



Executive Function Guidance for School Staff

What is Executive Function?

Executive Function (EF) refers to a set of mental skills that help us manage time, attention, memory, and behaviour to achieve goals. Key components include: Working Memory – holding and using information; Inhibitory Control – resisting impulses and distractions; Cognitive Flexibility – adapting to changes and shifting focus. EF is like the brain’s “air traffic control system,” coordinating thoughts and actions.

Development of Executive Functions in Childhood

EF skills begin developing in infancy and continue into early adulthood. Rapid growth occurs between ages 3–5 and again during adolescence. Development is supported through play, routines, and adult scaffolding. Activities that challenge memory, attention, and self-control are key. Adverse experiences (e.g. trauma, neglect) can negatively impact EF development.

What Do Executive Function Difficulties Look Like in the Classroom?

Inhibition: Impulsivity, calling out, difficulty ignoring distractions.

Shift: Trouble transitioning between tasks or accepting new approaches.

Emotional Control: Big reactions to small triggers, difficulty calming down.

Initiation: Struggles to start tasks, needs frequent prompts.

Working Memory: Forgetting instructions, difficulty retaining learning.

Planning/Organisation: Overwhelmed by tasks, poor sequencing.

Organisation of Materials: Losing items, messy workspace.

Monitoring: Not checking work, unaware of impact on others.

Assessing Executive Function Needs

Use child-friendly EF checklists and questionnaires (e.g. EF Checker for Kids).

Gather pupil feedback on helpful teaching strategies.

Observe behaviour patterns and task engagement.

Consider input from parents and other professionals.

Use ABC charts to identify triggers and patterns.

Supporting Executive Function in the Classroom

General Strategies:

- Use visual supports: Now and Next boards, visual timetables, finished boxes.
- Incorporate movement and sensory breaks to support regulation and attention.
- Use motivational interviewing techniques to help pupils prioritise and reflect.
- Implement paired or buddy activities to support social EF development.
- Use pre-agreed gestures or phrases to acknowledge pupils and reduce interruptions.



Skill-Specific Supports:

Response Inhibition:

- Use fiddle toys, doodling, or drawing to channel impulsivity.
- STOPP

technique: <https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/STOPP.pdf> , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tStXi7f7Vgk>

- Use traffic lights or flags to signal when pupils want to speak.
- Play inhibition games: Simon Says, Musical Statues.
- Delayed gratification activities and breathing exercises.
- Stop/wait cards and anticipation activities with timers.
- <https://southcountychildandfamily.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Response-Inhibition-LW4K.pdf>
- <https://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/media/109514313/10-adhd-guide-hyperactive-impulsive.pdf>

Task Initiation:

- Backward chaining and sentence starters.
- Checklists, visual clocks, and clear expectations.
- Now and Next boards and response boxes.
- <https://ot4adhd.com/2022/10/18/task-initiation-and-adhd-strategies-and-support-for-getting-started/>
- <https://www.betterup.com/blog/eat-the-frog-meaning>

Metacognition:

- Teach metacognitive strategies explicitly.
- Use planning tools and modelling techniques.
- Encourage self-reflection and self-talk.
- <https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/metacognition/Metacognition-A-starter-kit.pdf>
- <https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/metacognition/Questions-to-support-metacognitive-regulation-Planning-tool.pdf>
- <https://ccea.org.uk/downloads/docs/ccea-asset/Resource/Metacognition%20Planning%20Activity.pdf>

Emotional Regulation:

- Zones of Regulation: <https://zonesofregulation.com/>
- Stop Think Do: <https://stopthinkdo.com/>
- CBT-base resources: <https://www.tworiversschool.net/attachments/download.asp?file=1684&type=pdf>
- **My Hidden Chimp:** <https://chimpmanagement.com/books-by-professor-steve->



[peters/my-hidden-chimp/](#)

- The Incredible 5 Point Scale: <https://www.5pointscale.com/>
- Calming sequences and visual emotion scales.
- ELSA interventions and restorative conversations.

Useful Websites and Resources

Executive Function & Metacognition:

- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/guidance-for-teachers/metacognition>
- <https://www.toolsofthemind.org/>
- <http://mindsetonline.com/changeyourmindset/firststeps/index.html>

Emotional Regulation:

- <https://zonesofregulation.com/>
- <https://stopthinkdo.com/>
- <https://www.5pointscale.com/>
- <https://chimpmanagement.com/books-by-professor-steve-peters/my-hidden-chimp/>
- <https://www.tworiversschool.net/attachments/download.asp?file=1684&type=pdf>
- <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Colour-Monster-Anna-Llenas/dp/1783704942>

Working Memory:

- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resource/supporting-a-child-with-working-memory-difficulties-a-guide-for-parents-t-s-1664957796>
- <https://www.teachstarter.com/gb/blog/working-memory-in-kids-printable-resources-and-activities-2/>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/8-working-memory-boosters>
- <https://veryspecialtales.com/working-memory-strategies-activities-for-kids/>
- <https://www.theottoolbox.com/how-to-improve-working-memory/>

Attention & Concentration:

- <https://sltforkids.co.uk/ages-and-stages-developmental-milestones/attention-milestones/>
- <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/the-shrec-approach-four-evidence-informed-strategies-to-promote-high-quality-interactions-with-young-children>
- <https://childrenandfamilyhealthdevon.nhs.uk/resources/paying-attention-hints-tips/>
- <https://www.mindworks-surrey.org/advice-information-and-resources/neurodevelopmental-needs/support-strategies-attention-activity-and->



behaviour-parentscarers

- <https://learningmole.com/supporting-students-with-attention-difficulties/>
- <https://www.theottoolbox.com/attention/>