

Overview of Executive Function

“Executive Function...apogee of evolutionary and mental development”

Aron, *Current Directions in Psychological Research*, 2008

What is Executive Function?

Executive Functions (EF) are the cognitive processes that regulate an individual’s ability to sustain self-directed action toward a goal. They include areas of the brain responsible for:

- Planning
- Cognitive flexibility
- Rule recognition
- Initiating appropriate actions
- Inhibiting inappropriate actions
- Regulating emotions
- Monitoring and adjusting behavior

What Does Executive Function Difficulty Look Like?

Most adolescents and young adults are still developing their ability to self-regulate emotions and behaviors. Those with ADHD, ASD, and learning disabilities struggle even more with those tasks. They may have difficulty with:

- Procrastination/Lack of initiative
- Failure to complete tasks/Meeting deadlines
- Missing appointments or being late
- Prioritizing
- Developing routines
- Regulating sleep
- Seeking support

Why is Executive Function so important?

Executive Functions reside primarily in the pre-frontal cortex, the last part of the brain to mature. Fully developed executive functions are hallmarks of self-regulated adult behavior.

Executive Functions are critical for success in:

- Academics
- Social interactions
- Job performance
- Recruiting and sustaining motivation
- Changing unproductive habits

How Can Schools Strengthen Students’ EF?

Create an EF Friendly Environment:

- Establish routines
- Provide “just enough” structure
- Address EF difficulties with a non-judgmental, problem-solving approach
- Provide coaching services
- Work collaboratively with parents

Teach students how to improve their own ability to self-regulate emotions and behaviors:

- Provide a common language for talking about executive function
- Explicitly discuss EF skills needed for success
- Help students anticipate EF challenges and rehearse solutions
- Provide feedback and accountability

This EF Overview was created by Linda Hecker, Lead Education Specialist, for LCIRT. LCIRT offers professional learning about Executive Function for educators and parents through webinars, workshops and customized training. Contact us for more information: institute@landmark.edu