

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING & ANXIETY: INSIGHTS & TIPS FOR ADULTS WHO SUPPORT AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE



Here are some important insights, tips & resources from Autistic/Neurodivergent members of our team who know what it's like to manage executive functioning challenges.

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING ISN'T JUST PLANNING, ORGANISING AND TIME MANAGEMENT. It also includes prioritisation, problem solving & flexible thinking, working memory, self awareness & self regulation, task initiation to task completion, attention and self advocacy. Many of us Autistic/Neurodivergent people find these things quite difficult.

LANGUAGE & MINDSETS ARE IMPORTANT. Often (young) people who have poor executive functioning skills are labelled disorganised, messy, resistant, under-achievers, day-dreamers, manipulative or disruptive. But they are really just young people who lack skills to be able to carry out certain functions without meaningful support and understanding.

ANXIETY AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING ARE INTERCONNECTED. When your anxiety goes up, your executive functioning capability goes down and with it, your performance. This reduces your confidence and your motivation, which can create a downward spiral unless support is put in place. Reducing anxiety for your young person - through things like sensory accommodations and clarity around expectations, for instance - is central to supporting their executive functioning capability.

BE THAT SAFE PERSON. Your young person/student might feel confused, frustrated and embarrassed that everyone else around them seems to have solid executive functioning skills and they do not. You are more likely to be able to help if the young person trusts you, feels safe and does not think you'll judge them.

DEVELOP A COLLABORATIVE PLAN. Work with your young person on the plan. Quick, simple changes that can be implemented every day are likely to be more effective than something that takes two weeks to learn, but the young person gives up before it becomes a habit. It should be a team effort, the young person doesn't necessarily have to make all the changes. Start with what is getting in the way the most, or where the young person wants to start.

CONTINUE TO SEEK OUT AUTISTIC & OTHER NEURODIVERGENT VOICES. Executive functioning and its impact on daily living and sense of self are common themes among Autistic/Neurodivergent authors, bloggers and vloggers (see next page). Seeking out these insights will not only help you understand and support your young person more effectively, it will help reassure your young person that they are not alone.

PRACTICAL TIPS & RESOURCES



AT SCHOOL:

- Encourage students to ask for help - both by explicitly stating that it's okay to ask for help when you are stuck but also modelling this in class
- Help your student develop a plan for when/how/who to ask for help, e.g. "If I'm not sure how to start after X minutes, I will ask my teacher for help." This can help prevent the student from internalising "I can't do this. There's no way forward."
- If possible, provide two sets of books/materials for your young person/student: one for the classroom and one for home.
- Make all assignments, handouts and instructions available online in a clearly marked, accessible place, such as Google Classrooms
- Check in frequently but discreetly to ensure that the student understands the assignments/expectations.
- Break down projects or assignments into smaller, more achievable steps.
- Help your student visualise what "done" looks like for a project or assignment and work with them to determine the steps needed to get there (see details [here](#)).

AT HOME:

- Very gradually, and in terms they can understand, introduce your young person to the [different components](#) of executive functioning. Help convey that these are skills they can develop and strengthen over time, i.e. these might be skills that they haven't developed YET, not skills that they will never possess.
- Gently work out together which arenas they are having most trouble with. Then collaborate on [potential solutions](#).
- Many of us with executive functioning challenges might have trouble making decisions - we don't have the inbuilt skill to "know" the process, or even that there is a process.
- You can help your young person develop this skill by planning and problem solving out loud. Discuss with your young person what you take into account when you make decisions. Show them how you readjust your plans when the situations change so they can learn not everything goes well all the time and we all are constantly planning and changing.
- Emotional regulation can also be difficult for young people with executive functioning challenges. Interoceptive awareness can also be a key part of helping a young person learn to self-regulate. See these stellar resources for [primary](#) and [secondary](#) students.
- Involve your young person in planning activities, outings and projects they love so they can practice the skills and success.
- For practical tips from Autistic young adults directed at younger peers, please see our complementary tip sheet, "Getting Things Done".

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS & RESOURCES (NOT EXHAUSTIVE)

From Understood, [A Day In The Life of A Child With Executive Functioning Issues](#) • From Positive Partnerships, [Executive Functioning](#) • From Seth Perler, [The Holy Grail: Executive Function](#) • From [Lives in Balance](#)/Dr Ross Greene, Assessment for Lagging Skills & Unsolved Problems • From Amythest Schaber, [Ask An Autistic #25: What Is Executive Functioning](#) • From Autistic teen Quincy Hansen, [Task Initiation, Executive Functioning & Autistic Inertia](#) • From Cynthia Kim of Musings of an Aspie, [Executive Function Series](#)