

Key Points: From Overwhelmed to Organized

Building Executive Functioning Skills, a parent workshop by Rebecca Sitman, Delaware County Intermediate Unit

What is executive functioning?

- A set of brain skills for planning, organizing, managing time, starting tasks, and handling emotions.
- It covers nine areas: attention, impulse control, planning, emotion regulation, starting tasks, self-monitoring, flexibility, organization, and working memory.
- It is commonly linked to ADHD, autism, and learning differences, but a child doesn't need a label to struggle with it. Busy families and over-scheduled kids often have the same challenges.

What it looks like

At home: trouble starting or finishing tasks, forgotten assignments, messy spaces, lost items, poor time management.

By age:

- *Preschool:* trouble with routines and transitions, always “on the go”
- *Elementary:* messy, loses things, doesn't hand in work
- *Middle/High school:* chronically late, poor project planning, impulsive decisions

Common barriers

Over-scheduling, technology, family stress, and mental health challenges.

Over-scheduling

- Parents mean well: they want to expose kids to experiences, find talents, and not miss opportunities.
- A full schedule has real benefits, including self-esteem, time-management skills, and social connection.
- Every child is different. Some thrive on a full schedule, and others get anxious.
- **Signs of over-scheduling:** losing interest in things they used to enjoy, missing family time, poor sleep, dropping grades, moodiness, trouble focusing, feeling stressed, uneasy with downtime.
- Screens often take over free time, and kids need practice playing and being creative.

Strategies for parents

Routines and predictability

- Routines reduce stress, help with planning, and build independence.
- Use a visual schedule that includes downtime and family time.
- Use checklists so kids can cross things off and see progress.
- Involve the whole family in planning.

Organization

- Keep spaces tidy and set aside a daily time to reorganize.
- Give each activity its own space (homework, getting ready, relaxing).
- Create quiet zones and set screen-time rules.
- Set up the night before: clothes, lunch, bookbag.

Time management

- Build time awareness first. Try the game “How Long Will This Take?” and compare guesses to reality.
- Show activities and time on a visual schedule, and build in downtime.
- Ask “What comes next?” to encourage independence.
- Teach and practice with timers, with clear expectations for what to finish.

Getting started on tasks

- Break tasks into small chunks, using a game timer.
- Be clear about what needs to be done.
- Offer choices *within* the expectation, such as “Reading or math first?” The expectation stays the same, and the child gets some control.
- Use **First-Then**: “First 10 minutes of homework, then 10 minutes of a video game.”
- For long projects, set mini-deadlines and give verbal reminders.

Communication

- Say explicitly when something is important and what you want them to do with it, and pair it with visuals.
- Guide rather than fix. Ask open-ended questions: “What’s another way you can do this?” or “What’s getting in your way right now?”
- Model flexible thinking: “That didn’t work, let’s try another way.”

Working memory

- It’s the information you hold in your head while learning or doing a task.
- **Struggles look like:** forgetting instructions, losing track after an interruption, trouble with multi-step tasks, feeling overwhelmed.

- **Helpful tools:**
 - *Physical:* checklists, sticky notes, planners, a large family calendar
 - *Digital:* note apps, reminder apps, voice memos
 - *Environmental:* visual cues, and a dedicated spot for unfinished work
 - *Chrome extensions:* Momentum (visual dashboard), Stay Focused (limits distractions), Noisli (white noise and ambient sound)

Emotions and mental health

- **Emotional regulation** means recognizing feelings, understanding how they affect behavior, and managing stress. Big reactions can come from small triggers.
- **Strategies:** reframe negative thoughts, practice mindfulness, take breaks, talk about feelings, and problem-solve.
- Constant chaos can lead to anxiety, frustration, avoidance, and feeling like a failure.
- **Stress vs. anxiety disorder:** everyday stress is tied to events like a test or an awkward moment. An anxiety disorder is constant worry that disrupts daily life, social avoidance, panic attacks, or irrational fears.
- **Sadness vs. depression:** sadness is temporary, tied to a trigger, and eases with strategies. Depression lasts long (over two weeks), isn't tied to a clear trigger, interferes with life, is isolating, and doesn't ease with strategies.

Big takeaway: reset, don't punish

Instead of “How many times do I have to tell you?”, try “Something isn't working with our current system. Let's figure out what needs to change.” This moves the focus from **blame to problem-solving**.