



What are Executive Functions?

Executive functions are those functions that enable us to plan ahead, organize our work, make good use of time, break down tasks into workable units, consider consequences, and a host of other activities. Poor executive functions can appear at any time in life, among the elderly as well as symptomatic with a number of disabilities.

Common in children with certain disabilities

Children with particular disabilities, especially ADHD, often display a deficit in the area of executive functions. These deficits become more serious as a child grows older. More is expected in the way of independent work, making good use of time, having complicated assignments completed in the allotted time, managing academic multitasking, extracurricular activities, and remembering appointments and chores. Older children are expected to "be more responsible" by handling such tasks independently with little oversight. For some children that "responsibility" is impacted by their "incompetency" in expected performance.

Lack of supports can lead to school failure

It is important for adults to recognize that performance levels may be seriously impacted negatively for some children with poor executive functions. Without that recognition, children can begin to fail because there are no built in supports to help compensate for such deficits. When failure is viewed as a matter of willful noncompliance there is little hope of a turnaround.

Teach compensatory strategies, with careful adult oversight

On the other hand, if children are taught compensatory measures, with careful adult supervision and coaching, they can make steady progress towards more independent effective study habits and successful school performance. That progress should be carefully planned out in small, achievable steps. Those small steps can add up dramatically over a period of time. But just as we expect a small child to learn to walk before running, so progress in overcoming poor executive functions by learning compensatory tools must be looked at in smaller steps.

The neglect of this extremely important area of functioning has led to the downfall of otherwise serious, responsible students. The importance of addressing executive functions cannot be over estimated. Most schools do not understand this area of concern. It is often up to parents to bring it to the attention of school personnel.

What parents can do

If a child has such difficulties, parents might ask the school district to assess the executive functions. The tests are very simple, inexpensive, and can be given by a school psychologist. The approach must always be positive, never punitive. Positive reinforcement works wonders, especially as every child starts out wanting to be successful. School psychologists, however, are usually delighted when the subject comes up. Parents can usually depend on their cooperation and enthusiastic input.

If deficits are discovered, then there should be a written plan to be followed at school and at home, step by step. Parents and school personnel should work together as a creative team, to decide what steps will lead to more self sufficiency. If the deficits are causing a negative impact on a child's education then there definitely needs to be consideration of a formal 504 plan or even an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with a formal goal in the area of executive functions. Children who already have an IEP could have such a goal/goals added to it.

By Judy Bonnell