

What are Executive Functions?

Executive functions are the mental processes that enable us to plan ahead, evaluate the past, start and finish a task and manage our time. They can affect what we do in the present and also how we plan and organize for the future. These skills affect our ability to access and juggle many thinking skills at the same time. Executive Functioning skills can also impact how we interact with others. They help us to control our emotions, identify and find solutions for a problem, monitor and stop our actions, evaluate our thoughts and give ourselves direction through self-talk. Executive functions have been described by Dr. Thomas E. Brown, renowned author and researcher, as the conductor or manager of the brain organizing and timing brain functions to work together.

During school, problems with executive functioning (EF) impacts students in almost all their subjects and daily tasks. However, problems with EF often end up being a hidden impairment to learning that is not readily diagnosed. When a student has a specific learning disability, they will often function well in some areas, highlighting the discrepancy in the areas where they are struggling. This variation in competency becomes evident to parents and teachers and normally triggers some type of assessment and diagnosis. However, when there is a problem with executive functioning, the student often presents with similar problems across all subjects. These may present as difficulties with: starting work, staying focused on work, completing work, and remembering to do the work. When children present with these problems they are often incorrectly labeled as: lazy, unmotivated, undisciplined, not very bright or simply not trying hard enough.

Active working memory, a part of EF, is used when we need to open and manipulate several files from our memory at the same time, similar to a computer operator opening and manipulating several files from saved documents, flipping from one file to another, accessing and using information from all of them. Working memory also helps us to stay attentive and resist distractions, and assists us in making decisions throughout the day. Working memory is a vital executive function that is required for: writing, reading comprehension, complex math problems, problem solving, following directions, monitoring progress and evaluating strengths and needs.

Dr. Ross Greene, renowned author and researcher frequently refers to parents of children with ADHD as the “surrogate frontal lobe” for their children. Many parents take over tasks of organization, planning, remembering, and generally being the executive manager of their child’s life, without even realizing it.

As we grow older, executive functioning skills become more crucial. Adults take on many roles at one time needing to juggle: work, parenting, relationships, paying bills, shopping, house work, paperwork, money management etc. and most adults do not have the luxury of having a manager to assist them with these tasks. Spouses of undiagnosed adults frequently complain of having an extra child to look after rather than another adult to help out, adding a great deal of stress to family life.

The good news is that once diagnosed, many of the core symptoms of ADHD, if not alleviated, can be diminished to a level where people with ADHD can lead happy, productive lives in careers they find stimulating and rewarding. However, it is very important to note that “pills do not teach skills”, especially in the case of executive functioning impairment, so psychosocial treatments, and the teaching and implementation of organizational and time management strategies, as well as classroom and workplace accommodations is essential. For more information on EF in the classroom access www.teachadhd.ca