

A Day in the Life of a Child With Executive Functioning Issues

Meet Josh, a sixth grader who has executive functioning issues. Executive functions work together to help the brain organize and act on information. To understand how issues with executive functioning can affect kids in school and outside of it too, take a look at a typical day in Josh's life.



Executive functions include:

- Organizing, setting priorities and starting tasks
- Focusing, shifting or sustaining attention and thinking flexibly
- Regulating alertness and staying on task
- Managing frustration and keeping emotions in check
- Using working memory and recalling information
- Self-monitoring and controlling impulses

7am

Argh! Josh knows he's forgetting something. Ah, that's it—his cleats for today's game. He runs back inside to get them...but ends up leaving his backpack at home as he races to catch the bus. He sprints past the checklist his mom made to help him remember what he needs for school. But it's too late: the bus is about to pull away! He's going to miss it again...



Executive Functions:

Organizing, using working memory



11am

Josh's teacher asks, "Who has a good answer to the first question I gave you yesterday about last night's reading assignment?" Josh squirms, hoping he won't be called on. He didn't write the questions in his planner and has no idea how to answer them.

Executive Functions:

Organizing, focusing

1pm

It's the best part of the school day: lunch! But Josh hogs the conversation, talking way too loud and too much about his video games. He doesn't notice how annoyed his friends are getting.

Executive Functions:

Self-monitoring, controlling impulses



3pm

In soccer Josh is so focused on getting the ball that he doesn't keep in mind which direction he's supposed to run once he gets it. He quickly heads for the nearest goal and kicks the ball—right into his own team's net.

Executive Functions:

Shifting focus, thinking flexibly

6pm

Josh isn't happy when his mom tells him to turn off the TV and set the dinner table. When he thinks he's done with this task, his little sister tattles that he's forgotten to give each person a cup. Frustrated with his sister and with missing his TV show, Josh loses his cool and screams at her.

Executive Functions:

Managing frustration, keeping emotions in check



8pm

After lots of prodding from his mom, Josh sits down to do his homework. But he doesn't know where to start. Instead of doing the book report or the math problems that are due tomorrow, he surfs the web to find a topic for his science report that's due next week. Then he takes a break to play a video game.

Executive Functions:

Setting priorities, starting tasks

10pm

When Josh finally begins the book report, his mind keeps jumping from one thought to another. He can't figure out what to write and only gets one sentence down on paper before he gives up for the night. He thinks he can do more on the way to school tomorrow—even though he's never gotten anything done while riding the bus with his friends.

Executive Functions:

Sustaining attention, staying on task, organizing



12am

It's way past his bedtime. Josh is exhausted. He tries to go to sleep, but he can't shut off his brain. He keeps worrying about disappointing the teacher with his book report and getting teased by his teammates for kicking the ball into the wrong goal.

Executive Functions:

Regulating alertness, keeping emotions in check

About Executive Functions

Many kids with learning and attention issues have trouble with executive functioning. It's very common in kids with ADHD.

Executive functions are the brain's self-management system. Issues with executive functioning can make it hard to complete schoolwork and everyday tasks.

But there are ways to help at home and in school. Classroom accommodations and informal supports can help kids like Josh get organized and stay on top of their assignments. Then they'll feel less stressed and more prepared for day-to-day activities.



Ways to Help

- Ask teachers to make sure your child writes assignments down in a daily planner.
- Post schedules and directions and say them out loud.
- Give step-by-step instructions and have your child repeat them.
- Use checklists and color-coded school supplies.
- Break projects into smaller pieces with their own deadlines.
- Use graphic organizers or mind-mapping software.
- Talk with your child's doctor about considering ADHD medication.
- Follow a daily schedule that builds in time for taking breaks.

