

The Road to Independence: Executive Function Skills for Young Adults



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Introduction

Welcome

Purpose: Understand how executive function skills influence independence for young adults.

And how to develop strategies to support independent living.



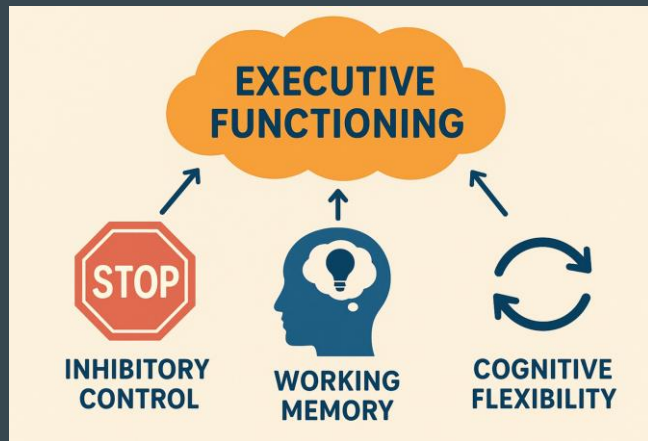
What are Executive Function Skills

Core Components:

1. **Inhibitory Control** – the ability to stop and think before acting, resist distractions, and control impulses.
2. **Working Memory** – holding and manipulating information in mind to complete tasks (e.g., remembering directions).
3. **Cognitive Flexibility** – shifting perspectives or strategies when situations change, problem-solving in new ways.

Broader Skills Built on EF:

- Planning and organization
- Task initiation and follow-through
- Sustained attention, focus, shifting focus
- Emotional regulation
- Self-monitoring and reflection
- Goal-setting and prioritization
- Social engagement and understanding



Developmental Pathway

- EF skills develop gradually into the mid-20's
- Pre-frontal cortex is under construction
- Influenced by genetics, environment, and experiences

Why EF Skills Matter for Independence

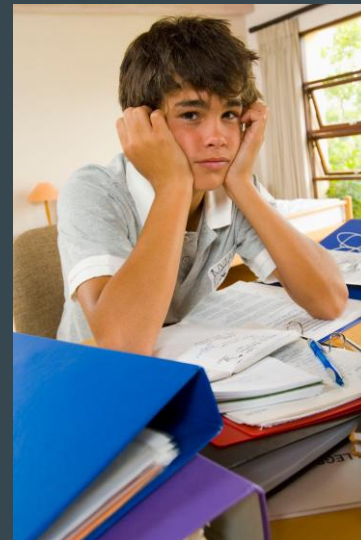
- Foundation for self management
- Critical for academic and workplace success
- Linked to emotional regulation and decision-making
- Predictor of life outcomes (health, career stability, relationships)



EF Challenges in Transition to Adulthood

Common difficulties:

- Time management
- Prioritizing tasks
- Following through on commitments
- Managing stress
- Balancing school/work/life



EF and Post-Secondary Education

- College demands independent planning
- Fewer external reminders
- Need for self-advocacy and flexible problem-solving
- Executive function difficulties → missed deadlines, stress, dropouts



EF and the Workplace

Employers value:

- Reliability and organization
- Problem-solving and adaptability
- Emotional regulation under stress
- Communication and task completion



EF and Daily Living

- Sleep cycle
- Medication
- Personal hygiene
- Nutrition and exercise
- Budgeting and paying bills
- Managing appointments
- Cooking and cleaning
- Maintaining relationships
- Driving safely
- Learning new information
- Balance—including managing electronics



Building EF in Young Adults—The Brain is Trainable

- EF can be strengthened through practice
- “Scaffolding” and structure help internalize routines
- Repetition + reflection = skill growth

Strategy 1 – Environmental Supports

- Use planners, apps, or calendars
- Break tasks into steps
- Visual schedules and reminders
- Create organized workspaces



Strategy 2 – Coaching and Modeling

Model time management and organization

Verbalize planning process

Use “think-aloud” problem-solving

Provide EF coaching or mentoring



Strategy 3 – Building Self-Awareness

- Encourage reflection: “What worked? What didn’t?”
- Teach emotional regulation tools
- Mindfulness or journaling
- Growth mindset language



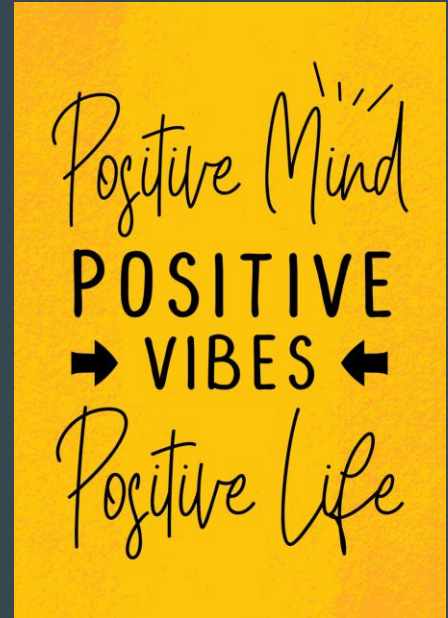
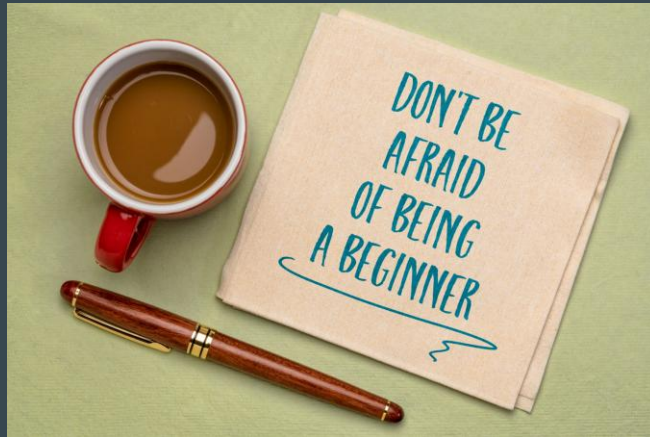
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Strategy 4 – Practice and Gradual Release

Scaffold responsibilities gradually

Use “I do → We do → You do” model

Reinforce effort, not perfection



Strategy 5 – Collaboration with Families & Schools

Align strategies across settings

Encourage shared language (e.g., “plan-check-do-review”)

Consistency builds habits



Tools and Resources

These promote time management, organization, focus, planning, and self-regulation.

1. **Trello** – Visual task organization using boards and lists; great for project-based planning.
2. **Microsoft To Do** – Syncs across devices, allows step-by-step task lists and reminders.
3. **Evernote** – Note-taking and information organization; supports multimedia inputs.
4. **Forest** – Focus app that uses gamified “tree growing” to discourage phone distractions.
5. **Habitica** – Turns routines and tasks into a role-playing game; builds motivation and consistency.
6. **MindNode** – Mind mapping tool for visual thinkers to brainstorm, plan, and connect ideas.
7. **RescueTime** – Tracks screen use and productivity patterns for time awareness and accountability.
8. **Structured: Daily Planner** – Timeline-based planner designed for neurodiverse users.
9. **TickTick** – Combines task management, time blocking, and Pomodoro timer for organization.
10. **Headspace** – Mindfulness and stress regulation app; supports EF through emotional regulation practice
11. **Todoist**: to-do list and productivity app that helps users organize daily, weekly, and long-term tasks. It allows you to create projects, break tasks into subtasks, set priorities, add due dates, and use recurring reminders.
12. **Google Calendar**: a digital calendar that integrates seamlessly with Gmail, Google Meet, and mobile devices. It allows users to schedule events, color-code different life areas (school, work, health), set recurring reminders, and receive notifications before appointments or deadlines.
13. **Focus Keeper**: uses the **Pomodoro Technique**, a method that alternates short bursts of focused work (usually 25 minutes) with short breaks (5 minutes). The app helps users stay on task, reduce mental fatigue, and improve sustained attention.

Tools and Resources

These target EF, ADHD, transition skills, and self-regulation for older teens and young adults.

1. **The Smart but Scattered Guide to Success** – Guare, Dawson, & Guare (for college and workplace settings).
2. **Late, Lost, and Unprepared** – Cooper-Kahn & Dietzel; practical strategies for EF challenges.
3. **The Executive Functioning Workbook for Teens** – Schab, L.A.; CBT-based exercises and tools.
4. **Thriving with ADHD Workbook for Teens** – Honos-Webb, L.; focus on self-regulation and organization.
5. **The Organized Student** – Goldrich, D.; actionable strategies for school organization.
6. **Mindset: The New Psychology of Success** – Dweck, C.; builds self-awareness and resilience (key EF supports).
7. **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens** – Covey, S.; applies EF principles to real-life teen choices.
8. **Executive Function Difficulties in Adults: 100 Ways to Help** – Dawson & Guare; adaptable for older teens.
9. **How to ADHD: An Insider's Guide to Working with Your Brain (Not Against It)** – Jackson, J.; relatable, neurodiversity-affirming.
10. **Smart but Scattered—and Stalled** – Dawson & Guare; focuses on emerging adults (ages 18–30).

Tools and Resources—Tangible Tools

1. Time Timer® – visual countdown clock for time management
2. • Analog Planner (e.g., Panda Planner, Passion Planner) – daily structure and goal tracking
3. • Dry-Erase or Magnetic Weekly Board – visual organization of routines
4. • Visual Task Cards or Checklists – breaking tasks into manageable steps
5. • Pomodoro Timer – structured work/break intervals
6. • Color-Coded Binders and Labels – improve material organization
7. • Goal-Setting Journal or Habit Tracker – build consistency and reflection
8. • Stress Ball or Fidget Tool – regulate sensory input and attention
9. • Sticky Notes or Visual Cue Cards – quick visual reminders
10. • Visual Alarm Clock or Light (e.g., Hatch Restore) – support routine and self-regulation

Reflection and Discussion

Key Take-aways

- ✓ EF skills = foundation for independence
- ✓ EF develops through practice and reflection
- ✓ Support, not rescue, young adults
- ✓ Consistent routines build lifelong habits

Questions to consider:

- Which EF skills do your young adults struggle with most?
- What supports have worked?
- What strategies will you implement first?

THANK YOU!!!



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