

Executive Function Disorder in Children and Adults

By Mrs. Rifka Schonfeld

Grade Level: Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle School, High School, Special Ed, Administration

Description:

This article defines what constitutes an Executive Function Disorder and discusses some solutions for both children and adults who are suffering from this disorder. To help parents and educators discern if a child/pupil is exhibiting signs of this disorder, the article includes a chart which provides executive function benchmarks for children from preschool through high school. Although the article is written for parents, it is a very helpful resource for educators as well.

What to download

- Download the print-ready PDF file (includes lesson plan/instructions).
- OPTIONAL: Download the editable Word file (does not include lesson plan/instructions).

Please note: When choosing an editable file, depending on the version of the program that you are using, and the fonts that you have, the document may not appear exactly as it was originally intended and/or it may not exactly match the PDF that we provide.

Goals/Objectives:

Teachers will read through the article to educate themselves about a disability they may encounter along their teaching career or as a means of better understanding a student/s in their classroom and how to best relate to him/them.

Instructions:

1. Read through the article.
2. If you have concerns about a particular student, discuss them with your principal.
3. Implement the techniques mentioned in the article (if applicable).
4. Give this article to parents of a child whom you suspect of an Executive Function Disorder (if appropriate).

Additional Tips:

This article is a very useful addition to a school newsletter.

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By: Rifka Schonfeld, Director S.O.S (Strategies for Optimum Success)

Chava was staring at her calendar. She knew there was something she needed to do today (actually, a few somethings she needed to do)! But, she just couldn't remember. She also hadn't managed to write any of them down. Oh, well. Whatever it was that she was missing would have to wait until she figured it out.

It's true that Executive Function Disorder is becoming a hot topic in education these days. Of course, that is not because more children and adults are dealing with it, but rather because experts have given it a name and have devised ways to deal with its accompanying difficulties.

First, what is Executive Function Disorder? In order to understand the disorder, we must understand the executive functions that we all perform on a daily basis.

Pioneering authors, Peg Dawson and Richard Guare, in their book, *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents*, outline the ways that we employ executive skills regularly. They write, "Executive skills allow us to organize our behavior over time and override immediate demands in favor of longer-term goals. Through the use of these skills we can plan and organize activities, sustain attention, and persist to complete a task. Executive skills enable us to manage our emotions and monitor our thoughts in order to work more efficiently and effectively."

Executive skills, like executives at large companies, are the managers of our behavior. These skills allow us to keep our impulses and emotions under control, while planning and organizing for a larger goal.

Some specific examples of executive skills include:

- **Planning:** creating a roadmap to reach a goal.
- **Organization:** keeping track of multiple sets of information and materials.
- **Time management:** understanding how much time you have and dividing it in order to meet a goal.
- **Working memory:** holding information in mind even while performing other tasks.
- **Metacognition:** self-monitoring in order to recognize what you do well or poorly.
- **Response inhibition:** thinking before you speak or act.
- **Sustained attention:** attending to a situation or task in spite of distraction, fatigue or boredom.

Children and adults who have Executive Function Disorder lack many of the above skills. This, in turn, means that they are often late, disorganized, and messy. People

who have Executive Function Disorder have trouble moving fluidly from situation to situation, controlling their emotions through rational thought, problem solving, and keeping long term goals.

Frequently, when others view these behaviors, they assume it is because the person is lazy and undisciplined. That is not always the case. Many people with Executive Function disorder would love to change their behavior but do not ask for help and have no idea where to begin (after all, both of those skills are executive functions!).

Not every child or adult who is disorganized has Executive Function Disorder. The chart below details benchmarks that deal with executive function skills.

Preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Run simple errands (“Put your clothing in the laundry) ○ Inhibit behaviors (don’t touch a hot stove or hit another child) ○ Self help tasks: brush teeth, get dressed
K – Grade 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Run errands (“Get your shoes, coat, and hat. Then, go downstairs and grab your lunch.”) ○ Clean up bedroom or playroom ○ Bring homework to and from school ○ Inhibit behaviors (safety rules, raising hand in class)
Grade 3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Run errands that involve a time delay or a distance (“Remember to stop by the corner store on your way home and buy a pen.”) ○ Complete homework assignments (maximum of one hour) ○ Keep track of changing daily schedule ○ Save money for desired objects ○ Inhibit behaviors (refrain from rude comments, temper tantrums)
Grades 6-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Help out with chores around the home (empty dishwasher, shovel snow) ○ Babysit younger siblings ○ Plan and carryout long term projects for school or personal interest ○ Inhibit rule breaking in the absence of visible authority
High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Manage schoolwork on a day-to-day basis while planning for the long term ○ Establish a goal upon exiting high school and work towards that goal ○ Make use of leisure time through employment or recreational activities ○ Inhibit reckless and dangerous behaviors

What are some solutions to Executive Function Disorder for adults?

As the disorder centers on a lack of internal organization and planning, it is extremely important to create external organization. Some forms of organization that may be helpful:

- *Create checklists.* These checklists allow you to keep track of the different components of each task, ultimately leading to a goal.
- *Put a clock in every room.* Having a constant reminder of time will keep you on course. In addition, wear a watch with digital numbers so that the passage of time is immediately apparent.
- *Keep your house and office clutter-free.* Clutter creates visual and physical distraction. Because initially this step might be hard, ask for assistance from someone who is skilled at organizing. Then, do daily checks to make sure the clutter is not piling up.
- *Write down directions and instructions.* Since working memory is often weaker in people with Executive function disorder, writing things down will significantly reduce mistakes and forgetfulness.

What can children do in school to help them get organized?

If you feel that your child always misunderstands directions, loses track of time, and misplaces his belongings, consider taking him to be evaluated for Executive Function Disorder. With just a bit of organization, your life and his life can get a whole lot easier.

- Break long assignments into chunks and assign time frames for completing each chunk.
- Use visual calendars to keep track of long term assignments, due dates, chores, and activities.
- Be sure to write the due date on top of each project.
- Plan breaks in the middle of longer homework assignments.
- Sit with a parent at the beginning of each week to organize assignments into manageable portions of time.
- Clean out backpack at the end of each week.

Getting organized can make life more fulfilling and enjoyable. Taking small steps can be the beginning of a whole new life!

An acclaimed educator and education consultant, Mrs. Rifka Schonfeld has served the Jewish community for close to thirty years. She founded and directs SOS.