



25 Easy Ways to Improve Executive Functioning Skills

How do we help our children or students who are perpetually losing things, often running late and seem completely disorganized? Do we reprimand them for being lazy? Do we keep them in at recess because they forgot to do their homework? Do we let our frustration and angst get the better of us and completely give up on helping them with anything at all?

Or, do we wonder if there is a reason as to why this child just can't seem to pull things together? Instead of labeling the child or student as lazy, forgetful and inattentive, consider that perhaps they are struggling due to weak executive functioning skills. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, "Executive function is a set of mental processes that helps connect past experience with present action. People use it to perform activities such as planning, organizing, strategizing, paying attention to and remembering details, and managing time and space." (National Center for Learning Disabilities, Dec 2010)

Teachers and parents often spend an inordinate amount of time supporting children with weak executive function skills. Just as importantly, this wasted time is to the detriment of the other children who are left sitting and waiting while there is a tear-down of the desk, a hunt for the pencil or a search party sent out looking for lost homework.

However, in a carefully planned and organized school day, there are 25 easy ways for teachers and parents to help strengthen weak executive functioning skills in kids:

- Have students take homework and planners out of their backpack and place it ON their desks at the beginning of the day (homework should never see the inside of a desk!).
- Teacher makes time to check-in with each child to see if homework is completed and planner is signed by parent.
- All homework is put into a "Hand-In" bin.
- A Daily Schedule is posted in the class and the teacher reviews the plan for the day.
- Older students keep materials such as pencils, erasers and markers in a pencil box inside their desk. In younger classrooms, pencils are kept in containers which are passed around or kept at group tables.
- The tops of desks should be kept clear. If it can't fit into the desk, find a shelf in the classroom to house large items.
- All work is kept in a color-coded folder according to subject. The folders are kept in separate bins on a shelf in the classroom. ie. a blue folder is for Math
- Lessons are kept in age-appropriate chunks of time and students are cued when a transition is about to take place. i.e. "You have 10 more minutes until Math begins."
- Countdown students before instruction is about to begin. For example, "You have to the count of 5 to stop, look and listen."
- Give instructions in short, simple steps.
- At the end of each lesson, have students hand-in unfinished work, as well as finished work. Again, paper should not go into the desk!
- Create a checklist of daily activities for students to keep at their desk and check off when items are completed.
- Organize class into groups. Give instruction regarding movement and change according to groups. For example, "Can the Blue Group please line-up at the door."
- Make a seating arrangement when students are sitting at the carpet. Learning takes place here as well as at desks, so give this area just as much thought.
- Consider having the students turn the desks around (so that the opening of the desk is facing the front of the classroom) to prevent loose papers from being placed inside.
- Model the activity or behavior you expect from children and then have them practice it. Repeat if necessary.
- Create a Homework Board. At the end of the day, set aside time to review the homework for the day. Then have all students copy homework into their planners. Accommodations can be made if the student has trouble writing from the board, (ie. the student can take photo of homework board with a digital camera, a buddy can write out homework etc.).
- Guide students as they gather their homework, planner and materials to take home.
- Have students place their homework and materials immediately into their backpacks.
- Some students may benefit from having an extra copy of text books to keep home.
- Use the school website to post assignments, announcements and communicate with parents, as well as paper documents.
- When the child arrives home, unpack the backpack right away!
- Help the child lay out homework and materials in a quiet work space, where an adult can check-in and oversee progress.
- Check to see if all homework is completed and then sign the homework planner to indicate that the homework is done.
- Have child pack all homework and materials into his/her backpack as soon as everything has been completed and leave it by the door for the next day!