

How to improve executive skills without the frustration

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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

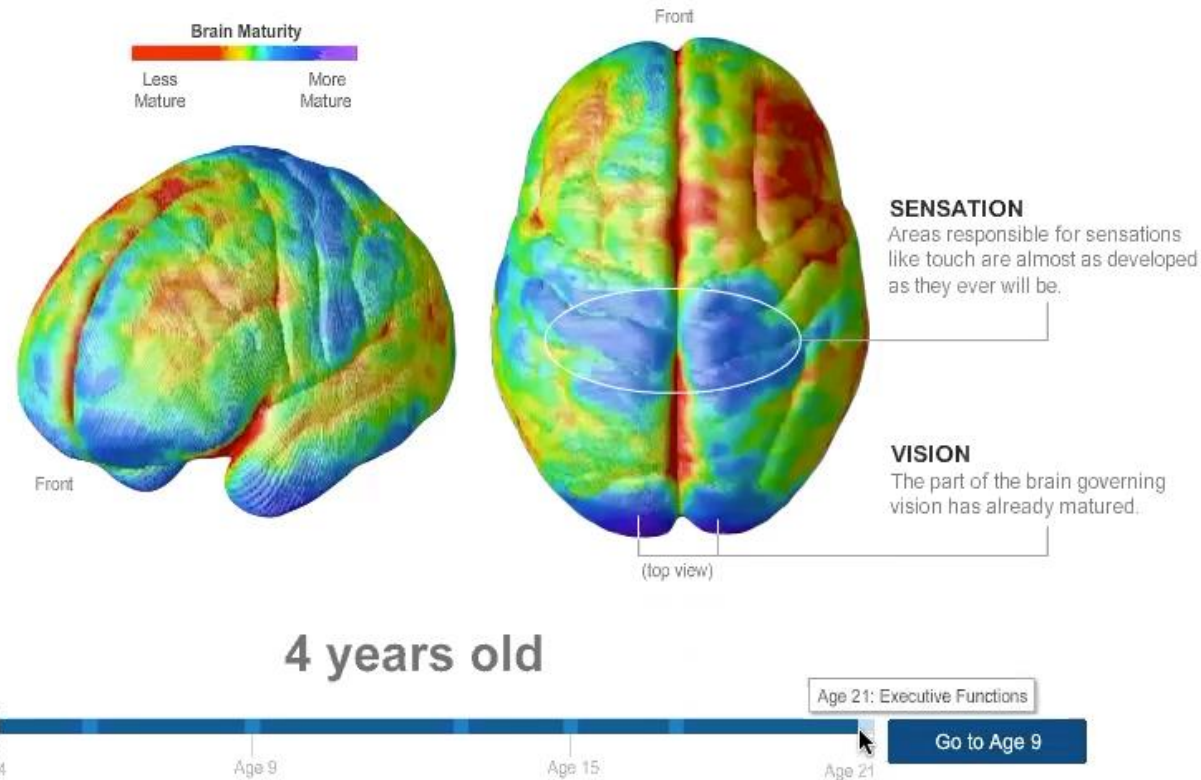
- Planning/Prioritizing
- Organization
- Time Management
- Goal-Directed Persistence
- Metacognition

The Child's Developing Brain

Different areas of the brain mature at different rates, which helps explain many of the intellectual and emotional changes seen in children, teens and young adults. While no two children develop in exactly the same way, scientists have been able to link certain developmental milestones to changes in brain tissue, observed by MRI scans taken repeatedly over years. Move the slider below to see how the brain matures. Red, yellow and orange patterns indicate undeveloped brain tissue, while green, blue and purple indicate a maturing of the brain.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT

In the first few years of life, areas of the brain devoted to basic function change at a rapid pace. By age 4, primary senses and basic motor skills are almost fully developed. The child can walk, hold a crayon and feed himself.



Brain images courtesy of Dr. Paul Thompson, University of California, Los Angeles. Source information provided by Dr. Jay Giedd, National Institutes of Mental Health. Produced by Tara Parker-Pope, Jon Huang, and Mike Mason/The New York Times

What's Executive Function—and Why Does It Matter?

The skills that make up executive function are better predictors of success than test scores, IQ, or socioeconomic status.

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EduTopia



Peg's Take on the “Perfect” Intervention for Executive Skills

The perfect intervention to support executive skill development is one

- that takes no more than 5-10 minutes a day
- and that you're willing to do *forever* (or as long as it takes).

Response inhibition



The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

Key strategy: Teach Wait/Stop

Working Memory



The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.

Key Strategy: Pair verbal with **VISUAL**

Emotional Control



The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Key Strategy: Start by acknowledging how the child feels

I want to make a case for the Lighthouse Parent. A Lighthouse Parent stands as a steady, reliable guide, providing safety and clarity without controlling every aspect of their child's journey. Here's an example: A child comes home feeling overwhelmed by school and frustrated that she is doing "all of the work" for a big group project that is due next week. The overfunctioning parent is ready with an array of next steps: "Why don't you assign the other group members what they each have to do?" "You should put your name next to all of the parts that you did so the teacher gives you credit." "I'm going to email the teacher so she knows that you're doing all of the work." These tactics may address symptoms, but they fail to get at the underlying issue. They also inadvertently communicate to a child that what's needed is parental involvement. Sometimes what a child needs is simply to be acknowledged: "Wow, that sounds like a lot." "I can tell you are working really hard." "Do you have ideas about what you want to do?"

~Russell Shaw (Sept. 25, 2024). Lighthouse parents have more confident kids. *The Atlantic*.

Flexibility



The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.

Key Strategy: Help kids find multiple pathways (Plan B)

Sustained Attention



The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.

Key Strategy: Ask the child how long they can work before they need a break

Task Initiation



The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.

Key Strategy: Have child make a plan with a start time

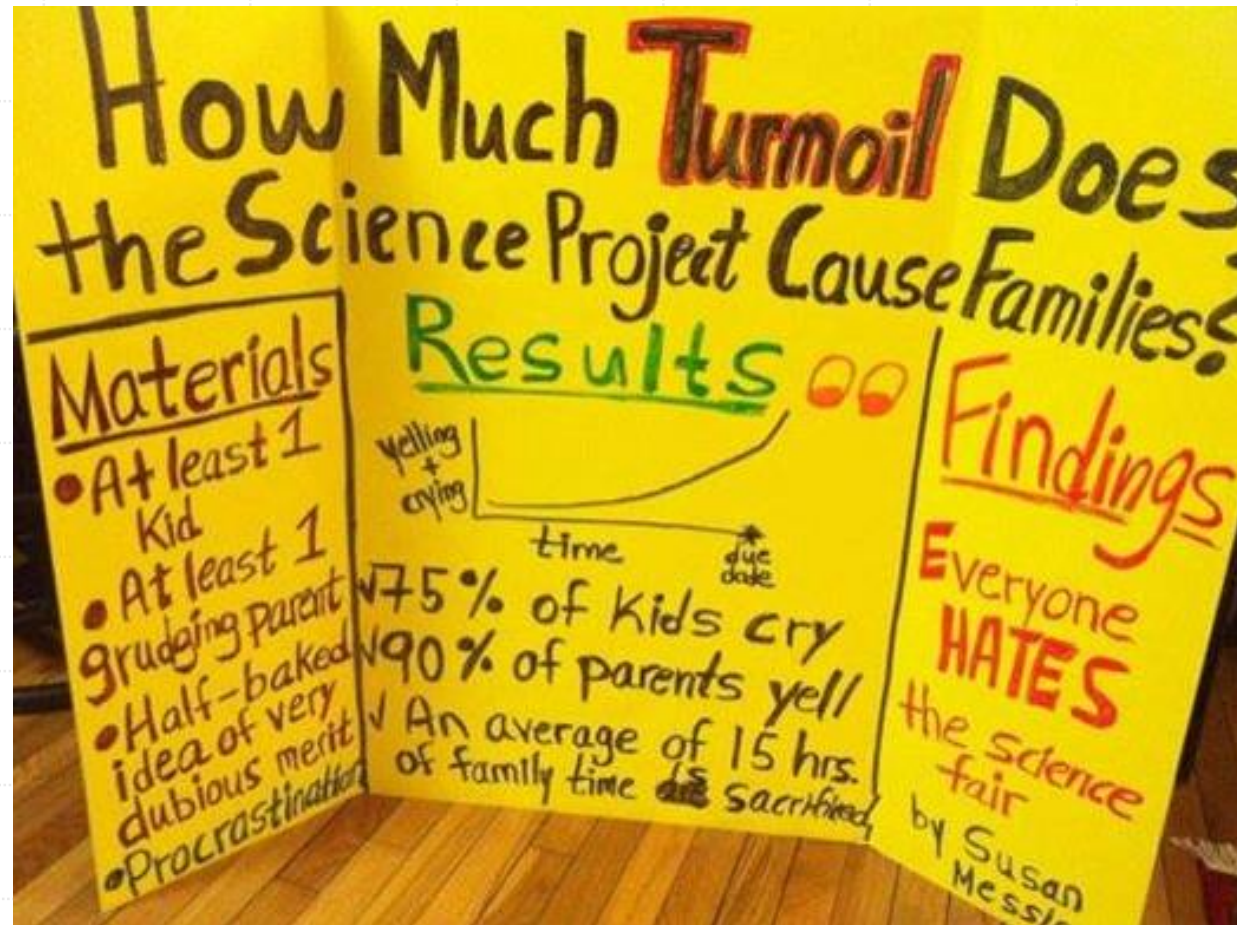
Planning/Prioritizing



The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what's important to focus on and what's not important.

Key Strategy: Plan *with* kids rather than *for* kids

Planning is a skill that takes time to develop



Organization



The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.

Key Strategy: Start small and keep it simple

Time Management



The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

Key Strategy: Practice time estimation

Goal-Directed Persistence



The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.

Key Strategy: Have the child practice setting *small* goals

Metacognition



The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself, “How am I doing? or How did I do?”).

Key Strategy: Encourage self-reflection following successes

How do we describe these kids?

What concerns you most about this pupil?

That he is lazy and not working
his potential.

Please describe the best things about this pupil:

He is sweet and has a good
sense of humor.

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
- Time management
- Working memory
- Goal-directed persistence



There are 3
primary ways
parents and
teachers
can help kids
with weak
executive
skills:

Change the environment
to reduce the impact of
weak executive skills.

Teach the youngster
executive skills.

Use incentives to get
youngsters to use skills
that are hard for them.

Ways to modify the environment

1

Change the
physical or social
environment

2

Modify the tasks
we expect
children to
perform

3

Change the way
adults interact
with kids.

Examples of environmental modifications



Manage distractions



Modify tasks (shorten them, build in breaks, create a schedule, build in choice)



Give advance warning when something changes



Use visual cues (rather than verbal “nags”)

Effective Praise

1. Is delivered immediately after the positive behavior.
2. Specifies the particulars of the accomplishment (I appreciate you loading the dishwasher without my having to bug you about it).
3. Communicates the value of the accomplishment (I know you didn't want to watch your sister after school, but it really got me out of a bind at work—thanks for helping out).
4. Lets the child know you saw him working hard to accomplish the task (Your brother was pushing your buttons, but you worked hard to keep your temper in check).
5. Orients the child to appreciate her ability to problem solve or use other executive skills (I like the way you thought about that and figured out a good solution to the problem).



TEACH deficient skills

Don't expect the child to acquire executive skills through observation or osmosis.



The formula for teaching executive skills

Embed

Embed the skill in a daily routine

List

List the steps in the routine

Walk

Walk the child through the steps repeatedly

Create

Create a visual that outlines the routine

Fade

Fade the prompts by having the child use the visual to follow the routine

Teaching Kids to Make Study Plans

STUDY PLAN

Date: _____

Task	How long will it take?	When will you start?	Where will you work?	Actual start/stop times		Done (✓)

Use incentives to augment instruction.



Incentives make both the effort of learning a skill and the effort of performing a task less aversive.



Furthermore, putting an incentive after a task teaches delayed gratification.

Simple Incentives

- Give the child something to look forward to doing when the effortful task is done (we call that Grandma's Law).
- Alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities (use simple language: First...then, e.g., First work, then play).
- Build in frequent, short breaks (depending on the child's attention span, breaks could come every 10 minutes and last 5 minutes).
- Use specific praise to reinforce the use of executive skills.



How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

- Ask children to reflect on their own performance, **especially when they are successful** (What worked for you today? Why do you think it worked?)
- Use questions to get them to use their executive skills (What's your plan? Do you have a strategy for that? What's your goal? How long do you think that will take?)



How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

- When problems arise, share your observations in a nonjudgmental way (I noticed you....What can we do about that?).
- Brainstorm strategies. Together with the child, make a list of possible strategies. Ask the child to pick one, and then make a game plan for trying it out.

Keep your
eye on the
biggest
prize:
building
goal-directed
persistence!

Model

Model this yourself—if your child sees you persisting over time to achieve a goal, that can make an impression.

Help

Help your child set and achieve little goals—they add up over time.

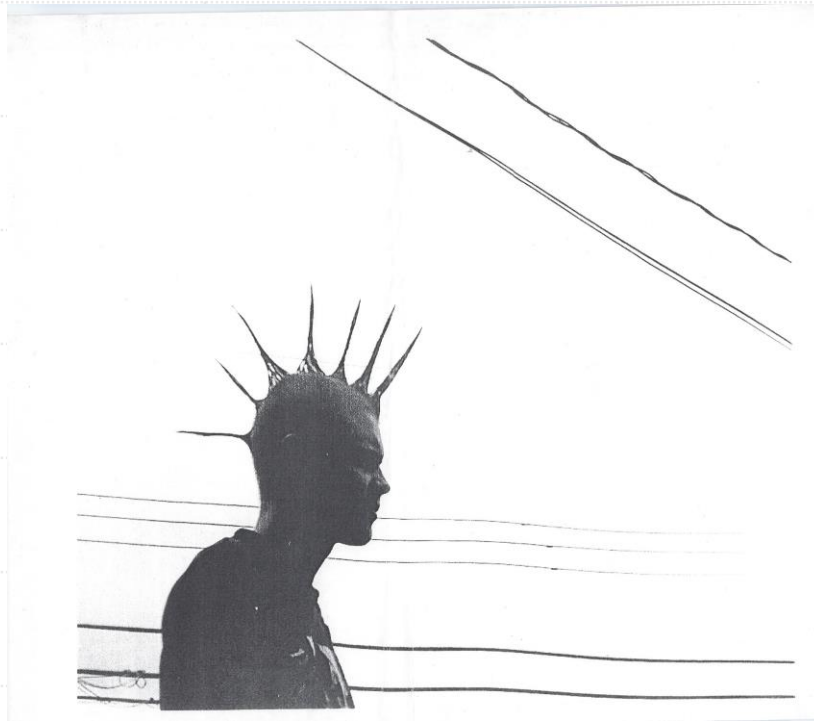
Praise

Praise effort— “Wow, you stuck with it!” “You figured it out.” “I can’t believe how hard you worked for that!”

Emphasize

Emphasize your child’s goals, not yours.

Be Patient: Your Child at 15 Will NOT Look
the Same at 25







Check out the
Homework Problems
and Solutions Guide