



3 strategies to boost executive functioning skills

Executive function is defined as a term of art in the regulations implementing Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended by the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, as "a constellation of cognitive abilities that include the ability to plan, organize, and sequence tasks and manage multiple tasks simultaneously." [28 CFR 35](#), Appendix C. Because executive functioning skill deficits may substantially limit brain function, students who struggle with executive functioning skills may qualify under Section 504.

Helping students with executive functioning skill deficits does not require the perfect tool, but rather some good strategies, said Tara Bruss, an assistive technology specialist at the PACER Center who specializes in executive function. The PACER Simon Technology Center collaborates with parents, professionals, and consumers to make the benefits of technology more accessible to children and adults with disabilities.

Some tools are unique enough that attempting to substitute with a different tool might not provide the same benefit, she said. "[But] without good strategies in place, a good or 'perfect' tool will likely not be as helpful as it could or should be."

Bruss offers the following three commonly used strategies. The key is to find the right fit for the students, she said. Not all of these are appropriate for all students.

1. Note it. Whether the student needs to remember an event or appointment, or she needs to complete a task, it needs to be somehow noted, Bruss said. The method for noting can be writing down with words using paper and pencil, drawing a picture, creating a video, doing an audio recording, using an app, or something else. Noting is greatly beneficial.

"A lot of times we might have heard students say, 'I'll remember that. I don't need to record it,'" Bruss said. "Then later they forget about it."

2. Save note in same place. Once the event, appointment, task, or assignment the student needs to do has been noted, make sure the student saves that note in a place where she can find it again, Bruss said. "Have a central location," she said. For example, if the student is making the note with his smartphone, encourage him to always use the same one or two apps that he likes. This might be a calendar system and/or a task list.

If the student is using an audio recording, have him use the same device every time.

If he's writing down on scraps of paper, have him save the scraps of paper in the same envelope that's kept in the same location every time.

"Otherwise, it could get lost," Bruss said. In choosing a central location and doing the same thing every time, the student doesn't even have to think about it, she said.

3. Make a plan. Before she starts a work session, whether its homework or some kind of home chore or task, make sure the student has a plan in place, Bruss said. The plan should be noted and saved using the previous guidelines.

Lay out the plan in order of attack, so that the student can use less of her cognitive functioning load to navigate the list. "[He] doesn't have to think about it," Bruss said. "Just follow the order." The student can say to himself, "I've got two hours to get things done. Let's look at my list of things to do. I probably won't get everything done, so let me make a plan. What can I do in that time?"

Some students feel overwhelmed with getting started, Bruss said. "They don't know where to start," she said. "Making a plan ahead of time can reduce that stressor on their mind, so they can focus on the task at hand."

Have the student schedule everything out for the next day the night before or make a schedule for a two-hour session right before they do it.

See also:

- [Teach time management strategies to students with disabilities](#)
- [Improve student outcomes through executive functioning skills training](#)
- [Enhancing Executive Function in the Early Years: Environment, Instruction and Adaptations to Promote School Readiness](#) by Padmaja Sarathy

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March 16, 2021

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