

# Executive functioning: Tips for Autistic teens

## What is executive functioning?

Executive functioning skills are the mental processes that allow you to plan, make decisions, focus your attention, and organise information in your mind when completing tasks.

## What are the different skills of executive functioning?

Executive Functioning has many different skills which include:

- Working Memory
- Organisation
- Flexible thinking
- Metacognition (self-monitoring)
- Planning and prioritising
- Task initiation
- Time management
- Goal-directed persistence
- Emotional regulation

## Why can Executive Functioning be challenging at school?

At secondary school, you need to be organised for many subjects and complete lots of work due at different times. You will also be expected to do a lot more tasks that involve executive functioning skills. Staying organised, planning and completing tasks requires a complex set of skills and processes and can feel overwhelming.

## How can you develop strategies to help with Executive Functioning at school?

Not all strategies may work for you, but it is very helpful to try new strategies when you are having difficulties with managing school related tasks to see which ones work. A strategy may not work the first time, but it is worth trying it again in the future, because levels of executive functioning can change over time.

The best way to develop your executive functioning skills is to continually practice them. Remember to ask for help from a family member, mentor or teacher if needed.

One strategy you can try is to use your strengths to assist you in your areas of need.

You could do this by:

## **1) Identifying what you find easy and tricky from the executive functioning skills that are listed below which relate to managing your schoolwork:**

*Working Memory – keeping information in your mind while you are using it.*

For example, reading part of a book to do research for a project and then keeping the information you read in your mind so you can use it to write your project.

*Organisation – keeping track of tasks and belongings.*

For example, keeping a clear list of your current homework/projects or organising your school locker so you can easily find what you need.

*Flexible Thinking – adjusting your thinking and behaviour.*

For example, changing the way you're trying to do a task, if it's not working and moving your attention from one activity onto the next.

*Metacognition (self-monitoring) – being aware of what you are doing.*

For example, noticing when you're getting frustrated with a task or if your attention is still focused (are you still working on the task you planned to).

*Planning and prioritising – setting goals and preparing yourself for a task.*

For example, preparing all the materials/equipment you need to complete a task or making a calendar to work out which of your homework tasks you're going to complete each day.

*Task initiation – taking action to get started on a task.*

For example, once you know and understand what you have to do for a project, actually starting to write your information down

*Time management – managing your time to get tasks completed.*

For example, working out how much time you have available for homework on the weekend and how much time you will spend on each subject (1 hour on math homework, 30 mins on English homework, 2 hours on a Music project).

*Goal-directed persistence – internal motivation that allows you to achieve your goals.*

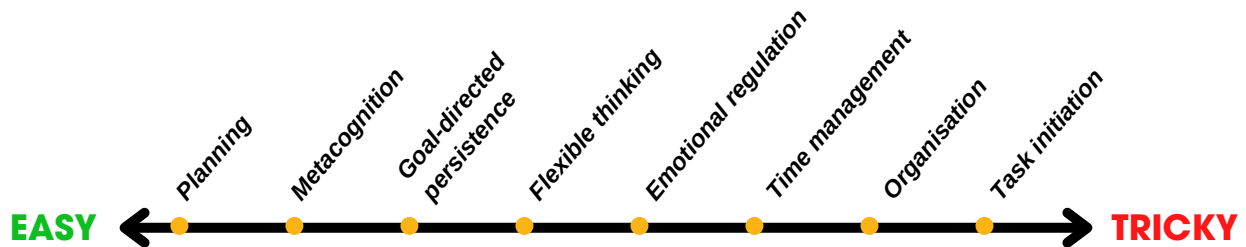
For example, being able to keep working on tasks, even when they're tricky, because you want or need to have them finished by a certain date.

*Emotional regulation – managing your emotions to allow your brain to use other executive functioning skills.*

For example, taking a break or using fidget or sensory tools when you notice you are getting overwhelmed, tired or frustrated.

## 2) Plotting these skills along an “easy-tricky” scale

Write the things you find easy on the left through to things you find tricky on the right. For example, I find flexible thinking easy, but working memory is tricky.



## 3) You can use what you find easy to help you with what you find tricky

For example – ‘I find flexible thinking easy so I can use it to help me with my working memory (tricky), by trying different ways of recalling information and keeping track of where I’m up to.’

### Some examples of how you could do this are:

- If you have tried reading a whole chapter of a book and then answering questions about it, but are having trouble remembering what you’ve read, you could go back and read just one or two paragraphs and then answer the first couple of questions. Then read the next couple of paragraphs and answer the next one or two questions.
- If you have a checklist of tasks you are trying to follow to keep track of where you are up to, but you keep forgetting to mark off each task when you finish it, set yourself an alarm for every 10 minutes reminding you to go to your checklist and tick off what you’ve done in the last 10 minutes.

## Tips to help you with different areas of executive functioning

### Working memory

- Ask your teacher for written instructions for a of each task.
- Take a photo on your phone or iPad of instructions that are written on the whiteboard
- Ask your teacher for a list of topic specific words and key terminology that should be included in the assessment task and/or highlighting them in the written instructions for the task
- When completing a task, use a notepad/phone to write down the step you’re working on or where you’re up to if you take a break, so you don’t forget
- Set multiple calendar reminders on your phone for due dates for important projects

## **Organisation**

- Colour code your timetable and match the colours for each subject to your folders
- Use a checklist of the equipment needed for each subject to keep in your locker
- At the beginning of the term, ask your teacher for the subject's course outline and the assessment tasks to be completed and their due dates.
- Ask your teacher to use a highlighter to identify the most important parts of homework to complete

## **Flexible Thinking**

- If you're finding a task tricky, think of and write down three other ways you could try to do the task. Then try each way to see if one works better. Ask an adult for help if you need some ideas.

## **Metacognition (self-monitoring)**

- Ask your teacher for a lesson outline or checklist of the order of tasks to be completed and use this to keep track of where you're up to
- If you feel frustrated or overwhelmed, ask yourself 'What's not working right now?' or 'What's making this task hard?' then take steps to change that. Ask an adult for help if you need it.

## **Planning and prioritising**

- Use a graphic organiser (Eg. Flow chart, mind map, brainstorm) to visually represent the task or sequence of work to be completed
- Ask your teacher for a checklist that helps with the steps of planning a task
- Use the task assessment rubric to check your work has included the requirements of the task

## **Task initiation**

- Ask your teacher for an example of the finished work
- Divide tasks into sections
- Ask your teacher for a template of the task that clearly describes what information should be included in each section

## **Time management**

- Schedule regular breaks to help you stay engaged when you are working on tasks. When you are feeling more tired, increase the length of your breaks.
- Ask a trusted adult to help you organise your homework and nightly to do list in your diary.
- Use an alarm/timer to help you stick to the time you've allocated to each task, so you don't spend longer on it than you want or need to.

## **Goal-directed persistence**

- Choose how you're going to reward yourself for completing a task, to help motivate you to finish it. For example – when I finish my math homework, I'm going to text my friend for a chat.
- If you're finding it tricky to get started on or to finish a task, write down a benefit/positive to finishing it and stick it up somewhere you can see it. For example – 'Finishing my homework before dinner means my parents won't keep asking me if I've done it.'

# Templates



<b>Things I find tricky</b>	<b>What can be done to make them easier</b>	<b>Who could help me</b>
<i>Eg. Starting a task (Task initiation)</i>	<i>Ask the teacher for an example of the finished product. Break the task into sections.</i>	<i>Teacher</i>

## Resources

Amaze executive function videos

[Executive functioning by Positive Partnerships](#) explains executive functioning in a very clear way. Positive Partnerships have other links to some great resources on the subject.

[Enhancing and practising executive functioning skills with children and adolescents](#) by Harvard University. This resource has lots of suggestions for activities sorted by age.

[Classroom accommodations for executive function issues by Amanda Morin](#), published by Understood, gives some simple tips for education settings

[Executive functioning by Ask an Autistic](#), a young Autistic woman, explains what executive dysfunction looks and feels like from an Autistic perspective.

[What is executive functioning by Understood](#), an organisation in the US that supports people with learning and cognitive disabilities and has plenty of information relevant to autism. It has some detailed information about executive functioning.

[Getting Things Done and Practical Tips and Resources at School](#) - resources available on the I CAN Network's website.

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