



A+ Test Prep and Tutoring Newsletter

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Understanding Executive Functioning



What's Up With Johnny? Executive Functioning and the Problem of Production

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We all know the story: bright, active students who just cannot seem to get the job done. We prod them, we tutor them, and we test them, and yet the problem remains. We might even diagnosis them with an attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and treat them with medication only to find some improvement in behavior and focus, yet ongoing gaps in achievement still persist. It's not an issue of intelligence, it's not a learning disability, it's not simply an emotional problem. It can be quite a mystery!

So now let's look through another lens. Executive Functioning has been defined as "a collection of processes responsible for guiding, directing, and managing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functions, particularly during active, novel problem solving." (Gioia, G., Isquith, P., Guy, S., Kenworthy, L. 1996. Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning Professional Manual. Florida: Psychological Assessment Resources).

These processes might be organized to encompass the following eight skills:

- **Inhibit**
- **Shift**
- **Emotional control**
- **Initiate**
- **Working memory**
- **Plan/organize**
- **Organization of materials**
- **Monitor**

Here is a set of discrete learning skills that can be taught and developed. They seem to reside in the pre-frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex, an area of the brain that current research suggests does not fully mature until age 24. (Ever wonder why insurance companies always set their rates based upon the absence or presence of "drivers under the age of 25"? They made that decision based upon actuarial data. Now we know the brain isn't fully mature until then, and good drivers need to have these skills!).

In addition, these skills seem to emerge organically in some children and not all at in others. And usually some of the skills lacking in the child closely resemble the skill deficits of one or both parents--how frustrating!

I believe that, as parents, tutors, and classroom teachers, we need to explicitly model, point out, structure, instruct, and practice executive functioning skills. We might indeed need to "be our children's pre-frontal lobes" sometimes as we move toward the production aspect of school. This is not babying them, or coddling them, or even dumbing down for them--this is survival for them. Even those who "get it" early and easily can use this support from us. Furthermore, our efforts should be positive and affirming, avoiding at all costs the use of shame and embarrassment as pedagogical tools for compliance.

Let's look at these individual executive functions and some simple suggestions for developing each skill:

1. **INHIBIT:** This is the ability to exercise impulse control--a major issue for many people in our culture. What to do? Try a STOP-LOOK-THINK card (a card with a picture of a stop sign/eye/light bulb): hold it up when Johnny needs to think before he acts!
2. **SHIFT:** This function is critical in school as well as in the lives of most of us who work for and with others. Once we can focus--and thus use our attention in appropriate and selective ways--we must learn how to move that focus around, like a spotlight, to illuminate the tasks at hand. What to do? Give a "heads up" about a change in activities: use various timing devices (hourglass, kitchen timer, etc.) as visual cues; incorporate transitional activities into your day--stand up and stretch, sing a

song, do a breathing exercise, get a drink.

3. **EMOTIONAL CONTROL:** The emotional control function involves developing our emotional intelligence and deepening our ability to sustain our efforts and relate well to others in a given situation. What to do? We can teach emotional control by creating a safe yet structured environment that emphasizes four precepts: the ability to name and control one's feelings; the ability to solve problems creatively; the ability to form relationships that can become friendships; the ability to be optimistic.

4. **INITIATE:** The initiate function is commonly missing in bright and creative students who cannot take that world inside their head and put it aside for that math assignment or the social studies map questions. One needs the ability to "shift gears" and start something new, at times in the middle of another task. What to do? Eliminate the daunting sight of a blank piece of paper by having at least a format outlined or an opening sentence. Create work rituals at home (best followed by the entire family): like Mister Rogers coming home and changing his shoes and putting on his sweater. Having a routine that leads one to the desk for homework is quite useful.

5. **WORKING MEMORY:** Working memory allows us to handle lots of information at one time: it is like a "chalkboard in the brain." Embedded in this memory function is the ability to use previous knowledge when doing the task at hand as well as "setting the table" for doing the next right thing. What to do? The teaching of memory techniques--like acronyms, rhymes, songs, chunking, lists, associations, visualizing, and patterns--is an essential part of engaging all types of learners. Using movement enhances memory, as does color, touch, smell, and music. Each of us has developed a useful memory style by now, but many children are still discovering their gifts and preferences. We must set the table with many different offerings for these hungry minds

6. **PLAN/ORGANIZE:** To plan and organize one's actions requires a myriad of skills: a sense of time and space; a good sense of boundaries (between activities, between our space and the personal space of others, and between essential and non-essential elements of information that are available to us); a desire for completion of tasks in a reasonable period of time. What to do? Create a classroom or family calendar of activities and color code different tasks and projects; establish step-by-step procedures for completing a task (cooking is a wonderful activity here); review each day/week/month and look for ways to organize time better; model these behaviors!

7. **ORGANIZATION OF MATERIALS:** This skill is modeled for children from birth in the home environment: the care and accessibility of household needs provides a template for what a student's room, desk, and locker will eventually look like. (Scary thought, no?!) What to do? Have periodic room/desk/locker clean-outs; make checklists; organize tools/kitchen gear/school supplies with whatever organization model works best for you (color codes, peg boards with outlines, checklists, etc.).

8. **MONITOR:** Learning to set up a feedback loop within ourselves is a vital skill in all aspects of life: from the "give and take" of non-verbal cues in a relationship to the honest appraisal of our efforts halfway through a project, we do best when we are problem-solvers with data to work from. What to do? Families can "check in" during family meetings to see how things are going and provide feedback to one another. Teachers can model self-evaluation by speaking openly of how a lesson went, asking for student feedback, and planning the next lesson accordingly. Students can be asked to grade their own work, evaluate their participation in a group project, and map out a plan for changes they will make in the future. In a family or a classroom that is emotionally safe and where honest and specific feedback is encouraged and practiced, children will develop the monitor function as a valuable tool for life.

If, as Steven Pinker suggests in How the Mind Works, the mind operates on the computational theory--a model that suggests "information processing is the primary activity of the brain"--then executive functioning skills emerge as even more important tools in school and life success. Acting like programming tools that channel and direct the flow of inputs to the proper areas of the brain and

then facilitate the impulses in getting back to the production department, these skills harness the raw energy of the creative process like [solar cells](#) turn sunlight into electricity. May our children shine on!

New Year's Resolutions for Teens (and Their Parents)



With the ringing in of a new year, we all like to entertain the idea of a fresh start-- relinquishing bad habits, setting goals for ourselves, and

getting organized once and for all. In this spirit, here are some resolutions we would like to share:

Breaking bad habits:

* Are you guilty of being a night owl? Or does your teen stay up late on a school night, then wake up dead tired in the morning? Although parents have always admonished their children to get a good night's sleep, a [recent article in Time Magazine](#) supports this wisdom with scientific data. Studies of both high school and college-age students demonstrate a strong connection between sleep habits and grades. In one study of college freshmen, [night owls](#) were found to have an average GPA of 2.84 by the end of freshmen year as opposed to the average GPA of 3.18 achieved by "larks"--those who go to bed early and wake up early. In a study of 14-18 years olds, different sleep habits had different effects: those who woke up frequently during the night and reported overall poor sleep quality did worse in math, for example, while those who slept wonderfully all night got better grades in English. So resolve now to start catching more z's and establishing a better sleep routine--your grades may depend on it!

* Are you a procrastinator? Do you cause yourself undue stress by putting off projects and papers until the last minute? There are many reasons why we procrastinate, but let's cut to the chase. Procrastination only delays the task that we must inevitably face, and the stress it causes is simply not worth it in the long run. If your child is a procrastinator, you may need to step in and suggest (or impose) some structure: work with your child to set up a schedule or timetable for completing the task and "check in" at regular intervals to see that progress is being made, or at least until the procrastination habit becomes less

Free Proctored SAT and ACT Practice Exams



Mark your calendars! A+ Test Prep and Tutoring is once again offering free, no-obligation, proctored practice exams to current students and to members of the community.

For your added convenience, we are offering these practice tests at two locations: Wynnewood and Glenside. See details below.

Penn Wynne Library
130 Overbrook Parkway
Wynnewood, PA 19096

ACT Proctored Practice Exam
Saturday, January 30, 2010, 10:00 AM-2:15 PM

SAT Proctored Practice Exam
Saturday, February 6, 2010, 10:00 AM-2:15 PM

St. Paul's Lutheran Church
120 N. Easton Road
Glenside, PA 19038

SAT Proctored Practice Exam
Saturday, February 6, 2010, 8:45 AM-1:00PM

This is a great opportunity for students to take the ACT or SAT under actual test-like conditions prior to sitting for the "real" thing. Students will receive a detailed score report which includes an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses on the exam.

These tests are offered by A+ for free, on a

severe. Rewarding progress on homework and projects can be a psychological boost--for a younger child, let her take a 10-15 minute cookies and milk break, whereas your teen can reward himself with listening to a few songs on his Ipod or taking a texting break. Such rewards serve a dual purpose--they help ease the tedium of the task at hand and reinforce the concept of work before play.

Setting Goals:

Many of us get so caught up in the business of living--commuting to and from work or school and doing chores or homework--that we forget to step back and look at the big picture.

* Read more: High school students often don't have time to read a book for pleasure because they are so busy with schoolwork, and any books they do read are "required," thereby somehow losing their luster. Gone are their elementary school days when they could lose themselves in the Harry Potter series. It is important to keep reading alive in your home by creating a reading-rich environment and by letting your child see you enjoy a good novel or perusing the Sunday paper. We are not suggesting you keep War and Peace on the kitchen table, but do subscribe to magazines that interest your child. Magazine articles are short and can even be enjoyed while your teen eats his morning cereal. During school breaks and in the summer when your children are less pressed for time, make a habit of going to the library. Libraries have kept excellent pace with new technologies and now offer titles in non-traditional formats such as audiobooks that can be downloaded to your computer, iPod, or other compatible portable device.

* Get out more: Expand your horizons. We don't need to travel far to experience new things. We are fortunate to live near Philadelphia, a city rich in history and culture. Take a walking tour and combine exercise with sightseeing. Visit some of the city's wonderful museums: The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Franklin Institute, the Please Touch Museum, or the quirky Mütter Museum. Check out the many features of Fairmount Park, the Philadelphia Zoo, the Liberty Bell and the National Constitution Center, or take a free, self-guided tour of the U.S. Mint. Graze through Reading Terminal or the Italian Market for lunch on a Saturday. Go biking or rollerblading with your child along Kelly Drive (weather permitting!).

* Get organized: Out with the old and in with the new! The new year is a wonderful time to take stock of our physical "stuff." Weed through your

no-obligation basis--no strings attached!
Space is limited, though, so call our office today at 610.520.0537 or 215.886.9188 to reserve a spot.

School and Community Partnerships



A+ Test Prep and Tutoring provides in-home One-to-One Test Prep and Academic Subject Tutoring throughout the Delaware Valley.

We also partner with schools and community groups to provide:

- Free Proctored ACT and SAT Exams at Your School
- SAT, ACT, SSAT, and ISEE Test preparation Courses at Your School
- Remedial Reading and Math Tutoring Programs
- Study Skills courses

Programs are offered throughout the Delaware Valley. For more information please contact me at 215.886.9188.

Daniel Ascher, M.Ed.
President

A+ Test Prep and Tutoring

files and desk for papers that are outdated and can be tossed, shredded, or recycled. Declutter your junk drawer, the coat closet, and the medicine cabinet--say goodbye to old coupons, single mittens, and expired medications. Donate gently used clothing, books, and toys to charity. If you still have a problem area in your home where "stuff" collects, analyze the problem: Do you need to purchase an additional filing cabinet or just create more folders? Do you need to sort through mail more often? Can you contact catalog companies to have your name removed from their mailing lists? Likewise, have your student clean out his bookbag and study area. A cleaner, more clutter-free workspace is more alluring than one that is disorganized and chaotic. Make sure your child's workspace is well-lit too.

Change can be difficult, but is often necessary. So make sure to keep your new year's resolutions reasonable, take a one-step-at-a-time approach, and stay positive!

Thank you for your interest in A+ and our newsletter. Feel free to contact us at 215.886.9188 or on the web at www.aplustutoring.com.

And don't forget to visit the [A+ Blog](#), which is updated weekly with articles relating to a variety of education-related topics including college admissions, test prep, learning disabilities, reading skills, etc.

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