

Executive Functioning



Students with executive function issues are commonly misunderstood in the classroom. Missed assignments, missed deadlines, and becoming overwhelmed by projects with multiple steps or parts often result in the child being mislabeled as lazy or unmotivated. This can lead to underachievement, low self-esteem, and adverse learning experiences and outcomes for the student.

Executive function issues are common in twice-exceptional students, and it can be difficult to understand why a bright student is unable to perform to their potential. Access to appropriate strategies designed to help them address lagging executive function is essential.

Executive Function Explained

To learn, work and manage daily life, humans use a set of mental skills known as executive functions to supervise, organize and regulate memory, thinking, and self-control. Executive function steadily develops from a young age through the twenties with timing of development unique to each individual.

Successful executive functioning helps students pay attention, organize, plan, prioritize, initiate and complete tasks. It also positions them to maintain focus, understand other perspectives, regulate emotions, and self-monitor. The uneven development of executive function can negatively affect a student's ability to meet expectations in school, at home, and in social situations, making early identification of lagging development and executive dysfunction essential.

Identifying students with executive function challenges can be difficult. There are a number of assessments that help to pinpoint issues, and it is essential they are administered as part of a full evaluation by highly qualified professionals to

ensure a comprehensive review of the student's full learning profile. Assessments of executive function include a focus on a student's working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control.

In the classroom, students use working memory for activities such as reading text, holding onto the information they've read, and then using the information to answer questions. Cognitive flexibility allows the student to answer problems in multiple ways and make connections between different concepts. Inhibitory control helps them refrain from blurting out answers, becoming distracted by outside stimuli, and acting impulsively. Each of these areas is important to operating within classroom expectations and being ready to learn.

Unresolved issues with executive function can lead to less desirable learning and living experiences, therefore it is essential to provide early and consistent access to the expertise, tools and resources the student needs to reach their full potential. Strength-based and talent-focused approaches are an effective complement to strategies for strengthening executive function skills and should be a focus both in and out of school.



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Characteristics of Executive Function Issues

When working memory, cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control are coordinating effectively, a student is considered to have good executive function and likely will meet the expectations and demands for learning, thinking, working and living. When these areas do not coordinate effectively, struggling in the classroom, at home and in social situations is common. Executive function issues vary greatly by individual and can resemble or coincide with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, and other learning disabilities. Students exhibiting difficulty with the following tasks may be dealing with executive function issues:

- Initiating and/or completing tasks
- Prioritizing what needs to be done
- Remembering what they hear or read
- Following directions or a sequence of steps
- Panicking when rules or routines shift
- Switching focus from one task to another
- Becoming fixated or overly emotional
- Organizing their thoughts
- Keeping track of their belongings
- Managing their time

Supporting Students with Executive Function Issues

There is no one-stop-shop for supporting students with executive function issues in school. Approaches should be personalized for the student and depend heavily on their learning profile and individual personality preferences. A broad range of support strategies and therapies can help strengthen areas of weakness including occupational, speech and psychological therapies; support for reading; cognitive behavioral therapy in combination with medication to treat coexisting conditions such as ADHD; behavior modification programs such as token systems and daily report cards; special accommodations via 504 Plans or individualized education programs (IEP); informal accommodations such as preferential seating near the front of the room or away from distractions; dividing large assignments into small pieces; and offering frequent movement breaks. Trying multiple approaches may be necessary to find what works best for the student.

At home, focusing on the positive rather than the negative through rewards and privileges can be effective alongside checklists, planning, and in some cases, timers to help with schedules. Young people and adults alike can benefit from external reminders such as signs, lists, journals, apps, clocks, and counters, as well as celebrating accomplishments and reaching goals. It is critical to focus both on strengthening current skills and introducing new skills as well as respecting the individual and their full cognitive profile. Patience, understanding, and collaboration between parents, teachers and therapists also contribute significantly to student academic success and their social and emotional well being.

Resources for Parents & Educators

- 2e News
- Bright & Quirky
- Davidson Institute for Talent Development
- GHF Gifted Learners (formerly Gifted Homeschoolers Forum)
- Hoagies' Gifted Education
- Let's Talk 2e
- National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC)
- Renzulli Center at University of Connecticut
- Roeper Review
- Summit Center
- Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)

About Summit Center

Summit Center, founded by Drs. Daniel B. Peters and Susan Daniels, provides educational and comprehensive assessments, consultations, and counseling for children, teens, adults, and families. We work with clients who are neurodiverse, gifted, talented, twice-exceptional (have both gifted and less developed abilities), and/or are asynchronous in their development. Summit Center has assembled an expert team of professionals and specialists dedicated to using a strengths-based approach to help our clients reach their fullest developmental potential.