



What is So Important About Executive Functioning Competencies?

By **Chris Abildgaard, LPC, NCC, NCSP**

IN CONNECTICUT, MOST OF US HAD “REMOTE LEARNING DAYS” THIS PAST WINTER BECAUSE OF SNOWSTORMS THAT BURIED US IN A BLANKET OF WHITE. ONE DAY, AS I SAT AT HOME THINKING ABOUT EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING COMPETENCIES, I LOOKED ACROSS THE TABLE AT MY 10-YEAR-OLD SON, WHO LEARNS EVERY DAY WHILE STRUGGLING WITH DEFICITS ASSOCIATED WITH DYSLEXIA, TRYING TO KEEP PACE WHILE “LEARNING” ON THE COMPUTER. HE RUBBED HIS EYES AND PLACED HIS HAND ON HIS FOREHEAD WHILE RESTING HIS ELBOWS ON THE TABLE, ALL WHILE TRYING TO TAKE NOTES ON WHAT THE TEACHER TALKED ABOUT. HIS FRUSTRATION SHOWED WHEN HE PUT DOWN HIS PENCIL AND SAID, “DAD, I AM JUST STUPID.” I REMINDED HIM IT WAS JUST HIS BRAIN ON OVERLOAD—THAT IT DID NOT MEAN HE WAS STUPID, LAZY, OR A BAD STUDENT. HE LET OUT A SIGH AND GOT BACK TO WRITING AND RUBBING HIS EYES.

My son is not the only student who has those thoughts. As a society, we need to be asking ourselves, “Where does that thinking come from?” Has this time period we are living in really had that big of a negative impact on our kids and their mental health? The simple answer is yes. However, there is another major factor really impacting students like my son: executive functioning.

Thinking about executive functioning starts with thinking about our brain. We, as educators, mental health providers, and parents, need to remember our brain is a muscle. Many of us strive to work out daily (or a few times a week) to keep our body and mind feeling good, settled, and ready to take on the challenges of the day. That’s great for most of us, but for some of our students, there is a deeper type of exercise that needs to happen in order to strengthen one of the most important muscles we have: working to improve their executive functioning skills.

So, these executive functions; why are they so important, and why should we as an educational and mental health community be addressing these cognitive skills? Since the COVID-19 outbreak, education has taken to new models of teaching, and our students have had to tap into different parts of their brains just to keep up. As a result, we see more behavioral is-

ssues, sleep issues, cognitive and physical fatigue, and an apparent lack of motivation to engage in the learning process.

What research and clinical experience have shown us is that deficits in executive function, defined as one’s ability to modify behavior, emotions, and thoughts in an adaptive and goal-directed way (Lyll, Schweitzer, Schmidt, Hertz-Picciotto, & Solomon, 2017), have a direct and adverse effect on core social and behavioral competencies, such as the ability to accurately encode social cues, understand others’ perspectives, self-regulate our body and language when feeling stressed, and to be able to problem-solve in the moment (Berggren, Engström, & Bölte, 2016). What strikes me as odd is that we don’t consider the importance of keeping our brain in good shape so we can continue to grow and strengthen our competencies, such as creative and critical thinking. We expect people to just “get it” and be able to understand the various processes in the educational and social world.

Yet it doesn’t work like that. It is true; our brain is a beautiful thing filled with a variety of neuro-pathways that allow us to access various competencies we have learned to use, understand, and accept as part of our social norm. For example, did you know our executive functions are located primarily in the prefrontal regions of the frontal lobe of the brain, with multiple neural connections to other cortical, subcortical, and



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brainstem regions? The paths in our brain that lead to our “executive actions” (the behavior or observable motion that indicates our executive function path is clear and working well) are immense. What we have discovered in our work is that if the paths are not clear, if one’s thinking/emotional path in their brain has a barrier in its way, it will impact how the executive actions are carried out. The issue for educators, clinicians, and parents is that we can’t physically see that path or the blockage in the path.

Thinking back to the example of my son, does he know how to use the computer? Yes. Can he log on to Google Classroom? Yes. Can he access a lecture or worksheet within Google Classroom? Yes. Those are all isolated steps in a process. For him to bring them all together so they create the whole process we need him to achieve, he needs to self-monitor his emotions, inhibit negative thoughts about being in school at home while looking at all that great snow, sequence all these steps he “knows,” and then visually and auditorily process the information being shared on a tiny screen, which may or may not be of importance/interest to him. When one of the pathways becomes blocked—a barrier that impacts his executive actions—we as educators, parents, and mental health providers need to ask ourselves, “What can we do to help students through those moments?” Simply telling them, “I know you can do this,” does not work. If anything, you may be creating more barriers on that path.

We cannot take the cognitive processes associated with executive functioning for granted. We also cannot just think executive functioning is about organization. We have to respect all that goes into one’s executive actions, especially during high-stress situations. Avoid phrases like, “You did this yesterday,” or “It should only take you five minutes.” Instead, validate what you are seeing. Share a personal example of how this type of work is sometimes hard for you too. Make them feel like they are a part of something and not all alone.

There is a huge push in this country to improve our social/emotional learning within our schools. Encourage your child/

student’s educational team to think about executive goals and objectives that address multiple executive functions. Encourage school districts to make executive function training a part of their curriculum. Let’s be more aware of why these executive function competencies are important to one’s academic success, social and adaptive functioning, and employment. For resources and more information on executive function, check these sites out:

- <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/#:~:text=Executive%20function%20and%20self%2Dregulation,and%20juggle%20multiple%20tasks%20successfully>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/what-is-executive-function>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childrens-school/instructional-strategies/at-a-glance-classroom-accommodations-for-executive-functioning-issues>
- <https://www.sociallearningcenter.org/executive-function-coaching>

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