

Resources, Activities, and Strategies for Developing Executive Function Skills at Home

This list offers practical activities and strategies families can use at home to help their children develop executive function (EF) skills. These skills are critical for success in school and daily life. They include working memory, task initiation, organization, time management, and emotional regulation.

Working Memory

Working memory helps children hold and manipulate information in their minds. Here are some activities to enhance it:

- **Memory Games:** Play games like Memory or Simon Says to improve the ability to retain and recall information.
- **Repeat and Review:** Encourage your child to repeat instructions out loud or use visualization to remember steps in a process.
- **Chunking Information:** Break down complex tasks into smaller parts to make them easier to remember and manage.
- **Story Recall:** After reading a story, ask your child to retell the events in order, helping to reinforce memory.

Task Initiation

Task initiation is the ability to begin tasks without procrastination.

- **First-Then Statements:** Use “first-then” language, such as “First we do homework, then you can play outside,” to help children start tasks.
- **Timers and Routines:** Set a timer to create urgency for starting tasks, and establish daily routines to make task initiation more automatic.
- **Break It Down:** Help your child break tasks into smaller, manageable steps. Reward them for completing each step to build momentum.
- **Visual Cues:** Use checklists or visual schedules to remind your child of what needs to be done.

Organization

Organization is the ability to keep track of information and materials.

- **Create Visual Systems:** Use labels, color-coding, and containers to organize school supplies, toys, and clothes.
- **Daily Clean-Up:** Set aside a specific time each day for cleaning up. Teach your child to tidy up one area at a time, like their backpack or desk.
- **Planning Tools:** Encourage the use of planners, calendars, or to-do lists to help organize assignments and activities.
- **Model Organization:** Show your child how you stay organized and involve them in organizing shared spaces.

Time Management

Time management is the ability to plan how to use time effectively.

- **Use a Visual Timer:** Set a timer for specific tasks so your child can see how much time they have left, encouraging them to stay focused.
- **Create a Daily Schedule:** Help your child create a simple, structured schedule to follow each day. Include time for breaks and fun activities.
- **Estimate Time:** Ask your child how long they think a task will take, then time it to help them understand how to allocate time realistically.
- **Prioritize Tasks:** Teach your child how to prioritize tasks by labeling them as “important” or “can wait” and encourage starting with the most critical tasks.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage emotions in a healthy way.

- **Deep Breathing Techniques:** Teach your child simple deep breathing exercises to calm down when feeling overwhelmed or upset.
- **Emotion Charts:** Use emotion charts to help children label and identify their feelings, encouraging self-awareness and control.
- **Model Calm Behavior:** Show your child how you manage your emotions in challenging situations by talking through your feelings.
- **Use Positive Self-Talk:** Encourage your child to use positive phrases, like “I can handle this,” to manage frustration and anxiety.

Flexibility

Flexibility is the ability to adapt to changing situations and think in new ways.

- **Role Play:** Role-play different scenarios where your child has to think of new solutions or change their plans. For example, “What if we need to change the order of our day?”
- **Switching Tasks:** Create small games where children must switch between tasks, helping them practice adaptability.
- **Encourage New Experiences:** Introduce your child to new activities and ask them to reflect on how they adapted to the change.
- **Problem-Solving Challenges:** Give your child puzzles or brain teasers that require flexible thinking to solve.

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is the ability to evaluate one's own performance and behavior.

- **Reflection Time:** After completing a task, ask your child to reflect on what went well and what they could improve next time.
- **Checklists:** Provide a simple checklist your child can use to track their progress on tasks, helping them self-evaluate.
- **Role Models:** Discuss how successful individuals monitor their progress and adjust their efforts to reach goals.
- **Praise Effort, Not Just Results:** Encourage self-monitoring by praising the effort your child puts into a task, regardless of the outcome.

Sustained Attention

Sustained attention is the ability to stay focused over an extended period.

- **Set Specific Focus Times:** Use a timer for focused work periods (e.g., 15-minute intervals) and build in short breaks for rest.
- **Engage in Focused Activities:** Play board games or do puzzles that require sustained attention to complete.
- **Minimize Distractions:** Help your child identify and reduce distractions in their workspace, like turning off the TV or putting away toys.
- **Use a “Focus Object”:** Have your child use a small, quiet fidget tool to keep their hands occupied while staying focused on a task.