

Practical Strategies to Improve Executive Functioning (EF)

Executive Functioning (EF) are skills that allow us to retain and work with information in our brains, focus our attention, filter out distractions, and switch mental gears. It is needed to support learning and development from infancy through geriatric years. Collectively, we refer to EF as involving three areas: memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. People describe EF as the mental tasks that allow us to start and stop behaviors, and remember when to do things we need to do and how to recover when things don't go as expected. These definitions and tips will allow you to help your child improve his/her EF.

Working Memory

Your brain can only remember so much before forgetting or getting overwhelmed. Consider evidence-based programs, such as the Cogmed™ program, to help kids improve working memory. The goal is to offload as much cognitive burden (things we have to keep in our mind so we don't forget them), by using routines, schedules, apps, checklists, and calendar alerts to take on the reminding for us and to free our minds to complete everyday tasks. Good WM allows us to have better time management skills and to be able to plan and manage tasks through to completion. It also allows us to use information from the past (eg., *Last time I didn't hand in my homework on time I lost 20% of my class grade*), to plan for the future (eg., *If I still want to pass this class, I'll have to study harder this time*), and to work on the present (eg., a project that is due tomorrow).

Inhibitory Control

Self-control and self-regulation are about having feelings without immediately acting on them. Kids of all ages need to learn about response inhibition so they can focus on non-preferred activities (eg., homework; chores). For self-regulation tips, see "size of the problem" and zones of regulation curriculum at socialthinking.com. Strategies for self-motivation/activation to work on non-preferred activities include: (1) Make the first task of the goal smaller and more manageable; (2) Visualize the rewards and give rewards for starting (not just finishing) a task; (3) Set a timer to work on the task for just 5 minutes (oftentimes, kids will keep going after the timer or will find it easier to return to the task because that first part is already started); (4) Make the task more fun by adding music, inviting a friend over to work with you, etc.; (5) Clump tasks into categories (eg., It may be hard to clean your entire room but picking up just the dirty socks isn't such a big deal and, before you know it, you've already gotten started); (6) Use the pomodoro technique -- short bursts of 20-30 minutes to do work (apps Flora-Focus Habit Tracker).

Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the capacity to switch gears and adjust to changing demands, priorities, or perspectives and the ability to handle expected and unexpected behaviors and events. Good flexibility allows us to think through new alternatives to handle an event or situation we did not expect or anticipate. For practical strategies to help improve mental flexibility for kids 7-years-old through adolescence, consider using Superflex™ and other curricula available at socialthinking.com.

General Reminders

Never underestimate the value of meeting basic needs. Kids need: good mental and physical health; adequate, restorative sleep; appropriate nutrition; exercise – physical activity that includes a cognitive component, such as taekwondo, is especially beneficial; and a drug- and alcohol-free lifestyle.

Resources

- To learn more about EF across the lifespan:
<https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Enhancing-and-Practicing-Executive-Function-Skills-with-Children-from-Infancy-to-Adolescence-1.pdf>
- Social thinking curriculum for 7year olds through adolescents: <https://www.socialthinking.com>