



## Executive Function

**Executive function is the name given to the processes by which we regulate and manage our thoughts and actions. Individuals who have a deficit in their executive function will struggle with the mental processes which allow them to connect present action with past experiences.**

Individuals with learning difficulties, ADHD and ASD often struggle in this area. This will show itself in a number of ways:

- Difficulties in controlling their impulses: they will have limited ability to stop and think before acting.
- Emotional control could also be challenged, and they may find it very difficult to manage their feelings by thinking about goals, for example, particularly when challenges come along. Coaching them through these difficulties, and talking through their impulsive or inappropriate behaviour and its consequences will help, if it is done in a way that avoids blame and disapproval, and focuses on finding ways to improve their executive function skills and to behave in more helpful ways.
- Planning will also be a challenge for individuals with executive function deficits, and they will find it difficult to prioritise and decide on an area of focus. If a project or task has a number of steps to it they will find it difficult to successfully sequence those steps into complete structured plan.
- They are likely to have inflexible thinking patterns, and will lack the ability to change strategy or revise plans when conditions change. If their first idea doesn't work out they may become very emotional and be unable to see another way through the problem.
- Working memory is a core executive function; it is the system that keeps hold of the information needed to complete a task, while the individual processes it. Breaking tasks and information into manageable chunks will help with this difficulty, as will writing down some of the information to relieve the pressure of having to 'hold it all in their head'.
- The ability to initiate is also limited, so individuals with executive function deficit will probably find it hard to start a piece of work, or to strike up a conversation. They may be seen as procrastinators because they put off tasks and projects to the last possible minute. This difficulty can be supported by sitting down with the individual and discussing a number of different ways that the task/ conversation could be started. This will build up a 'toolbox of beginnings' that the young person can draw from, once they have gone over them enough times to stay in their memory.
- An inability to monitor themselves effectively can lead to individuals losing sight of their original goals, and spending unnecessary hours working on a task. To help them to avoid this, they could set regular times (using a timer on their phone or laptop) to check their progress. It may help them to have a coach to help them to develop efficient study skills for a time, but this would ideally fade as the skills are developed.

Developing self-control, resilience and an awareness of their impact on others and the world around them is vital for young people with executive function difficulties to move forward and make a successful transition into the adult world.

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