

How to Boost Executive Function in Children & Why It's Important to Helping Them Thrive (by Dr Nicole Carvill)

S heysigmund.com/how-to-boost-executive-function-in-children/

Posted by Karen
Young

May 9,
2016



Dear Parent – I see that you're frustrated. And I see that your child is too. You wish your child would just listen, follow through and complete their schoolwork; stop getting so distracted and stop over-reacting when things don't go their way.

What if I told you that what appears to be a behavior issue; something worthy of a time-out, lecture, loss of privilege or other such punishment, might actually be a cognitive issue, requiring quite a different response?

Perhaps you would feel more hopeful, rather than frustrated. That is my intention in sharing with you the importance of Executive Functioning, and how to boost Executive Function in children.

In my work as a psychologist, I love empowering parents to help their children thrive. The starting point is to gain a true picture of what is really going on for your child. To understand your child requires compassion, yes, but also correct information.

Executive Functioning is of vital importance to children's success and happiness, yet most parents aren't familiar with what Executive Functioning is, let alone how to help a child who has Executive Functioning issues.

Parents often come to me because their child is:

- Easily distracted;
- Doesn't listen;
- Acts out and is getting into trouble;
- Won't do what they're told;
- Appears vague, disruptive or defiant.

When children present such "behavioural problems" often what actually needs to be assessed and addressed relates to **Executive Functioning**.

Why is Executive Functioning so important?

Executive Functioning is the greatest indicator of your child's success and happiness in the classroom, at home and beyond.

Studies have even proven that your child's executive functions between age 3 and 11 are predictive of physical health and mental health (whether they are more likely to be overweight or have substance abuse problems), future earnings, and even marital harmony.

Bottom line: If you want your child to eventually find and keep a job, be a dependable and happy adult, then you need to care about their Executive Functions.

So what are Executive Functions?

Executive Functions are cognitive processes. They are a set of mental skills that help us accomplish tasks, stay calm and think creatively.

Therefore, **Executive Functioning** relates to our ability to reason and problem solve; to plan, get things done, display self-control; all the mental skills we need to thrive as adults, but that are still developing until age 25.

Fact #1:

It's your child's executive functions that are the greatest indicators of mental, emotional and physical health.

Fact #2:

Executive Function issues are overwhelmingly encountered as poor or disruptive behavior and responded to as such.

What are Core Executive Functions and what do they look like in children?

If we think of Executive Function as an umbrella term for important mental control processes; we can understand three components of it; Working Memory, Inhibitory Control and Mental Flexibility.

1. Working Memory

Working Memory allows us to hold bits and pieces of information in our mind and mentally figure things out. Working Memory helps us reason, solve problems and plan.

What does this look like?

You can imagine your child's Working Memory visually as a post-it note. Depending on their stage of development, they will have a relatively small post-it-note (able to hold just a few bits of information) to quite large (able to mentally work with lots of pieces of information).

If you ask your child to “get off the couch, go and get your reader, but first wash your hands, don't forget the soap, and bring me a pen for your diary”, would their post-it-note be big enough to handle those instructions?

What happens if you find them in the bathroom washing their hands, completely forgetting that they needed to go and get their reader and a pen (which were in two separate locations in your house)?

While a natural response may be one of frustration, or a suspicion that your child hasn't listened – or shouldn't have gotten distracted, your best response comes from an awareness of your child's Working Memory.

2. Inhibitory Control

While Working Memory allows us to hold information mentally; make and follow through on plans, this requires attention. And focused attention requires some Inhibitory Control.

Inhibitory Control involves self-control, discipline; being able to manage interference and distractions while staying focused on a task.

As core Executive Functions, our Inhibitory Control and Working Memory work together to help us stay focused on a goal or carry out a plan, as we block out internal and external distractions.

IMPORTANT: Our kids live, as we do, in a digital smorgasbord, dominated by screens competing for attention. Understanding and enhancing Executive Functioning is crucial for your kids survival in our world today.

What does this look like?

Your child's inhibitory control relates to whether they can stay seated in class; when their urge is to jump out and run around. In children (and adults) it relates to holding your tongue or saying something inappropriate, showing up to training sessions (when you'd rather stay on the couch), resisting temptations for the pursuit of a higher goal.

There are ways to improve inhibitory control, and it's important that your child's age and developmental stage is taken into account.

3. Mental Flexibility

Mental Flexibility, or Cognitive Flexibility, is linked to creativity and involves being able to think in different ways, see new possibilities and perspectives.

Often children can feel frustrated because their original plan has failed and they are unable to conceive of an alternative way of solving the problem.

What does this look like?

Displaying a high level of mental flexibility looks like 'out of the box' thinking; new and novel ideas; noticing and taking advantage of opportunities.

A beautiful quote that reflects the reality of poor mental flexibility comes from Alexander Graham Bell:

"When one door closes, another door opens, but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us."

Wouldn't you love to help your child see the doors that open; to be able to conceptualise problems and ideas in lots of ways? Life is so much happier when children develop mental flexibility. Kids with mental flexibility usually roll with the punches, get along better with others, and recover from setbacks.

How to boost Executive Function in children.

Studies show that music, martial arts, singing, dancing and sports improve our Executive Functions.

Specifically, the strongest evidence for improving Executive Function includes:

1. Cogmed

A computerised brain-training program is proven to boost children's Executive Functions.

2. Mindfulness + Meditation

The results of a school-based program based on mindful awareness practices (MAPS) found that children with poor executive functions benefited the most from mindfulness and meditation practices.

3. Martial Arts

Traditional martial arts, such as Tae-Kwon-Do, are proven to increase executive function in children.

What other activities can boost Executive Function?

Harvard University has compiled a downloadable resource for enhancing Executive Function based on age. ([Access here.](#))

What can you do to boost your child's executive functioning?

The short answer: plenty.

The biggest block to supporting your child's executive functions is simply: not knowing what executive functions are.

Now that you've read this article, you know exactly what executive functions are and the important role they play. Which means you're in an empowered position to truly help your child thrive.

About the Author:

Dr Nicole Carvill (BA(Hons) PhD MAPS)

Nicole is a psychologist, presenter, author and mother, passionate about helping children/adults to understand how they learn best and to assist them to gain the skills they need to thrive.



Here is a snapshot of her professional highlights:

- + Presenter for the Pearson Academy on understanding the impact of working memory and attention on learning and life.
- + Awarded PhD scholarship to research how to support people caring for a child, parent or partner with additional needs as a result of an intellectual disability, mental illness or age. I've met many amazing and inspiring people so far.
- + Researched the impact of pregnancy on memory skills (and after two pregnancies I know all about the brain drain during pregnancy!).
- + Worked within a Multi-disciplinary Autism Assessment Team under guidance of Dr Richard Eisenmajer at Gateway Support Services.
- + Worked with Preschool children with developmental delays while supporting their families, Specialist Children's Services.
- + Worked as a Clinician within the Behaviour Intervention Support Team, Disability Services [DHS].
- + Regional Co-Ordinator (Barwon South Western region of Victoria) for Program for Students with Disabilities, Lewis & Lewis Psychological Consultancy.

You can find Nicole and more of her work on her website, <http://thinknicolecarvill.com> or [Facebook](#).

Like this article?

Subscribe to our free newsletter for a weekly round up of our best articles