Smart but Scattered:
Helping Children Improve Executive Skills to Achieve School Success

smartbutscatteredkids.com

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There are 3 primary ways adults can help kids with weak executive skills:

1. Change the environment to reduce the impact of weak executive skills.

2. Teach the youngster executive skills.

3. Use incentives to get youngsters to use skills that are hard for them.
Ways to modify the environment

1. Change the physical or social environment
2. Modify the tasks we expect children to perform
3. Change the way adults interact with kids.
Change the physical or social environment

- Add barriers
- Reduce distractions
- Provide organizing structures (clean desk, storage bins)
- Provide supervision (homework, parties, recess)
Modify the tasks we expect children to perform

- Make the task shorter--reduce the amount of work required or divide it into pieces with breaks built in along the way.
- Make the steps more explicit.
- Create a schedule.
- Build in variety or choice either for the tasks to be done or the order in which they’re to be done.
Change the way adults interact with the child

- Rehearse with the child what will happen and you the child will handle it.
- Use prompts (verbal or nonverbal).
- Remind the child to check his list or schedule.
- Praise the child for using her executive skills. Rule of thumb: 3 POSITIVES for each corrective feedback.
Effective Praise

1. Is delivered immediately after the positive behavior.
2. Specifies the particulars of the accomplishment (*I appreciate you loading the dishwasher without my having to bug you about it*).
3. Communicates the value of the accomplishment (*I know you didn’t want to watch your sister after school, but it really got me out of a bind at work—thanks for helping out*).
4. Lets the child know you saw him working hard to accomplish the task (*Your brother was pushing your buttons, but you worked hard to keep your temper in check*).
5. Orients the child to appreciate her ability to problem solve or use other executive skills (*I like the way you thought about that and figured out a good solution to the problem*).
TEACH deficient skills

Don’t expect the child to acquire executive skills through observation or osmosis.
Teaching Kids to Make Study Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>How long will it take?</th>
<th>When will you start?</th>
<th>Where will you work?</th>
<th>Actual start/stop times</th>
<th>Done (✓)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</table>
Studying for Tests (adapted by Elisabeth Pasquini from Dawson/Guare, 2015)

Test date: ____________________  Subject: ____________________

Menu:

Check off the strategies you will use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive Strategies (Use Sparingly)</th>
<th>Active Strategies (Better)</th>
<th>Active Strategies with Feedback (Best)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reread text</td>
<td>7. Make study guide</td>
<td>13. Quiz myself with Quizlet/study guide/flash cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Highlight notes/text</td>
<td>9. Make concept maps</td>
<td>15. Re-do old tests or homework (check answers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Read study guide</td>
<td>10. Organize notes</td>
<td>16. Have someone else quiz me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Re-write notes</td>
<td>11. Complete review packet (no answers)</td>
<td>17. Complete review packet (check answers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Read/watch Spark Notes, Kahn Academy, etc.</td>
<td>12. Attend review session or study group</td>
<td>18. Meet 1:1 with teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study Plan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Strategies to use (list numbers)</th>
<th>How much time for each strategy?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 days before</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 days before</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 days before</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 day before</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Posttest Evaluation:

How did your studying work out? Answer the following questions:

1. What strategies worked best?

2. What strategies were not so helpful?

3. Did you spend enough time studying? Yes  No

4. If no, what more should you have done?

5. What will you do differently next time?
## Starting Task Independently

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did I...</th>
<th>Check off</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Paper and pencil" /></td>
<td>Get my materials ready?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Child at desk" /></td>
<td>Read the directions? What's first?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Blocks" /></td>
<td>Look to see if manipulatives would help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Pencil" /></td>
<td>Try on my own first?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use incentives to augment instruction.

Incentives make both the effort of learning a skill and the effort of performing a task less aversive.

Furthermore, putting an incentive after a task teaches delayed gratification.
Simple Incentives

- Give the child something to look forward to doing when the effortful task is done (we call that Grandma’s Law).
- Alternate between preferred and non-preferred activities (use simple language: First...then, e.g., First work, then play).
- Build in frequent, short breaks (depending on the child’s attention span, breaks could come every 10 minutes and last 5 minutes).
- Use specific praise to reinforce the use of executive skills.
How to implement a child-centered intervention

1. Choose a problem behavior and a recurring situation in which the behavior occurs.
2. Decide which executive skill impacts that behavior.
3. Gather some baseline data (ideally, objective, but if that’s not possible, create a vivid picture of the behavior in action that you can share with the child).
How to implement a child-centered intervention

4. Share with the child your data or observations. Talk about the negative impact you think it has and what positive effect you think might come from trying to change the behavior.

5. Say to the child, “Maybe no one has taught you this yet. So let’s start by watching Suzy do her work.” After the child has observed the model peer, ask what she saw and list the observations.
How to implement a child-centered intervention

6. Ask for input from the child (Do you agree this is a problem? Can you think of other situations where this has gotten you in trouble?).

7. Brainstorm some strategies the child might try to improve the behavior, emphasizing how the strategy should benefit the child (rather than the adult). Hint: think about environmental modifications.
How to implement a child-centered intervention

8. Have the child select a strategy to try and explain when the child will use the strategy.

9. Just before the target situation, ask the child what the plan is. In the beginning, keep the practice sessions brief and compliment the child often.

10. Prompt during the target situation if the child doesn’t remember to use the strategy independently.
How to implement a child-centered intervention

12. Debrief afterwards. Ask child how it went before giving your own feedback. Always find something to praise and *be specific*!

13. Continue as long as necessary, but continue to praise progress and improvement.

14. When problems arise, troubleshoot—if one strategy stops working, have the child choose another one to try.
And finally...

How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?
How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

• Use minimal cues—if they need more support, model your thought process so they hear how you got to an answer.
• Use visuals whenever possible—a cue on the desk you can point to or ask them to check their list.
• Praise effort, persistence, and risk-taking.
How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

• Ask children to reflect on their own performance, especially when they are successful (What worked for you today? Why do you think it worked?)

• Use questions to get them to use *their* executive skills (What’s your plan? Do you have a strategy for that? What’s your goal? How long do you think that will take?)
How can we work with kids to get them to use their own executive skills?

• When problems arise, share your observations in a nonjudgmental way (I noticed you....What can we do about that?).

• Brainstorm strategies. Together with the child, make a list of possible strategies. Ask the child to pick one, and then check back with the child later to see how it worked (this can be a whole class activity, too).