

UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVE FUNCTION DIFFICULTIES



A FREE GUIDE FROM
KIDS MATTERS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY



EXECUTIVE FUNCTION DIFFICULTIES

Executive function is required for everything we do and has many parts to it - as a result, difficulties can show up in many different ways.

How executive function difficulty can present in children:

- Distractibility
- Day dreaming
- Impulsivity - leap before they look or think!
- Hyperactivity - can't sit still to focus for long, flits between activities
- Poor awareness of how their behaviour is affecting others
- Poor awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses
- Rigid thinking - difficulty with adapting to change
- Fearful of change or new situations
- Poor frustration tolerance
- Perfectionistic tendencies
- Poor problem solving skills
- Easily upset and becomes more upset than is necessary, or becomes overly excited and has difficulty calming down
- Slow to start tasks they have to do or want to do - require many reminders and support to get through even everyday tasks
- Difficulty with reading and writing
- Poor memory for instructions
- Difficulty communicating their thoughts and ideas verbally and/or in written form
- Disorganised, messy
- Inconsistent with performance of tasks
- Difficulty with playing/occupying themselves
- They make careless errors
- Have messy writing
- Reliant on adults or older siblings

...and many more!



Executive function difficulties are a sign of the brain being underdeveloped and are not the child misbehaving or being lazy.

There are many reasons why executive function difficulties arise:

- Biological - genetics, the way the brain is wired, executive function difficulties are often inherited
- Sensory Processing issues - confused messages from the senses
- Physical well-being - respiratory or gut issues
- Brain damage - from falls, accidents or birth injury
- Underlying developmental disabilities
- Prolonged stress or trauma
- Chronic poor sleep
- Poor nutrition



WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?

Executive Function refers to a collection of skills which interact together and are regulated by different parts of the brain. It allows us to pay and shift attention appropriately, control impulses, and concentrate on how we are affecting others. Executive function also helps us flexibly problem solve, control emotions, do what we want and need to do, remember and use information, learn, perform, plan, organise, and monitor our performance.

- Problems with executive function can be likened to difficulties with our own personal air traffic control system being not adequately staffed - this causes overload, shutdown and/or chaos!
- Executive Dysfunction is not a diagnosis in and of itself, rather it is usually associated with a variety of different diagnoses.



HOW DOES EXECUTIVE FUNCTION WORK?

Executive functions work together in different combinations and on many levels at the same time, just like a computer can work on multiple tasks simultaneously.

Activation:
organising,
prioritising &
initiating to work

Memory:
using working
memory & co-
ordinating with
short & long term
recall

Focus:
sustaining
and shifting
attention as
needed

Effort:
regulating
alertness,
sustaining effort,
processing speed,

Action:
monitoring for
mistakes &
adjusting actions
as needed

Emotion:
Managing
frustration &
modulating
emotions

Executive Function Difficulties are usually the sign of an underlying diagnosis such as:

- ADHD/ADD
- Autism
- Dyslexia
- Learning Difficulties
- Down Syndrome, Fragile X and other syndromes
- Intellectual Impairment
- Brain injury
- Stress and Trauma





STRATEGIES

- Build a warm, engaged and trusting relationship with your child. Having **special time** with your child can be very valuable - it is scheduled time in your diary regularly where your focus is completely on your child - the phone is put away, no chores and not other people can interrupt this precious time that is all about connection with your child.
- Use of **invitational or declarative language** offers a more conversational or open style of communication between parent and child - promoting curiosity and social wonder. It lets children hear how we think so they can learn skills for regulation and problem solving. It encourages social reciprocity and supports the development of executive skills.
- **Collaborative problem-solving** or working out the answers to problems together. Kids are much more likely to have buy in if they were part of the solution.
- **Make tricky things playful & fun** - Kids are far more likely to overcome their struggles if they are engaged, motivated and having fun.
- **Visual strategies** - checklists, schedules, whiteboards and even paper lists, show kids what is expected and help them remember what to do. This helps build predictability and understand expectations.
- For focussed work it is better to do so in **short bursts** followed by preferred activities with the emphasis on staying with the task rather than completing it - this helps with reducing procrastination and helps with improved engagement with tasks children prefer to avoid.



STRATEGIES

- **Breathing** can help slow the heart beat and increase focus. Try playful ways of breathing such as pretending to blow out your fingers like candles or a bubble tub (detergent in a cup of water and blow bubbles with a straw).
- **Use of a visual timer** can be very helpful to help children develop an awareness of time and develop planning/organisation skills
- Try programs like the **Alert Program** or **Zones of Regulation** to help kids (and parents) understand their state of regulation and what they can do about it.
- Ensure **healthy sleep routines** to support overall executive function with a regular bedtime, sufficient sleep for their age and environmental strategies in place to support a gentle glide to sleep and sound sleep throughout the night to wake up refreshed and ready for the day!

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HOW CAN KIDS MATTERS HELP?

1. Check out our **LEARN ONLINE: EXECUTIVE FUNCTION** course.
2. If you need more personalised support, submit an enquiry form to see one of our Occupational Therapists' who can put in place strategies for everyday life and ultimately help your child to achieve their goals.

LEARN ONLINE: EXECUTIVE FUNCTION



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Julia has been working for over 40 years with children who have learning difficulties, sensory processing challenges, anxiety, and developmental delays of every kind. She shares her extensive knowledge and practical experience in an engaging way.

