

Smart but Scattered: How Executive Skills Create Successful Students

smartbutscatteredkids.com

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Response inhibition



Being able to control your impulses so you can think before you act, resist peer pressure, and make good choices (e.g., choosing to study rather than being on social media).

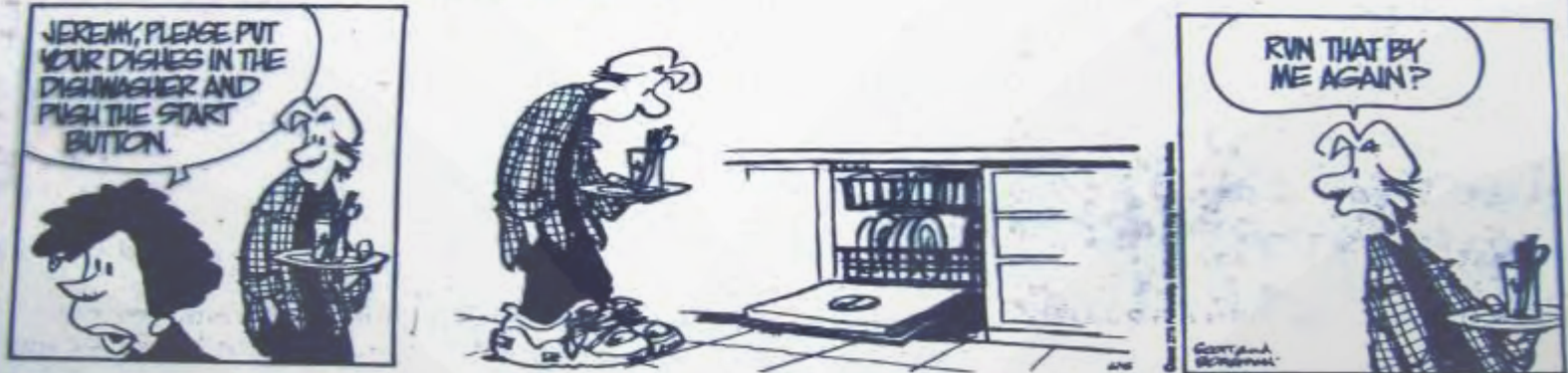
Working Memory



Being able to keep in mind everything you have to remember—and remembering what worked the last time.

What working memory looks like in a 15-year old

ZITS by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman



What working memory looks like
in a 15-year old--
and what impact does it have on parents?



Emotional Control



Being able to manage your feelings so they don't get in the way of getting work done or meeting goals.

Flexibility



The ability to adapt to unexpected events and to come up with more than one solution to a problem.

Sustained Attention



The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.

Task Initiation



Being able to make yourself start a task. It's the opposite of procrastination and a challenging skill to learn. Many adults struggle with this.

What task initiation looks like in a 15-year old



What task initiation looks like
in a 15-year old--
and what impact does it have on parents?

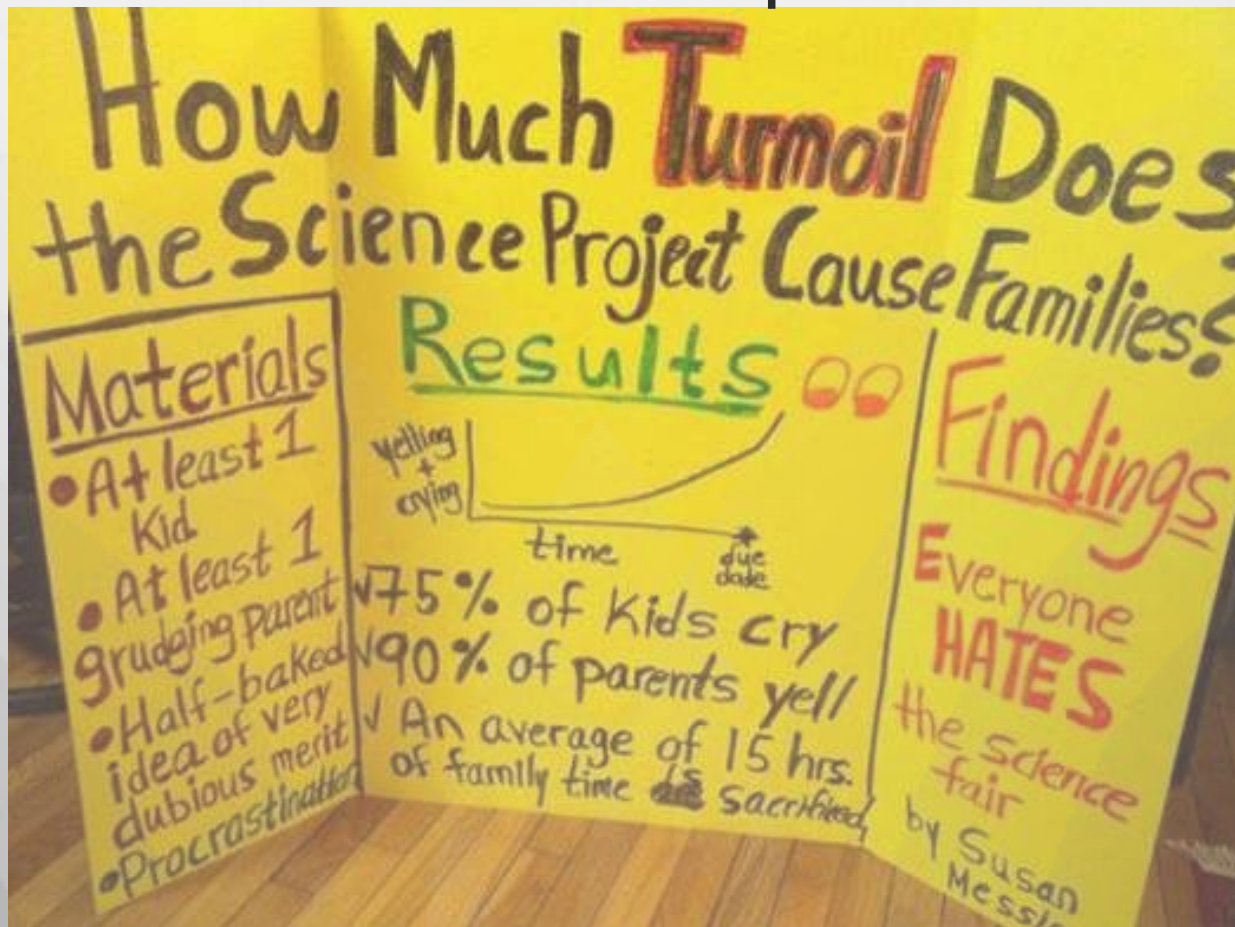


Planning/Prioritizing



Planning is your road map, your GPS. When you have a good plan, you know all the turns you have to make and how to get past the roadblocks along the way. You also can focus on what's important and let the little things go.

Planning is a skill that takes time to develop



Organization



The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.

Time Management



Time management allows you to manage the tug of war between what you want to do, what you need to do, and what others ask you to do. A key piece of time management is the ability to estimate how long it takes you to do something.

Goal-Directed Persistence



This is a giant version of sustained attention (with some response inhibition thrown in there, too). This involves making a goal, being determined to get there, and keeping the goal in mind as you make decisions about how you spend your time.

Metacognition



This is your brain's life lesson machine. It allows you to reflect

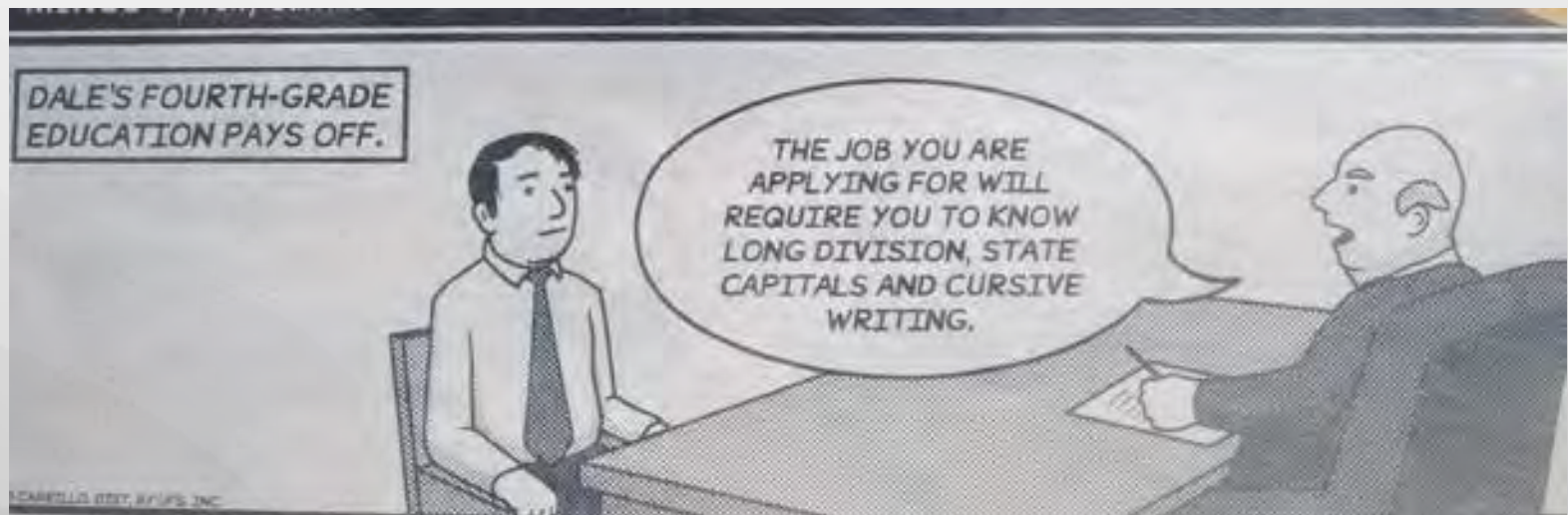
on past actions and behaviors and make informed decisions about how you will act in the future. The formula:

what did I do +

why did I do it =

what will I do the next time?

Why is it important to help kids develop executive skills?



How do executive skills develop?




Through a process called *myelination*. Myelin acts as insulation, increasing the speed with which nerve impulses are transmitted. The faster the impulse, the better the skill.

Frontal lobes take time to develop...

ZITS by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman





http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2008/09/15/health/20080915-brain-development.html?_r=0

What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Students?

- Acts without thinking
- Interrupts others
- Overreacts to small problems
- Upset by changes in plans
- Overwhelmed by large assignments
- Talks or plays too loudly
- Resists change of routine
- Doesn't notice impact of behavior on others
- Doesn't see their behavior as part of the issue
- Easily overstimulated and has trouble calming down
- Gets stuck on one topic or activity
- Gets overly upset about "little things"
- Out of control more than peers
- Can't come up with more than one way to solve a problem
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Acts wild or out of control

What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Students?

- Doesn't bother to write down assignment
- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring materials home
- Keeps putting off homework
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Chooses "fun stuff" over homework or chores
- Passive study methods (or doesn't study)
- Forgets homework/forgets to pass it in
- Leaves long-term assignments or chores until last minute
- Can't break down long-term assignments
- Sloppy work
- Messy notebooks
- Loses or misplaces things (books, papers, notebooks, mittens, keys, cell phones, etc.)
- Can't find things in backpack

What Do Executive Skill Weaknesses Look Like in Younger Students (K-2)?

- Forgets directions
- Forgets to bring materials back and forth between home and school
- Runs out of steam before finishing work
- Chooses “fun stuff” over homework or chores
- Leaves a trail of belongings wherever he/she goes
- Sloppy work
- Loses or misplaces things (books, papers, permission slips, mittens, lunch money, etc.)
- Messy desk/cubby areas/backpack
- Leaves a “paper trail”—scattered around the room

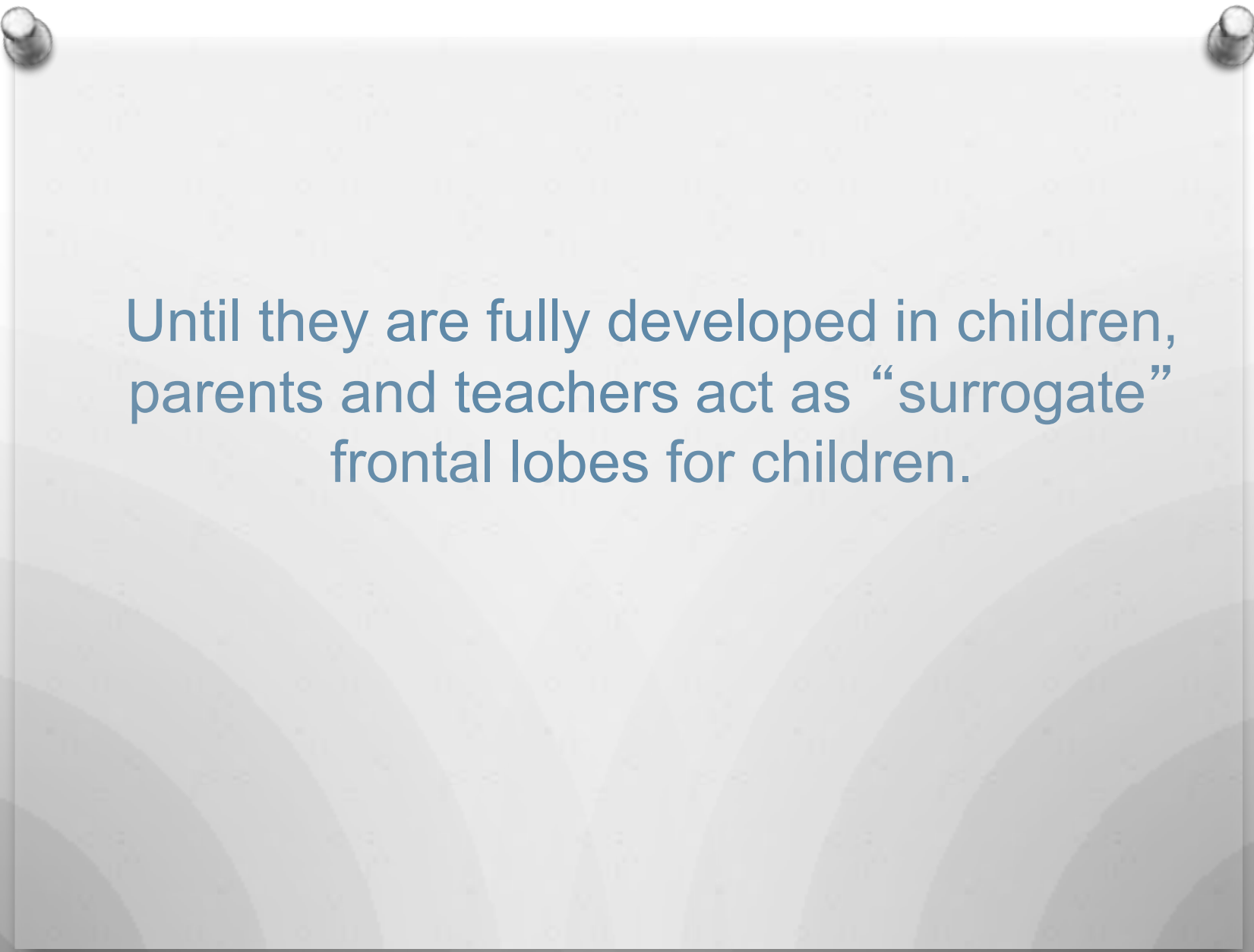
What's the population we're talking about?

What concerns you most about this pupil?

That he is lazy and not working his potential.

Please describe the best things about this pupil:

He is sweet and has a good sense of humor.



Until they are fully developed in children,
parents and teachers act as “surrogate”
frontal lobes for children.

There are 3 primary ways parents and teachers can help kids with weak executive skills:

1. Change the environment to reduce the impact of weak executive skills.
2. Teach the youngster executive skills.
3. Use incentives to get youngsters to use skills that are hard for them.

Ways to modify the environment

1. Change the physical or social environment
2. Modify the tasks we expect children to perform
3. Change the way adults interact with kids.

Change the physical or social environment

- Add barriers
- Reduce distractions
- Provide organizing structures (clean desk, storage bins)
- Provide supervision (homework, parties, recess)

Modify the tasks we expect children to perform

- Make the task shorter--reduce the amount of work required or divide it into pieces with breaks built in along the way.
- Make the steps more explicit.
- Create a schedule.
- Build in variety or choice either for the tasks to be done or the order in which they're to be done.

Change the way adults interact with the child

- Rehearse with the child what will happen and you the child will handle it.
- Use prompts (verbal or nonverbal).
- Remind the child to check his list or schedule.
- Praise the child for using her executive skills. **Rule of thumb: 3 POSITIVES for each corrective feedback.**

Effective Praise

1. Is delivered immediately after the positive behavior.
2. Specifies the particulars of the accomplishment (*I appreciate you loading the dishwasher without my having to bug you about it*).
3. Communicates the value of the accomplishment (*I know you didn't want to watch your sister after school, but it really got me out of a bind at work—thanks for helping out*).
4. Lets the child know you saw him working hard to accomplish the task (*Your brother was pushing your buttons, but you worked hard to keep your temper in check*).
5. Orients the child to appreciate her ability to problem solve or use other executive skills (*I like the way you thought about that and figured out a good solution to the problem*).



TEACH deficient skills

Don't expect the child to acquire executive skills through observation or osmosis.

BEDTIME ROUTINE

Task	Number of reminders Tally marks (////)	Done (✓)
Pick up toys		
Make sure backpack is ready for school		
Make a list of anything you have to remember to do tomorrow		
Get clothes ready for next day		
Put on pajamas		
Wash face or bathe		
Brush teeth		

From *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare. Copyright 2009 by The Guilford Press.

Math 1 Math 2 Calc 1 Calc 2

STUDY PLAN

Date: _____

[illegible]

Use incentives to augment instruction.

Incentives make both the effort of learning a skill and the effort of performing a task less aversive.

Furthermore, putting an incentive after a task teaches delayed gratification.

Simple Incentives

- Give the child something to look forward to doing when the effortful task is done (we call that Grandma's Law).
- Alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities (use simple language: First...then, e.g., *First work, then play*).
- Build in frequent, short breaks (depending on the child's attention span, breaks could come every 10 minutes and last 5 minutes).
- Use specific praise to reinforce the use of executive skills.

Tips for working with teenagers

As a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in 7 years.

~Mark Twain

Tips for working with teenagers

- Pick your battles.
- Use natural or logical consequences.
- Make access to privileges contingent on performance.
- Be willing to negotiate (make deals!)
- If something is non-negotiable, ask this question: What will it take for you to go along?
- Involve others when you can (tutors, teachers, guidance counselors, coaches).
- Build in verification.

Tips for working with teenagers

- Understand that everybody has to work harder (parents, teachers, student).
- Work on positive communication skills.

Communication Strategies

If your family does this...	Try to do this instead:
Call each other names.	Express anger without hurt.
Put each other down.	“I am angry that you did _____”
Interrupt each other.	Take turns; keep it short.
Criticize too much.	Point out the good and bad.
Get defensive	Listen, then calmly disagree.
Lecture.	Tell it straight and short.
Talk in sarcastic tone.	Talk in normal tone.
Dredge up the past.	Stick to the present.
Read others’ minds.	Ask others’ opinions.
Command, order.	Request nicely.
Give the silent treatment.	Say what’s bothering you.
Make light of something.	Take it seriously.

From *ADHD in Adolescents: Diagnosis and Treatment* by Arthur L. Robin. Copyright 1998 by The Guilford Press.

Tips for working with teenagers

- Seek help if you need it--therapists often act as 3rd party mediators that help parents and teenagers communicate better.
- Set goals that are realistic--sometimes the best you can do is keep your kids “in the game” until their frontal lobes mature enough for them to take over.

How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

- Use minimal cues—if they need more support, model your thought process so they hear how you got to an answer.
- Use visuals whenever possible—a cue on the desk you can point to or ask them to check their list.
- Praise effort, persistence, and risk-taking.

How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

- o Ask children to reflect on their own performance, **especially when they are successful** (What worked for you today? Why do you think it worked?)
- o Use questions to get them to use *their* executive skills (What's your plan? Do you have a strategy for that? What's your goal? How long do you think that will take?)

How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

- When problems arise, share your observations in a nonjudgmental way (I noticed you....What can we do about that?).
- Brainstorm strategies. Together with the child, make a list of possible strategies. Ask the child to pick one, and then check back with the child later to see how it worked (this can be a whole class activity, too).

Key Strategies for Parents to Use (the biggest bang for the buck)

- Keep tasks and chores brief or build in breaks.
- Give your child something to look forward to when the effortful task is done.
- Use lists and checklists as reminders.
- Build in routines.
- Have your child help you problem-solve—use brainstorming to find good solutions (What's your plan? What strategy will you use?)

Keep your eye on the biggest prize: building goal-directed persistence!

- Model this yourself—if your child sees you persisting over time to achieve a goal, that can make an impression.
- Help him/her set and achieve little goals—they add up over time.
- Praise effort— “Wow, you stuck with it!” “You figured it out.” “I can’t believe how hard you worked for that!”
- Emphasize your *child’s* goals, not yours.

Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Task initiation (getting started). Have your child—

- Make a plan; put it in writing and tell someone what your plan is.
- Stick to a routine--start your homework at the same time every day whenever you can.
- Start with the easiest task--or have him/her work on a hard task for only a short time before switching to something else.
- Figure out when your child's high energy times are and work then.

Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Sustained Attention (sticking with something long enough to finish).

- Give your child something to look forward to when you're done.
- If it takes more than 30 minutes to do, build in brief breaks to do something fun (e.g., play 1 level on a video game).
- Switch off between several tasks so your child doesn't have time to get too bored with any one.
- Teach your child to use self-talk to motivate himself/herself ("You can't walk away from this").

Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Working memory (keeping track of everything you need to keep track of). Help your child—

- Find a memory aid that works for him or her (assignment book, subject notebook, smart phone apps, post-its, writing on the back of your hand).
- Create a checklist of things he/she need to remember to bring to school or bring home .
- Put stuff by the front door where the child will trip over it.
- Find someone or something to remind him/her of what needs to be remembered.

Strategies for Building Executive Skills

Time management (getting done everything that needs to get done). Help your child—

- Make a written plan; decide when you plan to start each task on your plan.
- Estimate how long it will take you to do something (and then compare your estimate to the actual time).
- Take advantage of small periods of “down time.”
- Figure out what the common distractions are and try to get away from them.