

Talking to Your Child About Executive Functions

It's important to help your child understand what executive functions are and how they work. This can help empower children to take ownership of their learning and development. But how do you explain these complex concepts in a way that kids can understand? Unlike skills like reading or math, executive functions are the behind-the-scenes managers of the brain. Executive functions include more abstract processes like planning, organization, and impulse control that are crucial for success but are hard to visualize and understand. Breaking down these complex cognitive skills requires more than just definitions; it requires relatable language, practical examples, and engaging strategies that connect with a child's world and experience. Below are tips and things to keep in mind when explaining executive functions to kids. If you are looking to learn more about executive functions yourself, please reference our resource library on executive functions [here](#).



Parents and their child discussing a list of executive functioning skills in a way that their child can understand them.

Tips and strategies for talking to your children about

executive functions:

Keep it Simple and Age-Appropriate:

Use language that your child can grasp. Avoid technical terms and jargon. Here are some examples:

- **Instead of “working memory,”** say “remembering things in your head while you’re doing something else.”
- **Instead of “inhibition,”** say “stopping yourself from doing something you know you shouldn’t.”
- **Instead of “cognitive flexibility,”** say “being able to switch gears and try a different way.”
- **Instead of “planning,”** say “making a plan before you start something.”

Use your best judgement and knowledge of your child’s comprehension to assess what they would be able to understand. Putting terms in their language allows them to relate to and understand the processes you are describing.

Use Analogies and Examples:

Relate executive functions to things your child already understands. This helps make complex concepts more accessible and relatable, as well as less overwhelming. When children can connect new ideas to familiar experiences, they are more likely to stay engaged and retain what they learn.

- “Your brain is like a computer, and executive functions are like the programs that help it run smoothly.”
- “Remember when you had to remember all the steps to build that Lego set? That’s using your working memory!”
- “When you waited patiently for your turn on the swing, you were using your self-control.”

Make it Personal:

Talk about how executive functions affect your child's own life. Describing specific ways executive functioning impacts their daily activities, they can better recognize areas where they may need support and feel more motivated to practice and improve.

- "Sometimes, it's hard to focus on your homework, isn't it? That's because your attention muscles need practice."
- "When you get frustrated and want to give up, that's when you need your problem-solving skills the most."
- "Remember when you forgot your library book at home? That's your memory skills getting a little mixed up. We can work on strengthening those."



Family reviewing executive functioning skills and how they impact their child's life.

Focus on Strengths and Weaknesses:

Help your child identify their own executive function strengths and weaknesses. Once the child is able to comprehend executive functions, encourage them to reflect on how these skills show up in their daily life. This kind of self-awareness builds confidence by highlighting what they do well and provides clarity on areas that might need more support.

Addressing both strengths and weaknesses creates a balanced and encouraging approach, helping your child feel capable while also recognizing where they can grow.

- “You’re really good at planning ahead and thinking things through. That’s a great strength!”
- “Sometimes, it’s hard for you to remember all your chores. Maybe we can make a checklist to help.”
- “You always notice when it’s time to leave for practice. That shows strong time awareness.”
- “It seems like switching between tasks can be tough sometimes. Let’s find a way to make transitions easier.”

Encourage Self-Reflection:

Ask questions that prompt your child to think about their own thought processes. This encourages them to slow down and reflect on how they approach tasks and challenges. By doing so, you are modeling for the child how they can problem-solve and begin to figure out how to combat their challenges. With practice, they can learn to adjust their strategies, become more independent, and feel more in control of their actions and decisions.

- “What was your strategy for solving that puzzle?”
- “How did you stay focused when it got hard?”
- “What could you do differently next time?”
- “What helped you remember all the steps for that project?”
- “Why do you think it was hard to get started today?”

Connect to Games and Activities:

Use games and activities as examples of executive functions in action. Visit our website learningworksforkids.com to learn more about how to use gaming as a way to strengthen executive functioning skills.

- “In this game, you need to remember all the patterns. That’s working your memory!”
- “When you have to wait your turn in this game, you’re practicing self-control.”

Be Patient and Supportive:

Remember that understanding and developing executive functions takes time. These skills grow gradually and often require repeated practice and support. Be patient with your child, and offer encouragement along the way to help them stay motivated. Celebrate small successes and recognize effort, even when progress feels slow. A supportive and understanding environment helps your child feel safe to try, make mistakes, and learn from them, which is essential for building long-term growth and confidence.

Make it an Ongoing Conversation:

Talking about executive functions shouldn’t be a one-time event. These skills are part of everyday life, so it’s important to keep the conversation going and make it a regular part of how you connect with your child. Look for opportunities to reinforce these concepts in daily routines, like during homework, chores, or getting ready for school. When you consistently talk about executive functions in a natural and supportive way, your child begins to see them as useful tools rather than just challenges. This ongoing dialogue helps build awareness, strengthens skills over time, and shows your child that growth is always possible.

For those seeking additional support and resources on ADHD and executive functions, South County Child and Family Consultants offers a wealth of information and expertise. By visiting our

website, you can access a curated selection of books and materials, connect with knowledgeable specialists, and find tailored advice to help you or your child navigate the complexities of ADHD. Whether you're looking for strategies to improve daily routines, educational accommodations, executive functioning, or to simply better understand your child's ADHD, South County Child and Family Consultants is an invaluable resource for empowering individuals and families.