Executive Function Coaching at Hayutin
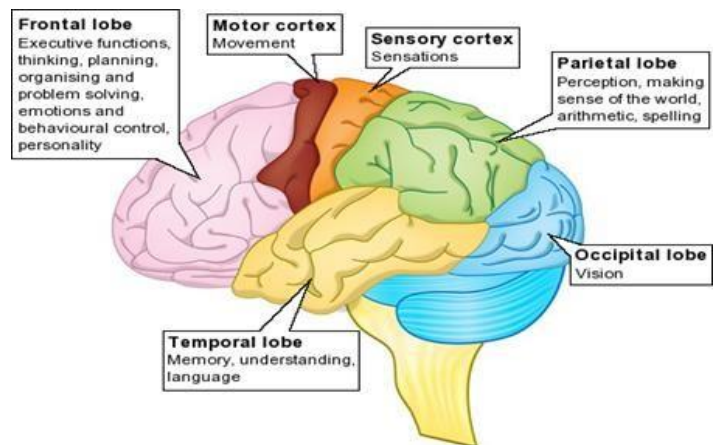
What is Executive Function?

The term comes from the CEO, or the business executive; we all have executive functioning and it develops over the course of childhood and adolescence. EF is an umbrella term referring to one's ability to initiate, break down, and follow through on multi-step tasks. The executive functions develop in the prefrontal cortex over the course of adolescence and are typically fully mature by the mid-twenties.

The following are definitions and descriptions of what is referred to as executive functioning:
- The management functions of the brain
- The covert, self-directed actions individuals use to help maintain control of themselves and accomplish goal-directed behavior
- The variety of functions within the brain that activate, organize, integrate, and manage other functions
- A set of mental skills that help you get things done

The executive functions involve the following:
- Working memory
- Organization of thoughts, time, and space
- Planning and activation
- Sequential thinking
- Prioritizing
- Self-regulation
- Cognitive flexibility

When discussing difficulties associated with ADHD, many of them center on the ability to employ the "executive functions" of the brain. Not all people with low executive functioning have ADHD, but most students with ADHD also have low executive functioning. Learning differences and anxiety can also negatively impact executive functioning.

When executive functions are not well-developed, several academic challenges may result. Deficits in executive functioning may cause difficulties to varying degrees with homework completion, self-advocacy, task initiation, motivation, time-management and goal-directed behavior.

How to Develop Executive Function Skills

Step 1: Describe the problem behaviors
Examples of problem behaviors include: not following morning routines on school days, forgetting to submit homework assignments, losing important papers, etc. Be as specific as possible when describing the problem behaviors.

Step 2: Set a Goal
The goal should relate directly to the problem behavior. For instance, if not bringing home necessary homework materials is the problem, the goal might be, "Mary will bring home all necessary materials to complete her homework." SMART goals must be specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound.

Step 3: Establish a procedure or set of steps to reach the goal
We believe in creating a task list that outlines the procedure to be followed. Example lists: morning routine, end of day routine, homework planner routine, project planning, writing planning, study planning for tests, organizing notebooks, and note-taking.

Step 4: Supervise the student following the procedure
In the early stages, the student will need guidance through the entire process. Steps include: (1) reminding the student to begin the procedure; (2) prompting the student to perform each step in the procedure; (3) observing the student as each step is performed; (4) providing feedback to help improve performance; and (5) praising the student as each step is completed successfully and when the entire procedure is finished.

Step 5: Evaluate the process and make changes as necessary
At this step, the executive function coach continues to monitor the student's performance to identify where the process might be breaking down or where it might be improved. Most commonly, this will involve tightening the process to include more cues or a refined breakdown of the task into subtasks. When possible, involve the student in the evaluation process to tap into his or her problem-solving skills.

Step 6: Fade the supervision
Decrease the number of prompts and level of supervision to the point where the student can follow the procedure independently. This should be done gradually, for example by (1) prompting the student between steps; (2) getting the child started and making sure she finishes, but not being present while she performs the task; (3) cuing the student to start, to use the checklist to check off each completed step, and to report back when done.

Six-step process excerpted from "Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents," Peg Dawson & Richard Guare, The Guilford Press, 2004.

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What to Expect from Executive Function Coaching

The executive function skill building program will be adapted to the individual student's needs and existing skill set. The length of the EF program varies greatly by student according to the scope of the goals and the student's ability to absorb and integrate new systems and strategies. It takes a minimum of four weeks for any behavior to become a habit. For some students, improvement is achieved in 8-10 weeks, while others need an entire semester or even an academic year to see significant gains.

Consistency and repetition, including regular feedback, are key components to a program's success. A team approach is always the most effective for students to reap the benefits of EF skill building. We strongly recommend that a school advisor or teacher is kept informed, along with the parents, in terms of email communication, weekly task lists, and biweekly session notes.

We typically recommend starting with twice-weekly sessions for EF skill building and then reducing from there as systems and habits develop. Some students may even need to start with three meetings per week. If a student is limited to only one session per week, the task list is even more essential, and a parent will need to check in with the student to ensure the student stays on track and accountable. Student engagement and commitment to developing these systems and skills should be reassessed after about four to six weeks.

Within four weeks, the student will ideally have established the following:
- Calendaring system
- Task management system
- Physical and digital organization systems
- Clear target skills and goals

Establishing a Calendaring System

A calendaring system is the core of the EF skill building process and should ideally be established within the first two sessions. It is the primary tool for developing EF skills and will be utilized tokeep track of daily homework, assignments, projects, assessments, and extracurricular activities. It will also help cue the student to manage time and prioritize what needs to be done. The student should be involved in choosing and designing the calendaring system. When a student refuses a calendaring system beyond the school portal calendar, do not despair, we can still make headway with a task list and/or paper planner!

The calendar should include: short and long term assignment due dates; exam dates; extracurricular and personal commitments. Digital calendars, paper calendars, and wall calendars will be considered based on student preferences, school requirements and efficacy.

Establishing a Task Management System

A task list should be created during each session. The task list should be broken down by day, by subject and by individual task in terms of specifically how each component of an assignment will be completed. Each task must be granular, as a vague directive such as "study for history test" does not indicate how a task will be completed. Each task should be given a time estimate and a planned window for completion. Larger tasks should be broken down into smaller chunks. Students should understand how to approach and complete each task before the EF coach leaves.

Task lists can be paper or digital. Just like choosing the calendar, the student must be in on the decision of what system or product is best. Regardless of the designated system, the list needs to be created with active student participation.

In some cases, the task list should be shared with tutors, parents, advisors or teachers. Task list reminders are key for students who struggle with initiation. Examples of reminders include:
- Phone reminders/alarms (if phone is allowed during school)
- Watch alarm
- Computer pop-up alarm reminders (if laptop is out during each class)
- Texts/phone calls/emails from tutor (short-term only, to build toward autonomy and avoid an unhealthy dependence)

Physical Organization

Some students are physically organized and just need help developing organization within the context of their assignments. When physical organization is an issue, evidence of the struggle will be abundant.

- Backpack is a mess
- Papers are everywhere
- Homework station is a disaster
- There is no clear organization of notes/notebooks/handouts
- Student is missing texts, books, assignments, instructions, handouts
- Student forgets to turn in completed work

Often an extra session needs to be scheduled for an initial physical organization overhaul. This organization process can be time consuming; it can easily take 1.5 - 2 hours. The list of desired supplies should be decided between tutor/student the session prior, and the family will have supplies ready for the next session. If necessary, Hayutin can ship supplies to the student's home, Hayutin office, or tutor's home.

The student should be an active participant in designing the system. What has worked and has not in the past is worthy of discussion between the student and parents. The tutor should offer suggestions but not make the decision without at least an initial dialogue. The system must be customized to the student and any school requirements. There is not one right way, and sometimes trial and error is needed. *Brainstorm, make a plan, and follow through with it.* Once the system is established, most kids need help maintaining it. Weekly check-ins should include cleaning the backpack, study area, and binders. Gradually, responsibility *needs to shift to the student.*

A Typical EF Coaching Session

- Check the school's online portal.
- Problem solve to develop workarounds when the portal is unclear or not updated regularly.
- Update calendar and task list.
- Email or share the task list according to the plan for this family (sometimes this is not a step, sometimes a shared google doc is used, sometimes it stays between student/tutor only; this will vary).
- If physical organization is an ongoing problem, a brief check in/clean up should be included at least once per week.
- If time allows, study skills and/or homework support (1.5 hour sessions are often necessary to have time for all of the above and actual work on assignments).

Measures of Progress

In executive function skill building, measures of progress will vary from student to student. Goal-directed behaviors should be identified with the student, tutor and parent(s) in the beginning of the relationship, as part of the executive function introduction and goal setting process. Your child's EF coach will address both progress and obstacles to achieving the goals. As students develop executive functioning skills and become autonomous learners, grade improvement typically follows.

Examples of common measures of qualitative progress include:

- Makes it through 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month (progressively) without…
  - Turning in a late assignment
  - Forgetting to bring home needed books/binders/handouts from school
  - Forgetting to submit completed work
  - Notification from a teacher as to a problem
- Noticeable improvement in state of physical organization
- Achieve SMART goals, as set in beginning sessions
- Ability to maintain calendar on a regular basis without assistance, then eventually without reminders
- Ability to maintain task list on a regular basis without assistance, then eventually without reminders
- Student has clearly accepted and internalized calendaring and task list management
- Ability to complete homework/study tasks independently after the tutor or parent gets the student started
- Ability to initiate and complete homework/study tasks independently
- Notice of positive change from teachers
- Ability to reduce the number of weekly EF coaching sessions without negative consequences