



# The Practical “*WHAT*”s of Executive Functioning:

What is it? What does it look like? What do you do?

Presented by

Erin Green, School Psychologist

and

Danielle Bond-Ishak,

Speech and Language Pathologist

January 24, 2013

# What is Executive Functioning?

The “formal definition” of EF according to LD Online is as follows:

*“The executive functions are a set of processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills involving mental control and self-regulation.”*

<http://www.ldonline.org/article/29122/>

# Executive Functioning-User Friendly Version

## According to LD Online,

- The executive functions all serve a "command and control" function; they can be viewed as the "conductor" of all cognitive skills.
- Executive functions help you manage life tasks of all types. For example, executive functions let you organize a trip, a research project, or a paper for school.
- Often, when we think of problems with executive functioning, we think of disorganization. However, organization is only one of these important skills.

<http://www.ldonline.org/article/29122/>

# Why should we worry about it?

- Poor executive functioning is common with learning disabilities, ASD, ADHD, and ED
- Weak EF skills can lead to “risky” behaviors, poor problem solving, aggressiveness, as well as, poor academic performance
- EF skills must be explicitly taught. Individuals with poor EF skills will not learn them by osmosis or from exposure alone
- Teacher’s may initially act as the student’s frontal lobe, but goal should be for student to learn skills and strategies to become more self-reliant and successful
- Incorporating EF skill development within curriculum and routines may initially seem repetitive, micro-managerial, and even an annoyance, however, once students begin to feel more in control, grounded, and successful they will see the results in their academic work, self-reliance, and social relationships



# 8 General Components of EF That Impact School Performance

- Inhibition
- Shift
- Emotional Control
- Initiation
- Working Memory
- Planning/Organization
- Organization of Materials
- Self-Monitoring

# Inhibition

## **What is it?**

The ability to stop one's own behavior at the appropriate time, including actions and thoughts.

## **What does it look like?**

- Blurting
- acting or speaking without thinking
- inappropriate behaviors for *current* situation or environment, etc.

# Shift

## **What is it?**

The ability to move freely from one situation to another to think flexibly in order to respond appropriately to the situation.

## **What does it look like?**

- Changing activities (especially preferred)
- Becoming “stuck” in situation and unable to problem solve or move forward
- Difficulty recognizing more than one way to solve a problem
- Recognizing and adhering to changing schedules, rules, or situations

# Emotional Control

## **What is it?**

The ability to regulate emotional responses while maintaining rational thought

## **What does it look like?**

- Low frustration tolerance
- Uncontrollable laughing, crying, anger
- Quick to “fly off the handle”
- Inability to problem solve in the moment
- Inability to self-soothe



# Initiation

## **What is it?**

The ability to begin and maintain tasks and to independently generate ideas, responses, or problem solving strategies.

## **What does it look like?**

- Refusal
- Task avoidance
- “I can’t do this.”, “This is stupid!”
- Unable to work without teacher sitting next to student
- Start tasks but never finish

# Working Memory

## **What is it?**

The capacity to hold information in mind for the purpose and duration of completing a task.

## **What does it look like?**

- Can't follow more than 1-2 steps at a time
- Can't take notes unless explicitly on board
- Doesn't take information from one setting to another (school to home, class to class, etc.)
- Can't manage all steps for bigger tasks in head
- Can't multi-task

# Planning/Organization

## **What is it?**

The ability to anticipate and plan for future events, set goals, consider all steps needed to complete tasks, carry out tasks in systematic manner.

## **What does it look like?**

- Misses steps
- Fails to identify barriers in problem solving process
- Can't communicate main ideas or key concepts
- Can't break down larger tasks into incremental steps to complete
- Difficulty getting ideas and thoughts across to others
- Difficulty meeting deadlines
- Does majority of work day before due

# Organization of Materials

## **What is it?**

The ability to impose and keep work space, personal space, and materials in order.

## **What does it look like?**

- Loses everything (black hole in locker or backpack)
- Takes up huge amount of work space
- Rumpled papers and projects
- Doesn't clean up after themselves
- Doesn't utilize organizational systems effectively
- Papers sticking out everywhere
- Laundered assignments
- Disheveled appearance

# Self-Monitoring

## **What is it?**


The ability to check work or performance during or after completing a task to ensure meeting imposed expectations.

## **What does it look like?**

- Lack of self-talk
- Once task is finished, it's finished (“won’t” recheck)
- Does not recognize how their behavior impacts others
- Doesn’t compare them selves to others in room to gauge what they should be doing
- Can’t judge when they are on the “wrong track”
- Easily frustrated with feedback or suggestions

# Executive Functioning Instruction

- Research shows **and** it is best practice to embed executive functioning instruction and tools into your curriculum and programs.
- Instruction should include consistent expectations for use of the skills and strategies being taught, modeling, practice, and real life application across a **variety** of settings.
- Individuals should be taught *how* to use them, *when* to use them, and *why* they should be used.



# **Simple, yet effective, tools to facilitate more successful executive functioning**

In the real world, the student won't have you around to assist them with successfully navigating and completing work and life tasks. Teach **simple, inexpensive, subtle**, yet effective, tools and strategies they can use in their daily lives.

# What should we, as teachers, learn from this?

- Use easily accessible tools
- Teach how to use tools
- Model practical tool use in everyday situations (both academic and non-academic)
- Practice tool usage repeatedly
- Refer students to use tools to increase self-reliance

But **ULTIMATELY...**





Don't be a  
**TOOL!**

Simplistic “coaching” steps throughout the building, for example...

## Late to class



# Visual “coaching” support

- As students master skills, visuals can and should be replaced by new area of executive functioning skills.
- They can easily be presented and reviewed during morning meetings.
- Should be very simple, repetitive and easily recalled by students (rolling their eyes isn't always a bad thing).

Brief daily class “to do” list/schedule up on board  
and checked off as completed.

January 24, 2013

Period 1-U.S. History

- 7:45-7:48 Agenda
- 7:48-8:10 Civil War video  
Take 5 point notes
- 8:10-8:32 Civil War poster project
- 8:32-8:35 Agenda

\*\*\*\* Civil War poster due Friday 1/25/13\*\*\*\*

# Daily class “to do” list visual support

- Very brief
- Updated daily, prior to class
- Incorporates consistent modeling, practice and application of agenda as a tool
- Decreases anxiety
- Review previous class' entries to “get up to speed” with what is being done today.
- Allows students who missed class to identify what was missed they missed more independently
- Encourage checking off items as completed
- Break down assignments/projects and show due dates visually.

Short, written steps for each activity (this assists with self-advocacy...two birds, one stone)

## Civil War Poster

**Step 1:** Pull out project rubric.

**Step 2:** Use resources (computer, books, handouts, etc.) to identify 10 facts. (by Friday)

**Step 3:** Create draft plain paper with layout.

**Step 4:** get teacher approval. (by Tuesday)

**Step 5:** Gather all materials needed-poster board, markers/colored pencils, notes, print outs glue, scissors

**Step 6:** Assemble final product

**Step 7:** Turn in (by Thursday)

# “to do” list support

- Makes larger tasks seem less overwhelming when written as list
- Assists with “where do I even begin?”
- Removes you as the verbal recording...
- Increases specificity with self-advocacy (“I need help with step 4”)
- Allows teacher to impose time limits on each step, if needed (e.g. 2 minutes to gather materials, 40 minutes to gather facts and pictures, etc.)
- Defines clear beginning and end
- Can be presented individually as handout, or up on board or overhead

# Agenda/day planner

## **Purpose:**

- To assist in organization via teaching information and time management using visual layout
- To accommodate for memory difficulties
- To reinforces what has been taught previously
- To teach valuable life skill on how to schedule and manage multiple pieces of information
- To teach and reinforce student ownership
- To increase school/home communication and recall



# DO's and DON'Ts of Teaching and Reinforcing use of the Agenda Book

## DO...

- ❑ 1st...Check all agenda's initially to set the expectation.
- ❑ Then...Check all agenda's intermittently (at least weekly) to keep expectation up
- ❑ And finally...Check "random" agenda's intermittently to sustain expectation throughout the course.
- ❑ Encourage all students to have agendas everyday
- ❑ Refer them to them frequently (e.g. "When is this due?"..."What did you put in your agenda?"
- ❑ Model exactly what you want to see written in their agenda's initially
- ❑ Be brief and encourage use of abbreviations and symbols
- ❑ Incorporate agenda book expectations into curriculum and grading (Be creative!!!!)
- ❑ Have students write down when assignments are due on the actual due date(if not due the next day)
- ❑ Break down assignments with incremental due dates in agenda
- ❑ Teach students to write "ahead" in agendas
- ❑ Give verbal, as well as, visual reminders that assignments/tests/etc. due dates are closing in
- ❑ Have students write down new information in their agenda's at the beginning of class when they are settling in
- ❑ Have students write "no homework" or "O" in space to acknowledge each class
- ❑ Encourage students to check off completed, turned in work (not scribble it out completely or rip out pages)
- ❑ Allow time to clarify questions/assignments

# DO's and DON'Ts of Teaching and Reinforcing use of the Agenda Book (con't)

## DON'T...

- Shout out homework as students are exiting the room-Most won't pay attention or hear you (and you just gave them the perfect excuse!)
- Allow students to go longer than a day or two without an agenda
- Turn using agenda into a lengthy writing task
- Expect that people other than the student need to read or use it. (Good luck to anyone trying to figure out my agenda...)

# Visual timers

- Many students struggle with accurately gauging the passage of time and/or with time management for tasks



# Visual Timers as supports

When to use...

- ❖ During individual “to do” tasks in class
- ❖ Break times
- ❖ Transitions
- ❖ During individual processing time, whether in or out of classroom
- ❖ Whenever ending of activity “drags”

# Large calendars (monthly/quarterly)

## Purpose:

- Visual support for planning, organization, time management, and management of multiple tasks over an extended period of time
- Assists in providing long term “whole picture” thinking vs. just short term “parts”
- Limits surprises
- Information can be found in one place
- Where visual timer, shows time span for minutes, large calendar shows time span for days and weeks

# Large calendars (monthly/quarterly) Do's and Don'ts

## DO...

- Keep a large, easy to see, calendar in a clearly visible place
- Keep it accurate and as up to date as possible
- Break down assignments with incremental due dates on the calendar
- Teach students to write and look “ahead” on calendar
- Give verbal, as well as, visual reminders that assignments/tests/etc. due dates are closing in
- Highlight important information
- Should be used for non-academic information as well

# Large calendars (monthly/quarterly) Do's and Don'ts –con't

## DON'T...

- Forget to update
- Display in area not easily seen by all
- Rely on verbal statements only to inform students of upcoming events
- Forget to include days off, vacations, appointments, changes in schedules, field trips, mid-terms, last day of school etc.

## And finally,

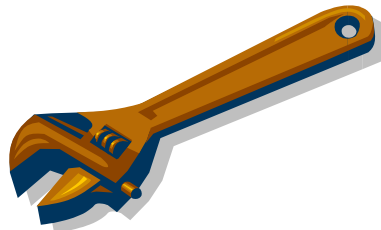
Think about the strategies you use to navigate your own hectic lives. What are the strategies/tools you couldn't live without.

What tools do your students currently have to help them manage increasingly demanding and chaotic schedules and demands of the adult world.

And remember, people as a strategy, is “iffy”, at best, especially if a student has tumultuous relationships on the best of days...



**TEACH the tool,  
Don't be one!**



**Thanks!**