

Smart but Scattered: The Executive Skills Approach to Helping Teens Reach Their Potential and Start the Year Off Strong

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3 Key Concepts about Executive Skills

- What they are: brain-based skills that take a minimum of 25 years to reach full maturation.
- Until these skills are fully mature, it's the job of parents and teachers (and adults who work with kids) to act as surrogate frontal lobes.
- It is also the job of parents, teachers, etc. to help kids grow their own executive skills.





Executive Skills that Underlie School Success

Foundational Skills

- Response Inhibition
- Working Memory
- Emotional Control
- Flexibility
- Sustained Attention
- Task Initiation

Advanced Skills

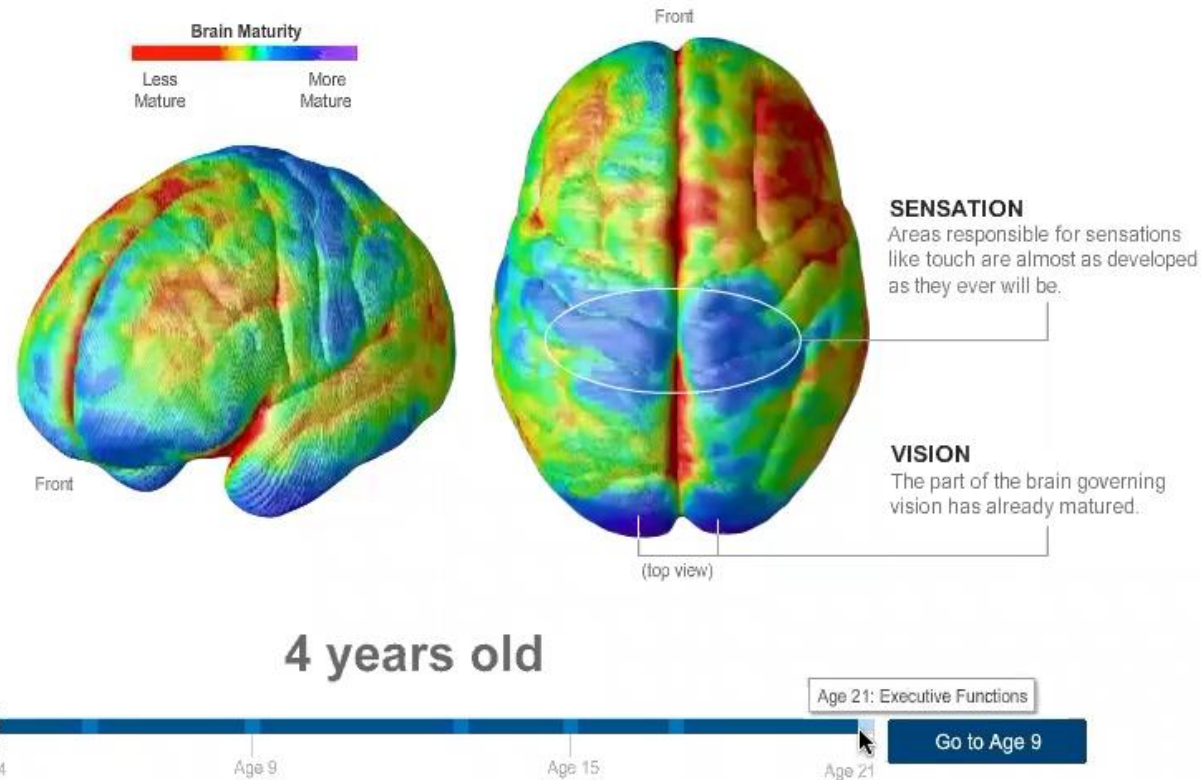
- Planning/Prioritizing
- Organization
- Time Management
- Goal-Directed Persistence
- Metacognition

The Child's Developing Brain


Different areas of the brain mature at different rates, which helps explain many of the intellectual and emotional changes seen in children, teens and young adults. While no two children develop in exactly the same way, scientists have been able to link certain developmental milestones to changes in brain tissue, observed by MRI scans taken repeatedly over years. Move the slider below to see how the brain matures. Red, yellow and orange patterns indicate undeveloped brain tissue, while green, blue and purple indicate a maturing of the brain.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT

In the first few years of life, areas of the brain devoted to basic function change at a rapid pace. By age 4, primary senses and basic motor skills are almost fully developed. The child can walk, hold a crayon and feed himself.



Brain images courtesy of Dr. Paul Thompson, University of California, Los Angeles. Source information provided by Dr. Jay Giedd, National Institutes of Mental Health. Produced by Tara Parker-Pope, Jon Huang, and Mike Mason/The New York Times



“Human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them rather than to them or for them.”

~Ted Wachtel
International Institute for
Restorative Practices

Where do you start with your teen?

It starts with them

- **What are their expectations and goals for the school year?**
 - Short term – Subjects, anticipated grades, extracurricular activities
 - Long term – Career: Tech school, college, military service, apprenticeship
- **What are your expectations for them? Have you shared these with them?**
 - Short term
 - Long term
- Are you on the same page? Whose choice is it?
- Reaching consensus or compromise

Where do you start with your teen?

Goodness of fit

- Do they believe they have the skills to manage school/goals on their own?
- Do you believe they have the skills?

It starts with them

- If they want to manage on their own, give them a chance.
- Decide on conditions (e.g., time frame, performance) and propose “if, then” plan.
- Mutually decide on a plan and help options (type and who will provide).

A few strategies to support executive skills



Date: _____

[illegible]

Solving the Procrastination Problem

Task:	Date:
Obstacle	Strategy
I don't understand the assignment.	
I can't think of how to start the assignment.	
I could probably do the assignment but it will take a lot of work and just the thought of that hurts my brain.	
The task is way too boring for me even to contemplate doing it.	
This assignment is pointless. I would get nothing out of doing it.	
The conditions for working aren't perfect—when they are, I'll get started.	
I have way too many things to do and don't know how to prioritize my time.	
It's going to take way too long and I don't want to commit that amount of time.	
There are other things I'd rather be doing that are more fun or more important to me.	
Wait, what assignment? When I leave school at the end of the day I put school behind me (i.e., the cues that remind me to do schoolwork are missing).	
The assignment isn't going to affect my grade so why bother	
Perfectionism—I'm not going to start because I know I won't be able to do work that meets my (impossibly) high standard.	
I'm stressed out about other things (either internal or external) and can't focus because of these preoccupations. I'll do better if I wait until my life calms down.	
I'm too tired. I don't have the energy to do this now.	
I don't <i>think</i> I can do it—because I've always failed in the past—so why should I try?	
I'm so far behind now, I'll never catch up!	
I don't want to do this because if I accomplish this, I'm scared of what comes next.	

A Template for Studying for Tests

Studying for Tests

Test date: _____ Subject: _____

Check off the strategies you will use.

Passive strategies (use sparingly)	Active strategies (better)	Active strategies with feedback (best)
<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Reread text	<input type="checkbox"/> 7. Make study guide	<input type="checkbox"/> 13. Quiz myself with Quizlet/ study guide/flash cards
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Reread notes	<input type="checkbox"/> 8. Make flashcards/Quizlet	<input type="checkbox"/> 14. Take practice test (check answers)
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Highlight notes/text	<input type="checkbox"/> 9. Make concept maps	<input type="checkbox"/> 15. Redo old tests or homework (check answers)
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Read study guide	<input type="checkbox"/> 10. Organize notes	<input type="checkbox"/> 16. Have someone else quiz me
<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Rewrite notes	<input type="checkbox"/> 11. Complete review packet (no answers)	<input type="checkbox"/> 17. Complete review packet (check answers)
<input type="checkbox"/> 6. Read/watch Spark Notes, Kahn Academy, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/> 12. Attend review session or study group	<input type="checkbox"/> 18. Meet 1:1 with teacher
<input type="checkbox"/> 19. Other: _____		

Study Plan

Date	Day	Which strategies will I use? (Write number)	How much time for each strategy?
	4 days before test	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
	3 days before test	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.

From The Work-Smart Academic Planner, Revised Edition. Copyright 2017 by The Guilford Press.

Studying for Tests (cont.)

Date	Day	Which strategies will I use? (Write number)	How much time for each strategy?
	2 days before test	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
	1 day before test	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.

Posttest Evaluation

How did your studying work out? Answer the following questions:

1. What strategies worked best?
2. What strategies were not so helpful?
3. Did you spend enough time studying? Yes No
4. If no, what more should you have done?
5. What will you do differently the next time?

A Template for Planning Long-term Projects

Long-Term-Project Planning Form

Due Date: _____

Step 1: Select a Topic

What are possible topics?	What I like about this choice:	What I don't like:
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Final topic choice:

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Step 2: Identify Necessary Materials

What materials or resources do I need?	Where will I get them?	When will I get them?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Long-Term-Project Planning Form (cont.)

Step 3: Identify Project Tasks and Due Dates

What do I need to do? (List each step in order)	When will I do it?	Check off when done
Step 1:		
Step 2:		
Step 3:		
Step 4:		
Step 5:		
Step 6:		
Step 7:		
Step 8:		
Step 9:		
Step 10:		

Reminder List: Include here any additional tasks or details you need to keep in mind as you work on the project. Cross out or check each one off as you take care of it.

- ___ 1.
- ___ 2.
- ___ 3.
- ___ 4.
- ___ 5.
- ___ 6.
- ___ 7.
- ___ 8.
- ___ 9.
- ___ 10.

Beware of one size fits all...

Dad liked planning on the computer and wanted his son to use an online planner, Mum used a whiteboard and thought that was the way to go, but the son, when he did plan, liked using a bit of paper and a pencil. He knew why he liked to plan this way (writing things out helped him to remember, seeing it all on paper enabled him to prioritize and he liked the act of color coding the priority numbers, and he got great satisfaction from crossing out something that had been completed and turned in).

