

Experts respond to readers' questions with helpful suggestions and information.

**Q:** At the last parent-teacher conference my 8-year-old daughter's teacher said she has issues with executive functioning. What does this mean and how can I help her?

*Lana – Cave Creek*

**A:** Your executive function can be called the CEO or control center of your brain and is in charge of making sure jobs get done; from the initial planning stages to the final deadlines. Executive function is a set of cognitive or mental skills that help you get these jobs done. It provides you with the skills to identify a problem to solve or a task to be done, think about solutions or steps to take, and implement those solutions or initiate those steps. There are several key skills involved in executive functioning, including:

- Task initiation: starting activities or tasks
- Planning and organizing
- Time management and prioritizing
- Working memory and remembering details
- Impulse control: thinking before acting
- Emotional control: accepting criticism and not over-reacting or under-reacting
- Self-monitoring and self-regulation: adjusting and asking for help when needed
- Flexibility in thinking: expecting the unexpected, looking at things from different angles and making changes as needed
- Multitasking: doing or thinking about many things simultaneously



These skills are controlled by an area of the brain called the frontal lobe. In individuals without executive functioning problems, the brain performs these tasks quickly—within seconds—and subconsciously, often without being aware of it.

Children (or adults) with executive functioning problems do not perform these mental tasks intuitively and any task that requires planning, organization, memory, time management and flexible thinking may become a challenge. A child could have difficulty cleaning their room, completing a school project, remembering directions, making decisions, or paying attention in class. They could do things too quickly or too slowly or sloppily or incompletely. They could have a difficult time transitioning and switching gears from one task or thought to another. They may not finish their work on time. They may not look or ask for help when needed. They may say or do inappropriate things at the wrong time. They may engage in risky behavior. They may have difficulty telling stories, either verbally or in writing. They may overreact or have trouble dealing with criticism or get easily frustrated when asked to think about something from a different angle.

Executive functioning issues are essentially weaknesses or deficits in one or more areas of the key set of mental skills. These mental skills are necessary for the cognitive control of behavior, so when one's executive function is not working as

it should, their behavior is less controlled. This can affect the individual's ability to be successful at school or work, do things independently or maintain relationships.

A child may not struggle with all of the skills to the same degree. Problems with executive function often appear in kids with learning and attention issues and can run in families.

#### Helpful Strategies:

- Using planners, organizers, computers or timers.
- Creating checklists and "to do" lists.
- Using a daily routine.
- Giving clear step-by-step instructions with visual organizational aids.
- Pairing written directions with verbal instructions and visual aids.
- Using positive enforcement to stay on task.
- Breaking long assignments into smaller tasks and assigning mini-timelines for completion of each.

Executive function may improve with qEEG-based Neurofeedback and cognitive therapy.

A qEEG is an assessment tool utilized to evaluate an individual's brainwave function and is typically completed prior to Neurofeedback training. Neurofeedback is the direct training of brain function and self-regulation which allows the central nervous system to function more efficiently.

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