

Learning Coach Series

Module 4

Teach your child to plan, organize, and prioritize.

Introduction

It is usually not how “smart” you are, but how well you plan, organize, and prioritize your effort that leads to success. These skills are often called “executive functions.”

It is common for a parent to say, “I know my son is a bright and capable child, so why isn’t he doing better in school?” The answer often lies in executive function. No matter what your child’s strengths or weaknesses are, he will benefit from working on executive function skills.

Some examples of executive function skills:⁶

- 1. Impulse control.** This is a child’s ability to stop and think before acting. Children who have trouble with impulse control may blurt things out. They’re likely to rush through school assignments without checking them over. They may stop working on a task before it is done so they can go hang out with friends.
- 2. Emotional control.** This is a child’s ability to manage his feelings by focusing on the end result or goal. Children who struggle with emotional control often have trouble accepting feedback. They also may overreact to little things they don’t like. They may struggle to finish a task when something upsets them.
- 3. Flexibility.** This is a child’s ability to come up with new approaches when a plan fails. They often do not see other options or solutions. They find it difficult to change, when it may seem obvious to others.
- 4. Working memory.** Children who have weak working memory skills have trouble with multi-step tasks. They have a hard time remembering directions, taking notes, or understanding something just explained to them.
- 5. Self-monitoring.** This is a child’s ability to keep track of and evaluate her performance on regular tasks. Children who have trouble self-monitoring cannot tell if what they are doing is working. They often do not think to or know how to check their work.

6. **Planning and prioritizing.** This is your child's ability to identify the steps needed to reach a goal, and to decide the order in which those steps should be done. They may not know how to start planning a project. They may be easily overwhelmed trying to break tasks into smaller, more manageable pieces.
7. **Task initiation.** This is a child's ability to get started on something. Children who struggle with this skill just cannot see what needs to be done first. They often have issues with planning and prioritizing. They can come across as lazy or as simply procrastinating, but often they're just so overwhelmed that they freeze and do nothing.
8. **Organization.** This is a child's ability to keep track of information and things. Children with organizational issues are constantly losing or misplacing things. They cannot seem to find a way to stay organized.

Here are a few simple ways to help your child develop executive functions—the skills they need to plan, organize, and prioritize.

1. **For younger children.** Play games such as...“How do I start?” or “What should I do next?” as you do normal, household tasks. Choose something you can do together. Have the child talk about how to get started and what to do next. For example, say “Let's clean your room. What should we do first? And then what?” “Now we're going to do the laundry. What should we do first? And then what?”

Teach impulse control by saying “Here is a treat. We can eat it as soon as we...”

2. **For older children.** Have older children write out the steps in accomplishing more complex tasks. For example, have your child write a plan for an activity. Then have them compare lists with the one you made, or with others working on the same task.

Try these time-tested ways of helping children learn to plan, organize, and prioritize their schoolwork.

3. **Checklists.** Steps in completing a task are not obvious to many children (or adults!). Teach them to make and follow checklists. Using checklists will help them learn what it takes to complete a task, and in what order the steps should be done.
4. **Use a planner.** Children should learn to write down important information like assignments, due dates, grading criteria, and so on. Teach them where and how to do this.
5. **Set time limits.** Help children obtain a good understanding of how long specific tasks should normally take to complete. Build this time into your checklists.

6. **Make sure children know *why* a task has to be done.** Knowing why you need to do something helps in getting it done.
7. **Use routines in your home.** Routines help children practice planning, organizing, and keeping things in order.



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A person can be “smart” and yet have trouble with things like staying organized, planning the time needed to do a task, or knowing what the most important things to do are in any situation. These skills are called “executive function” skills. The good news is that they can be taught.

You can help your child by patiently teaching them to:

- make lists,
- write out plans for what needs to be done,
- keep track of dates and times using a planner, and
- other habits that help them stay organized.

Talk a lot about what he or she has learned in the past and how it applies to the present task. Help them learn to do important things first and do the fun things or get the reward after. Remember, you will need patience and persistence to teach these things!