



WHEN A CHILD STRUGGLES TO “PLAY SCHOOL”

Our Brain and Executive Function

What do you do when kids struggle to organize their world, never hand in homework, and school performance is not what we expect? Why can't some kids play school? Why, if they are smart, can they not work to their potential? These kids often struggle at home too; you may ask ten times for them to brush their teeth, are continually making you late, or their bedroom is always a complete disaster. You can try all the parenting approaches out there, and there are many good ones, but when what we are trying doesn't work, we have to consider another piece of the puzzle. Behavior always has a reason, but one thing not often discussed is that much of this behavior is related to brain development and called executive function.

- Executive function develops in the brain but is not the same as intelligence and has little to do with IQ.
- There are different areas of the brain responsible for “doing” (execution), planning, and organizing- sort of like the air traffic control center of our brain
- There are chemicals in the brain that make “doing” and motivation easier...when those chemicals aren't working, we must figure out a different way to **motivate** our child. Teens and individuals with attentional deficits (ADD, ADHD) tend to have less of this chemical, which means life is even tougher
- Executive skill developmental and overall brain development tends to peak at 16-18 years with full maturity at 25, so all kids need to develop these skills, but some require extra help!
- A lack of executive skills can appear to be intentional or behavioral (lazy, unmotivated, forgetful are words often used to describe these issues), and this can negatively impact self-esteem and motivation toward success
- These skills can even affect us socially because if our brain isn't “reading the room” or our friend's reaction to us, we don't think to adjust (adjust our volume, behavior, or get out of someone's bubble, etc.) There is a lot of non-verbal communication that happens socially, and this can be missed entirely if the brain doesn't yet have this skill set.

A critical step in the process of behavior is understanding the real issue. When we look at this child and decide they are lazy, unmotivated, or manipulative, we may never actually find out what is going on- FROM THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE. Then, we need to help them figure out WHAT to do or teach them skills they can use until their brains can develop solutions. A separate handout is available to review specific strategies to help them find success until these skills develop.

1. Talk to the child. Ask them what they think the problem is without judgment or anxiety. You can call it "detective work," so the child doesn't feel like they have failed you again- you are just working together to figure out this problem. Let them think through the process; encourage them to PLAN AND EXECUTE. What is going wrong, and how can they fix it? Maybe the real problem is something at school, or with the kid next door. As adults, it is hard not to TELL kids what is going wrong and then TELL kids what WE (or they) are going to do about it.
2. One way to begin teaching strategies that can strengthen these executive skills is through coaching. Like athletics, coaches provide feedback and instruction- this is EXACTLY what our kids need here! It can be easy to forget that much of human behavior is LEARNED, so like with learning any other skill, we need a coach, teacher, or guide.

Recovery is a critical skill to learn, and failure provides an opportunity to recover. Laugh with the child, and remember that this is a process. Things will not change overnight, and it certainly won't be perfect tomorrow just because today was good, and just because something didn't work (again) doesn't mean it NEVER will. Focus on recovery. Help them problem-solve what went wrong and how they could have recovered to prevent getting stuck or repeating the same mistake over and over. Don't continue to focus on past behavior either... look forward and plan how to respond differently or make a different choice. Make sure to have your emotions in check for this process. Judgment and frustration =shut down

COACHING AT HOME OR SCHOOL

Coaching involves a quick daily check-in to go over classes, homework, goals, and progress. Sometimes it can happen quickly at school with the support of an adult or even an older peer who can chat with them in the last five minutes of their day. Parents can coach their kids, but the emotional piece needs to be continuously observed. Kids shut down when parents are anxious about what hasn't been done, which can negatively affect the relationship. Ultimately, a coach needs to look at this kid's life and **help** them figure out where the problems are, **help** plan and then **teach** them how to follow through to see how the plan went. Notice that all recommendations involve HELPING and TEACHING? If we, as the coach, do all the work, these skills will not develop.

-Initially, you want to prompt the child with, "What did you do in English (i.e.)? Do you have any homework? What did you do in Math? Do you have any homework?" Run through all the classes every day; they need to put themselves back in that setting to remember what was going on and if there was homework (because planners aren't something effectively utilized by most kids).

-Using a large desktop calendar on the wall (with a pencil attached) works great, but different planner pages work too. The calendar is nice because you can write in all the other life activities that take time and affect homework time. You can do the writing at first, but eventually, we want the child to be independent.

-Planning is critical, and procrastination is common. One way to counteract this issue is with Post-it notes that can be stuck to the calendar and then re-stuck when things didn't go as planned (Tuesday no work got done, so that sticky note with the assignment gets moved to Wednesday, etc.). Move the sticky notes as you are talking/planning. Suddenly they can SEE what procrastination does to a plan instead of living it and having a complete meltdown the night before something is due. When a child sees five sticky notes on one day, you can TALK about what that might feel like rather than living it, and you can re-plan so that day looks better (this also makes for good motivation to get a little done TODAY!) This seems obvious to us because we have a clear picture of what procrastination feels like and how it happens- we've been through it. They haven't.

-A single two-pocket binder can be used for ALL classes with HOMEWORK going on one side and TURN-IN on the other. Every assignment from every class goes into this, and it travels with them everywhere. The child can attach a planner page, a To-Do list, or anything that helps them remember little details.

-Remember, the plan needs to belong to the child, not the coach. The coach is a guide, but the child has unique wiring that might prevent "coach ideas" from working for them. Remind the child that THEY are the expert of their wiring, so they must be in charge. When we use this approach, we get unique ideas that might work, and we get BUY IN because it was their idea.

-Sometimes we worry that we are helping too much. While learned helplessness is something that should be acknowledged, research indicates that there will be times when we simply have to "loan" our frontal lobe to our child. This means they will need repeated cues and reminders as well as prompts to start a process. That said, remember, our kids need to execute to learn, so don't DO for them...let them work through the process with you but have them follow through with the plan. Make sure you allow them enough time to execute at their pace and remember this is new to them and will take longer

-Remember that everyone processes information at their own pace; a typical child needs 3-5 seconds to process, kids with attentional deficits or special needs can need 7-10 seconds. This is a LONG time, so make sure you aren't demanding an immediate response before assuming they are defiant.

-Timers are incredible tools because if a child can see that all they must do is work until the timer runs out, they can often get enough energy to begin. Experiencing this success with initiation is usually something they don't commonly get to feel, so this alone can be a great jumping-off point. For those who struggle with focused attention, it might be helpful to begin with TASK COMPLETION versus a timed activity. Make it reasonable to experience success, but let them finish one portion of a task, and then have a break and/or reward. Going from task-to-break and back again is another skill that can be very hard and practice will help.

-Remember that motivators are critical, especially at first, to develop the skill of finding energy reserves to initiate and complete anything. Time both the work and breaks so they see that screen time isn't all day, and they will eventually improve the ability to bounce between work and break without a huge, time-consuming meltdown.

Writing Issues: Of all academic tasks, writing requires the most executive skills!

- The area that affects writing and word processing (graphomotor) area of the brain is the same as for executive skills to come up with material, but when they go to put it on the page, their working memory disappears.
- A good executive function test is asking a child to write a few paragraphs about something they just read. If they can tell you, in detail, what they read, but cannot get it onto paper, they are struggling with executive skills.

There are two ways to address executive skill weakness, including modifying, teaching, or motivating. We know how critical motivators are for starting and completing that task. Still, if they lack organizational skills that prevent them from knowing HOW to finish, all the motivators in the world will not help this occur. If motivators don't work, we must consider if they are ACTUALLY motivating to the child OR, maybe there is a different skill deficit that prevents them from finding success. We have to look at skills as well as the task and where it is happening.

Helping at the level of the environment

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

Helping at the level of the child

1. Teach the child the weak skill
2. Motivate the child to use that skill

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

How can we change the environment?

- Change from unstructured to a structured environment
- Have specific rules- black and white is more manageable than grey
- Reduce distractions- use white noise, music, etc.
- Provide cues for task initiation- a bell that signals time to begin/end
- Teach skills- if steps aren't easy, these kids won't try on their own, so you need to be as specific as possible (remember, it is usually assumed that kids can pick up the little pieces- these are usually the ones they miss that make the rest of the activity impossible)
- Organizational strategies- clear plastic containers with labels, bins for homework, consistent space on board for writing assignments, color-coded binders, lists on the mirror for a morning routine
- A visual schedule (even when it's in our memory, it's comforting to refer back to it- even for us)
 - Hi-light challenging areas of the day, review hard parts and strategize
 - A visual schedule can also serve as a reminder for goal setting and strategies
- Seating scheme- include opportunities for peer tutor/assistance/influence or seating away from windows and near teacher, etc.
- Teacher notes or tape recorder provided to reduce stress during times of writing AND listening
- Dictate vs. write- the material can disappear when kids go to get it on paper
- Use dynamic seating strategies: lie on the stomach, sit on a ball, stand for writing/reading
- Change social environment- reduce complexity with fewer kids, more supervision

How can we change the activity?

- Make tasks shorter or build in breaks during a long task
- Make steps very explicit
- Provide both auditory instruction and visual demonstration/picture cue
- Let the child fill in relevant information vs. coming up with content
- Cover up part of the page so visual detail doesn't overwhelm
- Encourage child to turn activities into a game: they can time how long it takes to do one problem
- Provide a reward after completing a problem: eat a grape after completing a problem
- Use a hands-on approach
- Emphasize critical information or "big picture."
- Preview new concepts at the beginning and highlight at the end
- New or challenging material is usually better in the morning vs. the afternoon
- Make tasks closed ended-example:
 - There is only one answer, one way to get to an answer
 - The work has an obvious starting point and ending point--Open-ended tasks create anxiety and can put a kid into "fight or flight."
- Remember activity goal: if it's spelling, don't focus on handwriting. If it's writing a paragraph, don't penalize for spelling
- Increase or eliminate time limits (timed math tests etc. can be done at home vs. school)
- Show disapproval of behavior, not the child
- Involve peers or siblings (write down schedule and homework at the end of the day)
- Cues- provide easy, visible ways to remind kids (post-it note on mirror or door to remind)
- Change the way adults and kids interact- the chemistry between an adult and child is critical
- Utilize checklists: our world is busier every day, and teaching this will be a life skill
- Focusing on things we look forward to- even parents need to think of things that get us through all the other stuff we don't particularly like in our life.
 - Utilize praise: 3 positives to 1 "critical" (must be delivered immediately and be specific about performance- thank you for cleaning your desk off right when I asked you to)
 - Let the child know you noticed how hard they worked vs. the outcome
 - Comment on problem-solving- (I like how you thought about that and found a solution)
- Provide the minimum support necessary (learned helplessness occurs when we do too much)
- Social stories can review specific behavioral details or skill sets