

Tips to support executive function

Executive function is a word that describes many different skills that allow us to manage our day, stay safe and get things done. It includes:

- Attention
- Problem Solving
- Flexible Thinking
- Memory
- Self-Control
- Planning
- Organization
- Prioritizing
- Staying on Task
- Processing
- Speed

Performing Everyday Tasks

We need to:

1. Forming ideas to do an action.
2. Starting an action.
3. Keep going until the step is finished (knowing when a step is done).
4. Switching behaviors to do the next step needed.
5. Regulating, controlling, and adjusting body actions to deal with changes and new information along the way.
6. Planning a tactic down the road to deal with a new issue or new direction.
7. Holding details in the working memory.
8. Controlling emotions.
9. Thinking abstractly.
10. Knowing when the whole task is finished, stopping that task, and moving onto a different task or activity.

Tips to Support Executive Function

1. Use a timer – it helps students know when to start or stop tasks and helps support switching to another task.
2. Break down tasks, use lists, sticky notes, visual worksheets with boxes for different steps or requirements.
3. Use visual schedules to know what is next or what the steps to a task are.
4. Label items, post pictures of what is needed or what belongs where.
5. Use memory strategies – chunk information, write it down, mentally rehearse, reminder messages/pictures, verbal repetition, ensure student can repeat the instruction back, ensure attention and focus during provision of instructions, provide the instructions both verbally and in writing, limit the number of instructions given at a time to two.
6. Planning and prioritizing – create a task list and number in order of importance, for older students add expected time required.
7. Inattention can occur due to sensory demands, frustration, boredom or challenges with self-regulation. Some students have trouble switching between tasks. Take time to determine the cause behind the behaviours of inattention.

Check out the OT Toolbox website www.theotttoolbox.com/executive-functioning-skills for different activity ideas.