



WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?

Executive Functioning

Have you ever reminded your child to put on their shoes, only to find them five minutes later playing with something they discovered along the way? Or wondered why they can remember every detail about their favorite game but forget the backpack sitting by the front door?

These everyday moments often involve **executive functioning**.

Executive functioning is a group of brain-based skills that help us plan, organize, remember information, manage our attention, control impulses, and adjust when things change. Think of these skills as the brain's "management system"—they help children figure out what needs to happen and follow through.

Supporting Executive Functioning

Executive functioning develops throughout childhood and adolescence, and children benefit from adults providing support while these skills grow.

Parents can help by:

- Breaking large tasks into smaller steps
- Using visual schedules, lists, or reminders
- Giving one or two directions at a time
- Creating predictable routines
- Preparing children for transitions and changes
- Helping children pause and make a plan before beginning
- Practicing flexible thinking when things don't go as expected

Instead of repeatedly asking, "Why haven't you done this yet?", try asking:

"What is the first thing you need to do?"

This small change helps shift the focus from correcting behavior to building a skill.

Why Does Executive Functioning Matter for Mental Health?

Children use executive functioning skills throughout the entire day. They help a child get ready for school, follow several directions, complete homework, wait for a turn, manage frustration, transition between activities, and remember belongings.

When these skills are still developing, you might notice a child who:

- Frequently loses or forgets things
- Needs repeated reminders
- Has trouble starting or finishing tasks
- Becomes overwhelmed by several directions at once
- Acts before thinking
- Struggles when plans suddenly change

These behaviors can sometimes look like laziness, defiance, or not listening, even when a child is actually having difficulty managing all the steps their brain is being asked to complete.

Executive functioning isn't something children simply have or don't have. These skills develop gradually, and different children develop them at different rates. With practice, structure, and supportive adults, children can build strategies that help them become more independent, flexible, organized, and confident in everyday life.