

# News You Can Use

And Things You Might Remember

## Executive Functioning Difficulties in ADHD

Why do children with ADHD seem to have difficulty independently completing routines, preparing for upcoming activities, or transitioning from one activity to another? Individuals with ADHD have deficits in executive functioning that contribute to difficulties in completing these above-listed actions.

### What is Executive Functioning?

“Executive functioning” refers to how we manage our thinking.

- Just like a CEO who creates short and long term goals for a company and manages the resources to achieve those goals, EF is like the CEO of the brain.
- It is like the conductor of an orchestra who manages many sections at a time to produce beautiful music. If the musicians are not managed in an organized manner, then the sound is compromised.
- Executive functioning helps people organize time, prioritize, efficiently interpret events, and plan.
- Scientists do not yet understand exactly how executive functioning works, or how to measure it. Nevertheless, many of the problems associated with deficits in executive functioning are consistent with the problems experienced by those with ADHD.

### Executive Functioning & Organization

Many of the problems exhibited by children with ADHD are related to disorganization and are thought to be related to executive functioning. These include:

- Has messy and disorganized desk and book bag
- Frequently loses assignments and other materials
- Misunderstands social interactions
- Exhibits poor planning and time management
- Has trouble recognizing and adhering to routines



### In this Issue:

Understanding how deficits in executive functioning cause impairment among children with ADHD

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The following suggestions refer to things teachers can do to help students organize.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING SEQUENCES

Emphasize the sequence of activities using terms such as “first, next, then, before,” and “after” to help children link information together in an organized manner.

- Give your student directions sequentially. Use visual aids (e.g., pictures) with younger children or create written lists for older children.
- Give no more than one or two commands at a time. Too many commands may overload students and result in forgotten instructions.

*“First, take out your math book and then choose a study partner.”*

*“We just came back from recess, what do we do first after recess? What comes next?”*

### 2. USING A PLANNER

Students need a reliable place to keep track of homework and deadlines. Using a planner can help students manage and remember detailed information.

- Planners for young students can simply be a list of a couple activities to do when they go home.
  - Example:
    - Give note to Mom
    - Do math sheet
- Planners for older students can take the form of traditional assignment notebooks and include plans for evening and the coming week.
- During the first few weeks, check the planner *daily* to make sure they are using it correctly. After the student is consistently using it correctly, check your student’s planner periodically for important dates/information.

### 3. MANAGING MATERIAL PAPERS

Students with ADHD need a system for organizing assignments and managing their materials.

- Develop a checklist that documents organization rules for their desk and binder. Check students' desks and binders with the students on a daily basis to be sure that materials are organized according to criteria. You may wish to establish rewards for students when they meet all or almost all of these criteria.
  - Example:
    - All papers should be in a folder (i.e., no loose papers)
    - Folders should only include papers for that subject (i.e., math folder only includes math papers)
    - Pencils, crayons and markers are in pouch/tray/box
    - All assignments and notes to parents that are to go home are in the "Take Home" flap

### 4. PRIORITIZING

Students with ADHD need help prioritizing among the many tasks and assignments they have each week.

- Help student determine how many assignments they have to complete, which are due tomorrow, and which are the most challenging.
- Make a plan with your student about where to start first, or how much time to allot for each assignment or for studying for a test.
- After reading or listening to new information, have student write or state a summary of what was presented. Help the student understand which information is most important.
- When allotted time for seatwork, discuss with the student what should be done first. Some students benefit from a 'to do' list on their desk that indicates priorities (e.g., star next to item).



### 5. USING TIMERS

Students with ADHD may benefit from having external supports (like the timer) to compensate for the weaknesses in planning.

- Set timers to motivate targeted behaviors and help students track their progress relative to the amount of time remaining.
- Tell students they have five minutes to finish their work and set an alarm to signal when time is up.
- Timers may work best when the student can see an indicator of the progression of time and time remaining.

### 6. STARTING ON TIME

Students with ADHD often use tactics to delay starting assignments (e.g., sharpening a pencil).

- Stand next to the student to get them started.
- Include starting on time as a goal on a DRC.

### 7. PREPARING FOR TRANSITIONS

Students with ADHD struggle with transitions.

- Post a sign with the daily schedule, or put it on a card taped to their desk.
- Inform the student of an upcoming transition (e.g., science to language arts) so they are aware of the transition and can prepare to stop one activity and begin another.

*"We have 3 minutes left, and then we will clean up."*

When there are deficits in executive functioning, it may seem like "the CEO of the brain" is not working. The internal mechanisms for planning, prioritizing and managing materials and time are not working well. You can help students by using the above-described external structures that compensate for executive functioning deficits. Talk with your colleagues about how to maximize use of these strategies in your classroom.