



Play Therapy News

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Executive Functions

ADHD affects 3-5 percent of children in the USA and is more prevalent in boys than girls. The principal characteristics of ADHD: inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity (NIMH, 2009). But recent research is moving away from a focus on these previous traits and towards an emphasis on the "executive functions." The mental processes that help organize behaviors and allow us to direct our actions towards an end goal include the following brain tasks: ability to plan ahead by thinking in future terms, working memory, self-regulation of emotional impulses, awareness of time passage, inner

self-talk, hindering actions that prevent reaching goals, self-management and moving successfully among various tasks (Yeager, 2009). Experts now believe that a person with ADHD may have ample knowledge and skills, but may have trouble carrying out these resources at proper times and places. When kids with ADHD are in a setting where they must rely on their own internal mental processes, they have difficulty. But if tools that 'externalize' these executive functions are used, like an immediately-available checklist or cue cards, they support working memory.



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Strategies for School Success with Executive Functioning Challenges

1. To manage time:

- Create checklists with estimates of how long tasks will take. A student's checklist could include: Get out paper and pencil, put name and due date on paper, read directions, etc.
- Break long assignments into chunks and assign time frames for completing each chunk.
- Use visual calendars to keep track of long-term assignments, chores and activities.
- Use management software - Franklin Day Planner, Palm Pilot or Lotus Organizer.
- Be sure to write the due dates on top of each assignment.

Play is our brain's favorite way of learning

Diane Ackerman -
Contemporary American
Author

Not only does using tools help recall, but it breaks the reliance on constant parental prompting and increases the child's confidence in their own ability to succeed. The executive functions are a diverse, but related and overlapping set of skills. It is vital to look at which brain tasks are most problematic for a

2. Managing space, work and materials:

- Organize work space.
- Minimize clutter.
- Consider separate work areas with complete sets of supplies for different activities.
- Schedule a weekly time to clean and organize the work space.
- Meet with a teacher or supervisor on a regular basis to review work; troubleshoot problems.

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September—School Days!
As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in the schools — author unknown



child, and to what degree, in order to decide where to focus improvements. There is no battery of tests that identify all the various features of executive functioning, but careful observation can detect certain problem areas.

General strategies — use of visual/organizational aids, time managers, computers or watch alarms. A review of prepared visual schedules several times a day. Use of written directions with oral instruction. Structured and planned transition times or shifts in activities.

The good news is that the brain will continue to develop connections into adulthood. A person's executive functioning abilities are shaped by sheer physical brain growth and life experiences in the community, classroom and home environment. Also consider - appropriate medication, school accommodation, behavior management and play therapy to regulate behaviors. Allowing kids to be partners in their own treatment is strongly recommended.

Resource Corner

Barkley, R. (2005). ADHD and the Nature of Self-Control. New York: The Guilford Press.

Executive Function Part One: What is Executive Function? by Phillip David Zelazo, Ph.D. This is the first feature of a multi-part series on topic of Executive Function:
Copy and paste into your address bar:

<http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/News/Executive-Function-Part-One-What-is-executive-function.aspx?articleID=8024&categoryID=news-type>

To link to the entire series, copy & paste:

<http://aboutkidshealth.ca/News/SeriesArchive.aspx#ExecutiveFunction>

Yeager, M. (2009). Executive Function: A Key to Understanding the ADHD Mind. *Play Therapy Magazine*. Association for Play Therapy. Clovis, CA