**Executive Functioning and ADHD: A Guide for Parents**

ADHD involves a delay in executive functioning skills and creates a disconnect between knowledge and performance, often impacting self-esteem—even in bright children—because success can feel elusive. Supporting your child effectively with understanding key principles, especially how your perspective shapes your interactions and responses.

**Important Considerations:**

* **Can’t vs. Won’t** – If your child isn’t following through on a task, it’s likely because they *can’t*, not because they *won’t*. ADHD affects executive functioning, which governs initiation, follow-through, and work completion.
* **Support at the Point of Performance** – Real-time cues and immediate feedback help kids integrate strategies into their daily routines. Use reminders like alarms, checklists, or visual cues to support planning and follow-through.
* **Transition Breaks Matter** – Jumping straight into homework after school can be overwhelming. A 10-minute movement break—running, pushups, or stretching—can help reset their brain. Pair this with a protein-rich snack to fuel focus and productivity.
* **Adjust Your Expectations** – Research shows kids with ADHD often have an executive functioning delay of about three years. When your child isn’t doing what expected, subtract three years from their age to set a more attainable goal. Success builds confidence, making it easier to gradually increase expectations.

**The Brain-Based Side of ADHD:** Understanding that there are brain-based reasons behind your child’s behavior can shift the focus from frustration to effective support. ADHD means there are structural differences in the brain and neurotransmitter levels that prevent them from easily doing anything. There is less dopamine for motivation and norepinephrine for alertness so this affects regulation and can cause delays in multiple areas:

* **Thinking & Reasoning** – Difficulty resisting distractions, forgetfulness, and missing verbal cues.
* **Flexibility** – Trouble shifting between tasks, rigid behaviors when asked to stop an activity, and sensitivity to change.
* **Working Memory** – Difficulty holding onto information while speaking or working, leading to frequent interruptions or blurting.
* **Language Processing** – Struggles with organizing thoughts, writing, and slowing down mental processes, sometimes accompanied by excessive verbal processing.
* **Social-Emotional Skills** – Intense emotions, difficulty regulating frustration, and trouble reading social cues, which can lead to difficulty with behavior regulation, conflicts or hurt feelings.
* **Motor Skills & Safety** – Sloppy handwriting, frequent careless mistakes, and risk-taking behaviors due to a high need for movement without fully developed gross motor skills.

**The ADHD Brain:** This brain thrives on specific input and support to navigate skill-based challenges that impact performance. To enhance success, consider incorporating these three key strategies:

1. **Engaging and Dynamic Input** – Incorporate novelty, fun, and variety within a structured routine, reinforced with visual cues to improve focus and attention.
2. **Organizational Support** – Provide assistance with planning and organization, as difficulties in these areas often manifest as behavioral challenges.
3. **Chunked Instructions with Rewards** – Break tasks into smaller, manageable steps with frequent reinforcement to sustain motivation and encourage follow-through.

**Common Challenges:** By understanding these challenges and providing the right support, we can help ADHD learners navigate their world with greater success.

* **Emotional, Motivational, and Arousal Regulation** – Difficulty managing emotions and motivation often leads to behavioral struggles.
* **Delayed Internal Language** – Trouble with self-talk affects rule-following, problem-solving, and self-regulation.
* **Limited Problem-Solving and Flexibility** – Struggles with adjusting plans and pursuing long-term goals; frequent frustration leads to giving up.
* **Rigid Thinking Patterns** – Difficulty adapting strategies, often repeating ineffective approaches. This is where we can help guide them in creating a more effective plan.

**Ways to change the way we Communicate with Kids to Enhance Executive Functioning:**

Goal: Praise effort, perseverance and the process, NOT precision, the product or performance.

What you should know: Example of how to communicate:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Don’t ask questions you know the answer to  (“did you do your homework?”) | “I don’t see your homework; how can I help?” |
| Acknowledge feelings/frustration then see how you can help | “I’m sorry you’re feeling this way, how can I help?” |
| Develop self-talk and planning | “I wonder what we can do?” |
| Be specific with praise | “You are working so hard on your chores; I love that you remembered to feed the dog” |
| Don’t make a run-on verbal list without a visual (they can’t process the verbal information and hold it) | Write the items on post-it notes or use a dry erase marker on the bathroom mirror (with words or pictures) |
| Encourage independence first, then offer assistance | “Try first, then I can help” |
| These kids are often trying harder than most people | Don’t say “try harder” |
| Focus on growth mindset | “You can’t do it….. YET” |
| Issues with blurting or only talking about their interests (hyperfocus on their topic) | Use a “talking stick” or a set number of sticky notes that are used when child talks or talks about their own agenda |
| Support meta-cognition | “How did you do that?” or “how did you know it was time to put your things away?” |
| Introduce concepts of control/choice | “Choose what you give your attention to”  “Pick a seat in a place of awareness” |
| Use mistakes as data | ” I notice you have tried a few times without quitting” |
| Acknowledge when behavior is positive and catch appropriate behavior | “How did you know that would work?” |
| Self-efficacy statements | “I can do this”  “I won’t walk away from this” |
| Praise: notice positive, name it specifically, nurture it | “I see that you’re really trying with this writing assignment and it shows me you don’t quit…nice work” |
| Self-monitoring requires self-talk: model this by talking aloud in front of them and ask questions instead of telling them what to do | “What am I doing? What should I be doing? How should I do that? What do I need right now to be successful?” |

**Supporting ADHD and Executive Functioning Challenges**

**Transitions:** Anticipation is Key! Kids with ADHD and executive functioning weaknesses thrive on predictability because they often miss instruction or can’t work through the steps. Help them transition smoothly with these strategies:

* **Visual Schedules** – Display a clear schedule of upcoming events. Discuss activities beforehand so they can express concerns and plan for success.
* **Role-Playing & Planning** – Have them talk through or act out how they will handle upcoming transitions.
* **Specific, Advance Instructions** – Use both oral and visual cues to clarify expectations.
* **Timers for Attention Shifts** – Use a timer to signal when it’s time to transition (e.g., putting away the computer).
* **Reward Small Efforts** – Each step is an opportunity for positive reinforcement (tangible or attention-based rewards) so break transitions into manageable steps:
  1. Putting materials away.
  2. Getting what they need.
  3. Moving to the next task.

**Self-Regulation Techniques**

Research shows that 20 minutes of focused work followed by a 10-minute break improves learning. Here are effective break-time strategies:

* **Breathing Exercises** – Teach kids to sit or lie down with a hand on their belly. Breathe in for 5 seconds, out for 7. Aim for five sessions per day.
* **Progressive Relaxation** – Guide them to tense and relax muscles from head to toe.
* **Mindfulness** – Encourage awareness of the present moment. Have them:
  + Recognize intrusive thoughts, then imagine setting them aside.
  + Focus on what they can hear, feel, and smell.
  + Visualize putting unrelated thoughts into a "box" to revisit later.
  + Brain Breaks – Neurotransmitters deplete after 10-20 minutes of focus. Short movement breaks like Simon Says, Charades (e.g., acting out vocabulary words), spelling with body movements, or any heavy-work type activities like desk or wall pushups, stretching, or movement can boosts norepinephrine for energy and focused attention.
* **Fidgets** – Allow quiet, non-distracting fidgets to keep hands engaged and minds focused.
* **Environmental Adjustments** – Adapt spaces to their needs:
  + *Calming areas* – Forts with pillows, darkness, or quiet spaces for breaks.
  + *Organized workspaces* – Color-coded folders and homework tools for structured support.

**Metacognition:** Teach self-monitoring to help kids evaluate their own learning process:

* **Before starting a task:**
  + *What do I already know?*
  + *What should I do first?*
  + *Why am I doing this?*
* **During the task:**
  + *How am I doing?*
  + *Am I focused?*
  + *Do I need to adjust?*
* **After the task:**
  + *How did I do?*
  + *What strategies worked?*
  + *Could I improve next time?*

**Work Production & Task Initiation: Building a Plan**

Many kids with ADHD struggle to get started and follow through. By implementing these strategies, we can help ADHD learners navigate challenges, build confidence, and develop essential executive function skills.

* **Set Time-Based Goals** – Focus for short periods (5-20 minutes depending on ability). Treat struggles as *data* and adjust as needed.
* **Reward Small Efforts** – Small, consistent rewards create dopamine boosts that enhance motivation.
  + Praise should **Notice** (acknowledge effort), **Name** (be specific), and **Nurture** (encourage continued effort).
* **Visual Steps for Tasks** – Checklists help with sequencing. Let them cross off steps and earn small rewards. ADHD kids benefit from immediate reinforcement.
* **Adjust Expectations** – Create a “just right challenge” so they don’t give up.
  + Consider the *3-year developmental delay* common in ADHD.
  + Focus on effort rather than the outcome.
  + Encourage independent attempts before offering help.
* **Use Declarative Language** – State out loud your plan then say part of the process aloud and let them complete the sentence.
* **Teach Time Awareness** – Time tracking is a challenge for many ADHD learners:
  + Estimate how long tasks will take, then check the actual time spent.
  + Use sand timers and clock-based visuals.
* **Rate the Task** – Ask: *“On a scale of 1-10, how hard is this?”*
  + If they say "10," break the task into smaller pieces to lower the difficulty.
  + Can they start if it now feels like a “3”?
* **WAIT Before Assuming Defiance** – Kids with ADHD often need up to 7 seconds to process a request. Give them time before repeating yourself.
* **Visualize the Brain Working** – Help them picture their brain making *superhighways* of connections when they focus.
* **Build in Choice & Control** – Offer options (e.g., choosing which math problems to do first).
* **Use “Forced Choice” Reinforcers** – Identify motivators tailored to their unique wiring:
  + *Adult approval*
  + *Competitive recognition*
  + *Peer recognition*
  + *Independent rewards*
  + *Consumable rewards* (snacks, small treats)

**Stress and the Fight/Flight/Freeze Response:** Stress is the gatekeeper to learning, yet many kids operate from their *reptilian brain*, where they are stuck in the reactive survival mode of fight, flight or freeze. Helping them manage stress allows for better emotional regulation and learning.

**--The Stress Tree Activity:** Use sticky notes to externalize stress and visually organize worries.

1. **Create the Tree** – Draw a tree with branches representing different stress categories: *Family, School/Grades, Sports, Friends,* etc.
2. **Identify Stressors** – Have kids write their worries on sticky notes (start with two) and place them on the appropriate branches. This reinforces that stress is normal and shared.
3. **Shift the Burden** – The tree is strong enough to carry their stress, so they don’t have to. Encourage them to add notes whenever needed.
4. **Problem-Solve Together** – Read stressors aloud when time allows and brainstorm solutions together. Write solutions on a different colored sticky note and place them on the tree. When a worry is resolved, it "falls off" like autumn leaves, but solutions remain for future reference.

**-- Scheduled Anxiety Appointments –** Instead of discussing worries throughout the day, set a dedicated time to be fully present and address any concerns. Outside of this scheduled time, encourage your child to shift their focus to other activities or to visualize putting their worry in a box for later.

* A great resource on managing excessive worry is *What to Do When You Worry Too Much* by Dawn Huebner. This kid-friendly book offers practical strategies and insights to help children understand and manage their anxiety effectively.

**--Bucket Filling-** Teach kids the power of kindness and emotional support:

* Share moments when they helped "fill someone’s bucket" with kindness.
* Normalize needing support by acknowledging when their own bucket needed filling.
* Emphasize that small acts of kindness make a big difference.

**--Meaningful Conversations-** Instead of the typical *"How was your day?"*, ask questions that encourage reflection and growth. These practices help kids manage stress, build emotional resilience, and develop stronger self-awareness—all essential skills for lifelong success.

1. **What did you do that was brave today?**
2. **How were you successful today?**
3. **When did you need help from someone today?**
4. **How did you show kindness or fill someone’s bucket today?**

**-- Use Visuals to Help Kids Gain Perspective-** When a child is upset, their emotions can feel overwhelming—like a 15 on a scale of 1 to 10. Using a visual scale can help them express how big the problem feels, providing a more accurate gauge of their emotions. This simple tool encourages self-reflection and can help them see that the challenge may not be as insurmountable as it first seemed, opening the door to possible solutions.

**What is the Size of my Problem:** Rate frustration from 1-10.

Help them see that while it feels really big, maybe it isn’t as big as it feels and there is a way to make it better.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Big problem

catastrophic

Little problem

For more information or specific concerns/questions please feel free to contact me.

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