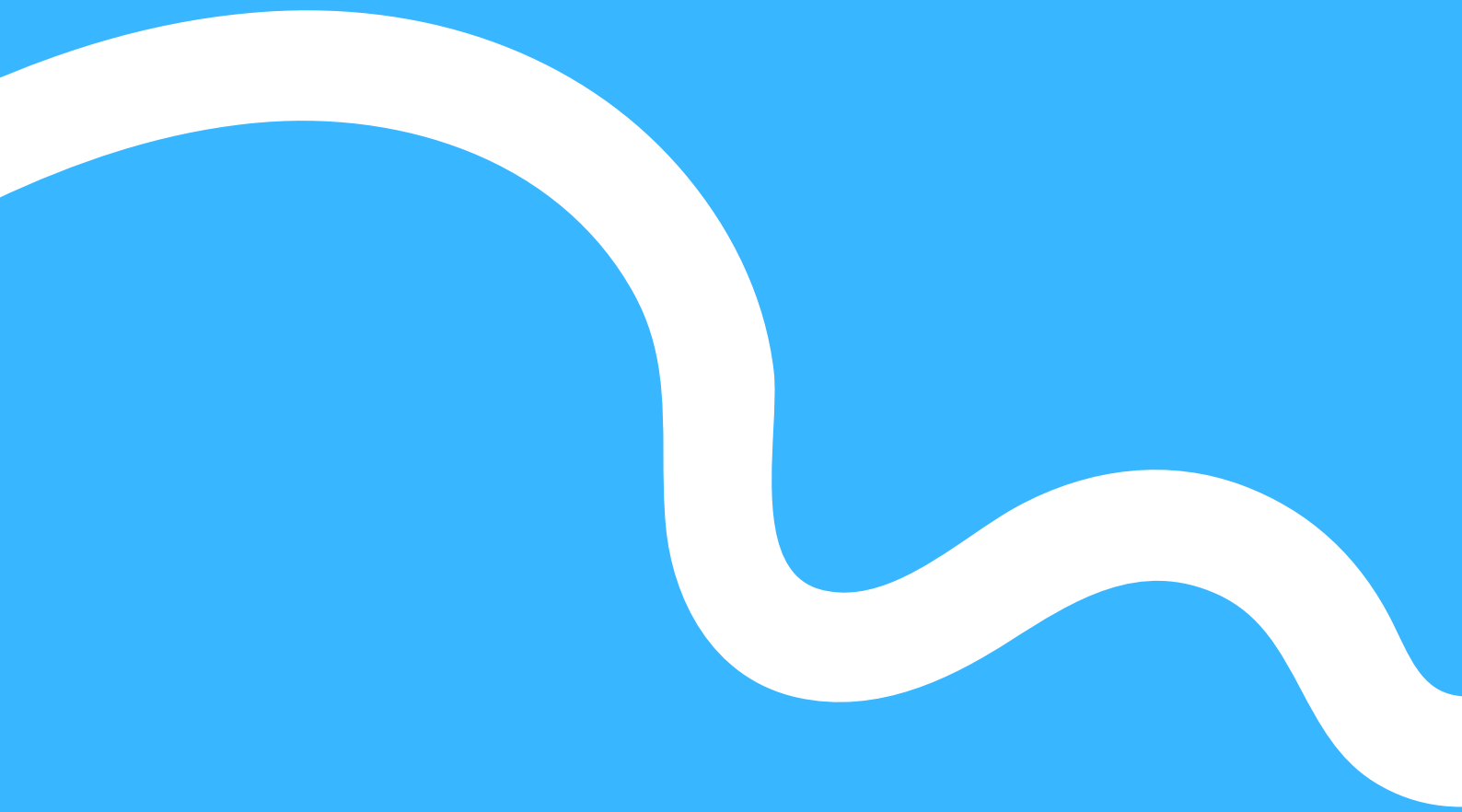


# THE PARENT'S GUIDE TO EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS



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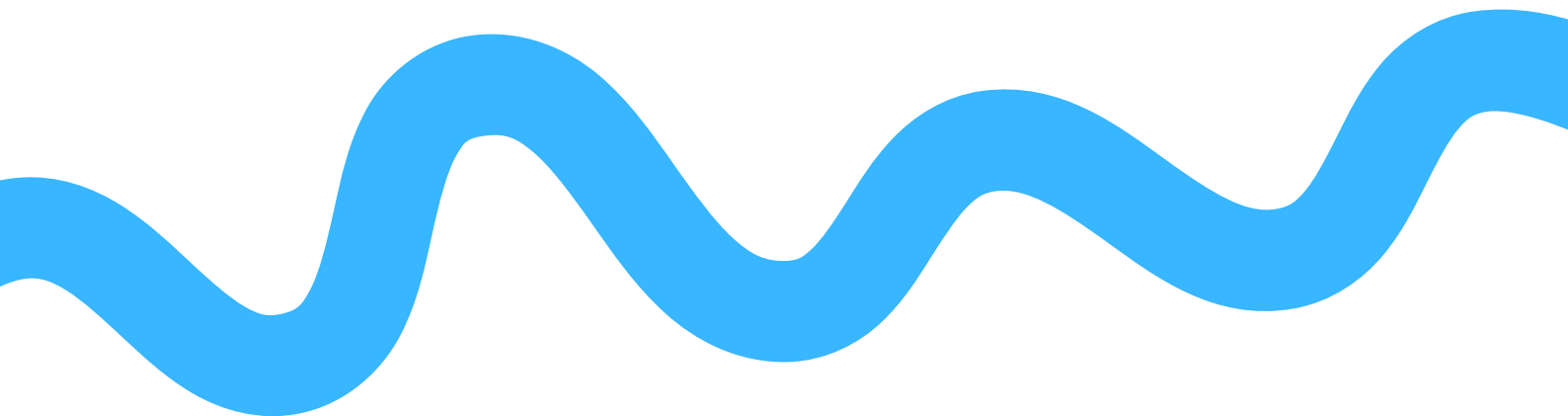
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# What are executive functions?

Executive functions are the essential mental skills that help us tackle everyday tasks and challenges. We are born with the blueprint for all executive functions, but they are developed with the help of adults around us as we grow.

When executive functions are working well, they help us to navigate the complexities of life with ease and effectiveness, and like muscles, they can be strengthened with practice and proper support.

## Why are executive functions important for children's development?

### ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Strong executive functioning is associated with better academic performance.

Children with well-developed executive functions can plan their study time effectively, organise their study materials, stay focused during lessons and regulate their levels of stress during exams.

### SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Executive functions help children navigate social situations and manage their emotions in a healthy way.

For example, impulse control allows them to think before acting and potentially saying something socially inappropriate.

### SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation is the ability to control one's thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Children who can manage their feelings and impulses well often find it easier to make friends, build relationships and have an overall better level of mental wellbeing.

### LIFE SKILLS

Beyond school, executive functions are crucial for success in work, relationships and general life. Whether it is planning a project at work or maintaining a household, individual's rely on executive functions to stay organised, focused and carry out their work.

# Key executive functions

## WORKING MEMORY

MOVING BETWEEN TASKS AND REMEMBERING INFORMATION

## EMOTIONAL REGULATION

REGULATING EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO SITUATIONS

## IMPULSE CONTROL

THINKING BEFORE ACTING

## PLANNING & PRIORITISING

SETTING AND MEETING GOALS, IDENTIFYING URGENT VS NON-URGENT TASKS



## SELF-MANAGEMENT

BEING ABLE TO MONITOR OWN PROGRESS AND BE INTROSPECTIVE

## ORGANISATION

KEEPING TRACK OF PHYSICAL OBJECTS AND INFORMATION

## TASK INITIATION

TAKING ACTION TO GET STARTED ON WORK

## FLEXIBLE THINKING

ABILITY TO ADAPT BEHAVIOUR TO UNEXPECTED CHANGES

# The brain and executive functions

## THE FRONTAL LOBE

The frontal lobe is the executive function centre of the brain. In children with ADHD, the prefrontal cortex (very front part of the frontal lobe), has been shown to have a reduced volume size, levelling out with peers around the age of 18-20.

The frontal lobe is the rational part of our brain, and helps us to make informed and sensible decisions. When underdeveloped, the executive functions are often not as strong. This means that things like our behaviour, decision making and concentration can all be affected.



## THE AMYGDALA

The amygdala is a small, almond shaped part of the brain located in the temporal lobe. It is a paired structure, meaning that it is present in both hemispheres of the brain.

Though small, the amygdala plays a very large role in the management of emotions and emotional memory. When looking at executive functions in particular, the amygdala is responsible for the control of impulsive behaviour. In teenagers, where the frontal lobe is slower to develop, the amygdala takes over and overrides rational thinking processes, often leading to individuals behaving impulsively.



# What is executive dysfunction?

Some people struggle with executive dysfunction. This can occur when they have a neurodiversity such as ADHD or dyslexia.

Executive dysfunction describes the lack of processing and order in the brain regions responsible for these skills. It is not uncommon for people who experience executive dysfunction to have problems with memory, organisation and planning. Additionally, problems with these processes often lead to issues in socialisation and academic performance.

In children and young people, executive dysfunction may display in various different ways, depending on the situation. Some common ways are:

- **Forgetting why they have walked into a room**
- **Difficulty following verbal instructions**
- **Becoming quickly irritated or upset, and taking a long time to calm down**
- **Consistently forgetting homework, materials or important dates**
- **Struggling to maintain friendships with their peers**
- **Appearing to make impulsive decisions and not understanding consequences**

All children need to learn to manage their executive functions, but children with a neurodiversity can often take much longer than their peers to do so. For this reason, it is incredibly important that children and young people receive support from school, as well as their families in nurturing these skills.

# Supporting executive functions at home

As a parent, it can be overwhelming to learn about your child's ADHD, neurodiversity or executive dysfunction, and not know how best to support them. The good news is, many of the things you can put in place are fairly straightforward. To support your child's executive functions at home, you could:

## 1 CREATE A STRUCTURED ENVIRONMENT

Predictable routines and clear expectations can help children develop planning and organisation skills. Using visual prompts, such as planners and calendars can outline daily tasks and activities.

## 2 BREAK TASKS DOWN INTO SMALL CHUNKS

Teaching children to break their tasks down into smaller, more manageable chunks can build planning, working memory and task initiation skills. Provide guidance and encouragement as they learn to plan and organise their activities.

## 3 ENCOURAGE SELF-MANAGEMENT

Teaching breathing and grounding techniques or use of positive self-talk can help children develop a toolbox of strategies that they can use when they are overwhelmed or frustrated. Modelling this behaviour is incredibly useful.

## 4 OFFER PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Recognising and praising children's efforts and achievements, particularly when they have demonstrated strong executive functioning skills, such as planning, organising or emotional regulation, can help to reinforce the positive behaviours.



## 5 PROVIDE A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

A supportive and nurturing home environment, where children feel comfortable taking risks, making mistakes and learning from their experiences can encourage executive function development.

## PROMOTE ACTIVE LISTENING 6

Practice active listening skills by modelling attentive and engaged listening during conversations with your child. Encouraging your child to listen, ask questions and summarise information can support working memory, attention and social skills.

## 7 PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DECISION MAKING

Allowing children to make age appropriate decisions throughout the day and during their schedules can not only allow them to feel in control of their choices, but also develop problem solving skills and fosters a sense of independence.

There are plenty of executive function building activities and changes to routine you can make as a family. Remember, it is okay to not have all of the answers and solutions! If you or your child require extra support in developing these skills, consider executive function coaching.

Trained to deliver age appropriate, neurodiverse-friendly executive function coaching, Strive provide individualised coaching to young people aged 9+, as well as their families and schools. Get in touch to see how we can help.

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