



# Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

## Mental Health Quick Notes

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Winter Newsletter  
February 2011

### What are Executive Function Skills and What Do They Have to Do With My Child's Homework?

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It is not uncommon for children and teens to occasionally miss or turn in a homework assignment late. If you talk to teachers, there are children and teens who show up to class without pencils, can't find things or have messy book bags or desks. While all this may be normal at times there are also students, some of whom are very intelligent, who chronically miss assignments, turn things in late, miss directions, lose things, or are so disorganized they can't find anything. For many of these students, it takes everything they have to get out the door every morning on time with the materials they need for the day. Some of these students are successful at school because there is a parent at home working overtime to make sure they are organized, know where all their possessions are, track their assignments, and prompt and remind them to do everything. These parents often worry about how their child will survive without them.

Are these children simply lazy and unmotivated? Probably not. It is likely that they may have poor executive function skills. If they have some other disability like autism, ADHD, a learning disability, bipolar disorder, etc., there is an even greater likelihood that there is a problem with their executive functions. In recent years school districts appear to be including an assessment of executive function skills more often in assessments of children suspected of having learning problems, mental health or other disabilities that may be significantly impairing school performance.

What are executive function skills? The concept of executive functions or executive skills comes from neuropsychology/neuroscience and refers to the processes in the brain that are necessary to perform tasks. This includes things like: planning for the future, the ability to inhibit or delay responding, initiating behavior, and shifting between activities flexibly (Packer, 2010). It is important to note that there is some overlap with problems with working memory and emotional control which, by themselves, are not executive functions (Packer, 2010). More simply, executive skills allow us to decide what tasks we will pay attention to and choose to do

(Hart and Jacobs, 1993). One way that executive skills help us is through the use of specific thinking skills to choose and work towards goals or develop solutions to problems (Dawson and Guare, 2004). According to Dawson and Guare (2004) these skills include the following:

**Planning** – The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what's important to focus on and what's not important.

**Organization** – The ability to arrange or place things according to a system.

**Time management**- The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadline. It also involves a sense that time is important.

**Working memory**- The ability to hold information in mind while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project problem-solving strategies into the future.

**Metacognition**- The ability to stand back and take a bird's-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself, "How am I doing?" or "How did I do?") (Dawson and Guare, 2004).

Secondly, we need other executive skills to modify our behavior as we attempt to reach our goals. These skills include:

**Response inhibition**-The capacity to think before you act. This ability to resist the urge to say "no" or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

**Self-regulation of affect**- The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

**Task initiation**- The ability to begin a task without undue procrastination, in a timely fashion.

**Flexibility**- The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. It involves adaptability to changing conditions.

**Goal-directed persistence**- The capacity or drive to follow through to the completion of a goal and not be put off by other demands or competing interests (Dawson & Guare, 2004).

Children start developing executive skills in infancy and continue to develop these skills through adolescence. Until children's skills are fully developed they rely on adults to either modify the environment OR provide cues and directives to compensate. The ultimate goal is for children and adolescents to independently use executive skills to complete tasks commensurate with their developmental level. In addition to academic and school related tasks, poor executive functioning affects other tasks as well, including chores and independent living tasks.

As some readers may have already surmised, adults can also be affected by poor executive function skills. You may know someone who chronically misses appointments or is always late. They may miss deadlines at work frequently and have difficulty prioritizing tasks. Maybe they are so disorganized they can rarely find things. People do not outgrow executive function problems. What they do is learn strategies to compensate for weaknesses.

If you suspect that your child has significant problems with executive function skills it is important to get an assessment of which specific executive skills they are experiencing difficulty with. If you suspect that your child may have problems with executive function skills, have them evaluated by a psychologist either privately or through the school psychologist. Once your child has been evaluated, then intervention strategies should be planned and carried out based on the specific skills with which your child is experiencing difficulty.

Some important things to keep in mind are that if a child has poor executive function skills he/she needs help to improve these skills. They are not simply being lazy. Applying negative consequences to the children without giving the strategies to cope or make up for weak skills will not work. It is important to address these skills and also resist the temptation to keep compensating

## **Executive Functioning Skills (cont'd)**

for your child at home and school. Finally, expect that it could be a bumpy road until the person with the executive function problems figures out what works for them. However, consulting psychologists and therapists, school psychologists, counselors and teachers, and resources like those listed below can help you and your child discover what works.

### **References**

Dawson, P. & Guare, R., (2004). *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents: A Practical Guide to Assessment and Intervention*. New York, N.Y.: Guilford

Hart, T., & Jacobs, H.E. (1993). Rehabilitation and management of behavioral disturbances following frontal lobe injury. *Journal of head trauma Rehabilitation*, 8, 1-12.

Packer, L.E. (2010): *Overview of Executive Dysfunction*. Retrieved 10/17/10 from Tourettes Syndrome "Plus": <http://www.tourettesyndrome.net/disorders/executive-dysfunction/overview-of-executive-dysfunction/>

### **Resources**

To read more about executive function skills, how to assess these skills and what to do to remediate specific skills, *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson, EdD., and Richard Guare, Ph.D., is an excellent resource. It is written for parents and includes screening checklists not just for children but parents who might have similar problems as well.

**Riegler • Shienvold & Associates provides comprehensive mental health services for individuals, couples, and families.  
Please contact us with any questions.**

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