

# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## Executive Function at Home (Part 4 of 4)

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As children get older, the mental demands on them increase greatly. **Executive function** skills are essentially “the management system of the brain” (Belsky). Skills such as planning, organization, task initiation, time management, and regulating emotions are all part of executive function. It is important for children to not only learn these skills but also to be able to generalize them—or use them across different settings—such as at school and home. Parents and caregivers can support executive function skills in easy and natural ways that will likely lead to a more peaceful home and better success at school.

### 1. Flexibility

People who struggle with flexible thinking may have a hard time adjusting to new situations. They may also experience difficulty with creative problem-solving, may become very upset when plans or routines have to change, or can struggle to take the perspective of another person. Help your child improve their flexible thinking with the following strategies:



- Try to warn your child about upcoming adjustments to their plans or routine, and problem-solve ways to cope with change in advance, if possible. If you can practice stress management, coping, or communication strategies together before unpredicted schedule changes occur, then children are more likely to be able to apply those skills when they need them the most.



- Talk about perspective-taking by reading stories told from another person’s point of view or by studying a variety of optical illusions. Point out how



perspective-taking can help with resolving conflict during arguments.



- Practice flexible and creative problem-solving. Break down tasks into smaller steps, and work together to come up with different ways to solve each problem if possible. It can be especially helpful to assist children with this process if you notice they often get “stuck” on the same problem or attempt to use a failing strategy repeatedly.

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(cont.)

## 2. Self-Awareness and Emotional Regulation

There are a lot of ways that people learn to recognize and regulate their emotions across a variety of situations and settings. Emotional regulation includes aspects of self-control, impulse control, and recognition of one's emotions and/or arousal (energy) level. Emotional regulation also requires self-awareness or self-monitoring, which are other areas of executive function that typically develop over time and with support. A child who struggles with emotional regulation may become easily overwhelmed or may exhibit outbursts, impulsive behavior, or even periods of total "shutdown" during times of stress. Here are some strategies to help your child build emotional regulation and self-awareness skills:



- One way to promote emotional regulation even with very young children is to practice co-regulation. Co-regulation refers to the process of demonstrating a calming presence when children are upset which can help them relax from a state of agitation. Trusted adults can promote co-regulation by maintaining a calm and steady voice, getting on the child's level, and offering options such as escape to a quiet space or a hug (if the child appreciates and is comfortable with hugs).



- It is also very helpful to teach children how to recognize and name their emotions and energy (arousal) states. You can say things like, "I know it made you feel frustrated and angry when



it was time to leave the party," or, "It seems like you have a lot of energy in your body right now—maybe we should go play outside for a while!"



- Teach kids how to recognize when they need a break and how to ask for it. Teaching children to realize when they are beginning to feel overstimulated is vital for helping them figure out how to advocate for their own needs. Create a "break" space that provides them with materials or environmental adaptations that can help them calm down. For example, some kids simply need to be removed from a crowded or overstimulating environment to calm down while others may want to retreat to a blanket fort or another dark, quiet space to help them self-regulate.

### Related Handy Handouts®:

- [647 – Executive Function at Home \(Part 1 of 4\)](#)
- [649 – Executive Function at Home \(Part 2 of 4\)](#)
- [654 – Executive Function at Home \(Part 3 of 4\)](#)
- [104 – Good Study Habits and Organizational Skills Create Successful Students](#)
- [334 – Teaching Time Management at Home](#)
- [274 – Visual Timers](#)

### Resources:

- <https://www.hillcenter.org/7-executive-functioning-skills-your-child-should-have/#:~:text=Executive%20functioning%20skills%20facilitate%20the,%2C%20time%20management%2C%20and%20organization.>
- <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>
- <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-is-executive-function>
- <https://www.thepathway2success.com/10-executive-functioning-skills-the-ultimate-guide/>

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