



When to Consider an Evaluation for Executive Functioning Deficits

Executive Functioning Deficit is not a disorder. It is a word used to describe a condition associated with specific weaknesses in the brain's self-management system, that impact learning and everyday life because of the effect they have on a set of mental skills that are critical to learning. Children who have trouble with executive function often struggle with working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control.

This means, they have trouble paying attention, focusing on directions and working on a task until it is done. They have deficient problem-solving skills, and it is hard for them to look at a problem and find a solution that is not obvious, or to think of new ways to solve problems if the way they are used to does not work. And it means they have trouble controlling their behavior and their emotions. They may act impulsively and do or say things that get them in trouble or that make other children not want to be around them.

Children with Executive Functioning Deficits may do poorly in school, not because they are not smart, but because these problem areas get in the way of learning. They also can have problems socially. Sometimes children are diagnosed with ADHD, when Executive Functioning Deficits are the primary concern, because the symptoms associated with ADHD are the first ones noticed by teachers and parents. ADHD and Executive Functioning Deficits often go hand in hand, but they are not referring to the same thing.

It can sound scary, but it doesn't mean your child has brain damage, or a learning disability, and it doesn't mean your child is "lazy" or "not trying." Many people who have brain damage or learning disabilities have some Executive Functioning Deficits, but lots of people have Executive Functioning Deficits without having either brain damage or a learning disability. Their brain just thinks differently. And once we can identify that, we can help with strategies to overcome it. Most likely, when the

brain's frontal lobes are fully developed (somewhere around age 24), children with Executive Functioning Deficits "catch up" with their peers and no longer struggle with the same issues. Until then, here are some things to look for if you suspect your child might have these deficits.

Pre-School

- **Self-Control**
 - Gets frustrated easily and often throws things on the floor, or just gives up instead of asking for help
 - Has frequent tantrums over things that seem fairly minor and manageable
 - Acts out aggressively instead of expressing feelings and frustrations
 - Has trouble waiting her turn
 - Often insists on doing things a certain way, and has trouble making adjustments. Tells the substitute teacher that is not that the way we do things and has a "melt down" if the rules are different that day (such as lining up by height, instead of alphabetically).
- **Working Memory**
 - Has trouble following directions and often forgets what to do, especially if multiple step directions are given
 - Can't master simple classroom tasks like finding things in a cubby or packing up at the end of the day
 - Frequently raises her hand but doesn't remember the answer when called on
 - Frequently gives unrelated answers to questions during group time

Grade School

- **Problems with Organization and Planning:**
 - Has a desk full of loose papers and pencil stubs, but his schoolwork folder and pencil box are empty.
 - You are constantly buying new gloves or mittens because she is always losing hers.
 - Often mixes up assignments and doesn't bring home books and handouts needed to complete their work.
 - You find out too late that tomorrow is the deadline to sign the permission slip, or that they need a white t-shirt in the morning for a project.
 - Starts one task and gets distracted, then doesn't ever finish the original task
 - Has plans to do things, but never gets around to doing the details needed. For example, keeps asking for a sleepover, but forgets to ask his friend for their parent's phone number.
 - Focuses on the least important thing you said and misses the big picture. Gets lost in little details and can't prioritize
- **Inability to Shift:**

- o Panics when rules or routines are challenged, such as if the babysitter puts the popcorn in the wrong dish or gives each child the wrong colored glass.
- o Rigidly applies rules. If you tell them to pick up all their toys off the floor in the living room before going out to play, they will leave all the dolls that were on the couch.
- **Poor Problem Solving Skills:**
 - o Sticks with a plan even when it's clear that the plan isn't working.
 - o Can't "think outside the box"
 - o Struggles to find the right information in a word problem to come up with an equation
 - o Can solve a math problem one way but gets stuck when asked to solve it using another method. Loses points because they don't "show their work"

Middle School

- **Problems with Organization and Planning:**
 - o Often calls you from the bus because they forgot their book bag, or forgot to take their medication, or left their math homework at home.
 - o Leaves shoes, backpacks, papers, I pads etc. all over the house
- **Self-Control**
 - o Frequently gets upset about small things and has an overdeveloped sense of "fairness." Cannot help telling if a student gets hit during dodge ball but won't sit out. Does not accept the gym teacher's answer as good enough and continues to focus on it the rest of the class. Gets angry if you run out of their favorite snack, or if their favorite shirt did not get washed for Monday. Often thinks the teacher is being "unfair" when he's told to do his work at home, even though the other kids finished theirs in class
 - o Takes jokes too far, acts immature to try get other kids to laugh Has trouble reading social cues, tends to monopolize conversations and over stay her welcome.
 - o Blurts out answers in class instead of waiting his turn.
 - o Answers simple questions with long stories that contain irrelevant details, and may have to stop and start over several times.
 - o Has trouble working in groups, complains that other kids pick on her or bully her all the time.
 - o Acts impulsively, and may do things with a high likelihood of negative consequences without thinking about what could go wrong
- **Problems with Time Management**
 - o loses track of time and does not complete tasks, especially if given the option to do them at an unspecified time such as "before bedtime" or "after dinner."
 - o Tells you at the last minute his football jersey is dirty and he has team pictures tomorrow.
 - o Has a hard time starting a big assignment and focuses on the less important details first
- **Poor Problem Solving Skills:**

- o Has trouble problem solving in new situations, such as how to contact you if her phone battery goes dead. Might not think to borrow a friend's phone or charger.

High School

- **Problems with Time Management:**
 - o Has trouble finishing short-answer tests in the time allotted, Loses track of time and is often still "in the middle of something", Hasn't filled out any of the job or college applications that have been sitting on her desk for a month
- **Self-Control**
 - o Has trouble budgeting money
 - o Tends to be impulsive and engages in risky behavior
 - o Gets speeding tickets, or in car accidents
- **General Forgetfulness/Lack of Organization:**
 - o Grades may suffer because the homework is done, but never gets turned in.
 - o He may come home from the store with many things, but not the one thing you asked him to pick up.
 - o Frequently losing things, such as car keys, wallet or jacket.
 - o Bedroom is messy, unorganized beyond what might be typical for a teenager.
 - o Finds it hard to incorporate feedback into work or an activity, gets written up at work, or fired

If you read this list and notice one or two things that your child does occasionally, you are probably just noticing the typical problems we all have from time to time. But if this lists reads like every parent-teacher conference you have ever had, it might be time to think about an evaluation.

Why do you need an evaluation if you're now pretty sure this is the problem? An evaluation is important, because we need to identify the WHY not just the WHAT. If your child is not turning in their homework, because they don't know how to do it, maybe they need a tutor. If she keeps losing things and forgetting things because she is distracted by anxiety, or if she is unorganized because of trauma related stress, maybe she needs a counselor. If the symptoms are mild, maybe some simple organizational tips might be all that is needed. If problems are more serious, working with a professional and asking for certain accommodations in the school environment may be warranted.

A trained and experienced psychologist can do an evaluation that looks at attention, concentration, set shifting, working memory, organization and planning skills, concept formation, problem solving skills, processing speed, inhibition control, word and idea generation etc and can use this data to get a better idea of

your child's specific strengths and weaknesses. With this information they can help develop a treatment plan, with specific strategies and interventions to help your child overcome these difficulties and experience new success, academically and socially. If you think your child might benefit from this type of evaluation and treatment, call our clinic today.