

# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do to Support Student Executive Skill Development

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# TAKE THE EXECUTIVE SKILLS QUESTIONNAIRE



# DISCUSSION

Where do these skills come from?

- Are we born with them?
- If not, how do we acquire them?
- Are we taught them? By whom?



# More food for thought...

- ▶ Do they just emerge gradually over time according to some internal timetable (the way vision does in infants)?
- ▶ Are they learned through practice (the way infants learn to walk)?
- ▶ Are they learned through modeling and shaping (the way language is learned)?
- ▶ Or are they explicitly taught (the way reading is learned)?



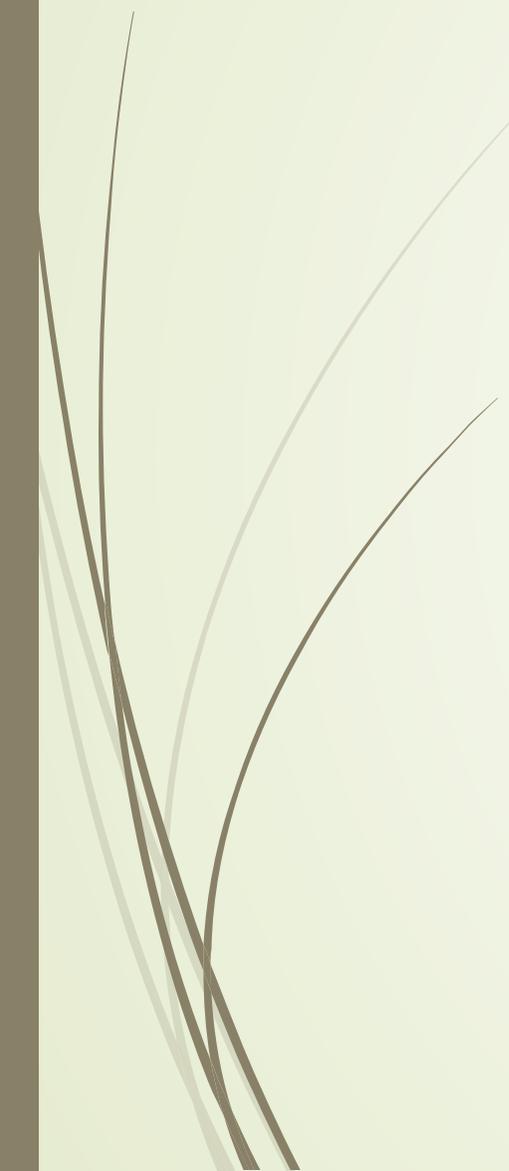
# What Are Executive Skills?

- Executive skills refer to the cognitive processes required to plan, organize, and execute activities.
  - They are frontal lobe functions that begin to emerge shortly after birth but take a full 25 years to fully mature. In students with attention disorders, they tend to develop more slowly than normal achieving peers.
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# Specific Executive Skills

Neuroscientists, neuropsychologists, and brain researchers have different schema for labeling and organizing executive skills; the organizational scheme we propose places a premium on specificity to better link the skill deficit to interventions designed to remediate the deficit.





# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

1. Familiarize yourself with what executive skills are and how they impact learning.
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# Executive Skills that Underlie School Success

## Foundational Skills

- Response Inhibition
- Working Memory
- Emotional Control
- Flexibility
- Sustained Attention
- Task Initiation

## Advanced Skills

- Planning/Prioritizing
- Organization
- Time Management
- Goal-Directed Persistence
- Metacognition



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

2. Learn to apply the executive skill terminology to student learning and behavior.
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# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

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3. When you discuss students with learning or behavioral challenges, use executive skill terminology whenever possible and encourage teachers and parents to do the same.

# Because what's the alternative?

Does this pupil have any illness or disability (either physical or mental)?  No  Yes— please describe:

What concerns you most about this pupil?

That he is lazy and not working to his potential.

Please describe the best things about this pupil:

He is sweet and has a good sense of humor.

Use extra pages if necessary.



# A better way...

Instead of calling students this:

- Lazy
- Unmotivated
- Not working to potential
- Disruptive
- Oppositional
- Messy
- Tardy
- Forgetful
- Absent-minded
- Lacking a work ethic

Describe them as having challenges in this:

- Task initiation
- Sustained attention
- Response inhibition
- Emotional control
- Flexibility
- Organization
- Working memory
- Goal-directed persistence



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

4. Encourage teachers to identify their own executive skill strengths and challenges and to use this information to create self-improvement plans.

## Examples:

- ▶ I will improve my time management skills by ending class 5 minutes early so that students have time to write down their homework assignments.
- ▶ I will improve my planning/prioritizing skills by writing lesson plans on Friday to cover the next week.
- ▶ I will improve my organizational skills by setting up a system for logging and tracking homework handed in.



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

5. Build professional development around helping teachers create classrooms that support executive skill development.
    - ▶ Voluntary book club/study groups
    - ▶ Take on school-wide projects to infuse executive skills into the daily life of the school
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# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

6. Identify ways teachers modify classroom environments to support kids with weak executive skills—and to help them strengthen those skills.

- ▶ Creative use of visuals
- ▶ Daily schedules/routines that incorporate executive skills
- ▶ Illuminating how executive skills are needed in classroom lessons, seatwork, projects, homework assignments



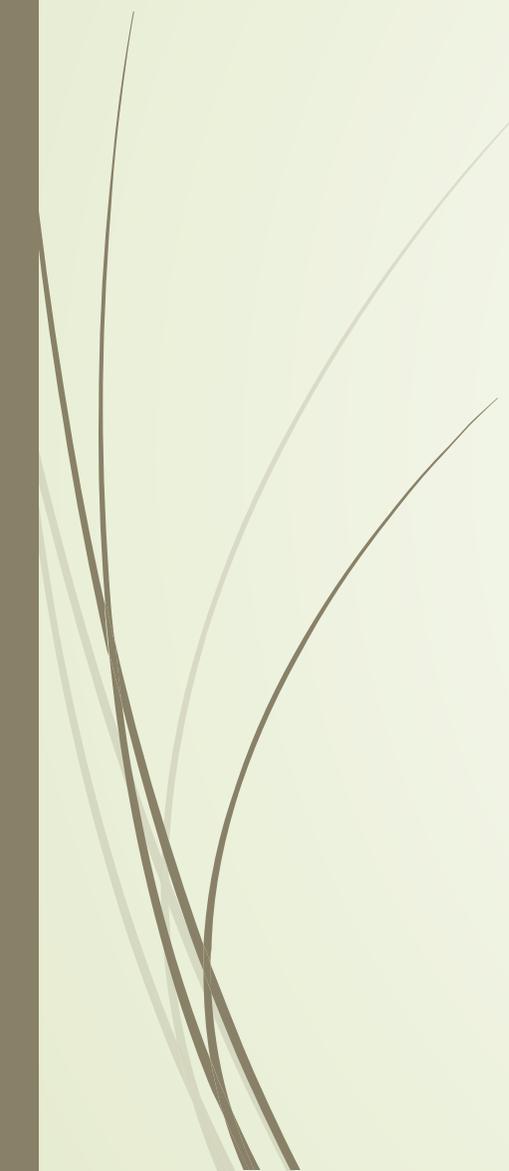
# Everyday activities that involve executive skills



- Classroom lessons
- Independent seatwork
- In the cafeteria
- In the hallways
- On the school bus
- Playing sports
- With friends
- After-school or summer jobs
- Doing homework
- Other situations at home (e.g., chores, getting along with parents or siblings)



# A strategy for embedding executive skill instruction into daily lessons

1. Describe the lesson being taught.
  2. Identify the executive skills the lesson requires students to use.
  3. Identify potential obstacles that might prevent the student from using those skills effectively.
  4. With the student, decide on a strategy to use to overcome the obstacle.
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# Examples

Lesson/ Assignment	Executive Skill(s)	Obstacle	Strategy
Math Subtraction with Regrouping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Organization</li><li>• Working Memory</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor spacing/ messy handwriting</li><li>• Forgetting steps</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use large grid graph paper</li><li>• Use checklist with each step numbered or color-coded</li></ul>
English Learning Vocabulary Words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working Memory</li><li>• Metacognition</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difficulty retaining meanings (ineffective study habits)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Make up “silly sentences” for each word</li><li>• Use flash cards- word on side 1, definition with cartoon drawing on side 2</li></ul>



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

## 7. Encourage teachers to introduce executive skills terminology and strategies to their students.

- ▶ Have students assess their own executive skills
- ▶ Practice goal-setting with students
- ▶ Incorporate mini-lessons on executive skills
- ▶ Place posters depicting executive skills in the classroom
- ▶ Have students brainstorm strategies for overcoming executive skill challenges (and post these in the classroom, too)



# Mini-Lessons on Executive Skills

- ▶ Elementary level: Train Your Brain
  - ▶ Secondary level: EF in the Classroom  
([www.efintheclassroom.net](http://www.efintheclassroom.net))
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# Mountain View School Key Elements

- Started with a small study group
- Piloted with small group of teachers
- Thirty minute mini-lesson on Monday
- Focus for the week\*
- Friday re-visit
- 12/13 weeks for all lessons
- Within 3 years, adopted by the entire school



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

## 8. Educate parents about executive skills.

- ▶ Evening presentations for parents
- ▶ Newsletters/emails
- ▶ Consider incorporating into report cards



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

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9. Establish an Executive Skills Committee to support school-wide efforts to support executive skill awareness and development.



# 10 Things School Administrators Can Do

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10. Help everyone (teachers, parents, students) understand that strong executive skills not only underlie school success but are essential for life after high school.



*By the time students graduate from high school, they will be able to:*

- Describe their own executive skill strengths and challenges and give concrete examples from their daily lives to illustrate them.
  - Identify with specific examples how their executive skill challenges impede academic performance.
  - Make and achieve specific goals to address executive skill challenges within a context and/or setting that is meaningful to the student.
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*By the time students graduate from high school, they will be able to:*

- ▶ Create tools (e.g., graph, chart, or checklist) that will allow them to track their progress toward goal attainment.
  - ▶ Identify and use strategies for overcoming obstacles toward goal attainment.
  - ▶ Independently set goals and use self-selected coping strategies that lead to measurable improvement in academic performance variables (e.g., grades on tests/assignments, homework handed in on time, report card grades).
  - ▶ Explain how they think they will be able to apply what they have learned about executive skills to future goals at school or home, in leisure activities, or in the workplace.
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*“Human beings are happier,  
more cooperative and  
productive, and more likely to  
make positive changes in their  
behavior when those in positions  
of authority do things with them  
rather than to them or for them.”*

~Ted Wachtel  
International Institute for  
Restorative Practices