


private prep

# Executive Functioning: The Basics



**The skills to help your child ensure a smooth and easy transition to high school**

# What is executive functioning?

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University —

*“executive functioning skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully.”*

In other words, executive functioning (or EF) skills allow us to set goals, establish a plan to reach those goals and then carry out that plan. While many students with ADHD or other learning disabilities struggle in this area, so do many students (and adults!) who do not have a formal diagnosis.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING IN ACADEMIC TRANSITIONS

Many suggest that the prefrontal cortex regulates executive functioning skills, but it's more accurate to look at the prefrontal system. The prefrontal cortex is densely connected to portions of the brain that regulate motivation, emotion, arousal, perception and action, and the prefrontal cortex coordinates those portions of the brain. It's important to note that the prefrontal cortex is the last part of the brain to develop.

The brain experiences two growth spurts – one from age 0-3 and another around the age of 11 or 12. Research suggests that this second growth spurt occurs largely in the prefrontal cortex and correlates with the beginning of the ability to develop complex EF skills. For most, the prefrontal cortex continues to grow into a person's twenties. Your school-aged child is necessarily still in the process of growing in this area, making it totally normal for them to be smart, but have trouble with follow-through or motivated, but overwhelmed by planning.

The competitive academic environments that many of our schools create mean that kids' lives require EF skills that they simply haven't had the time or support to develop. And when students transition to a new school, it's common for them to experience bumps in the road as demands on their attention and time shift. Our goal is to help them help them learn key skills to face challenges with tools like time management, mental flexibility, emotional control, and organization.

*"Talent is not all there is to achievement."*

ANGELA DUCKWORTH

# What skills are involved in executive functioning?

There are several models for considering the sub-skills that make up the totality of EF. For consistency's sake, Private Prep's program breaks those sub-skills down as follows.

01

## **PLANNING AND PRIORITIZATION**

Develop (and/or follow, depending on age) a set of steps that will lead to accomplishing a goal. Students who struggle with planning and prioritization may get lost in the details and fail to see the big picture or might not know how to take large tasks and break them down into manageable sub-tasks.

02

## **ORGANIZATION**

Create and maintain systems for keeping track of things and information. Students who need to work on organization lose time because they can't find what they need - be it a pencil or the answer to a question.

03

## **TIME MANAGEMENT**

Estimate how much time is available, how to track it and how to stay within timed limits. Students who struggle with time management may be great planners, but sticking to a plan proves challenging due to their lack of time awareness.

# 04

## **MEMORY**

Hold multiple pieces of information in the brain while performing tasks. Students who do not have good memories lose track of what to do and when to do it even if they have a realistic plan. They may also struggle with retaining information.

# 05

## **SELF REFLECTION**

Reflect on successes and failures and take note of oneself in a given situation. Students who are not in the habit of reflection may turn in work that contains errors or does not fully represent their understanding. They are likely unaware of their strengths and weaknesses making it difficult to establish academic strategies that work well for them.

# 06

## **PAYING ATTENTION**

Attend to a task in spite of boredom, distractions or fatigue. Students who struggle with attention may find themselves pulled to their phone or other distractions or may simply daydream. These students often have excess energy.

# 07

## **STAYING ON TRACK**

Push through to the completion of a goal and not be put off by difficulties or competing interests. Students who struggle with delayed gratification can find it difficult to follow through on plans. They know why they need to do something, but can't consistently make forward progress.

# 08

## **SELF CONTROL**

Manage emotions & impulses in order to achieve goals, complete tasks and direct behavior. Students who lack self control may act before they think or do the first thing that comes to mind. They may also find that their emotions overpower them at times.

# 09

## **GETTING STARTED**

Begin a task without excessive procrastination. Some students may struggle with simply starting work and others with shifting between tasks. Oftentimes, procrastination is closely linked to being overwhelmed, not knowing where to start or finding a task otherwise unpleasant.

# 10

## **COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY AND PROBLEM SOLVING**

Adjust an approach in response to new information, setbacks, obstacles or mistakes. Students who are unable to approach problems from multiple angles can be stymied when their first approach doesn't work. Encouraging flexible problem solving helps foster a growth mindset.