

Table 1
Executive Skill Definitions

Executive Skill	Definition	Description
Response Inhibition	The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.	In the young child, waiting for a short period without being disruptive is an example of response inhibition while in the adolescent it would be demonstrated by accepting a referee’s call without an argument.
Working Memory	The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.	A young child, for example can hold in mind and follow 1-2 step directions while the middle school child can remember the expectations of multiple teachers.
Emotional Control	The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior	A young child with this skill is able to recover from a disappointment in a short time. A teenager is able to manage the anxiety of a game or test and still perform.
Flexibility	The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. It relates to an adaptability to changing conditions.	A young child can adjust to a change in plans without major distress. A high school student can accept an alternative such as a different job when the first choice is not available.
Sustained Attention	The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.	Completing a 5-minute chore with occasional supervision is an example of sustained attention in the younger child. The teenager is able to attend to homework, with short breaks, for one to two hours.
Task Initiation	The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.	A young child is able to start a chore or assignment right after instructions are given. A high school student does not wait until the last minute to begin a project.
Planning/Prioritizing	The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what’s important to focus on and what’s not important.	A young child, with coaching, can think of options to settle a peer conflict. A teenager can formulate a plan to get a job.
Organization	The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.	A young child can, with a reminder, put toys in a designated place. An adolescent can organize and locate sports equipment.
Time Management	The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.	A young child can complete a short job within a time limit set by an adult. A high school student can establish a schedule to meet task deadlines.

Executive Skill	Definition	Description
Goal-Directed Persistence	The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal, and not be put off by or distracted by competing interests.	A first grader can complete a job in order to get to recess. A teenager can earn and save money over time to buy something of importance.
Metacognition	The ability to stand back and take a birds-eye view of oneself in a situation. It is an ability to observe how you problem solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself, "How am I doing? or How did I do?").	A young child can change behavior in response to feedback from an adult. A teenager can monitor and critique her performance and improve it by observing others who are more skilled.

For a deeper understanding, read the early chapters of any of our books (e.g., *Smart but Scattered* or *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents*).

One approach used by many schools to introduce executive skills to teachers is to use a study group or book club format. At Mountain View, an alternative high school in Fairfax, Virginia, for instance, Tim McElroy, the head of special education, created a voluntary study group and gave every member a copy of *Executive Skills in Children and Adolescents*. About 8 teachers signed up, and each month of the school year, participants read and discussed a chapter of the book until they completed it.

Step 2: Learn to apply the executive skill terminology to student learning and behavior.

As you learn about each skill, you can stretch your understanding of the skill by looking for examples of it *in action* in the classroom. Executive skills impact both learning and behavior. Table 2 shows some examples.

Table 2

Executive Skill	Learning	Behavior
Response Inhibition	Jumps into work without reading directions	Blurts out hurtful things to peers or classmates
Working Memory	Forgets to put math book in backpack	Forgets rules for games
Emotional Control	Gets frustrated and shuts down when doesn't understand worksheet instructions	Lashes out at peers when something at recess is upsetting
Flexibility	Significant problems with creative writing assignments or other open-ended tasks	Gets upset when a fun planned event or activity gets cancelled
Sustained Attention	Gets distracted before completing seatwork	Doesn't listen to instructions or gets distracted on the playing field and misses an important play
Task Initiation	Dawdles before starting work	May frustrate peers during group activities because fails to follow through on promised actions
Planning/Prioritizing	Difficulty carrying out long-term projects	Difficulty "thinking ahead" to pack what's needed for a fieldtrip or activity with friends
Organization	Loses papers; messy notebooks, backpacks	Has trouble keeping track of play equipment; may leave things behind at school or on the playing field

Time Management	Fails to allot sufficient time to complete long-term projects	Late for school; keeps friends or family waiting for organized activities
Goal-Directed Persistence	Doesn't set goals for the future or connect the present with those goals (may want to go to college but doesn't invest the time to earn good grades)	Lives "in the moment." Makes choices about how to spend time based on immediate needs and interests only.
Metacognition	Struggles with tasks that require analysis or abstract thinking	Can't see the impact of behavior on others, or can't see understand why peers react the way they do

As issues come up during the school day, see if you can tag them to executive skills. But don't just look at problem situations or behaviors—be on the lookout for executive skill strengths as well.

This practice can also be incorporated into a study group. Study group members could keep logs where they collect examples of executive skills in action to share with the rest of the group. If you see a behavior or learning challenge that is a puzzle to you—does it reflect an executive skill strength or weakness or not?—share that with the group as well, and together come to some decision. Obviously, not all learning or behavioral deficits are associated with executive skill challenges, but you might be surprised how many are.

Teachers will often ask me, what are reasonable expectations for executive skills at different grade levels? I wish I could answer this question, but the ability to use executive skills is highly *context-dependent*. If a first grade teacher works really hard to establish classroom routines that incorporate executive skills (such as teaching the class to follow a morning schedule to help them get ready for the school day promptly), her students may look very different to a second grade teacher than students coming from a class that did not focus on embedding executive skills into daily routines. In both cases, students may start the year looking similar, but the first group will probably be able to learn and internalize the second grade teacher's routines faster than the second group. In the absence of clear grade level norms, I suggest you look at what the majority of students at your grade level are able to do and assume that that's the norm. To be honest, we don't place a whole lot of emphasis on norms at any age or grade level, because if you have a child with executive skill challenges you have to start with the level the child is at. Your goal, then is to bring that child to the level where he or she doesn't stand out as markedly different from their classmates.

Step 3: Introduce executive skills (concepts, vocabulary, definitions) to your students.

Once you feel that you have a firm grounding in executive skills, can differentiate the different skills, and can match behaviors with skills, you are now ready to introduce executive skills to your students. The most typical way that schools or teachers do this is to present the skills one at a time across the school year. Some teach one skill a week, others one every other week (which allows them to build in a little more practice with each skill). An elementary school in New Hampshire introduced one skill each month, creating a poster for each skill that was posted near the entrance to the skill and reminding students in the daily announcements what the focus skill for the month was. Teachers developed different activities and strategies for promoting each skill, which they gathered in a resource notebook that was kept in the teacher's room. How fast you roll them out depends on the age and developmental maturity of the students you're targeting.