



Functional Cognition, Executive Functioning, and Learning Strategies

What Are Executive Functioning Skills?

Executive functioning refers to a set of thinking and self-management skills that help students set goals, manage tasks, and follow through with activities.¹ These skills support students in planning, staying organized, managing emotions, and completing schoolwork.

Executive functioning skills include:¹

- Starting tasks and staying focused
- Planning and organizing work and materials
- Remembering information
- Managing emotions and impulses
- Shifting between tasks or activities
- Monitoring progress and completing tasks

Functional cognition is the ability to *use* these thinking skills during real-life tasks and routines (“knowing what to do” vs. “doing it in the moment”).^{2, 3, 4} A student may understand expectations but still struggle to carry out the steps independently and consistently across the school day.^{2, 3, 4} Together, executive functioning and functional cognition support learning, independence, and participation throughout the school day.^{2, 3, 4}

Impact on student participation

Students may:

- Know content or “test well,” but struggle to apply skills during real routines (homework, projects, classwork)
- Have difficulty starting work, persisting, or finishing within expected time
- Lose track of materials (binder/backpack/assignments) or miss multi-step directions
- Struggle with planning and organizing longer tasks (writing assignments, studying, group work)
- Have difficulty with flexibility (transitions, changes in schedule, shifting between tasks)
- Need frequent adult prompting to stay on track or use strategies consistently¹

How school-based occupational therapy can help

School-based OT supports EF and functional cognition by helping students participate more independently in real school activities (not isolated “brain training”). OT focuses on strategies that can be practiced and generalized across routines, often through occupation-based and context-driven supports.⁵

OT may:

- Teach students to identify, prioritize, and organize tasks using planners, checklists, visuals, or chunking
- Build routines for initiation, persistence, and time management (timers, first/then, “launch routines,” work cycles)
- Support organization of materials (backpack/binder systems, locker routines, “home–school” check-ins)
- Embed metacognitive reflection (“What worked? What didn’t? What will I try next time?”) to strengthen carryover
- Adjust the environment in real time (seating, visual schedules, reduced distractions, cueing systems)
- Collaborate with teachers to integrate learning strategies into daily classroom expectations⁵

Contact

If you’re interested in learning if OT services might be helpful for your child at AIM, please contact supportservices@aimpa.org.

Sources

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5. Grajo LC, Candler C, Sarafian A. Interventions within the scope of occupational therapy to improve children’s academic participation: a systematic review. *Am J Occup Ther*. 2020;74(2):7402180030p1-7402180030p32. doi:10.5014/ajot.2020.039016