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## Executive functioning worksheets for adults

The first time you hear that your 7-year-old son is weak in “executive functions” it sounds like a joke. No kidding—that’s why he’s a first grader, not a CEO. But executive functions are the essential self-regulating skills that we all use every day to accomplish just about everything. They help us plan, organize, make decisions, shift between situations or thoughts, control our emotions and impulsivity, and learn from past mistakes. Kids rely on their executive functions for everything from taking a shower to packing a backpack and picking priorities.Children who have poor executive functioning, including many with ADHD, are more disorganized than other kids. They might take an extraordinarily long time to get dressed or become overwhelmed while doing simple chores around the house. Schoolwork can become a nightmare because they regularly lose papers or start weeklong assignments the night before they are due.Learning disorder specialists have devised ways to bolster the organizational skills that don’t come naturally to a child with poor executive functioning. They teach a mix of specific strategies and alternative learning styles that complement or enhance a child’s particular abilities. Here are some of the tools they teach kids—and parents—to help them tackle school work as well as other responsibilities that take organization and follow-through.ChecklistsThe steps necessary for completing a task often aren’t obvious to kids with executive dysfunction, and defining them clearly ahead of time makes a task less daunting and more achievable. Following a checklist of steps also minimizes the mental and emotional strain many kids with executive dysfunction experience while trying to make decisions. Ruth Lee, an educational therapist, explains, “Often these kids will get so wrapped up in the decision-making process that they never even start the task. Or, if they do begin, they’re constantly starting and restarting because they’ve thought of a better way to do it. In the end they’re exhausted when the time comes to actually follow through.” With a checklist, kids can focus their mental energy on the task at hand.You can make a checklist for nearly anything. Lee notes, including how to get out of the house on time each morning—often a daily struggle for kids with executive dysfunction. Some parents say posting a checklist of the morning routine can be a sanity saver: make your bed, brush your teeth, get dressed, have breakfast, grab your lunch, get your backpack. Lee also recommends completing as many of the morning tasks as possible the night before. Lunches can be made ahead of time, clothes can be laid out, and backpacks can be packed and waiting by the door. It takes a little extra planning, she adds, but doing the work ahead of time can prevent a lot of drama the next day.Related: Metacognition: How Thinking About Thinking Can Help KidsSet time limitsWhen making a checklist, many educational therapists also recommend assigning a time limit for each step, particularly if it is a bigger, longer-term project. Matt Cruger, PhD, Director of the Child Mind Institute Learning and Development Center, likes to practice breaking down different kinds of homework assignments with kids to get them used to the steps required—and how long they might take. He describes recently working with a fifth grader who could think of only two steps required to complete a book report—writing the report and then turning it in. The time involved in reading the book slipped his mind.Use that plannerEducational specialists also highlight the cardinal importance of using a planner. Most schools require students to use a planner these days, but they often don’t teach children how to use them, and it won’t be obvious to a child who is overwhelmed by—or uninterested in—organization and planning. This is unfortunate because kids who struggle with executive functioning issues have poor working memory, which means it is hard for them to remember things like homework assignments. And working memory issues tend to snowball. Dr. Cruger explains, “Kids don’t remember that they won’t remember their homework if they don’t write it down. It doesn’t matter how many times they forget. Once a frustrated father told me, ‘It’s like he has this delusion that he’ll remember it!’” As a backup to planners, many schools are also using software platforms like eChalk to create webpages teachers use to post homework assignments and handouts—giving kids with executive dysfunction one less thing to worry about Spell out the rationaleWhile a child is learning new skills, it is essential that he understand the rationale behind them, or things like planning might feel like a waste of time or needless energy drain. Kids with poor organizational skills often feel pressured by their time commitments and responsibilities, and can be very averse to delay. “It’s almost like they’re making neuroeconomics decisions,” Dr. Cruger says. “They’re constantly weighing things to see if it’s worth their effort, and planning can feel like a waste of time if you don’t understand the rationale behind it.” Older kids are particularly resistant because they’re more stuck in their ways. “They’ll say, ‘This is what works for me,’ even if their method really isn’t working,” says Dr. Cruger. Explaining the rationale behind a particular strategy makes a child much more likely to commit to doing it. Explore different ways of learningBecause everyone learns differently, educational specialists like Mara Ravitz, MA, one of the founders of the learning company Smarten Up, advocate using a variety of strategies to help kids with executive dysfunction understand—and remember—important concepts. Using graphic organizers as a reference for visual learners is one such example. Students learning how to write a paragraph might follow the hamburger paragraph model, a diagramed drawing of a hamburger in which each sandwich component matches a part of a paragraph—the top bun is the thesis, the three supporting sentences are the lettuce, tomato, and patty, and the bottom bun is the conclusion sentence. Some versions of the hamburger paragraph act as a visual aid while others double as forms that a child can fill in.Other kids remember things better if there is a motion supporting it, like counting on their fingers, which is good for visual and tactile learners. Younger children benefit from self-talking to reduce anxiety and Social Stories, which are narratives about a child successfully performing a certain task or learning a particular skill. Social Stories are told from a child’s first-person perspective and are similar to self-talk, but they can also double as a checklist because they break tasks into clear steps and can be referred to later.As kids get older and are expected to memorize a lot of dry factual information, Ravitz recommends mnemonic devices as a way to structure information in a more memorable way. But with all of the different learning strategies out there, Dr. Cruger stresses the importance of not overwhelming kids. Ideally the educational specialist should be working with your child on one new skill at a time, and spending at least two weeks practicing before evaluating how effective or ineffective it is and moving on to anything new.Establish a routineThis is particularly important for older kids, who typically struggle more to get started with their homework. Educational specialists recommend starting homework at the same time every day. Expect some resistance from older kids, who often prefer to wait until they feel like doing their work. Dr. Cruger strongly advises against waiting to start homework. “Realistically, the desire to start homework probably isn’t going to come. A kid who is waiting for inspiration to strike will still be forced to start his homework eventually, but it will probably be at 11 o’clock. That’s clearly a bad work model.” Ideally, kids should come home, unpack their bag, have a snack, and then get started. Homework is best done in a quiet, well-lit space fully stocked with paper and pencils because a search for supplies can quickly derail homework time. Any space with minimal distractions is good. Some families find doing homework on the kitchen table works best for their child, particularly if a parent is nearby to supervise and answer questions.Use rewardsFor younger kids, Ravitz recommends putting a reward system in place. “Younger kids need external motivators to highlight the value of these new strategies. Something like a star chart, where kids see the connection between practicing their skills and working towards a reward, works very well.” Besides, Ravitz notes, “It’s also a good way to communicate to kids that their parents and their teacher also value this skill.” If you’re using a reward chart, hanging it in the designated homework area can be a good incentive. For older kids who aren’t as motivated by things like rewards, parents should still be encouraging. Ravitz recommends parents checking in with older kids. “Ask how things are going or offer help. Tell them you appreciate all the hard work they’re doing. School is really hard for a lot of kids—it shouldn’t be a given that learning these things is easy.”Developing new strategies for learning isn’t easy either. Initially, it can put kids who are already self-conscious even further outside their comfort zone, but it’s worth the effort. We use our organizational skills every day in a million ways, and they are essential to our success in school and later as adults. Getting organized even gives us more time to play videogames.Read More: How Do I Know if My Child Has Executive Function Issues? Social Challenges of Kids With Learning Problems The brain is dynamic and changes according to what we do and experience, and the impact of experiences is greatest when specific regions of the brain are still developing. However, the prefrontal cortex is still sensitive to experience in adulthood, and the adult brain is still able to build the complex networks required for executive function and self-regulation. Although there is age-related decline, when it comes to performance, these skills and the brain regions that support them are malleable, and can strengthen depending on how much they are practiced. Research consistently shows that the prefrontal cortex can be changed well into adulthood. How Can We Build or Restore These Core Capabilities? For tips and more on building adult capabilities, see our guide for practitioners. Building the core capabilities of adults is essential not only to their own success as parents and workers, but also to the development of the same capabilities by the children in their care. Doing this successfully requires two approaches: Environmental Approaches What changes can we make to programs and services that will create a less stress-inducing environment for people whose core capabilities are challenged? How can we provide positive opportunities to develop and practice those skills? Reduce the ways in which systems and services that are designed for adults in poverty overload and deplete their self-regulation skills. Pay attention to the style of interaction between caseworkers and those being served. Incorporate tools and techniques that help people take greater advantage of available services and build core capabilities. Use service delivery infrastructure to relieve key stressors in families’ lives by filling basic needs. Individual Approaches By focusing on real-life daily situations such as bedtime and mealtime, the Ready4Routines intervention seeks to strengthen executive function skills in adults and children, while also increasing predictability within young children’s lives. Learn more At the individual level, what can we do to help adults who have faced adverse conditions throughout their lives build their self-regulation and executive function skills? Provide training in specific self-regulatory and executive function skills aligned to the environment and context in which they will be used. Teach strategies for reassessing a stressful situation and considering alternatives. Teach strategies for recognizing and interrupting automatic responses, such as intense anger or frustration, to give more time to activate intentional self-regulation in stressful situations. Strengthen intentional self-regulation through specific training techniques that target the skills that can override automatic responses, such as helping adults identify their own motivating goals and support their pursuit. Create a “multiplier effect,” in which helping adults see how small actions and successes will make a difference leads to a reinforcing cycle of positive emotional responses.





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