

A Message from the Head of School

Moving to the Executive Suite:

Helping Children Develop Executive Skills

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We are currently in the midst of a particularly exciting time in the history of brain research. Neuroscientists are providing us with incredible insights into the inner workings of the human mind and those insights have far-reaching implications for a wide range of fields of study. Chief among those fields is education.

One of the central contributions of brain research to education is a significantly-enhanced understanding of the most essential processes that facilitate (or inhibit) thinking, learning, and problem solving. These processes are called executive skills. Given the centrality of executive skills to success in school and careers, it is helpful to clarify just what executive skills are and why they are so important before considering who can benefit from executive skills instruction and what instruction in this area looks like.

What are executive skills?

Executive skills are distinct but interrelated mental processes that allow us to manage tasks and engage in purposeful, goal-directed behavior in all aspects of our lives. Executive skills undergo dramatic growth in early childhood but continue to develop into early adulthood. There are three brain functions that are considered to be the core executive skills:

1. Cognitive flexibility—Quickly and easily shifting your attention and thinking based on changing priorities, demands, and perspectives.
2. Working memory—Holding information in mind and working with it.
3. Self-control (inhibitory control)—Resisting distractions, staying focused, selectively attending, persisting in the face of difficulty, and reflecting before acting.

A few additional executive skills that are often identified include:

4. Planning—Establishing a course of action (by identifying relevant knowledge, strategies, and resources) that enables you to approach tasks purposefully and work toward the attainment of identified goals.
5. Organization—Structuring ideas, strategies, time, space, and resources to complete tasks and achieve goals.
6. Social understanding—Understanding the causes and consequences of our own and others' thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Why are executive skills important?

Helping children develop executive skills is of the utmost importance because these processes make the difference between students taking control of their thinking and meeting with success, or struggling to complete tasks, make good decisions, and achieve goals. Facilitating the development of executive skills is particularly vital for students who have difficulties in these areas in order to help them achieve their highest potential.

Who can benefit from instruction in executive skills?

All children can benefit from the guidance of gifted teachers in the development of executive skills. However, the guidance of gifted and experienced teachers is especially critical for children exhibiting difficulty with particular executive skills. Difficulties with executive skills are often associated with learning differences and ADHD. However, children experience difficulties in these areas who have not been identified in these ways. If your child experiences difficulty planning ahead, initiating tasks, setting priorities, staying focused, monitoring behavior, reflecting before taking action, organizing thinking, time, or materials, adapting to changing conditions, retaining information, or getting things done, these can be indicators of difficulties with executive skills.

What does executive skills instruction look like?

At Benchmark School, for the past 45 years we have specialized in helping bright students who learn differently develop into confident and strategic thinkers, learners, and problem solvers. As such, our teachers are experts in helping students develop executive skills, and executive skills are at the heart of our instructional program.

We begin building executive skills from the time children arrive at Benchmark School. It starts with a fundamental understanding that ultimately they are in control of their own experience. Certain tasks may be difficult for them. Challenges and adversities may arise. But, challenges, learning differences, and general circumstances do not determine the outcomes they achieve or the quality of their life experience. Their beliefs, attitudes, skill set, and actions do. They can develop skills, strategies, and dispositions that will enable them to simplify tasks, overcome obstacles, and triumph over adversity again and again.

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Students learn specific strategies for:

- planning,
- setting goals,
- organizing time, materials, and tasks,
- retaining information,
- reflecting before acting,
- understanding and managing their own thoughts and emotions,
- demonstrating appreciation for the thoughts and emotions of others,
- remaining open to different perspectives, and
- adapting to change.

Every Benchmark student learns strategies in all of these areas that are applied across the curriculum. At the same time, teachers provide individualized instruction tailored to each student's needs in order to strengthen students' abilities in the areas of executive functioning that present them with the most challenge.

As an example of the executive skills instruction we

provide, some of the strategies students are taught related to time management include:

- creating homework plans that map out their afternoon and evening activities in half-hour chunks,
- using assignment books effectively in class,
- utilizing timers to remain focused on their work, and
- keeping track of their assignments by using resources such as *iprocrastinate.com* or sticky notes on the desktop of their computers.

Teachers help students develop their executive skills through explicit instruction and a gradual release of responsibility while students engage in tasks that require progressively more complex integration and application of the skills and strategies they have learned. Along the way, teachers engage in a great deal of discussion that gets students to articulate the reasoning behind their plans, priorities, beliefs, feelings, and actions.

By teaching students to take charge of their own learning and experience, we prepare students to succeed in school and life, and find fulfillment along the way. 