

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS

For a paper I wrote, “Hanging Out Syndrome,” I started thinking about brain development and executive functioning skills. As I was doing research about executive functioning I realized how this relates to so many diagnoses; such as, FASD, attachment disorder, early childhood trauma, ADHD, ODC, Tourette’s, and many others. This relates not only to my children, the many families I work with, myself, and everyone else.

Included in this lesson will be a short teaching, which you can use with the person you are doing this with: You can have them read it or you can read it to them and discuss it as you go.

1. *To start with give them a short lesson on executive function skills (included).*
2. *Have them do the check off list and answer the 8 questions.*
3. *Then you do your part of the check off list.*
4. *Go over the check off list and questions with them. Be gentle, be calm, don’t rush this, and try not to be confrontational. When there is a disagreement about the need for improvement, the child must prove the facilitator wrong. It will be agreed that during actual life situations, when there is a problem with that skill, the facilitator will call the child’s attention to the problem.*
5. *Talk about the different aspects of executive functioning skills, talk about how they affect their life, and make sure they understand each area.*
6. *Make a plan with them on how to increase their executive functioning skills. By having them be involved in the process there is a better chance of increasing their executive functioning skills. (A sample plan is included.)*

The lesson:

The word executive, as defined by Webster, refers to a person who controls or directs an organization, one who holds a position of administrative or managerial responsibilities. Therefore Executive Functioning refers to how a person controls their emotions and behaviors and how they organize their life. Another very important part of executive functioning is not only the desire to accomplish things but the ability to get them done.

I’m going to give you a couple of definitions that I found online:

1st. site:

The term executive function describes a set of cognitive abilities that control and regulate other abilities and behaviors. Executive functions are necessary for goal-directed behavior. They include the ability to initiate and stop actions, to monitor and change behavior as needed, and to plan future behavior when faced with novel tasks and situations. Executive functions allow us to anticipate

outcomes and adapt to changing situations. The ability to form concepts and think abstractly are often considered components of executive function.¹
1-<http://www.minddisorders.com/>

2nd. Site:

** **Executive Functioning** refers to a person's ability to manage or regulate a collection of basic cognitive and emotional processes. This includes planning, initiation, organization, and execution of tasks as well as the ability to cope with transitions or regulate emotional responses. A person lacking effective executive functioning skills tends to be less productive or successful in school or in life.*

Executive Functioning skills involve:

- *ability to stay focused on tasks*
- *ability to plan and anticipate*
- *organization of thoughts and materials*
- *ability to follow-through and complete tasks*
- *ability to cope with unstructured situations*
- *ability to cope with changes in routine*
- *ability to regulate emotions*

Students experiencing general Executive Functioning difficulties often struggle academically with work-completion, organization, and motivation for any task, which is perceived as difficult, frustrating, or simply unappealing. 2

After reading about executive functioning skills and how it affects our children, myself, I thought how do we increase these skills. I went on to read on the second site about this.

Intervention for executive dysfunction: Students with executive functioning issues tend to respond well to increased structure, routine, and predictability in their lives. The use of lists and schedules can help a great deal. The important thing to remember is that you are trying to help the student develop better executive functioning skills. A common pitfall occurs when parents or teachers simply perform the executive functioning tasks for the student rather than helping him learn to perform the tasks for himself. While it may be necessary and appropriate to initially help to develop lists, schedules, routines, and other structures to 'get the job done', when parents or teachers do too much for too long, the student's dysfunction actually becomes more significant and unmanageable.

2-http://www.ldinfo.com/executive_functioning.htm

One of the jobs of parent, teacher, and other adults is to teach a young child executive functioning skills. Those would include skills, such as staying focused, keeping on task, organizing their day, acting as a conscience, reminding them, helping them emotionally, and a whole array of things which would be thought of

as being things you normally help a younger child do. One of the jobs of these adults is teach the child to do these things on their own. The goal is as the child gets older they can do these things on their own. This is a normal part of childhood development. Just as every kid does not grow at the same speed, they also do not develop executive functions skills at the same speed.

There are some kids and young adults on into adulthood who have a hard time with these skills. At times we can point to the reason, at other times we have no idea why. Sometimes It is because of FASD, attachment disorder, childhood traumas, ADHD, and many other diagnoses. It can also be just part of adolescents.

There are common parenting strategies that can help which include:

- structure*
- routine*
- organizational strategies*
- calm*
- not giving multiple instructions*
- setting goals for the person and pushing them to accomplish them*

As I read what the second site recommended to help increase the executive functioning skills the term art of parenting came to mind. With each child or adult you will need to make an individual plan. You cannot base the plan upon their chronological age, but upon where they are at developmentally. That plan will need to change as they develop. Their development will determine the speed upon which they grow.

As a parent my job is to teach them to increase their executive functioning skills. In the beginning I teach them to set goals, to use a calendar, and a to-do list. At first I'm very involved in helping them make the list and use them. As they get used to doing this my involvement lessens to reminding them and then later just every once in awhile asking them if they're using them.

I've had kids asked me why it matters. It matters to them because how they develop these skills will determine what they are able to do in life. If a kid comes to me and asked to start taking drivers training one of the biggest factors my answer will be how they are doing and developing their executive functioning skills. I've known many kids who could do their schoolwork but would lose it or not turn it in. That is a problem of executive functioning skills.

For some the process of increasing their executive functioning skills may be very slow. They may also only be able to go so far before they developmentally either stop or move forward at a very slow pace. The goal is to teach them skills not to frustrate them.

A major problem is when they do not realize they have a problem in this area. Their lives will be more successful if they will admit they have a problem in this area and they develop strategies to help. A young adult asked me the other day if I was saying that if they don't use a calendar and list that they may not be able to succeed. I told them it certainly could mean that. This is how serious this subject is.

I was asked by one young adult why this should matter to him, because he planned on staying at home forever. I told him that by developing his executive functioning skills it will help him function at home and possibly help him to control their emotions. Plus who knows what their future holds.

If we can improve our executive functioning skills it will raise our GAF. Which is important for independent living. See teaching on GAF.

I know a person who all of a sudden was able to do things that they could not do before. These things would be considered executive functioning skills. When I asked her why they thought this change was taking place she said, "Because I feel better, when you feel better you can do more." She was also forcing herself to try doing more things.

Do you have any problem with: (checking all appropriate boxes)

I do this well	I need a little improvement	I need a lot of improvement	Others think I need improvement		They do this well	They need a little improvement	They need a lot of improvement
				staying focused and on tasks			
				being able to plan and follow through			
				organizing your thoughts			
				organizing your materials			
				showing up for class with your lesson done and school supplies – on time			
				following-through and completing tasks			
				coping with unstructured situations			
				coping with changes in your routine			
				having control over your emotions			
				having good self control over your mouth			
				having good self control over your behaviors			
				setting goals			
				caring out goals you set			
				abstract thinking			
				being productive in school and at home			
				using a to-do list			
				using a calendar			
				do not need reminders to do things			
				working on grade level in school			
				short term memory			
				speaking so people understand you (do people ask you to repeat)			
				do not have troubles with those in authority over you			
				accepting help or constructive advice easily			
				room kept organized and clean			

Then have them answer the following questions:

1. *When given a job to do are you almost always able to get it done on time as scheduled, and done well?*
2. *When given an instruction are you able to follow it most of the time?*
3. *Does TVs, computer, texting, cell phones, or people distract you when you're supposed to be doing something?*
4. *Do you do well with several instructions at one time?*
5. *Are you good at organizing your life: i.e., room, school, and job?*
6. *Normally you get your schoolwork done on time and handed in?*
7. *Do you think you get upset easily?*
8. *Do other people tell you that it is hard to discuss things with you because you become defensive or confused?*
9. *Do you use a calendar, to-do list, or check off list? Why or why not?*

Making a plan:

1. Acknowledge that there is a problem. If you can't admit that there is a problem you can't find a solution.
2. Come to an agreement with the facilitator about which five skills to target.
3. Develop strategies for each target skill.
4. Strategies need to focus expanding the level of each skill and should include multiple types of support, such as visual, auditory, touch, and movement.
5. A designated time should be set aside, at least once a week, to discuss the progress that is being made on each skill and make revisions as necessary.
6. New target skills will be added as previous target skills are improved.

These are subjects to discuss with your child: they are characteristics of a person with a higher GAF:

- Asking forgiveness
- Forgiving others
- Not arguing and bickering
- Being positive, not being negative
- Not throwing fits
- Being respectful, having good manners
- Asking for help
- Accepting help
- Hanging out with nice people who are polite, people who will not get you into trouble, people who have goals and are moving towards them
- Your physical appearance, clothes, hair, makeup, weight
- Others think you're a nice person
- Being patient

Parent, PCA, Therapist, or Responsible Adult: Go through this list and ask the individual with FASD to rate themselves from 1-3, with 1 being not good and three being very good, on how they think they are doing in the different areas. Talk through each item on the list with them; point out how important it is to do well in each area to succeed in life. Keep this List, and go through it again with them later on in life.

Executive Functioning Skills

- Staying focused and on tasks
- Being able to plan and anticipate
- Organizing your thoughts
- Organizing your materials
- Showing up for class or work with your lesson done or necessary items
- Making a plan for following-through with and completing tasks
- Coping with unstructured situations
- Coping with changes in your routine
- Having control over your emotions
- Having good self control over your mouth
- Having good self control over your behaviors
- Setting goals
- Caring out goals you set
- Abstract thinking – thinking beyond the obvious
- Being productive in school and at home
- Using a to-do list
- Using a calendar
- Do not need reminders to do things
- Working on grade level in school
- Short term memory
- Speaking so people understand you (do people ask you to repeat)
- Do not have troubles with those in authority over you (parent, teacher, boss)
- Accepting help or constructive advice easily
- Reporting to work on time
- Being reliable – doing what you say you are going to do
- Notify others when you can't do or be where you need to (being sick)
- Recognizing when you need help and asking for it
- Remaining calm

Friends are very important. How would your friends answer these questions?