

Tips to Help Build Executive Functioning Skills

Response Inhibition:

Assume that in the presence of peers your teen will have reduced impulse control. Know where your teen is going, whom the teen will be with, and what time the teen will return home. Have a procedure for how to handle a change of plans.

Expect your teen to choose fun activities over challenging or non pleasurable ones. You'll need to check to see if school projects, chores, etc. are being done. You may need to discuss ways to control or eliminate distractions.

To help your teen delay gratification, use a waiting period for things they want to do or have.

Require your teen to earn some of the things he wants as another way to teach delayed gratification and response inhibition.

Prepare your teen for situations that require impulse control by regularly reviewing the rules in advance.

Working Memory:

Make eye contact with your teen before telling him/her something you want them to remember.

Avoid competing distractions when giving your teen directions (turn off TV, put phone down).

Consider the timing of your directions. The best time to give directions is not when your teen is just arriving back home from school or a night out, on their way out the door, about to go to sleep or just waking up.

Use Written reminders; texts, stickies, etc.

Encourage your teen to use or adapt technological solutions to aid working memory (phone reminders, etc.)

When your teen is going to be involved in an activity or situation they have managed well in the past, reinforce that prior success as a way of reminding them to let past experience guide current behavior.

Emotional Control:

Be clear and specific about your rules and keep the 'have-tos' to a relatively small number.

Be sure your teen knows about appointments, family gatherings, and other events not scheduled by the teen for fun, so there are no surprises.

Use communication strategies that invite discussion rather than confrontation.

Use active listening.

Negotiate when you can; save the non negotiables for situations that are important.

Avoid the automatic 'no' to any request that your teen makes. Use no judiciously.

Flexibility:

Whenever possible, provide advance notice or a warning for what's coming next, especially if it does not conform to the teen's expectation.

Try to maintain schedules and routines whenever possible. Build in flexibility (ex., say dinner will be at 4:45 - 5:15 instead of at 5:00). If they have a doctor's appointment let them know the appointment time and that they should be there 15 minutes early.

Give your teen a script for handling a situation, particularly one that is unfamiliar. Ex., rehearse how to set up an appointment by phone or what questions to ask on a job interview.

Whenever possible help your teen anticipate what they might encounter in a situation. The more information they have in advance, the more comfortable they will be in a new situation.

For recurring situation or expectations such as sleepovers and curfew, be clear and specific about any nonnegotiable rules,

Be judicious in your use of the word 'no'. Assume that a 'no' answer will cause a meltdown and use strategies to diminish the intensity.

Sustained Attention:

Provide supervision, check-ins, to make sure they are on task.

Ask your teen how long they can work on a particular task before needing a break and discuss the use of some sort of timing device to depict elapsed time.

Use a tool like a vibrating watch to prompt engagement.

Use incentives.

Always offer praise for staying on task and for successfully completing a task.

Task Initiation:

Whenever possible, use a goal that your teen has set as a way to work on task initiation.

If a task does not lead to a desired goal or that goal is not powerful, consider offering an external incentive.

If a task seems overwhelming to your teen, encourage them to work with a teachers to help break the task into more manageable parts, with specific deadlines for each part.

Let your teen decide on deadlines and on cuing systems that would work best for them to trigger task initiation.

Planning and Prioritizing:

Use things your teen wants as a jumping off point for teaching planning skills. Any goal that requires a roadmap to achieve can be used to teach planning skills, but your teen is going to make a higher investment in working toward personally meaningful goals.

Spell out in advance any priorities or limitations you want to impose on a goal process. You need to buy in on the incentive for the goal being met.

Involve your teen in the planning process.

If your teen appears to understand the various pieces of a project that need to get done but isn't sure how to get started, prompt them to prioritize by asking what needs to get done as the first step, the next step, and so on in the process.

Organization:

Organization is best approached from some area that they have an invested interest in.

In the short run, offer reminders in a format that your teen feels they can tolerate. Checklist, post a visual, send a text, etc. Over time, your teen will be able to do this on their own.

Even though you feel it is solely your teen's responsibility, periodically offer to help him clean and organize his space.

Model some simple organizational schemes for your teen.

Time Management:

In matters involving your teen, try to ensure that you are modeling good time management practices.

If you are following a routine or trying to get your teen to a scheduled event, let them know how long it will take and when you need to leave to arrive on time. Use calendars at home and on phones.

Let your teen choose a timing device that will help them wake up and start their routine every day.

Goal-Directed Persistence:

Whenever possible, work on persistence toward a goal that your teen has an investment in.

If your teen has goals that you can agree to, but you have conditions or expectations surrounding the goal, be clear about the conditions.

If the goal your teen sets is well into the future, help them set some concrete benchmarks along the way so that they can have the sense that they are making progress toward the goal.

Maintain interest in longer-term goals by keeping them visible and concrete.

For goals you care about but your teen does not, use an incentive to help them stick with it.

Metacognition:

Provide praise for key elements of task performance by recognizing strategies that your teen used. You need to look for examples of chores at home, performance on school assignments, and interactions with friends to see when your teen used problem-solving strategies or can accept feedback from others and change his behaviors.

Encourage your teen to evaluate their own performance on a task or in a social situation.

Use your behavior as a way of indirectly helping your teen understand how people might react to their behavior. Ex., telling your teen how your tone of voice or body posture is interpreted by other people and even giving her an example may help them appreciate this behavior in him/herself, as long as they do not perceive it as a lecture or as fault finding directed toward them.

