

Smart But Scattered: How Parents Can Help Strengthen Executive Skills in Their Children

smartbutscatteredkids.com

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Executive Skills that Underlie School Success

Foundational Skills

- Response Inhibition
- Working Memory
- Emotional Control
- Flexibility
- Sustained Attention
- Task Initiation

Advanced Skills

- Planning/Prioritizing
- Organization
- Time Management
- Goal-Directed Persistence
- Metacognition

Response inhibition



The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.

Working Memory



The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future

Emotional Control



The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Flexibility



The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.

Sustained Attention



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

Task Initiation



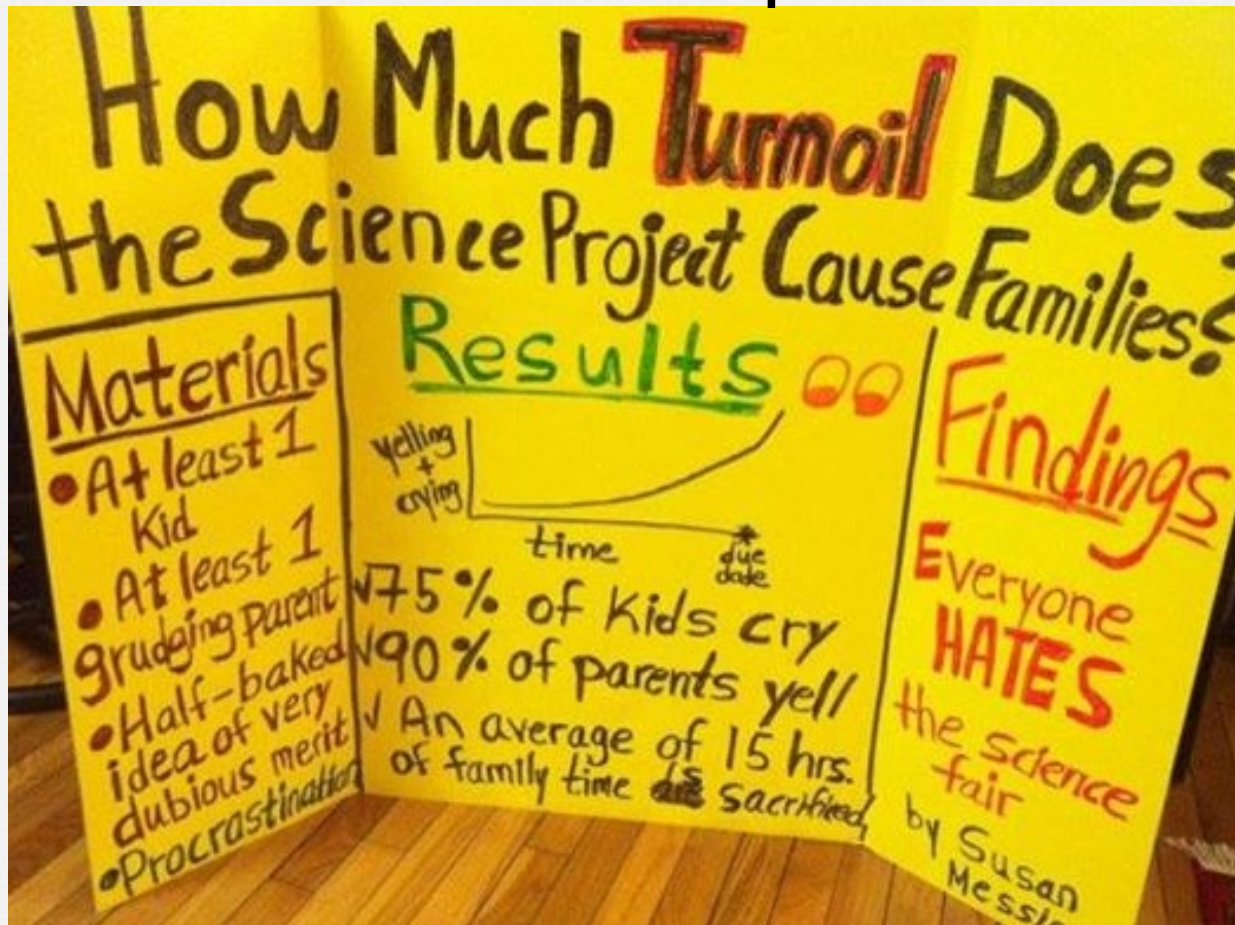
The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.

Planning/Prioritizing



The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what's important to focus on and what's not important.

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



The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

Goal-Directed Persistence

The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.

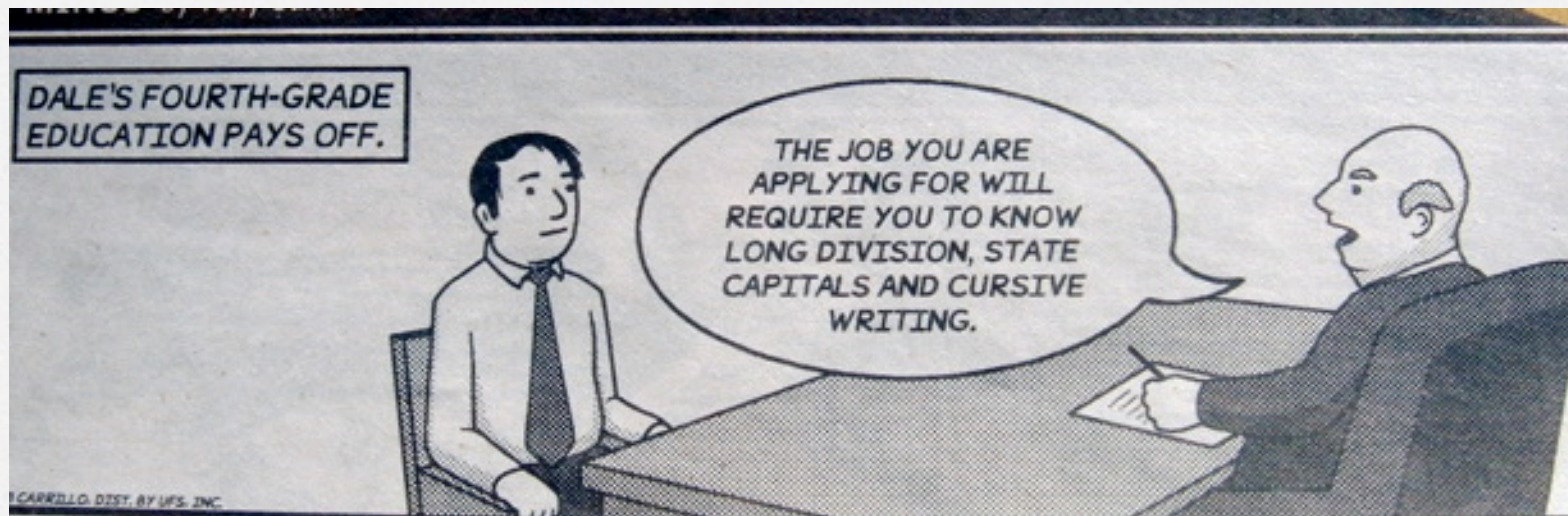


Metacognition



The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself, “How am I doing? or How did I do?”).

Why is it important to help kids develop executive skills?



Published: September 15, 2008



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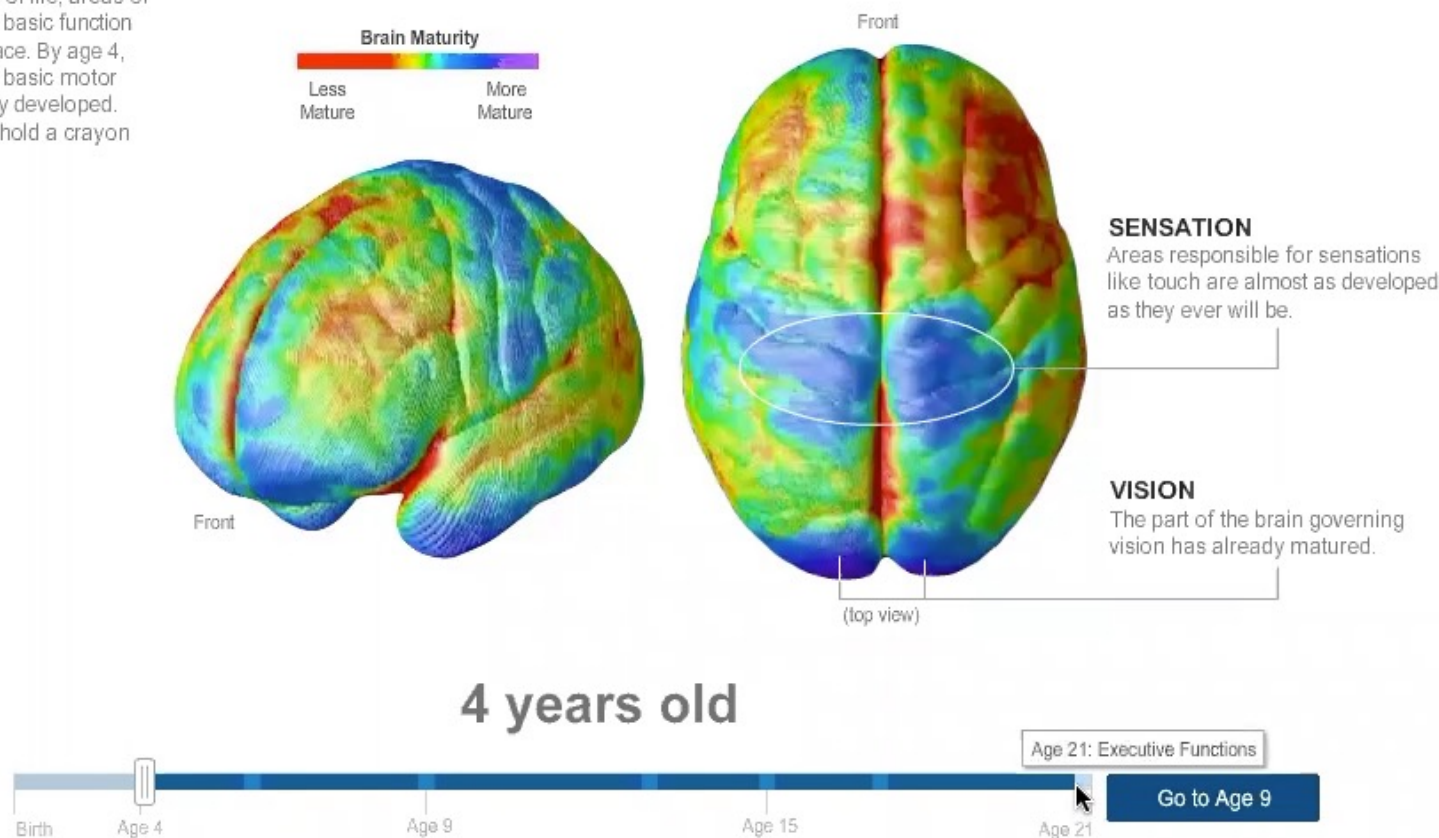
SHARE

The Child's Developing Brain

Different areas of the brain mature at different rates, which helps explain many of the intellectual and emotional changes seen in children, teens and young adults. While no two children develop in exactly the same way, scientists have been able to link certain developmental milestones to changes in brain tissue, observed by MRI scans taken repeatedly over years. Move the slider below to see how the brain matures. Red, yellow and orange patterns indicate undeveloped brain tissue, while green, blue and purple indicate a maturing of the brain.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT

In the first few years of life, areas of the brain devoted to basic function change at a rapid pace. By age 4, primary senses and basic motor skills are almost fully developed. The child can walk, hold a crayon and feed himself.



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.

A better way...

Instead of calling students this:

- Lazy
- Unmotivated
- Not working to potential
- Disruptive
- Oppositional
- Messy
- Tardy
- Forgetful
- Absent-minded
- Lacking a work ethic

Describe them as having challenges in this:

- Task initiation
- Sustained attention
- Response inhibition
- Emotional control
- Flexibility
- Organization
- Time management
- Working memory
- Goal-directed persistence

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.

Examples of environmental modifications

- Manage distractions
- Modify tasks (shorten them, build in breaks, create a schedule, build in choice)
- Give advance warning when something changes
- Use visual cues (rather than verbal “nags”)

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.

TEACH deficient skills-- Formula 1

1. Find a daily routine to embed the skill in.
2. List the steps in the routine.
3. Turn the list into a checklist (or some other visual).
4. Prompt the child to do each step in the routine.

Jack's Clean Room Checklist

My Clean Desk



- ☒ garbage is cleared and thrown away
- ☒ desk items are placed in the appropriate drawers

My Clean Bed



- ☒ bed is made (sheets and pillows in place, blanket spread evenly)

My Clean Shelves



- ☒ toiletries are put away
- ☒ clothes are folded and in correct place
- ☒ shirts are on hangers

My Clean Floor



- ☒ dirty laundry is picked up and in the hamper
- ☒ all other items have been put away
- ☒ garbage has been thrown out
- ☒ there is nothing on the floor

Introduction to the Mathematical Sciences

STUDY PLAN

Date: _____

[illegible]

TEACH deficient skills-- Formula 2

Go back to Formula 1 and **collaborate** with your child to:

1. Identify the problem situation
2. Come up with the steps in the routine
3. Create the checklist
4. Agree on a start time

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.

“Human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them rather than to them or for them.”

~Ted Wachtel
International Institute for
Restorative Practices