

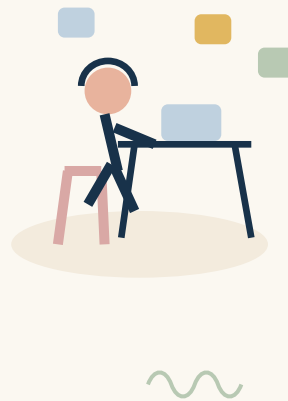
Executive Function

A practical guide to understanding where a child may be getting stuck, and what can make the task easier to manage.



A child can understand the work, have the ability to do it and still struggle to get started, keep track of what they are doing or get it finished.

Executive functions help us manage information, attention, actions, change, planning and progress.



THREE AREAS WORTH KNOWING

Working memory

Holding and using information while we are doing something.

Inhibitory control

Pausing, filtering distractions and managing impulses.

Cognitive flexibility

Adjusting when something changes and shifting between ideas or demands.

Can do isn't always can do right now

Being able to organise, remember or initiate something in one situation does not guarantee that the same skill will be equally available in another. Task demands, environment, tiredness, anxiety, sensory load, hunger and the amount already being managed can all affect performance.

What might you be seeing?

These are possibilities to consider, not labels. The same behaviour can have several explanations.

	Struggles to get started	Starting, planning, uncertainty or overwhelm	Make the first step concrete. Begin alongside them if needed.
	Forgets instructions	Working memory, attention or information load	Give fewer verbal instructions and put important steps somewhere visible.
	Starts well, then loses track	Working memory, sustained attention or sequencing	Use a short visible sequence and check in at natural points.
	Their things are constantly disorganised	Organisation, working memory or a system that is too hard to maintain	Give important things consistent homes. Keep systems simple.
	Leaves work until the last minute	Time awareness, planning or difficulty anticipating future workload	Make time visible. Work backwards from the deadline.
	Finds change very difficult	Flexibility may be part of the picture; so may anxiety, uncertainty or regulation	Give advance notice where possible and allow processing time.
	Rushes and makes avoidable mistakes	Inhibitory control, self-monitoring or attention	Build a brief checking step into the task.
	Can explain it, but struggles to write it	Planning, sequencing, working memory or the demands of writing	Help organise ideas before expecting the finished output.
	A large project feels impossible	Planning, sequencing, time management or working memory	Break it into visible stages with separate starting points and deadlines.
	Can do it one day, struggles the next	Capacity can change with fatigue, stress, sensory load, emotional demands and context	Look at what else the child is managing before assuming unwillingness.

Keep the context in view

Executive function does not operate separately from the rest of a child's experience. Stress, sensory load, emotional demands, understanding and environment may all be relevant.

Make the task easier to manage

Start by identifying which part is difficult. Another reminder is useful only if remembering is actually the problem.

BEFORE ADDING ANOTHER REMINDER

-  Is the task understood?
-  Is the starting point clear?
-  How much needs to be held in mind?
-  Are the sequence and timeframe visible?
-  Can they find what they need?
-  Has something changed?
-  What else are they managing at the same time?

Make some of the thinking visible

Adults often manage the hidden steps in a routine so automatically that we forget how much thinking a simple instruction can contain. “Get ready for school” might actually mean:

GET DRESSED

BREAKFAST

TEETH

BAG

WATER

SHOES

GO

Useful supports might include a short checklist, visual routine, calendar, timer, written instruction, smaller project deadlines, one consistent place for important belongings, an example of the finished task or working backwards together from a deadline.

Helping without taking over

MORE SUPPORT

Plan the stages together.

SOME SUPPORT

Child plans; adult prompts where needed.

LESS SUPPORT

Child plans; adult checks if asked.