Darien Public Schools

Parent University: Executive Functioning 101
Elementary

Executive Function	What It Is	K–Grade 2 Examples	Grade 3–5 Examples	How to Support at Home
Response Inhibition	Thinking before acting or speaking	Wait for a turn; raise hand before speaking; stop before crossing the street, not grabbing toys from others	Count to three before blurting an answer; pause before grabbing something from a friend; re-read work before handing in	● Praise the pause: 'I love how you stopped and thought!' ● Play freeze games, Simon Says, card games like Slapjack
Sustained Attention	Maintaining focus and effort over time, especially when challenging	Stay on task for 5-15 min; finish a puzzle; sitting through read aloud or bedtime story, re-engaging after a distraction	Independent reading 20-30 min; practicing an instrument through a lesson, persist through writing assignment	● Build 'focus stamina' with timed work period; work for 10 min break for 5 for younger kids ● Minimize distractions in learning space ● Remember wandering attention is not defiance
Emotion Regulation	Managing emotional responses, including calming down when upset	Take a breath when losing; use a calm-down corner; name feelings	Recognize rising frustration; use coping strategies, handling peer conflict, manage disappointment	● Build a calm-down toolkit (stress ball, breathing steps) ● Name emotions without fixing them ● Model regulation and verbalize our own emotions
Working Memory	Holding information in mind while using it to complete a task	Follow 2–3 step directions; keep score while playing; remember a short number	Hold sentence beginnings while writing; track multiple instructions; mental math	● Play memory games ● Give multi-step directions gradually, have them repeat back to you ● Read aloud and ask them to retell
Time Awareness	Understanding time; estimating task duration and managing deadlines	Understand before/after, yesterday/today/tomorrow; recognize when 5 vs 30 min has passed	Estimate homework time; pace on tests; plan after-school schedule	● Use visual timers ● Play 'guess how long' with chores ● Ask: 'We leave in 20 min—what can you finish?'

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Initiation	Beginning a task independently and in a timely manner	Getting materials without repeated reminders; begin getting dressed independently, begin a simple chore when asked, brush teeth when prompted once	Start a homework assignment without procrastination, practice a sport or instrument without parent oversight	• Use a visual schedule • Break tasks to the first tiny step' • Recognize and praise even small steps or efforts to start tasks • Use “when-then” statements not “if”
Planning	Developing a strategy or steps to reach a goal before starting	Pack backpack the night before; sequence craft steps; plan a simple story	Plan steps for an activity, (e.g., walking the dog; organize a multi-day science fair board; think through what to bring on a field trip)	• Use visual checklists • Ask: 'What do you need first, next, last?' • Let them plan a family activity
Organizing	Creating systems to arrange information, materials, and space	Sort toys by type; keep a tidy cubby; organize papers into folders	Maintain a binder system; use an agenda; organize their room or play area	• Designate consistent spots for school items • Use labeled bins • Do a weekly 'reset' together
Flexibility	Adapting to change, shifting strategies, tolerating unexpected events	Adjust when plans change (rained-out sports); try a new approach when the first doesn't work	Adapt to a substitute teacher/sitter; suggesting different ways to solve problems; handle schedule changes	• Narrate small changes as opportunities: 'Our plan changed—let's figure it out ' • Play strategy board games
Metacognition	Thinking about your own thinking; monitoring and self-evaluating performance	Notice 'I don't get this'; notice when they lost track of a story or directions	Reflect on what went well and what did not go as well, knowing their learning style, *I work better at the kitchen table*	• Ask reflective questions: 'How do you think that went? What might you try differently?' • Celebrate self-caught mistakes • Articulate our thought processes even when we make an error

Executive functions develop gradually Support, not rescue, is the key to building independence

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Secondary

Executive Function	What It Is	Middle School (Gr 6–8)	High School (Gr 9–12)	How to Support at Home
Response Inhibition	Thinking before acting, especially in social or high-pressure moments	Wait before reacting to conflict; pause before posting on social media; check work before submitting	Apply the 24-hour rule before emotional texts; think through risky social decisions; pause in interviews	• Model your own impulse control • Discuss social media: 'How might different people read this?' • Talk through impulsive moments calmly afterward
Sustained Attention	Maintaining focus and effort across long, complex tasks over days or weeks	Stay on task during a 45-min work period; persist through a hard chapter; maintain effort on a multi-week project	Push through a rigorous semester; maintain athletic/arts practice schedules; sustain focus for cumulative finals	• Connect effort to their goals - not ours • Try the Pomodoro technique (25 min on, 5 off); Forest app • Keep phones out of the workspace
Emotion Regulation	Managing intense emotions in academic, social, and performance contexts	Cope with peer conflict; manage pre-test anxiety; handle disappointing grades, healthy sleep and eating patterns	Manage high-stakes anxiety (auditions, AP exams, tryouts); cope with rejection; actively engage in strategies to regulate emotions including balance/self-care	• Normalize hard emotions without fixing them • Ask: 'Do you want me to listen, or help problem-solve?' • Model healthy emotional expression
Working Memory	Holding and manipulating multiple pieces of information simultaneously	Follow multi-step directions; track steps in a math problem; hold an essay argument while writing details	Integrate notes, outline, and rubric while drafting; follow complex lab procedures; manage multiple responsibilities	• Encourage writing things down to 'outsource' memory • One task at a time—multitasking tanks working memory • Use graphic organizers for writing
Time Awareness	Accurately estimating task duration; managing competing deadlines	Budget time across multiple assignments; manage after-school activities; pace on timed tests	Balance coursework with jobs or sports; manage SAT/ACT timelines; estimate project hours weeks ahead	• Encourage a planner of their choosing • Ask: 'How long do you think this will take? Let's time it ' • Allow natural consequences from missed deadlines

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Secondary

Executive Function	What It Is	Middle School (Gr 6–8)	High School (Gr 9–12)	How to Support at Home
Initiation	Beginning tasks independently, especially when they feel overwhelming or have distant rewards	Start a project the week it's assigned; begin studying without being told; ask a teacher for help	Start a college essay without external pressure; initiate job applications; self-start SAT prep	• Break tasks to the tiniest first step: 'Just open the document ' • Use 'when-then': 'When you write one sentence, you're done for now '
Planning	Building multi-step strategies; anticipating obstacles; planning contingencies	Break projects into weekly chunks; plan study time; sequence steps in a lab or report; identify MIT (most important thing) to get done	Reverse-engineer long deadlines (research papers, AP exams); map college application timelines	• Help reverse-engineer deadlines: 'Work backward—what needs to happen each week?' • Use a shared calendar • Debrief after projects
Organizing	Maintaining complex systems across multiple classes, activities, and digital platforms	Manage a multi-subject binder; track assignments from multiple teachers; organize a group project	Maintain digital filing systems; coordinate extracurriculars and academics; organize cumulative exam notes	• Do a weekly 'backpack/digital audit' • Teach one consistent system • Apps like Notion can help—but teach the system, not just the tool
Flexibility	Adapting thinking and strategies in response to feedback or unexpected changes	Adjust to a substitute teacher; revise after feedback; cope with an unequal group project	Substantially revise a paper; shift college plans; adapt study strategies when a course is harder than anticipated	• Validate frustration while modeling flexibility: 'That's disappointing, What can you control here?' • Avoid over-rescuing when plans fall through
Metacognition	Monitoring comprehension and performance; self-evaluating and adjusting strategies	Notice when they don't understand and ask for help; check work against a rubric; reflect on test performance	Evaluate which study strategies work; identify knowledge gaps; self-edit writing for logic; reflect on communication patterns	• Debrief after tests: 'What did you do to prepare? What worked? What would you change?' • Celebrate when they catch their own mistakes

Executive functions continue developing through adolescence Your steady support—without rescuing—builds lasting independence