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MAKE YOUR INNER CEO STRONGER: STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS





As discussed last month executive function skills can be enhanced. These children with difficulties can be helped! It is important we realize that children with Executive Function Dysfunction have unique needs. They might need extra help to understand assignments, get started, and stay focused. Children with EFs difficulties will struggle around the clock.

Meet Rohan he's an 11-year-old studying in the sixth grade; and let's see what we can do to help him get through his day!

Rohan struggles through his day.	How can we help Rohan?
<p>7:00 a.m.: Oh no! Rohan knows that he has forgotten something. Ah that's it! It's his shoes for his soccer games. He drops his lunch bag in the kitchen and runs back to his room. But it's too late his bus is here and about to pull away! He sprints back to the door forgetting his lunch bag in the kitchen, to avoid missing his bus again.</p> <p>EF: organization and planning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a checklist of all the things Rohan needs to take to school and stick it on his bedroom door. • Inculcate the habit of packing his bag the previous night and making sure all the important things have been kept inside.

<p>11:00 a.m.: It's reading class, all the children are busy reading their books, Rohan can't decide if he wants to read a comic book or a book about astronomy or the one about cars. He finally, settles on the comic book. While reading he cannot control his laughter and starts laughing loudly, not realizing that his friends are getting disturbed. He is so engrossed in reading that he is the last child in the library. He thus springs out of his chair in excitement for his soccer class. He is already late for soccer class by the time he's changed for his soccer shoes; his library teacher is waiting by the door for him. Rohan, had left his book just like that on the desk and needs to go and place it back on the shelf.</p> <p>EF: decision making, attention, impulse control and working memory</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Rohan with just two options and let him pick one • Have him sit close to the teacher so he can be reminded verbally when it's time to go for the next class • Use a visual timer to help Rohan with time management
<p>1:00 p.m.: It's the best time of the day! It's lunchtime. But Rohan has forgotten his lunch bag, despite that, he is super excited and is calling out loudly to his friend from across the room. His other classmates are getting disturbed and the lunch monitor is glaring at him, but Rohan doesn't even notice them.</p> <p>EF: Impulse control, self-monitoring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach Rohan about Social thinking skills • This will help him to be more aware of how his behavior impacts those around him
<p>7:00 p.m.: It is time for dinner. Rohan must help his mom set the table. Hmm Rohan scratches his head trying hard to remember the order in which he must place the spoons and what goes where. He finishes his task at hand and feels happy that he got it right this time! But his younger sister reminds him that he hasn't. He blows up, "how dare she?" and starts screaming at her.</p> <p>EF: Planning, organization, impulse control</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Rohan with a visual of how he must set the table • Programs like how does your engine run or Zones of Regulation will help teach Rohan about regulating his emotions • Teach him calming down or relaxing strategies such as deep breathing techniques, counts, etc. • Provide him with a corner in the house where he can go and cool down
<p>10:00 p.m.: Rohan realizes he needs to turn in his science homework tomorrow, one hour has gone by but he is still confused as to where and how to start his assignment. He just can't figure out what steps he must take to get it done. Its way past his bedtime, but at least his homework is done. He decides to go to sleep, but in haste, leaves his notebook out on his study table.</p> <p>EF: task initiation, planning and prioritizing, organization and self-monitoring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach him note taking skills in the class or a to-do list • Help him break down a task into steps, plan each step and perform them in an orderly manner • Using a checklist can also be beneficial • Use a binder or folder to keep assignments and worksheets

Providing Rohan and many other children just few external aids will help support them throughout their day. EFs are vital skills that everyone need, thus giving each child new opportunities to develop these skills through activities, teamwork and novel tasks is essential.

1. **STOP**  • Stop what I am doing.
2. **THINK**  • What do I need to do?
• Do I have a checklist that I can use?
3. **PLAN**  • Plan the steps needed to finish the task.
• Fill out the checklist that I can use.
4. **DO**  • Sit down and start working!

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Accommodations along with games and technology can help develop and improve the child’s executive function skills. The key to choosing successful accommodation is identifying the two or three most important deficits and picking accommodations that address them.

- To help children at home, provide structure by designating a special homework space and equipping it with the supplies they need to get started.
- Pre-decide a fixed timetable/schedule to help with task initiation and getting started with school tasks or other activities.
- Sit with your child while he starts his assignments, and then check homework when it’s finished.
- Break homework into segments.
- Give children a snack (something crunchy and alerting) or let them run around before starting homework.
- If keeping track of time is a problem, try a timer.
- If staying organized is the issue, use a diary or an organizer to keep notes according to dates.

What will also help is sitting with your child, once the assignment is over to reflect back on what did and did not work. Develop a list of things that helped your child complete his/her assignment. Think about ways to ensure that these supports are in place for other projects. Think about what was learned from assignments that were not completed well. Was this due to a lack of information, a need to improve certain skills, bad time management, etc.? What would you do differently next time?

There are many ways to strengthen various components of executive function. Games can help to improve executive function skills, too. Most games help with improving more than one skill at a time. Such as, Checkers, Monopoly, and Clue help improve planning, sustained attention, response inhibition, working memory and metacognition. Games like scavenger hunt, Sudoku, crosswords help with problem solving and goal-directed persistence. But, there are also many games that primarily help improve a certain skill set.

Working memory:

- Playing games like Uno, Go fish, memory games. The child has to keep the rules of the game in mind. But he/she also has to remember what cards he/she has and the ones other people have played or which card is placed where
- Teaching the child ways to visualize thoughts and finding ways to connect information also helps.
- Using multisensory strategies: Write tasks down so your child can look at them. Say them out loud so your child can hear them. Processing information in as many ways as possible can help with working memory and long-term memory.

Self-monitoring and impulse control:

- **Zones of Regulation:** Is a program that can help us realize, when we are not in the “just right” state of emotions; and equips us with strategies and ways to do something about it and feel better. It will teach the child to self-monitor and differentiate expected behaviour from unexpected behaviour.
- **Social Thinking:** Is a program that helps people develop their social competencies to better connect with others and live happier, more meaningful lives. It teaches us to understand the other person’s point of view.
- **The Alert Program:** This program makes self-regulation easy for children, teens, and adults and helps them stay alert, attentive and focused

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while learning, playing, working, and socializing.

- Deep breathing exercises can be helpful
- Maintaining a personal journal can foster self-reflection by providing teens/adolescents a means with which they can explore thoughts, feelings, actions, beliefs, and decisions they make during their day.

Planning and organization:

- Participating in group activities and working with others will not just improve the children’s ability to interact with others but also make them more responsible, this will also impact their problem solving skills and impulse control
- Let your child take the lead to plan a casual family event
- Encourage your child to take up simple and fun “do it yourself” projects

Research states that, to improve EFs, focusing narrowly on them may be less effective than simultaneously addressing emotional and social development and/or physical fitness (such as aerobics, martial arts, and yoga). Whether EF gains are seen depends on the way in which an activity is done and the amount of time a child spends doing it, pushing himself to do better. It’s the discipline and practice that produces the benefits. It is best, if your intervention involves an activity that children love, so they will devote intensive time and effort to it, in turn leading to improvement of their EFs.

Children who have strong executive function and self-regulation skills are more social and better liked by their peers, are more self-confident, can handle stress better, and perform better academically. For this reason, executive function skills are a part of everyday learning and to ensure a child’s overall success whether at school or a job, it is of utmost importance for us as parents and professionals to nourish and enhance their EF skills.

WRITING CAN BE OVERWHELMING!

If your child reverses letters, has difficulty with spelling or cannot pen his/her thoughts down onto paper, he/she is not alone. It is not uncommon to see children having difficulty with the physical act of writing or putting ideas into words or both. Writing is a complex task! There can be a number of reasons why it is a struggle for a child.

Children with writing issues may avoid any task involving writing altogether. Here are some signs of a possible writing issue:

- Has messy handwriting
- Writes slowly and painstakingly



- Is easily overwhelmed by writing assignments
- Refuses to write or do work that involves writing
- Mixes up or omits words and letters
- Has a poor grasp of spelling and punctuation
- Has trouble putting thoughts on paper

Complains of aches/pain in the hand post writing for short duration

It is important for us as parents and professionals to understand and support our child. Once we analyze the problem areas and the underlying reasons for writing difficulties we can help our children better. Here are some ideas you may want to consider:

- **Understand that your child is facing a genuine difficulty.** Once we realize this, only then can we get the help he/she needs. Learn as much as you can, as it will enable you to help your child find strategies to improve his/her skills and thereby reduce frustrations.
- **Get a formal assessment done by an appropriate professional** (developmental pediatrician/ pediatrician and occupational therapist/ special educator/ counselor). This will ensure that the child gets the most apt help.
- **Observe, take notes and analyze.** Watch your child's behavior when he/she is writing, you may start to see patterns. And that can help you find solutions. Maybe you've noticed that your child immediately has a meltdown, when he/she has more than a page of written homework. You can try breaking down the work into 10-minute segments and see if that helps. Or writing is more difficult on certain days in the week; it may be due to a long, tiring school day with an extra class. Plan your child's homework schedule such that he/she has less work on these days.



- **Look past the finished work and praise your**

child's hard work. Every time your child puts in the effort to write, motivate him/her with cheers and compliments. Explain to him/her, the importance of practicing, and provide rewards for making progress. Notice small gains. Focus on remediating one thing at a time.

- **Encourage keyboarding.** For many children, keyboarding (typing) is easier than writing by hand. For some children, voice-activated software can make typing easier. Some students find an audio recorder a helpful supplement for taking notes in class.
- **Look for apps and other high-tech help.** There are lots of applications and online games that can help your child build writing skills. Games and apps involving letter tracing, matching uppercase and lower case letters, or those with jumbled letters or words to improve spellings and encourage sentence building can be helpful.
- **Encourage writing at home.** Give your child a chance to practice writing in low-pressure situations. Have him/her jot down items on the grocery list and take short phone messages. Or encourage him/her to journal and write about their interests, even if it's just a few sentences a day. Don't rush your child through this process.
- **See it through your child's eyes.** It's hard to know what your child is experiencing with his/her writing difficulties. Having that insight can make it easier to be supportive.
- **Connect with other parents.** Connecting with parents in similar situations can give you support and confidence. They can be a great source of information, ideas and tips.
- **Connect with teachers at school.** Share your child's difficulties in terms of his/her strength and weakness with respect to writing. Also sharing strategies that support your child at home can help extend the same in school.

Finding out what's causing your child trouble with writing, and how to help him/her are important first steps in an on-going journey. Just getting started can

make you feel more hopeful and confident about helping your child. In the following months newsletter; we shall look at various other ways a child can participate in writing without actually writing!

“Having insight in your child’s difficulties can make it easier to be supportive.”

For any concerns and queries regarding the newsletter please write to us on: reachtherapycenterforchildren@gmail.com

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