Why Is This Child So Disorganized and What Can I Do About It?

CHADD 2015
Annual International Conference on ADHD

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Today’s Agenda

I. What do we know about executive functions?
   A. Definitions
   B. Development of EF

II. Who has trouble with EF and why?

III. Intervention
   A. How does change happen?
   B. Challenges to intervention

IV. Meeting the challenge: What can we do?
   A. General rules for intervention
   B. Building organizational skills
   C. Helping with working memory
   D. Helping kids who procrastinate
What do we know about EF?

RESEARCH RESULTS AND CLINICAL KNOWLEDGE
A formal definition of EF

- Executive functions are the mental processes that serve a supervisory role in our own thinking and behavior.

- The executive functions work together to direct and coordinate our efforts to achieve a goal.

From Cooper-Kahn and Foster, Boosting Executive Skills in The Classroom, 2013.
Like A Good Executive...

- Our EF processes focus on the master plan
- Allow us to keep goals in mind over time
- Allow us to monitor progress and adjust our pace and/or our plan as needed
Cool and Hot EF

Regulation of thinking

Regulation of behavior and emotions
Executive Skills

**Cool Skills**
- Planning and Organization
- Working Memory
- Initiation
- Task Monitoring

**Hot Skills**
- Self Monitoring
- Inhibition
- Emotional control
- Shifting

Adapted from Gioia, G. A., Isquith, P.K., Retzlaff, P.D. and Espy, K.A., 2002
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive Skills: BRIEF DEFINITIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planning and Organization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to impose order on <em>thoughts</em>, tasks, play, and storage spaces</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Working Memory</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal scratch pad; a dynamic process that involves reviewing new information and retrieving, holding, and manipulating stored information in our minds for the purpose of completing a cognitive task</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## EF Definitions (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiation</th>
<th>The ability to begin a task or activity and to independently generate ideas, responses, or problem solving strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task Monitoring</td>
<td>The ability to monitor one’s own performance and to measure it against a standard of what is needed for any given task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EF DEFINITIONS (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self Monitoring</strong></td>
<td>The ability to observe one’s own behavior and to determine whether it conforms to explicit behavioral expectations and unwritten social rules</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Inhibition</strong></td>
<td>The ability to “put on the brakes” or to stop behaviors at the appropriate time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Control</td>
<td>The ability to reflect on one’s own feelings and then to use that understanding to guide one’s emotional responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shifting</td>
<td>The ability to “change gears,” to move freely from one situation to another, and to think flexibly in order to respond appropriately to a new or unexpected situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Cycling Metaphor

Smooth executive functioning is like riding a bike. You need to have the foundation skills in place (for example, pedaling, steering, braking, and balancing), but no single skill alone accounts for the magic that happens when you put them all together.

(Cooper-Kahn and Foster, 2013.)
There are predictable surges in the development of executive functions, and school demands are designed to pace these changes.
Who has trouble with EF and why?

ATYPICAL DEVELOPMENT, DISORDERS & DIAGNOSES
Executive Functioning Disorder? There’s no such thing!

- “Executive Dysfunction” and “Executive Functioning Disorder” are not disorders in any formal diagnostic system.
- Executive dysfunction is a description, not a diagnosis.
- EF problems are generic; they can be part of a larger pattern of difficulties or occur alone.
Good executive functioning depends on:

- sound development of several different brain regions
- development of efficient connections between regions
- smooth functioning of the neuro-transmitter systems responsible for communication between neurons
Who has trouble with EF?

Developmental Disorders
- ADHD
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Learning Disabilities

Developmental Advantage
- Giftedness

Acute and Chronic Stress
- Fight or Flight
- Long term changes in the brain
- Energy depletion
Who has trouble with EF?

(2)

Psychiatric Disorders
- Depression
- Anxiety

Lower Incidence Disorders
- Tourette’s Syndrome
- Velo-cardio-facial Syndrome
- Schizophrenia
ADHD

- Children with AD(H)D tend to be at least 1-2 years behind in areas of development, including social-emotional.

- New brain imaging studies show that the delay in brain development can be much more significant, as much as 3-5 years behind.

- Children with ADHD have different wiring in their motivational systems, arising from functional differences in dopamine response to rewards.
Stress, Anxiety, Depression...
EF: A Finite Resource

How long does it take to deplete our storage of available executive energy?
EF and Healthy Habits
Summary: The Good News and Bad News on EF

The long trajectory of development and the variety of processes involved mean EF is vulnerable on many fronts. It also means that we have a big window of time for input and our task is clear.

Our focus:

• opportunities for learning and practice
• physical and emotional health
Intervention
How Does Change Happen?

- Brain maturation
- Incidental learning
- Learning from direct instruction
- Scaffolding
Challenges to Treatment Planning for EF

- Brain maturation and learning take time and life keeps coming at us.

- Unknown upper limits on executive ability for a particular individual means that the ideal balance between “remediation” and accommodation is unknown for any individual.
Individuals with EDF will not always see the benefit of the hard work to learn skills.

The need for help with executive functions may be out of synch with peers and with the individual’s emotional needs for independence.
Challenges to Understanding and Compassion

• Adults may be skeptical or confused because students with weak executive skills can look the same in the classroom as students who have the skills but choose not to perform.

• The slow pace of change may lead us to think that our efforts are not working and so we give up rather than sticking with the process.

• Often there is a mix of executive dysfunction (skill delays) and limited or variable effort and motivation.
Meeting the Challenge

WHAT CAN WE DO?
4 Rules for Intervention

1. Successful intervention always involves a two-pronged approach. Focus on support in the short term and on building competency over the long term.

2. Building habits and routines is the cornerstone of any intervention plan.

3. Adhere to the principle of successive approximations.

4. Focus on executive thinking, not just executive skills.
Rule 1: Use the Two-Pronged Approach

Short-term interventions provide support that allows the student to be successful on a daily basis (Barkley’s concept of a “prosthetic environment”).

Interventions are:

- Designed to lighten the load on the executive system.
- Often involve “lending” our own executive competence.
- May need to remain in place for years, despite expectations when we use the term “short-term.”
Two-Pronged Approach (2)

Long-term interventions teach skills and strategies that will allow the student to become independent and to succeed on her own.

- Build toward self-awareness.
- Require as much active engagement as possible.
Rule 2: Build Habits and Routines

Habits compensate for weak executive functioning

- Habits are formed through ‘context-dependent repetition.’
- Habits are mentally efficient
- Require time and patience to build automaticity
Rule 3: The Principle of Successive Approximations
Rule 4: Focus on Executive Thinking, Not Just Executive Skills

• Make the “how” of success a goal that is as important as the “what.”

• As new demands are introduced, discuss strategies and options for how to complete the task (e.g. new chores, book reports, study demands)

• Celebrate successful management of tasks as a separate and explicit accomplishment.
Building Organizational Skills

PLANNING, TASK MONITORING, WORKING MEMORY
General Principles for Intervention to Improve Organization

- Use behavioral routines that create order and efficiency
- Offer organizational routines for managing “stuff”
- Teach cognitive routines that help kids organize information
- Highlight the planning process
- Teach strategies to relieve the burden on working memory
Home Routines

- Morning routine
- After school routine
- Homework routine (including task management and “stuff” management)
- Chores
- Bedtime routine
Helping with Organization for School In the Early Grades

- For younger students, planning and organization is mostly about paper flow and supplies: where to put loose papers like permission slips, handouts, and homework assignments.

- Create a system for storing basic supplies for re-stocking at the backpack.
M.O.O.S.E. Folders (Management of Organizational Skills Everyday)

F.R.O.G. (Fully Responsible, Organized and Growing)

B.E.E. (Bring Everything Everyday)

Things to be “Left at home” pocket

Things to go “Right back to school” pocket
Planners

- Use the planner to teach planning
- Focus on “do” dates, not just “due” date
# Student Planner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday/Sunday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>✔️</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
<td>✔️ pg. 47 # 1-10 odd</td>
<td>✔️ Read Chap. 2</td>
<td>✔️ Bring eg. of an equation</td>
<td>✔️ Prep Graphic</td>
<td>✔️ Due Graphic</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td>✔️ Bring a cup of dirt!</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️ Study</td>
<td>✔️ Study</td>
<td>✔️ Study</td>
<td>✔️ Test</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Studies</strong></td>
<td>✔️ Read article</td>
<td>✔️ Journal response</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️ Grandma’s birthday</td>
<td>✔️ * Thursday Note</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization of Materials</td>
<td>Planning and Organizing</td>
<td>Working Memory</td>
<td>Task Monitoring</td>
<td>Task Initiation and Completion</td>
<td>Emotional Control</td>
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<td>Planners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entries for every class, including “None”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long-term projects, entered sideways</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1–10 confidence scale for tests</td>
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<td>Thursday grade checks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday notes to teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunday’s weekly preview with parents</td>
<td>✓</td>
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(Cooper-Kahn and Foster, 2013, p. 83.)
To Improve Acquisition and Recall of Information

- Offer organizational frameworks in advance to help kids tag and prioritize information.
- Relieve the burden on working memory.
Building internal schemas: Previewing

Creating a framework for the details:

- Create an outline before reading the chapter
- Use the comprehension questions as a reading guide
- Discuss the goal of the lesson
During input: Building more active engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlighting $10 words: textbooks—subtitles and paragraphs</th>
<th>Organization of Materials</th>
<th>Planning and Organizing</th>
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<th>Task Monitoring</th>
<th>Task Initiation and Completion</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highlighting $10 words: novels and short stories with chapter summary bullets</td>
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<td>√</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting $10 words: assignment sheets</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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Use visual maps for brainstorming, planning and organizing. These can be done by hand or with computer software (Inspiration©, Kidspiration©, MindJet MindManager©). Expect to prompt the student to use the technology until it becomes habitual.

(Cooper-Kahn and Foster, 2013, p.103.)
Surprise Party for Megan

Activities
- Videos
  - Open presents
- Talk with Meg's mother about best day

Food
- Dinner
  - Pizza
  - Salad
  - Sodas
- Snacks
  - Popcorn
  - Pretzels
- Chips and salsa and maybe another dip

Invitations
- Guest list
  - Denise
  - Emily
  - Jordanna
  - Leah
- Buy invitations
- Get addresses
- Complete and mail invitations

Choose date
- July 11 or 18
- Okay with Mom
General Principles to Help With Working Memory

Take some of the work out of working memory:

1. Focus on your delivery of auditory information
2. Accommodate difficulties with note-taking
3. Offer templates for repetitive procedures at home and in school
4. “Prime the pump” with warm-ups
5. Focus on the use of external scratch pads
Delivery of auditory information

What is the message that you want the child to take away?

- Simplify your language
- Highlight the most important points
Accommodate difficulties with note taking

1. Take notes for the child and teach the child how to simplify the task by modelling
2. Offer outlines with space for bullet points
3. Provide a copy of the class notes as a back-up
4. Encourage the use of apps that allow note-taking on screen
5. Try out other technology such as smart pens.
Working memory

- Use lists, templates, and more lists... (e.g. chores, morning routine, long division, science labs)
- Start the lesson or conversation with a review or warm-up
- Focus on the use of external scratch pads as a reasonable and non-judgmental lifestyle (e.g. Google docs, iCloud and Dropbox eliminate lost or misplaced information and are the way of life for many of us now.)
Helping kids who procrastinate
General Principles for Intervention to Help With Initiation

- Address faulty thinking
- Address the faulty ignition system
Why do people procrastinate?

• Overwhelmed by the task due to inability to plan & organize
• Avoidance
• Over-focus on mood and mood repair
• Poor ability to connect current behavior with future outcome
• Slow processing speed
Strategies to Help with Initiation Problems

1. Develop a designated work time to avoid power struggles and mood-based decisions.

2. Use very specific timeframes. (What is the deadline time for completion of chores or school work?)

3. Alarms, timers, and other external aids can help cue the “start” function.

4. Provide external structure by cueing and prompting, as needed.
Strategies to Help with Initiation Problems

5. Start the task with the child (e.g. topic sentence, chores).
6. Target initiation as a goal by timing the interval between directions and starting and offering a reward for improving the time.
7. Create an easy first step (brief time or easy task)
8. Teach “time travel”
Working with teens

- You may need a tutor to preserve family relationships.
- Brief, frequent, regularly scheduled check-ins are better than as-needed support (a.k.a. crisis management).
- Isolated study skills classes are less useful than ongoing support that uses real-life demands.
- Learning to ask for appropriate support is a critical life skill. Even this skill may be delayed, though. (Self-monitoring?)
Remember the whole child

Everybody needs a reason to get up in the morning. What makes your child’s heart sing? Are there opportunities to develop and show off her strengths?
References and Resources


References and Resources (continued)


