



PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #39



projectaccess.missouristate.edu
projectaccess@missouristate.edu
866-481-3841

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS: WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

Have you heard a parent or teacher ask why their very bright high school graduate with ASD can't keep a job? Why is that student failing at college when he was so academically able in high school? It might be that he has one or more problems with executive functioning skills.

The term *Executive Functioning Skills* (EF skills) comes from the neurosciences literature, and refers to the brain-based skills that are required for humans to *execute*, or perform, tasks. Executive function deficit is not a medical diagnosis or an education disability category. These skills are real and necessary for optimum performance of tasks, and deficits in any of these skill areas make success in school and work difficult. There is no exact cause of executive functioning difficulties, but there are a higher number of issues among children who have at least one parent with the same type of difficulty. Researchers have determined that EF is controlled mostly in the frontal lobe, but other parts of the brain can be involved. The brains of persons with EF deficits are different in the area of the deficit from others with good EF.

Students do not grow out of having executive function skill deficits. Fortunately, executive functions continue to develop into young adulthood, and teaching methods for improving these skills are available and more are being developed all the time. Different researchers call the various EF skills by different names, but the skill areas are consistent. Students with LD, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorders are more likely to exhibit executive function deficits. Deficits in EF are not connected in any way to intelligence, or even with any learning problem. An otherwise typically developing child could have EF skills problems, making ordinary day to day activities difficult. The child knows he struggles but is unable to describe this "hidden" problem so that adults can help him. It's up to parents and teachers to become familiar with EF skills and begin teaching children these necessary skills.

In their book *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents*, Dawson & Guare list these skills in order of their developmental emergence:

- 1- Response inhibition; controlling impulses; and self-monitoring
- 2- Working memory
- 3- Emotional control, including social control
- 4- Sustained attention and focusing
- 5- Task initiation
- 6- Planning / prioritization

- 7- Sequencing / organization
- 8- Time management
- 9- Goal-directed persistence
- 10- Flexibility
- 11- Metacognition

Dawson & Guare note that EF skills fall into two dimensions: *thinking* and *doing*. The eleven skills they identify in the list above fall into the two dimensions like this:

Thinking (cognition)

Working memory
 Planning / prioritization
 Sequencing / organization
 Time management
 Metacognition

Doing (behavior)

Response inhibition
 Emotional control
 Sustained attention
 Task initiation
 Goal-directed persistence
 Flexibility

Drs. Strosnider and Sharpe of Frostburg State University in Maryland identified five EF skills areas for basic skill development. They had success teaching EF skills in their clinic setting. In their opinion, working memory is the most important EF skill, and deficits in this area need to be addressed first. The other four skill areas they address are Prioritizing, organizing, sequencing, managing time and planning; Attending, focusing, initiating; Controlling social/emotional behaviors, impulses, and self-monitoring; and Communicating and transitioning. They feel that it's important to identify EF deficits in early childhood and begin immediately teaching strategies at that age.

Resources

- Branstetter, R. (2014). [*Everything Parent's Guide to Children with Executive Functioning Disorder \(The\)*](#). Avon, MA: Adams Media Publisher.
- Cooper-Kahn, J. & Foster, M. (2013). [*Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom: A Practical Guide for Educators*](#). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dalgliesh, C. (2013). [*Sensory Child Gets Organized \(The\): Proven Systems for Rigid, Anxious, or Distracted Kids*](#). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Dawson, P. & Guare, R. (2010). [*Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents, 2nd Edition*](#). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Dawson P. & Guare, R. (2009). [*Smart But Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential*](#). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Dorminy, K.P., Luscre, D., and Gast, D.L. [*Teaching organizational skills to children with high functioning autism And Asperger's syndrome*](#). *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities*, 2009, 44(4), 538-550.
- Guare, R., Dawson, P. & Guare, C. (2013). [*Smart But Scattered Teens: The "Executive Skills" Program for Helping Teens Reach Their Potential*](#). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Hansen, S. (2013). [*Executive Functioning Workbook for Teens \(The\): Help for Unprepared, Late & Scattered Teens*](#). Oakland, CA: Instant Help Books, an Imprint of New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Improving Executive Function Skills – An Innovative Strategy that May Enhance Learning for All Children. Retrieved From CEC Today online newsletter, Summer 2008.

<http://www.cec.sped.org>

Kaufman, C. (2010). *Executive Function in the Classroom: Practical Strategies for Improving Performance and Enhancing Skills for all Students*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

© Project ACCESS - 2019 *Project ACCESS is a collaboration among the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Missouri State University, and Missouri's public schools.