

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION

WHAT IS EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION?

Executive functioning is a term for all of the mental processes that go into planning, organising, and carrying out tasks. Some conditions, like autism and ADHD, can cause executive dysfunction – finding these planning and organising processes difficult or impossible.

A child with executive dysfunction might consistently forget to bring necessary things to school or to take important things home. They might struggle to organise their time or understand how long it will take to do a task. They might have difficulty switching between activities or planning the sequence of things they will need to do to complete an activity.

Children with executive dysfunction may also become stressed or anxious about starting a new activity, going to a different location, or doing something they've never done before – even if they're looking forward to the actual activity. Because they know that they frequently forget things, skip essential steps in the process of getting ready, or mess up an important task because they're not in control of their attention, they can become constantly anxious that they will be embarrassed or in trouble, or that they will ruin the activity for themselves and/or everyone else.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

VISUAL REMINDERS. Have the day's schedule written up somewhere, along with what the children will need for each activity (having this second part in picture form can save space).

CHECKPOINTS. Before the child leaves school for the day, check with them that they have everything they came in with (they may need a list of specific things), along with any homework or notices they need to take home. Before they go swimming, or to another classroom, or on a trip, run through a list with them to check that they have everything they need while there's still a chance to grab whatever they've forgotten.

PATIENCE. Remember that children with executive dysfunction are not messing up on purpose – they know that they frequently get things wrong, and they would love to get it right more often! Staying calm and patient with a child who has forgotten something vital or messed up a task will help to reassure the child that their executive functioning struggles don't need to cause total disaster, and that they have someone on their side to help them get things back on track.

ASSIGN A BUDDY. For older children, it can help to give the child with executive dysfunction another child to check themselves against (and it can take some of the pressure off the teachers and staff). Have the child look at what their buddy is bringing to the new activity, and check that what they're bringing matches; or have them check in with their buddy that they're on the same step of a task.

HAVE A PLAN THAT INCLUDES ASKING FOR HELP. Children with executive dysfunction will sometimes get stuck when they can't work out what the next step is or how to move forward. Having a visual reminder that they can ask a teacher for help, or including "If you're still on page 2 in ten minutes, ask for help", or similar instructions can get them over that hurdle.

REDUCE THE NUMBER OF THINGS TO REMEMBER. Separate bags for different subjects or parts of the day can really help – "get out your maths bag" is a much easier instruction than "get out your maths book and yesterday's homework and a pencil and a worksheet". If possible, hand notices etc. directly to parents instead of giving them to the child to take home. The less remembering, planning, and organising the child has to do, the less anxious they will be, and the more mental space they'll have to allocate to learning.