

A Toolbox of Activities to Improve Executive Function



Executive Function in Children

What is Executive Function?

The phrase “executive function” refers to a set of skills. These skills underlie the capacity to plan ahead and meet goals, display self-control, follow multiple-step directions even when interrupted, and stay focused despite distractions, among others.

Executive function skills help our brains prioritize tasks, filter distractions, and control impulses.

These skills take time and continual practice to develop! We can help children of any age become better in these areas!



How do we
do that?

Building Children's Executive Function Skills

- 3 to 5 year olds

Imaginary Play

- **Play plans can be a good way to organize play.** Children decide who they are going to be and what they are going to do before they start playing, and then draw their plan on paper. Planning means that children think first and then act, thus practicing inhibitory control. Planning play in a group also encourages children to plan together, hold these plans in mind, and apply them during the activity. It encourages social problem solving, as well as oral language

Story Telling

- **Encourage children to tell you stories,** and write them down to read with the child. Children can also make pictures and create their own books. Revisiting the story, either by reviewing pictures or words, supports more intentional organization and greater elaboration.

Building Children's Executive Function Skills

- 5 to 7 year olds

Card Games and Board Games

- **Games that require players to remember** are great at exercising working memory. At the simplest level, there are games such as Concentration, in which children uncover cards and have to remember the location of matches. At a more complicated level are games that require tracking types of playing cards as well as remembering their locations, including Go Fish, Old Maid, Happy Families, and I Doubt It.

Physical Games/Activities

- **Games that require attention** and quick responses help children practice attention and inhibition. They include freeze dance (musical statues); musical chairs; Red Light, Green Light; or Duck, Duck, Goose for younger children. Others require selective responses and test inhibition, such as the Magic Word Game, in which children wait for a “magic word” to start an action.

Building Children's Executive Function Skills

- 7 to 12 year olds

Brain Teasers

- Crossword puzzles are available for all skill levels and draw on manipulation of letters and words in working memory as well as cognitive flexibility.
- Sudoku provides a similar challenge but works with numbers and equations rather than letters and words.
- Classic spatial puzzles like Rubik's Cube require children to be mentally flexible and consider spatial information in devising potential solutions.

Physical Games/Activities

- Various jump rope games also become popular among children of this age. Children can become very skilled at jump rope, double Dutch, Chinese jump rope, and other such challenges. Developing skill in these games requires focused practice, as well as the attention control and working memory to recall the words of the chant while attending to the motions