



# "Executive Lens" to Support

# POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

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*in the Classroom*

When underdeveloped executive skills are mistaken for poor behaviour, students and teachers can feel stressed and hopeless. By properly identifying the underlying skills beyond the surface behaviour, both teachers and students will feel empowered and hopeful about school performance abilities.

## 1 What are Executive Skills?



Executive Function skills are the mental processes that allow a person to "think and do" when planning and executing a task. They are brain-based thinking skills that precede an action, allow for adjustments during the execution of an action, and permit us to reflect on our experiences to make decisions for future actions. Your E.F. skills are hard at work whenever you are thinking about thinking!

## 2 Common Areas of Difficulty



The **pace** and **range** of EF skill development is different for everyone. The 4 most common areas you will notice lagging executive skills will be during **Task Initiation, Task Persistence, Transitions or Times of Stress, Emotional Regulation**.

**NOTE:** The more demanding the task, the greater the demand on the executive load, thereby lowering the student's task management ability.

## 3 Misinterpreting E.F Skills



Underdeveloped executive skills are often misinterpreted by adults as intentional negative behaviour. This can leave both teachers and students feeling hopeless, as consequences and rewards consistently fail to improve behaviour. That's because **consequences and rewards are motivators; however, motivation does not teach skills!**

## 4 Skill vs. Will



Disruptive and off-task behaviours can be exhausting, as teachers struggle to find long term solutions. When this is the case, take a moment to stop and reflect: is the undesired behaviour repetitive and on-going? Is it undeterred by consequences? If so, it is likely a case of skill and not will! Instead, observe surface behaviours through an "Executive Skills Lens" for solutions and strategies.

## 5 Behaviour Regulation Skills

### Emotional Regulation

Requires a physiology that can access and apply all the other executive skills.

### Self-Monitoring

To observe one's own behavior and to match it with social expectations and unwritten rules.

### Inhibition

The ability to focus on relevant information while ignoring irrelevant information. This can be to sensory stimulus in the room, as well as, suppressing and highlighting information to manage tasks in math, language arts, science, and other subjects.

### Cognitive Flexibility

To have a growth mindset, to be open minded, to manage disappointment and to change a course of action in response to a change in plans, wants or needs.

## 6 Task Execution Skills

### Planning & Organization

The ability to impose order on thoughts, tasks, play, and storage spaces.

### Working Memory

Cognitive appraisal of incoming stimuli. Working memory allows us to think about incoming information, reflect on previously learned information, process our emotions around the information, and initiate a response.

### Initiation

The ability to begin a task or activity and to independently generate ideas, responses, or problem-solving strategies.

### Task Monitoring

The ability to monitor one's own performance and to measure it against a standard of what is needed for any given task.

## 7 Don't be Vague

**Passive modelling  
is NOT enough!**

By supporting executive skills directly, students will be more on-task, demonstrate increased independence for initiating and persisting in their work, and ultimately have fewer negative school experiences.



## 8 Explicit Support

- Working Memory
- Inhibition
- Cognitive flexibility
- Emotional Regulation



Remember, as task demands increase, so does the demand on the executive skills. While all executive skills are important, there are four skills that are foundational to school success! Working memory capacity, inhibitory control, the ability to think flexibly to adjust thoughts and actions, and an ability to manage emotions in response to stimulus.

**Positive mental health and positive  
classroom climate starts when teachers  
teach with executive skills in mind.**



### Example for Teaching L.A. with E.F in Mind

#### What are the tools you need:

Journal, pencil, eraser

#### Quantity of work I need to produce:

3 paragraphs/5-6 sentences each

#### How much time do I need to put in?

2 minutes to get ready, 10 minutes per paragraph, 5 minutes to edit.

**Total time:** approx. 37 minutes

#### Adjustments:

If you get stuck, ask for help, use the word wall, go to a quieter area, get some water.

#### What is the present goal:

To create a descriptive essay for peers who have never been to LaRonde.

#### What is the future goal:

This is going to be counted in the term evaluation. Practicing this now, will help me to get a good grade on my report card.



### Example for Teaching Math with E.F in Mind

#### What are the tools you need:

Math book, pencil, eraser, calculator

#### Quantity of work I need to produce:

complete pages 15-18: What is not completed will be for HW

#### How much time do I need to put in?

2 minutes to get ready, 10 minutes per page. **Total time:** approx. 32 minutes

#### Adjustments:

If you get stuck, ask for help, go onto the next question while you're waiting.

#### What is the present goal:

To practice equal sharing problems/ place value.

#### What is the future goal:

This is going to be on the test next week. Practicing this now, will help me during the final exam.

For more information regarding executive function skills visit:

[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)  
Cognitive Connections <https://efpractice.com/>

Cooper-Kahn, J. (2013). Boosting Executive Skills in the Classroom. Wiley-Blackwell  
Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2008). Smart but scattered. Guilford Publications.



Executive Function Skills