



Task Initiation

Task initiation refers to the ability to efficiently begin a task or activity and to then independently generate ideas, responses, and problem-solving strategies. Successful application of this ability allows one to initiate a task without procrastination. This skill is demonstrated when one starts directly on a task, such as doing homework or completing chores. Getting started involves having an understanding of what is expected, the wherewithal to ask appropriate questions if there are misunderstandings, and the skills to redirect one's attention from a previous involvement.

Home and School Situations Requiring Task Initiation

- Getting started on homework or an assignment
- Taking a test
- Preparing for the school day
- Writing a paper or book report
- Completing chores around the home
- Prioritizing the importance of different tasks
- Contacting peers for homework help or to make social plans
- Starting a puzzle, Lego model, or art project

Hints and Strategies to Improve Task Initiation

- Provide external supports for your child when she starts doing homework, chores, and other activities, and then allow these supports to taper off over time. This could be coaching her through the first few homework problems or prompting her to start a chore at home. Support could also be provided by helping her to formulate a list of what smaller tasks each larger task entails and then to assist her in identifying which of these tasks should be worked on first.
- Use your child's hands-on, experimental approach to new digital technologies as an opportunity to discuss getting started on tasks. Many parents want to read the directions for a new gadget before they start using it. Digital children however, recognize that a good gadget teaches you how to use it as you try things out. Parents can learn from their child how "playing" with a gadget can be an important part of the learning process. Use this as an opportunity to let your child to teach you a new approach to getting started on tasks, but also discuss how other activities, such as studying for a test, learning how to do complicated mathematics, or preparing a science project, may require that one knows where and how to start rather than the "let's try it out" approach.

- Model getting started on a project for your child. Verbalize what it is you want to do, demonstrate the process of brainstorming what you will need to do, and then organize your brainstorming ideas. When you are done with this process, be sure to make statements such as "Okay, this is what I need to do to get started" and then proceed to do so immediately.
- Provide your child with structure, such as time limits, for designated tasks. Use a visible kitchen timer or alarm clock to remind your child when to start a task, to remain aware of the time she has remaining, and alert her as to when it is time to cease working on the task. Promoting the awareness of time is helpful for a child who struggles to get started.
- Encourage your child to work with peers or in small groups. This will hopefully allow the child to observe the appropriate cues of when to start a task and the value of working through a complete task.
- Encourage your child to use self-talk to initiate tasks. If your child can use self-talk during tedious steps of a project, then she will be less apt to get bored or irritated during the process.
- Make starting a task fun! By making finishing a task a competition or game, your child may be more motivated to accomplish it. For example, challenge your child to finish cleaning her room before a timer goes off or race to complete a household chore.

Books on Task Initiation

Cooper-Kahn, Joyce, Ph.D. and Laurie C. Dietzel. (2008). *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. [Chapter 13]

Cox, Adam J., Ph.D. (2007). *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control--The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. [Chapter 3]

Dawson, Peg, Ed.D. and Richard Guare, Ph.D. (2009). *Smart but Scattered*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press. [Chapter 15]

Emmett, Rita. (2002). *The Procrastinating Child: A Handbook for Adults to Help Children Stop Putting Things Off*. New York, NY: Walker and Company.

Espeland, Pamela and Elizabeth Verdick. (2008). *See You Later, Procrastinator!* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Richard, Gail J. and Jill K. Fahy. (2005). *The Source for Development of Executive Functions*. East Moline, IL: Lingua Systems.

Websites and Articles on Task Initiation

LearningWorks For Kids (<http://www.learningworksforkids.com/EF/task.html>): The premier resource for executive function information, offering a detailed explanation of task initiation, tips for parents, and activities to improve this skill.

CollegeBoard (<http://www.collegeboard.com/parents/plan/hs-steps/21274.html>): A compilation of tips on how to build and maintain children's positive study habits.

Family Education (<http://life.familyeducation.com/behavioral-problems/responsibilities/36530.html>): Author provides descriptions of the different types of procrastination that children can use and tips for parents dealing with each of these types of procrastinators.

PBS (<http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/school/time/article2.html>): An interactive site that allows children to learn techniques to assess and improve their time management skills.

Games and Activities That Can Practice Task Initiation

- *Rayman: Raving Rabbids, & The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*
Having your child engage in games which require following directions and learning the basics will allow her to learn the importance of beginning a task. Questioning your child about what needs to be done to move onto the next level, or having your child teach you the basics of the game can also be beneficial.
- Make unpleasant tasks (e.g. cleaning room, doing chores) into a game or competition.
Embedding a task into the format of a game or competition may provide your child with the motivation to accomplish the undesirable task.
- Use a "token economy" where your child receives tokens that can be redeemed for rewards for completing chores or homework.
A token economy can be an effective means of reinforcing the child's task initiation behaviors when there is a reward (token) incentive for starting and completing a task.
- Give your child the responsibility for setting up a game or activity that they want to do (e.g. arts and crafts, sport, board game).
Ensuring that your child is given the responsibility of preparing for a desired game or activity will force your child to initiate the steps. The reward for setting up the game is that your child is now able to play it.
- Play games which use a timer (e.g. Boggle, Taboo).
The use of a timer will prepare your child for situations where timing and structure are important and allows her to practice working within a time limit.