Supporting Executive Function at School
A Guide for Educators

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. Students just... do things. They remember what they need, start tasks without fuss, and manage their time.

When executive function struggles, everything becomes harder. Not because a student 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 students experiencing anxiety, stress, trauma, or sleep difficulties. They're real neurological differences, not laziness, defiance, or a lack of effort.

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
- **Assume competence:** EF challenges don't mean a student is incapable
- **Separate the struggle from the person:** "having a hard time with organisation" not "being disorganised"

Working memory

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

What you might see

- Forgetting instructions between hearing them and starting the task
- Asking "what are we doing?" moments after you've explained
- Losing track mid-sentence when writing
- Struggling with mental maths despite understanding the concept
- Reading a paragraph and having no idea what it said

What helps

- Keep instructions short: one or two steps, not five
- Provide written instructions alongside verbal ones
- Use visual task boards showing each step
- Allow students to photograph the whiteboard
- Ask them to repeat back what they've heard (as a processing aid, not a test)
- Check in after giving instructions rather than assuming they've landed
- Pair verbal instructions with gestures or images

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 instructions at once. That's why we write things down."

Self-advocacy script: "Can I have the instructions written down?" / "I need to write this down before I forget."

Task initiation

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

What you might see

- Sitting in front of a blank page for ages
- Endless sharpening pencils, finding equipment, asking unnecessary questions
- Appearing to daydream when they should be working
- Only starting when an adult stands beside them
- Knowing exactly what to do but being unable to begin

What helps

- Start tasks together as a class before independent work
- Provide sentence starters or worked examples
- Break the starting moment into micro-steps: "First, write your name. Now the date. Now read question one."
- Check in with struggling students in the first two minutes, not ten minutes later
- Use "body doubling": your presence nearby can help them begin
- Reduce the perceived size of the task: "Just write one sentence to start"

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. Once you're going, it gets easier."

Self-advocacy script: "I know what to do but I'm stuck starting. Can you help me with the first bit?"

Planning and prioritisation

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

What you might see

- Not knowing where to begin on projects
- Spending too long on one part and running out of time
- Struggling to break big tasks into smaller steps
- Submitting incomplete work because they couldn't see what was missing
- Underestimating how long things take

What helps

- Provide planning scaffolds: graphic organisers, step-by-step templates
- Build planning time into the task, not as invisible homework
- Chunk long-term projects into interim deadlines
- Model planning out loud: "First I need to... then I'll..."
- Work backwards from deadlines together
- Use the same planning structures repeatedly so they become familiar

Explaining it to children
Analogy: "Planning is like having a map for a journey. Some people's brains don't automatically make the map, so we need to draw it out together."
Simple language: "Your brain finds it tricky to see all the steps at once. That's why we write them down so you can follow them one at a time."

Self-advocacy script: "Can you help me break this into steps?" / "I'm not sure what to do first."

Time awareness

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

What you might see

- Completely misjudging how long tasks will take
- Running out of time in tests despite knowing the material
- Not noticing time passing during enjoyable activities
- Being shocked when the lesson ends
- Chronic lateness to lessons

What helps

- Make time visible: analogue clocks, visual timers, Time Timers
- Give time warnings: "Ten minutes left. Five minutes. Two minutes."
- Display timers during tasks
- Help students estimate how long tasks will take, then review accuracy
- Build in more time than seems necessary
- Use consistent time structures so patterns become familiar

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 as well, so we use real clocks to help."

Simple language: "Your brain doesn't feel time passing the same way other people's might. That's not your fault. We use timers so you can see time instead of trying to feel it."

Self-advocacy script: "Can I use a timer?" / "Can you tell me when there's ten minutes left?"

Organisation

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

What you might see

- Losing equipment constantly
- Crumpled papers at the bottom of bags
- Not finding completed homework
- Messy workspaces that generate chaos
- Forgetting which books are needed for which days

What helps

- Provide clear, consistent systems for where things go
- Use colour coding for subjects or days
- Build in regular "organisation moments": checking bags, clearing desks
- Have backup equipment available without shame
- Assign a buddy for checking they have what they need
- Reduce the number of things to keep track of where possible

Explaining it to children

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

Simple language: "Your brain finds it hard to keep track of where things are. That's why everything needs a home, so you don't have to remember."

Self-advocacy script: "I've lost my [item]. Can you help me find it?" / "Can I keep a spare in class?"

Flexible thinking

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

What you might see

- Distress when routines change unexpectedly
- Getting "stuck" on one approach even when it isn't working
- Difficulty seeing other perspectives in discussions
- Rigidity about rules or the "right" way to do things
- Struggling to transfer skills to new contexts

What helps

- Give advance notice of changes whenever possible
- Use visual schedules that can be adjusted
- Teach "Plan B" thinking: "What's Plan A? What if that doesn't work?"
- Model your own flexible thinking out loud
- Validate that shifting is genuinely hard
- After they've calmed, gently review what happened

Explaining it to children

Analogy: "Your brain likes things to go a certain way, like a train on tracks. When the tracks change suddenly, it's really hard for your brain to switch. We can practise being ready for track changes."

Simple language: "Changes feel harder for your brain than for some other people's. That's okay. We'll give you warning when we can."

Self-advocacy script: "I need a minute to get used to this change." / "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

- Blurting out answers
- Acting before thinking
- Emotional reactions that seem disproportionate
- Difficulty waiting for turns
- Doing things they "know" they shouldn't, then being upset afterwards

What helps

- Respond to emotional outbursts with curiosity, not immediate consequences
- Create a low-demand pathway for dysregulated students
- Have sensory tools available
- Teach calming strategies to the whole class
- Stay calm yourself: they need to borrow your regulation
- Focus on repair after the moment has passed

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

Simple language: "Your brain acts fast, faster than the part that thinks things through. That's not you being bad. It's your brain's brakes being slow."

Self-advocacy script: "I need a minute to calm down." / "I didn't mean to do that. My brain went too fast."

Sustained attention

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

What you might see

- Drifting off during lessons
- Starting strong but fading quickly
- Needing constant redirection
- Only able to focus on high-interest topics
- Inconsistent work: brilliant one day, barely there the next

What helps

- Break lessons into chunks with varied activities
- Build in movement
- Allow fidget tools that help rather than distract
- Position distractible students where there's less to pull attention
- Check in regularly to re-engage wandering attention
- Make tasks more engaging where possible: timers, variety, games

Explaining it to children
Analogy: "Attention is like a torch beam. Some people's torches stay pointed where they put them. Your torch beam wobbles around more, so we need to help keep it pointed."

Simple language: "Your brain finds it hard to keep focused on one thing, especially if it's not super interesting. That's not you being lazy. It's how your brain works."

Self-advocacy script: "Can I have a movement break?" / "I'm finding it hard to focus. Can I use my fidget tool?"
