

Executive Functioning: Allowing Mental Exercise Through Everyday Skills

By Dr. Chris Abildgaard, EdD, NCSP, LPC, NCC

I WAS RECENTLY TRAVELING TO A CONFERENCE WHERE A NICE WOMAN LEANED OVER TO LOOK AT MY PRESENTATION SLIDES AND SAID, “THAT LOOKS INTERESTING. DO YOU MIND IF I ASK WHAT YOU ARE WORKING ON?” I WAS WITH TWO OF MY THREE CHILDREN, WHO HAPPENED TO BE TRAVELING WITH ME. ONE GAVE ME A LOOK AS IF TO SAY, “WHO IS SHE?” THE OTHER PUT HER AIRPODS IN AND WHISPERED, “HERE WE GO.”

I explained we were traveling to a conference where I would be speaking on ways to link aspects of a person’s cognitive abilities with their day-to-day living skills. She went on to tell me she was the mother of a daughter with dyslexia. We began to talk about how she’d thought for years and years that having her daughter in talk therapy would

help her be more successful at everyday tasks. I gently asked, “How would only talk therapy help bridge the gap between her executive functioning, self-motivation, and getting her to do things around the house?” This woman sat back in her seat a bit as if to think of her response. After about 15 seconds, she leaned back and said, “You know, I have no idea! I just thought

it was the next thing she needed to help her get her to do things around the house.”

We often encounter this story in our work with children and families. We hear how one’s child can do all these great things at school, but when it comes to showering, putting their shoes on, or remembering to charge their Chromebook at night, they look at their parents like they have never done that task before. The question then becomes, “How can we bridge what we are doing at school, at home, in the counseling office, and in our community to produce something meaningful for the individual?”

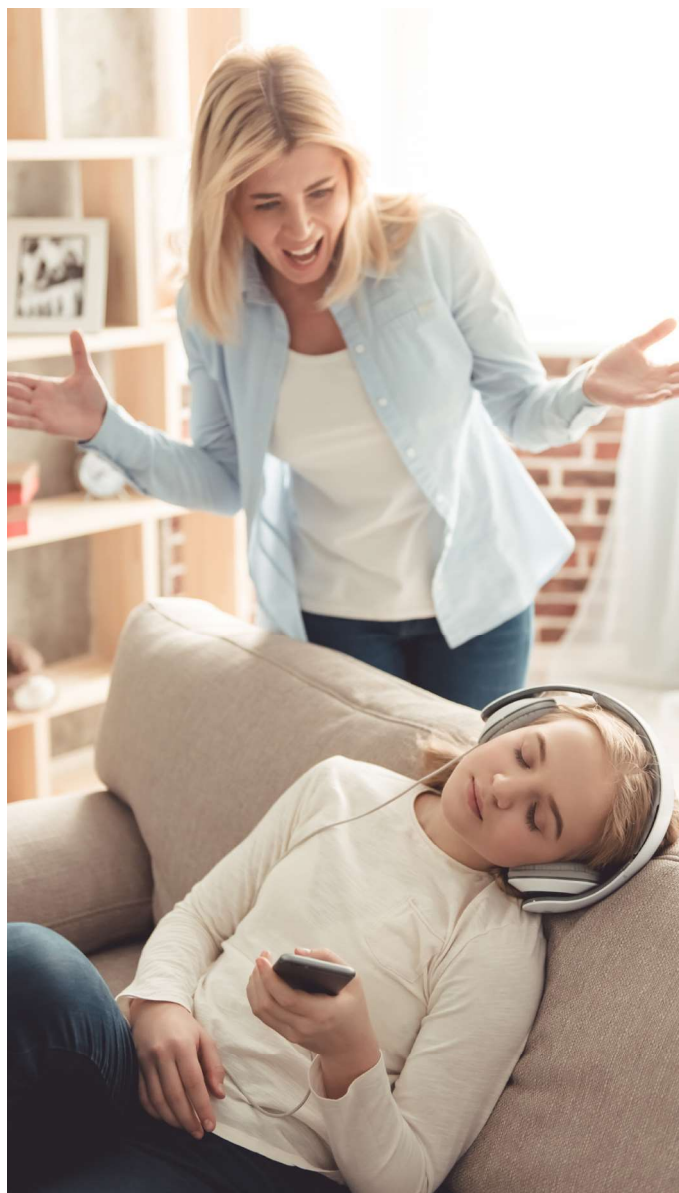
We can write 20 articles on “How to get your child to brush their teeth,” but it’s not just about the “how to.” Our work starts with expectations and knowing how to balance the ones we hold for our children, students, and clients and their internal executive function skills, motivation, perseverance, and ability to understand the “why.” The gap for many of us can be closed (though maybe never fully filled in) once we help others understand how all those factors intersect and create something we can check off.

Parents tell me, “Dr. Chris, I send Leah upstairs to get her shoes on, and she comes down 10 minutes later with the AirPods still in, gets to the bottom of the stairs, looks at me, and says, ‘What’s the matter now, Mom?’” Now we are running late, and we are feeling our own emotions because we asked her three times to get her shoes, and she still hasn’t done it. Is she being oppositional? Is she distracted? Does she not care about what we have asked? The answer to all those questions may be “yes”. However, it is what we do next that will start to fill that gap between what is in her mind and what really needs to take place for her day-to-day functioning.

Instead of saying or even yelling, “Leah, for the fourth time...!” or demanding, “Give me your AirPods because clearly, you are distracted,” I would love for you to try something different. Calmly say your child’s name, then shift your gaze down to their feet. If they have difficulty reading eye movement, pair your look with a finger pointing in the direction you want them to think about. Then bring your eyes back up to their head and say, “What am I thinking?” Try this with your four-year-old and your 19-year-old.

As parents, educators, and clinicians, we’re quick to tell others what they failed to do. The problem is, when we tell our young people what they didn’t do repeatedly, they become used to hearing that negative feedback. This begins to wear on their mental health and self-esteem, and WE end up rescuing their brains’ frontal lobes time and time again.

The human brain is a muscle, so we need to treat it like one. We need to get more comfortable with allowing students and younger clients to go through mental exercises to help them remember routines, tasks, things they should do, and things



they can do. By asking the simple (yet, for many, very complex) question, “What am I thinking about?” we are helping our kids exercise their perspective-taking skills, memory skills, communication skills, etc. Eighty percent of the time, their response to that question will be running back up to retrieve their shoes and saying, “Ugh...sorry, Mom.” Others will need more prompting and support before they remember what they went upstairs for in the first place. Our job, when possible, is not to answer right away. It’s essential to allow your child to think, to exercise that part of the brain, even if it takes a second or five.

Here is the final trick—positively reinforce them for remembering and completing the task they initially set out to do. Do not make comments like, “It took you long enough,” or “Now we are late!” or “You owe me 15 minutes of tech-free time later because you wasted 15 minutes of MY time.” Those sorts of comments only destroy bridges. They destroy self-confidence

and teach our kids they are an inconvenience. When we are working with our neurodiverse learners, WE—the adults, the counselors, the safe people in their lives—have to allow them to exercise their brain, their problem-solving skills, and their time management, even if it takes “time” away from us.

It’s also part of our job to allow for uncomfortable moments. Those awkward moments and even conversations are the ones that will often stick with our students and clients more than anything else. So, if you invite mental exercise to happen, model not being afraid of the uncomfortable, and invite conversation, feedback, and reinforcement for a job done. You will help mold a confident person who understands the “why” and “how” to balance the things they should be doing daily.

This will not happen overnight. I tell parents it’s our goal to give young people tips and tools, so they have a backpack of resources to use as they enter young adult life where Mom and Dad won’t always be there for things like reminding them to wear shoes before walking out the door. Allowing mental exercise to happen even when it is not convenient to do so will help create that bridge between one stage of life to another while also developing self-confidence, competence, and a sense of “why” those little things in life just need to happen.



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