depicts the different levels of emotions that a child may feel, allowing the child to create their own labels for each level. For example, levels can be labeled "feeling good," "a little upset," "upset" and "very upset." The chart should have two columns with the emotional levels in one column. Title the other column, "I feel this way when..." and leave the rows blank for the child to fill in.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10.

## HOW TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION CONTINUED....

Emotional Level	I feel this way when...
 feeling good	
 a little upset	
 upset	I can't figure out an answer on my home-work.
 very upset	I can't wear my favorite shirt.






### 2. Teach the child to assign emotional levels to certain situations.

The person working with the child can prompt them in a number of ways. Ask the child to write down different situations that make them feel specific emotional levels. Another option is to present a scenario and ask the child to identify how that situation would make them feel. For example, ask the child how she would feel if she wasn't allowed to wear her favorite shirt and instruct her to fill in the blank space next to the corresponding emotion.

### 3. Talk to the child about what appropriate reactions should be to different scenarios.

Use the scenarios in the emotional levels chart to identify what should be treated as a big deal and what should be brushed off. For example, talk to the child about how not being able to wear your favorite shirt should make you a little upset, rather than very upset.

[Download a blank emotional levels chart. \(PDF, 130 KB\)](#) [External link:open in new](#)

Emotional Level	I feel this way when...
 feeling good	
 a little upset	Should be here: I can't wear my favorite shirt.
 upset	I can't figure out an answer on my homework.
 very upset	I can't wear my favorite shirt. 

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11.

## HOW TO IMPROVE EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION CONTINUED...

### 4. Teach the child coping strategies.

Identify strategies that children can use when they are feeling upset or very upset and practice the strategies. Give the child hypothetical situations and role-play how to use those strategies.

### Coping Strategies

 Taking deep breaths	 Counting to 20	 Asking for help	 Talking to a friend
 Thinking of a compromise	 Walking away	 Letting it go	 Thinking of something that makes the learner happy

### 6. Practice coping strategies in a natural environment.

After the child has learned how to cope with a situation with advanced notice, ask them what they will do if the situation arises in real life. Remind them that they should always be prepared for the possibility that a situation will arise.

### 7. Measure the effectiveness of the intervention.

Use a graph to plot how often the child provides the correct response over time. The criteria for success may be different at each stage. For example, in the first stage, you may measure how often the child correctly identifies situations that make a child feel a specific emotional level. Once the child is able to score at least 80 percent across multiple sessions, you may begin the next stage. Measure for the following criteria:

#### Criteria to measure for:

- Correctly identifies situations that make the child feel an emotional level—across two to three sessions.
- Correctly identifies situations that are a big deal versus not a big deal—across two to three sessions.
- Correctly role-plays coping mechanisms—across two to three sessions.
- Successfully implements coping mechanism when warned about a difficult situation—across three to five sessions.
- Successfully implements coping mechanism when not warned about a difficult situation—across three to five sessions.

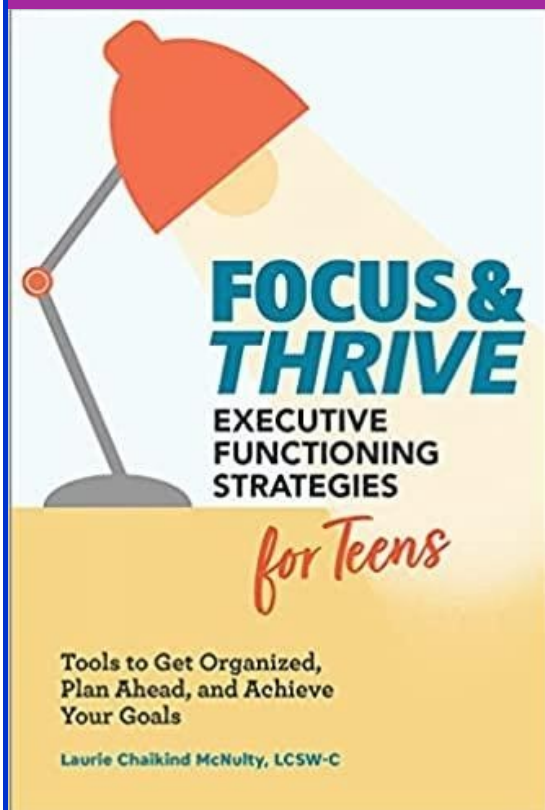
#### REMEMBER:

This lesson is not meant to replace meaningful consequences for a child's behavior. Children who react negatively to situations should not get what they want. Children who are able to use the discussed coping mechanisms should gain access to reinforcers. Reinforcers vary from child to child and can include praise or more tangible assets like candy or stickers. Children should not have regular access to reinforcers throughout the day, and you should make certain the child wants to earn the reinforcer and has not become bored with it. If the child is not responding to the reinforcer, you may also consider whether you need more continued reinforcement or whether you should be reinforcing more quickly after a positive response.

<https://onlinegrad.pepperdine.edu/blog/emotional-self-regulation-children-autism/>

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## BOOK SUGGESTIONS



### ***Focus and Thrive - Executive Functioning Strategies for Teens: Tools to Get Organized, Plan Ahead, and Achieve Your Goals***

by Laurie Chaikind McNulty

*Focus and Thrive* is full of practical tools to help teens uncover strengths and develop executive functioning skills like staying focused, getting organized, making plans, and managing time. From creating a checklist to maintaining a daily routine, this supportive executive functioning guide can help teens feel more confident in finishing everyday tasks at school, at home, at work, and beyond. This executive functioning book for teens features: **Step-by-step solutions**—Discover simple strategies to tackle difficult situations faced every day.

**Easy “life hacks”**—Learn how to overcome challenges like forgetting belongings, communicating one’s needs, and more.

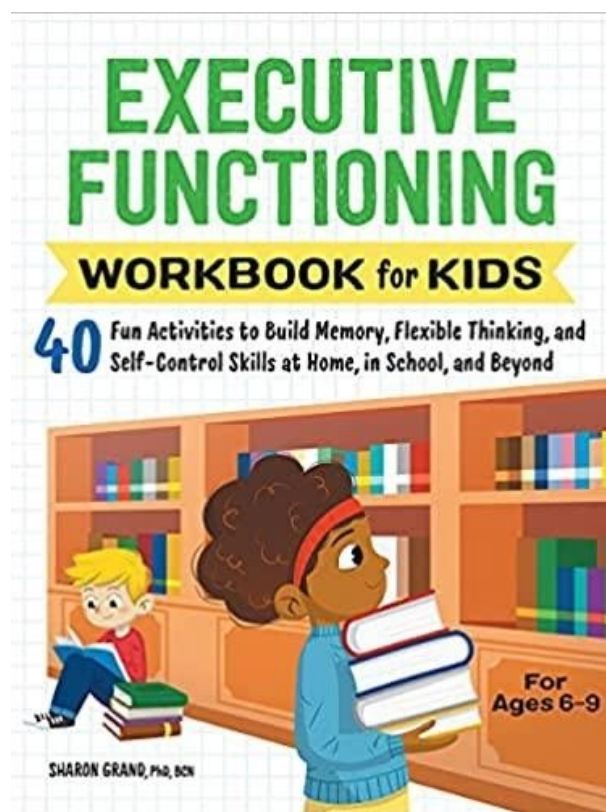
**Powerful tools**—Find a system that works for an individual teen with graphic organizers and sample checklists that can be copied and reused.

### ***Executive Functioning Workbook for Kids: 40 Fun Activities to Build Memory, Flexible Thinking, and Self-Control Skills at Home, in School, and Beyond***

by Sharon Grand

Empower kids to tackle any challenge with the skills they'll learn in the *Executive Functioning Workbook for Kids*. This workbook helps children, ages 6-9, train their brain to improve their memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. Kids will explore 40 hands-on activities to help them conquer executive functioning skills at home, at school, and out in the world.

- **Just for kids**—This book is made especially for kids to work on independently so they can see their skills develop and feel accomplished.
- **Insightful activities**—Kids will discover exercises that inspire them to work hard and appreciate the strengths and talents they already have.
- **Tools for parents**—Grown-ups can get involved, too, with a section of tips and activities that explain how kids learn and how adults can help them succeed.





## VISUALS



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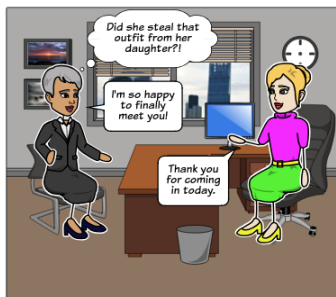

### HERE IS WHAT TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE STARTING A NEW TASK:

1. **STOP** 
  - Stop what I am doing.
2. **THINK** 
  - What do I need to do?
  - Do I have a checklist that I can use?
3. **PLAN** 
  - Plan the steps needed to finish the task.
  - Fill out the checklist that I can use.
4. **DO** 
  - Sit down and start working!

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<https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/executive-functioning>

WORKING MEMORY	INHIBITORY CONTROL	COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY
 <p>Working memory is the ability to hold information in the mind and work with it. The ability to remember instructions, create a plan of action, and pay attention, are all dependent upon working memory.</p>	 <p>Inhibitory control is the ability to control attention, behavior, thoughts, and emotions - instead of acting on impulse or desire.</p>	 <p>Cognitive flexibility is the ability to change tasks, adjust to changed demands, changed priorities, and changed perspectives.</p>

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