

Supporting Executive Function at Home

A Guide for Parents and Carers

Executive function is the brain's project manager. It's the set of mental skills that help us plan, organise, remember instructions, manage time, stay focused, and switch between tasks.

When executive function works well, it's invisible. Children just... do things. They remember what they need, get ready without endless prompting, and manage their time.

When executive function struggles, everything becomes harder. Not because your child doesn't care or isn't trying, but because the mental systems that coordinate all these tasks aren't working smoothly. It's like having a sat nav that keeps losing signal, or trying to juggle whilst someone keeps throwing in extra balls.

Executive function challenges are common in ADHD and autism, but also affect children experiencing anxiety, stress, trauma, or sleep difficulties. They're real neurological differences, not laziness, defiance, or a lack of effort. Understanding this can transform how we respond.

Quick reference: general principles

- **Reduce cognitive load:** simplify wherever possible
- **Externalise systems:** write it down, set alarms, use checklists
- **Create predictable routines:** consistency reduces EF demands
- **Build in extra time:** rushing makes everything worse
- **Stay calm:** your regulation helps them regulate
- **Separate the struggle from the child:** "finding organisation hard" not "being disorganised"

Working memory

The brain's notepad. It holds information temporarily whilst you use it.

What you might see

- Going upstairs and forgetting why
- Forgetting what they were asked to do whilst walking to do it
- Losing track of conversations mid-sentence
- Starting to tell you something and completely losing the thread
- Needing instructions repeated multiple times
- Struggling to follow recipes or multi-step tasks

What helps

- Give one instruction at a time and wait for completion before the next
- Use sticky notes in relevant places
- Create simple checklists for routines (morning, bedtime, leaving the house)
- Make important information visible, not just verbal
- Ask them to repeat back what they've heard (helpfully, not as a test)
- Reduce the number of things they need to hold in their head

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Your brain has a notepad for holding information, but it's quite small. Some people's notepads are smaller than others, so things fall off more easily."

Simple language: "It's hard for your brain to hold lots of things at once. That's not you being silly. We'll write things down so your brain doesn't have to remember everything."

Self-advocacy script: "Can you tell me one thing at a time?" / "I need to write this down."

Task initiation

The ability to get started on something, even when you know what to do.

What you might see

- Endless procrastination on homework, chores, or getting ready
- Knowing exactly what they need to do but being completely unable to begin
- Hours passing whilst they "just" do one more thing before starting
- Needing repeated prompts to get going
- Appearing to ignore you when you've asked them to do something

What helps

- Sit with them for the first few minutes, even if you're doing something else
- Use timers: "Let's just do five minutes"
- Start alongside them with your own task
- Make starting tiny: "Just put three things away" not "tidy your room"
- Avoid asking "have you started yet?" repeatedly (it increases pressure without helping)
- Use "body doubling": your presence nearby can help them begin

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Sometimes your brain is like a car on a cold morning. It knows where to go, but it takes a while to get the engine started."

Simple language: "Getting started is the hardest bit for your brain. It's not that you don't want to. Your brain just struggles to switch on for tasks. Once you're going, it gets easier."

Self-advocacy script: "I'm stuck starting. Can you sit with me for the first bit?" / "Can we set a timer for just five minutes?"

Planning and prioritisation

Working out what needs doing, in what order, and how long it might take.

What you might see

- Last-minute panics about forgotten homework or events
- No sense of how long things take
- Difficulty preparing for anything in advance
- Becoming overwhelmed by tasks that feel "too big"
- Not knowing what to do first when there are multiple things to manage

What helps

- Help them create weekly overviews of what's coming
- Use visual calendars where they can see the whole week or month
- Walk through planning together: "What do you need to do? What's most important?"
- Model your own planning out loud
- Work backwards from deadlines together
- Use the same planning approach repeatedly so it becomes familiar

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Planning is like having a map for a journey. Some people's brains make the map automatically. Your brain needs help drawing the map out on paper first."

Simple language: "Your brain finds it hard to see all the steps at once. That's not you being useless at planning. We just need to get the plan out of your head and onto paper."

Self-advocacy script: "I don't know where to start. Can you help me make a plan?" / "Can we write down what I need to do?"

Time awareness

Sensing time passing and estimating how long things take. Some people call difficulty with this "time blindness."

What you might see

- "Five more minutes" that somehow become forty-five
- No natural sense of when to leave for appointments

- Genuinely not realising how much time has passed
- Getting completely absorbed and losing hours
- Morning routines that never fit the available time
- Being shocked when you say it's time to go

What helps

- Make time visible: analogue clocks, visual timers, Time Timers
- Use timers for everything (helpfully, not punitively)
- Create routines with consistent timing so the pattern becomes familiar
- Call out time references: "It's 4 o'clock now, and we need to leave at 4.30"
- Help them experience what ten minutes actually feels like
- Build in more buffer than seems necessary

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Some people have a clock inside their head that tells them how much time has passed. Your internal clock doesn't work the same way, so time feels slippery. We use real clocks to help you see it."

Simple language: "Your brain doesn't feel time passing like other people's might. That's why you're not being difficult when you lose track. We need to make time something you can see."

Self-advocacy script: "Can you set a timer so I know when to stop?" / "Can you give me a warning before we need to leave?"

Organisation

Creating and maintaining systems for belongings, information, and physical spaces.

What you might see

- Bedrooms that become overwhelming disaster zones
- Losing important items repeatedly
- Not knowing where anything is
- Struggling to maintain any system for more than a few days
- Belongings scattered in random locations
- School bags full of crumpled mystery papers

What helps

- Create specific, visible homes for things that get lost repeatedly
- Do regular "resets" together rather than expecting them to maintain systems alone
- Use clear containers so contents are visible
- Reduce the number of things to organise
- Make the right choice the easy choice (if it should go in a box, make the box accessible)
- Accept that their system might not look like yours, and that's okay if it works

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Organisation is like having a filing system in your brain. Some people's filing cabinets are a bit jumbled, so things get lost in there. We make a filing system outside your brain instead."

Simple language: "Your brain doesn't automatically keep track of where things are. That's not you being careless. Everything needs a home so you don't have to remember."

Self-advocacy script: "I can't find my [item]. Can you help me?" / "Where does this live?"

Flexible thinking

Adapting when things change, shifting perspective, and trying different approaches.

What you might see

- Meltdowns when plans change
- Insisting things have to be done a certain way
- Difficulty compromising or seeing another person's point of view
- Getting locked into arguments because they can't let something go
- Struggling to problem-solve when the usual approach doesn't work
- Distress over small changes that seem trivial to you

What helps

- Prepare them for changes as early as possible
- Use "Plan B" thinking regularly: "What's Plan A? What if that doesn't work?"
- Validate that shifting is genuinely hard for them
- After they've calmed down, gently review what happened and what helped
- Don't punish inflexibility; it's not a choice
- Model your own flexible thinking: "I was going to do X, but that's not working, so I'll try Y"

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Your brain likes things to go a certain way, like a train on tracks. When the tracks suddenly change direction, it's really hard for your brain to switch. Other people's trains can change tracks more easily."

Simple language: "Changes feel much harder for your brain than they might for other people. That's not you being difficult. Your brain just needs more time to adjust."

Self-advocacy script: "I need a minute to get used to this." / "Can you tell me about changes before they happen?"

Impulse control and emotional regulation

Pausing before acting and managing emotional responses.

What you might see

- Meltdowns that escalate quickly
- Saying hurtful things in the heat of the moment
- Struggling to calm down once upset
- Acting on impulses and regretting it immediately
- Difficulty tolerating frustration or disappointment
- Doing things they "know" they shouldn't

What helps

- Stay calm yourself as far as possible (they need to borrow your regulation)
- Have a plan for what happens when things escalate
- Focus on co-regulation first: be steady, keep your voice low, reduce demands
- After everyone's calm, talk about what happened and what might help next time
- Build in regulation activities: movement, sensory input, downtime
- Separate the behaviour from the child: they're struggling, not being bad

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Your brain has a brake pedal that helps you stop before you do or say things. Sometimes your brake pedal is slow, so you've already done something before the brake kicks in."

Simple language: "When you're upset, the thinking part of your brain goes offline. That's why you do things you don't mean. It's not that you're bad. Your brain's brakes just need help."

Self-advocacy script: "I need to calm down before we talk about this." / "I didn't mean to. My brain went too fast."

Sustained attention

Maintaining focus over time, especially on tasks that aren't immediately engaging.

What you might see

- Homework that takes hours because of constant distraction
- Inability to finish anything that isn't immediately engaging
- Starting many things, finishing few
- Needing constant reminders to stay on task
- Getting completely absorbed in interesting things but unable to focus on anything else

What helps

- Create a dedicated workspace with minimal distractions
- Use timers to create structure (25 minutes on, 5 minutes break)
- Allow background music if it helps (it does for some, not others)
- Supervise without hovering
- Accept that some tasks will need support rather than expecting independent focus
- Reduce distractions: phone in another room, quiet space, minimal clutter

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Attention is like a torch beam. Some people's torches stay pointed wherever they put them. Your torch beam wobbles around more, especially if something isn't very interesting."

Simple language: "Your brain finds it really hard to keep focused, especially on boring things. That's not you being lazy. It's how your brain works. We can find ways to help."

Self-advocacy script: "I keep getting distracted. Can I work somewhere quieter?" / "Can I have a break and then come back to this?"

A note on your own energy

Supporting executive function at home is tiring. You're providing scaffolding that other families might not need, and it can feel relentless.

A few things worth remembering:

- The support you provide is genuinely necessary, not you being overprotective
- Your child isn't choosing to need this much help
- It's okay to have days where you can't do it perfectly
- Building systems and routines now reduces the load over time
- You don't have to do everything; pick the strategies that make the biggest difference and start there

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