

PARENT RESOURCE GUIDE

ADHD and Executive Functioning

Understanding the 'command and control' challenges of ADHD – and practical strategies that help.

The information in this guide is drawn from the clinical expertise of Dr. John Carosso, Psy.D. and Dr. Robert A. Lowenstein, M.D., current research findings, and authoritative sources including the DSM-5 and the National Institute of Mental Health. It is intended for informational purposes and does not replace a professional evaluation.

What Is Executive Functioning?

Executive functioning refers to a set of mental skills overseen by the prefrontal cortex — the brain's 'command and control' center. These skills allow us to manage time, pay attention, switch focus, plan and organize, remember details, and control impulses. ADHD significantly impairs executive functioning, often more than the hyperactivity or inattention symptoms that are more visible.

Core Executive Functions

Inhibition and Impulse Control

Stopping one's behavior at the appropriate time and thinking before acting.

Shifting and Flexible Thinking

Moving freely from one situation or idea to another in thought and behavior.

Emotional Control

Modulating emotional responses by bringing rational thought to bear on feelings.

Task Initiation

Beginning a task independently and generating ideas or problem-solving strategies.

Working Memory

Holding information in mind long enough to complete a task.

Planning, Organization, and Prioritizing

Managing current and future task demands; ordering by importance.

Organization of Materials

Imposing order on work, play, and storage spaces.

Self-Monitoring

Evaluating one's own performance against what is needed or expected.

Monitoring Time

Self-regulating based on time constraints; accurately judging the passage of time.

General Strategies to Improve Executive Functioning

- Take step-by-step approaches to work; rely on visual organizational aids
- Use tools like time organizers, computers, or watches with alarms
- Prepare visual schedules and review them several times a day
- Ask for written directions to accompany oral instructions whenever possible
- Plan and structure transition times and shifts in activities

Managing Time

- Create checklists and 'to do' lists; estimate how long tasks will take
- Break long assignments into chunks with time frames for each chunk
- Use visual calendars to track long-term assignments, due dates, chores, and activities
- Write the due date prominently on top of each assignment

Managing Space and Materials

- Organize the workspace; minimize clutter
- Consider separate work areas with complete sets of supplies for different activities
- Schedule a weekly time to clean and organize the workspace

Managing Work

- Make a checklist for getting through assignments (get out pencil, put name on paper, read directions...)
- Meet with a teacher or supervisor regularly to review work and troubleshoot problems

14 Principles for Managing ADHD and Executive Function

These evidence-based principles help parents and educators create conditions where children with executive functioning challenges can succeed:

1. Immediate feedback

Children with ADHD tend to be under control of the moment. Become part of the moment — make tasks more rewarding with quick praise, tokens, and immediate consequences.

2. Frequent feedback

Give feedback periodically during the task, not just at the end. Use visuals to remind yourself to check in.

3. Powerful consequences

Use more powerful consequences than with other children — they need more motivators to overcome the challenge.

4. Incentives before punishment

Praise before you punish. Too much punishment interferes with your relationship. Find replacement behaviors and reinforce them.

5. Externalize time

Children with ADHD have a disturbed sense of time. Use timers, visual timers, alarms, and recorder reminders. Break long timelines into small daily steps.

6. Externalize important information

Working memory is impaired — place helpful information out in the open where work is being done. Use posted rules and reminders.

7. Externalize motivation

Increase and make motivation obvious with visible incentives and rewards. Create win-win situations.

8. Make problem-solving physical

Keeping information organized in thought is hard. Use index cards, tangibles, symbols, and visual cues. Type out all points on a screen so ideas can be seen.

9. Strive for consistency

Use the same strategies every time. Be consistent and persistent. Both parents should respond the same way. Use strategies for at least 1–2 weeks before deciding they don't work.

10. Act, don't yak

Don't pester or over-explain. The issue is not a lack of information — it's a performance problem. Let actions and consequences speak.

11. Plan ahead for problem situations

If you can predict the problem, plan for how to manage it. Communicate clear expectations, share the plan with your child, and follow through.

12. Keep a disability perspective

Parents sometimes lose perspective and become frustrated. Remember you are the adult. React in a reasonable, rational fashion.

13. Don't personalize your child's disorder

Stay calm, don't take it personally, keep it in perspective, and accept the reality of the situation.

14. Practice forgiveness

Each day after problems are settled, let it go. Forgive your child — and yourself.

Managing Life with ADHD: A Behavioral Plan

In addition to the principles above, the following daily practices build a strong foundation:

- Set aside daily 'special time' with your child — free-play with no questions or directives; narrate the play with enthusiasm
- Show specific, immediate approval for any behavior you want to see more of
- Never give backhanded compliments ('I like that you cleaned up — I wish you'd do it every day')
- Give immediate, specific feedback about compliance; give repeated praise while tasks are being completed
- Reward spontaneous compliance enthusiastically
- Use 'fetch commands' — ask for easy tasks frequently over 15 minutes to build momentum and compliance habits
- Give effective commands: be direct, not posed as questions or favors; get eye contact first; give one instruction at a time
- Create chore cards listing the task, steps, and time needed; start a timer

Ready to take the next step?

Doctors Carosso and Lowenstein and our experienced team are here to help. Contact us to schedule an evaluation or to ask any questions.

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