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Introducing Executive Functioning Skills

This entry was posted in [Growth](#) on October 11, 2017 by Shannon Whitney



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Have you ever heard of executive functioning skills? I hadn't until recently. When I was a fifth and sixth grade teacher, the term "executive functioning skills" began to be used more and more frequently in my elementary school. We were encouraged to pause curriculum and spend a part of every day

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Executive functions (EFs) are the newest buzzwords in educational institutions, although the idea of them has been around for a while. It is a broad term, but simply put, EFs encompass the set of cognitive skills that help you decide which activities and tasks to pay attention to and complete. Ultimately, EFs are the skills that help you achieve your goals. They are what you need when it's time to concentrate or when you are facing a challenge.

This blog post marks the beginning of a series on executive functioning skills. Over the next several weeks, you will be introduced to a variety of EF skills and shown their importance to your success. We will also suggest ways to improve any of the skills in which you may be lacking.

What is the science behind executive functions?

There is a substantial amount of brain research* that suggests EFs are tied to the frontal lobe of the brain; scientists agree that the prefrontal cortex region makes up the base for EF skill development. This part of the brain is responsible for attention, behavior and judgement, and emotional responses. It is one of the last brain systems to fully develop, not maturing until late adolescence. Further research suggests that many of the EF skills develop in a specific order. For example, behavioral inhibition needs to develop before the ability to plan, otherwise we would have trouble thinking before acting (which is a critical skill for effective planning).

This is why EFs are becoming such a big deal in elementary schools—students are at the age when their brains are first developing these skills, and schools can play an important role in strengthening that development. The good news is that if you are weak in any of these skills, you can still train your brain when you're older.

Why do executive functioning skills matter?

Enough about the science. It's time to focus on what EF skills mean to you as a high school or college student. While you may not have been specifically taught these executive functions in elementary or middle school, you probably have an idea of what they are and use them on a fairly regular basis. No matter what, learning about and strengthening these skills will be immediately helpful to you. Some researchers even claim that EF skills are a better predictor of both academic and career success than IQ! Strong EF skills have a positive impact on your academic achievement, behaviors, health, and work. They help you focus, filter out distractions, work with both new and old information, and alter your thinking. These skills not only help you throughout school, but are all necessary for professional success. Knowing that, it's no wonder there's such a big focus on these skills in the education system now.

What executive functioning skills will be featured?

As mentioned above, this is the first post in a series on EF skills. We will cover the following in depth:

- Planning, Prioritizing, and Task Initiation
- Cognitive Flexibility
- Organization and Time Management
- Focus and Self-Control

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It's important to note that many of these skills overlap and impact each other. Instead of focusing on each skill in isolation, you have to take a look at the big picture. When you are strong in all of these EF skills, your likelihood of success (whether you're at work, in school, or accomplishing a task) will skyrocket.

Be on the lookout for our next executive functions post in which we will discuss task initiation, planning, and prioritizing!

***Source:** Dawson, Peg & Guare, Richard. (2010). Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents. *The Guilford Press*. New York, NY.

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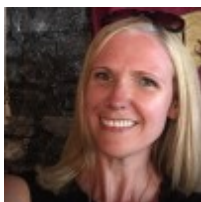
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About Shannon Whitney

Shannon loves traveling, watching *Friends*, and all things Florida Gators. While she grew up in Northern Virginia, she left the state to attend the University of Florida in 2001. After earning a master's degree in education, she returned home and has worked as an elementary school teacher for the past 11 years. Shannon recently decided it was time to put teaching on hold and venture down a new professional path. During her free time, Shannon is either traveling, cheering for Florida, binge-watching a Netflix series, or preparing to be an aunt!

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