

# **Demystifying Executive Functioning and How To Get Our Kids Ready For School**

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## **Parent and Child Resources**

### **EF Activities for 6 to 18 months**

Peak a boo games - These are really important to develop memory and emotional flexibility. A secure young child starts to build the ability to remember that the person who is hiding will come back. Children also learn to tolerate different emotions when a thing or person is hidden. Some get sad. Some are surprised. These simple games do so much! They facilitate the development of working memory, mental flexibility, and emotional regulation.

Parallel Play and Copying Adults - Adults showing young children how to play with a toy or how to make sounds will allow that young child to learn about predictability. It facilitates a love of learning and low stress associations with learning new things. Early versions of Simon Says help children develop a sense of fun when they get things wrong that fosters cognitive flexibility and self control.

Role Playing Games - This is also facilitates learning and memory because if play is repeated over and over again the young child remembers the role he/she played and also builds the ability to wait their turn and tolerate not being impulsive.

Clean-up! - Please don't skip clean up! Invite your child to participate. Even if in a rush, have them put one thing away. Sense of responsibility and pride in their contribution will go a long way to prepare them for future

responsibilities. When children stick with something that might not be their first choice to do, they learn grit, follow through, and perseverance.

### **Other Resources:**

- \* [zerotothree.org](http://zerotothree.org) - Please explore this website! Great advice, suggestions, and solid research. Highly recommended!
- \* Claire Lerner, MSW will be a HIR speaker this year. She also has a great newsletter for parent of children under the age of 6. Please reference Lerner Child Development to sign up for her newsletter.
- \* “Elmo Says” board book. Sesame Street version of Simon Says.
- \* Where’s Spot books - Hide and seek in a book form
- \* “Noisy Nora” book for infants and toddlers - book a “big” sister who wants to make noise to distract her parents attention away from the new baby. - teaches emotional awareness and self control.

### **EF Activities for Pre-Schoolers - AGES 3-5**

Imaginary Play - Provide lots of opportunities to use various things around the house to engage your child in imaginary play. Your child can use a cape, a toilet paper roll or oatmeal box, and a special role play spot in the house that encourages this kind of imagination. Your job as a parent is to simply set the stage that encourages this kind of play. When kids are involved in making their own play they have to plan out the story - at least so it makes sense to them and the people playing with them. Making a story that directs the play allows the child to develop organizational skills and cognitive flexibility, especially if the play hasn’t been directed by a television show or a grown up.

Read and Then Create Stories - Write down the stories that your child makes up and staple into book form. They will see themselves as “authors” and despite challenges in writing, will encourage life long learning in a supportive environment.

Matching and Sorting Games - Early forms of games like “I SPY” or memory games encourage cognitive flexibility. Shape sorter toys are great too! If in one game you are supposed to sort colors and the next game the task is to sort shapes this encourages the child’s brain to be adaptable.

Puzzles - Know the level at which your child will be optimally challenged. If you start with an “easy” puzzle and move to a more challenging puzzle the child will be confident to keep trying. If you start with something over their head they will most likely shut down. Starting with something in their wheelhouse will manage frustration and encourage them to try for increasingly difficult tasks. When we chose toys or task way beyond our child’s ability, we lose the optimal stress level that is best for learning.

Picture Checklists/Task Charts/Routines - Start with manageable tasks like brushing their teeth or putting their toys or books away before school. Routines create a safe learning environment for any child - they equal predictability and safety. This supports an environment that has optimal expectations- sometimes just beyond a child’s developmental grasp, but not too difficult to cause them to feel inadequate and shut down. Use pictures instead of words and have your child put a sticker on the paper when they have finished the task ( two tasks at first is enough). No need for additional rewards. Self acknowledgment and simple praise from an adult is most often enough. This helps a child develop motivation and working memory.

Physical Activity - Physical activity includes activities that are not planned or organized. What is most important is that your child have opportunities to move their bodies in space, get their heart rate up, and use both sides of their bodies. This increases blood flow to the brain, helps kids manage emotions, and uses both sides of the brain, thereby helping the whole brain to coordinated and integrate.

Scheduled “Quiet Times” - Sadly, we have to make quiet times scheduled aspects of our weekly routine. Technology, the demands of school/work, and the sometimes over programmed lives of most families causes most adults and children to feel like they can’t take a breath. “Quiet Times” could mean fifteen minutes after school with quiet music playing and kids having a choice of unplugged things to do. Regulating our attention and focus is very important to lifelong success.

### **Other Resources:**

\* “The Yes Brain Workbook”by Daniel Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D. - honestly, anything by this duo is terrific! This workbook helps parents plan and deliberately come up with activities that encourage emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and curiosity.

- \* **\*\***(all ages) [www.mindthemaking.org](http://www.mindthemaking.org) - Great website for Parents! Addresses challenges you might have with your children by age group and help parent turn the challenges into skill building opportunities.
- \* Relaxation Script for Younger Children - [depts.washington.edu](http://depts.washington.edu) - This is a way to help your child's body quiet down at the end of the day - it's my tried and true go to strategy.
- \* Pre-School Books - "Same, Same, But Different"- Helps kids develop empathy which represents an important emotional regulation and interpersonal skill
- \* "What Can You Do with a Poleta? - Encourages curiosity and cognitive flexibility.
- \* "Press Here" - Interactive Book that encourages cognitive flexibility and self efficacy as a learner.
- \* "My Five Senses" - emotional regulation starts with regulating your body and the five senses if a great place to start!
- \* "The Cow That Went Oink" - Cognitive flexibility. If an animal makes "the wrong" noise, children has to learn to have flexible brains and laugh at themselves "living in the grey area". A vital emotional regulation and intellectual skill.
- \* "Becoming Brilliant: What Science Tells Us About Raising Successful Children" by, Roberta Golinkoff and Kathy Hirsch-Pasek

### **EF Activities for School-Aged Children - Ages 5-7 years old**

Board Games - Remember, at this age, rules and winning and losing are really important tasks for kids to work out. Supervise your children and play with them at the beginning to maintain some safe limits. As your children become more and more comfortable with the rules of the game and the experience of winning and losing, you can ease away from playing with them. Do not allow your child to win or manipulate the game to have them lose in order to teach them these skills. Winning and losing will happen outside of the home and these are natural consequences of participating. Of course, model healthy reactions of your own. Also, if your child wants to change rules of a game then all players must agree. This encourages flexibility and communication, while regulating emotions. If you know that your child has the tendency to "skirt" around rules, then it is best to stick with the rules as stated in the game manual. Games help kids manage frustration, take turns, and learn self control.

Card Games - “Crazy 8’s”, “UNO”, “Blink” These games encourage cognitive flexibility and memory. One has to shift how they categorize the cards depending on each hand.

Physical Activities - Organized sports can be great and children of this age are ready for structured physical activity, but some need to move their bodies without competition or evaluation. Every body and every mind comes to sports, dance and other structured physical activities at their own pace. Encourage activities like “Mother May I” and “Red Light, Green Light” so that kids can move their bodies to increase healthy blood flow to the brain and encourage healthy competition and coordination.

Independent Quiet Activities - Give your kids ample time to chose quiet activities - legos, blocks, drawing, reading. These should be done within earshot of adults, but not adult directed.

### **Other Resources:**

- \* [toolsofthemind.org](http://toolsofthemind.org) - A curriculum used by teachers in classrooms and a resource for parents to encourage self regulation and executive functioning.
- \* [www.thinkfun.com](http://www.thinkfun.com) - Age appropriate games and toys
- \* “The Yes Brain Workbook” by Daniel Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.
- \* “Your Fantastic, Elastic Brain: Shape It, Shape It” - An age appropriate explanation of how the brain can grow. Taking chances, being curious, and pushing beyond their comfort zone is a child’s way of augmenting their brain development. This book is really about the concept of grit in child-focused language and pictures. by Jo Ann Deak, Ph.D.
- \* [pagat.com](http://pagat.com) - Find out rules to any popular card games- so no one can “fudge” the rules
- \* “The Brain Building Book” - by Dr. Liz Angoff - This story gives an explanation of executive functioning from a kid’s perspective, with interactive journal entries.
- \* “Parenting a Child Who Has Intense Emotions” - A hand’s on practical guide for parents.
- \* Everyday Parenting: The ABC’s of Child Rearing - [alankazdin.com](http://alankazdin.com) - search ABC’s - Alan Kazdin is one of the world’s leading parenting experts- this website offers free training videos for parents.

## **EF Activities for Tweens - Ages 7-12**

Games - Now we can choose games that entail using strategy, memory and planning. Hearts, spades, bridge, gin rummy, spit, are games that give kids the opportunity to flex their working memory, ability to make quick decisions, and mental flexibility. As kids get older they can be challenged more and more. As always, adults can safely win or lose without fear. A major skill that predicts future success is the ability to tolerate negative emotions. Minecraft and Dungeons and Dragons are fantasy games that build working memory and self determination.

Physical Activity - Most children at this age can be expected to move their bodies in more complex way. Jump rope, rock climbing, and paintball are examples of complex movements that require children to think ahead and monitor their bodies and the environment around them. They must focus their attention and modulate their energy to maintain stamina. Planning is important.

Musical, Singing, Dancing - there is no better way to engage multiple parts of one's brain than learning how to play a musical instrument. Not only does this engage regions of multiple parts of the brain and body, but it also fosters working memory in a way that might not be accessible to some learners in any other way. Music and dancing require physical coordination, memory, selective attention, and self-reflection. This is truly magical for the growth of the brain. Yoga and Marshall Arts also fall into this category.

Brain Teasers and Puzzles - Children's brains at this age are becoming more and more mature and capable of complex problem solving. Crossword puzzles, Rubik's cube, sudoku are all very promising quiet activities that foster life long learning and build on a child's ability to focus their attention and manage frustration.

Homework help - At this stage, children should be doing most of their homework on their own. Adults can help set up the best homework environment for their child and brainstorm about what that space looks like. Remember, not all kids require or learn best in quiet environments. Have your child experiment with different areas of the house. As a parent, you might have to tolerate the fact that they learn in a different way than you did. Asking for help and advocating for themselves are the most important skills kids can learn regarding homework at this age. The stakes

are relatively low and learning self efficacy, even in the midst of struggling is way more important that completing the homework which might require unnecessary parental intervention and loss of sleep for parent and child.

### **Other Resources:**

- \* [gozen.com](http://gozen.com) - A website that has recommendations for helping kids turn worry and anxiety into resilience.
- \* [infoaboutkids.org](http://infoaboutkids.org) - Science based articles for parents, teachers and clinicians about a wide range of topics including divorce, children with special needs, puberty, gender identity, anxiety, general child development and much more.
- \* “The Homework Squad’s ADHD Guide To School Success” by, Joshua Shifrin, Ph.D. - A well thought out guide to help young people recognize the best way they learn and suggestions for how to make homework and organization easier. Through character examples, kids will read this book/journal without feeling judged or self conscious. It provides lots of hands on tips and opportunities to make the information real to each student.
- \* Common Sense Media - [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org) - a one stop shop critique of games, shows, and movies with age appropriate warnings and reviews. Its good to get in the habit of looking at this website when children are 7/8 years old so that it becomes old hat by the time they start chasing media for themselves.
- \* [mensamindgames.com](http://mensamindgames.com) - Hundreds of members of Mensa (super smart people) play all the new board games for four straight days and make recommendations about the best ones!
- \* [humanetech.com](http://humanetech.com) - Digital well-being guidelines for parents to go over with everyone in their family.Helping parents navigate technology use at home.
- \* “Zero to 60” A Teen’s Guide to Manage Frustration, Anger, and Everyday Irritations” by Michael A. Tompkins, PhD - probably more appropriate for older children in this age group
- \* 5-4-3-2-1 Calming Technique and Square Breathing - [evergreenyfs.org](http://evergreenyfs.org) - I know we are all sick and tired of hearing the word “mindfulness” but these two techniques are truly pretty effective 90 percent of the time.
- \* “Learning to Plan and Be Organized; Executive Function Skills for Kids with ADHD” by Kathleen G. Nadeau, Ph.D.

### **EF Activities for Adolescents:**

Goal Setting, planning, self-regulation, and independence are the most important skills!

**Manageable Goals** - Have your kids identify short and long term goals. Some teens are motivated right away by long term goals like financial independence or getting into college. But, before that they must tackle smaller goals. Ask them if other goals are more pertinent like finding a volunteer job, saving money for concert tickets, or figuring out if playing a club sport is doable. Work up to the bigger goals and let them decide each school year what is most important for them to accomplish. Not every high school freshman or sophomore finds it relevant or gets excited about applying to college. The time will come when they are socialized to set college goals, but let them choose smaller goals prior to that time in order to become accustomed to making decisions for themselves.

**Plan** - One way to know what needs to be done in order to achieve a goal is to recognize what might get in the way, including executive functioning weaknesses. Some of the most successful people in the world are keenly aware of what they don't know. When our kids know objectively what they are and are not good at they don't feel the need to pretend to be someone they are not. They can learn the skills necessary to contribute to their future success without being defensive or self-conscious. Are they really good at planning but terrible at initiating tasks? Can they sustain their attention for long periods of time or in small increments of time? Do they usually complete tasks but take a very long time initiating them? Do they run out of time? This is invaluable information for your teen!

**Stay on the Path** - Your best bet as a parent is to be aware of your child's goals and plans to attain the goals. Then you can be available for support and periodically remind them to monitor their behavior. If an action or activity does not contribute to the plan and veers off course, ask them "is this part of the plan?" "Have your goals changed?" and "Is there a way to get back on track?". This way, you are not dictating what they should or should not be doing and you aren't criticizing every little detail of their behavior. Reminding them to get back on the path is less judgmental and allows them to be in the driver's seat. You will be glad that you took this approach when your child is in college or out in the work world. Self-motivation and direction and the ability to monitor one's own focus is vital to future independence.

Meaningful Activities for Your Child - It really doesn't matter what activity your child decides to participate in as long as they are interested and self motivated. Sticking with something even if they don't love it for a semester is important to build the ability to tolerate frustration and manage emotions. This can build resilience. But once the required commitment is over, the child must choose how to spend their time. If as a family you feel that having two or three extracurriculars is important, let the child pick what those are. Theater, Music, Sports, Volunteering, even video games have their benefits. Once they become a chore they become self defeating.

School Functioning - Teens are expected to be organized and independent in high school. This can place a large burden on some students whose executive functioning skills are less developed. Remember, we are not born with executive functioning skills, but have the capacity to learn them. Like most things in human development, everyone learns these skills at their own pace and way. But, if you find yourself monitoring your child's work or nagging your high schooler constantly, then it might be time to beef up the help.

Basic Study Skills - Breaking projects into smaller tasks, making realistic and attainable steps, monitoring their timing and pace, reducing environmental distractions, recognizing how your brain remembers information, keeping a calendar, and recognizing what works and doesn't work are the basics of success in school. Again, some of these skills come easily while others seem unattainable to many teens. A student might be strong in one and not in others. It is the integration of all that determines success.

Emotional Regulation and Distress Tolerance - If one more adult tells a teen "to just meditate", there might be a generational revolt! Some skills to handle intense emotions work for some people some of the time. Even if a meditation app like "calm" or "headspace" works for a couple of months, sometimes teens switch it up and take a break, only to return to these helpful tools a couple of months later. In general, when a teen's body is escalating and keyed up (heart racing, sweating, jittery, hard to breathe and hard to focus, for example), it is very hard to simply calm down. Typically, the teen needs to try something physical. Changing their body temperature with an ice pack placed on the sides of the face or gently dunking their face in ice water and counting to 20 can be very helpful.

Pacing their breathing with deep breath in through the nose and a longer exhale through the mouth or jumping jacks are also good ways for the body to return to baseline. After taking these steps, then maybe a teen can be distracted by watching a movie or listening to their favorite music. There are many skills like these that a teen can develop. They have to want to add skills to their repertoire before meaningful change can take place.

### **Other Resources:**

- \* “iGen” Why Today’s Super Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy - and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood, and What That Means for The Rest of Us” by Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D.
- \* “The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed” by Jessica Lahey
- \* ADDitude - one of the most exhaustive resources and online communities for parents of children with ADHD and executive functioning challenges
- \* “Brain Hacks: Life-Changing Strategies to Improve Executive Functioning” by Lara Honos-Webb, Ph.D.
- \* “Raising Independent, Self-Confident Kids: Nine essential Skills To Teach Your Child Or Teen” By, Wendy Moss and Donald Moses
- \* “ Teaching Life Skills To Children and Teens With ADHD: A Guide For Parents and Counselors” by, Vincent Monastra
- \* The 7 Best Pomodoro Apps - [unito.io](http://unito.io) - Increasing productivity using the pomodoro method.
- \* “What Your ADHD Child Wishes You Knew: Working Together to Empower Kids for Success in School and Life” (For parents of kids ages 6 to 18) by, Dr. Sharon Saline

