

## Tips for children with attention and executive functioning difficulties and disabilities

SUPPORT AND STRATEGIES FOR E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

These are remarkable times and parents do not need to feel under pressure to replicate school at home. However, there will be challenges in helping students to cope with the confined situation and to achieve some school requirements. This is especially the case for students with attention difficulties or those with executive functioning problems (e.g., organisation/planning issues, impulse control and self-monitoring challenges, problem-solving difficulties, as well as issues with flexible thinking and adapting to change).

For some children, having control over their timetable and learning without the added pressure of other students around them or a rigid classroom structure may help them to thrive. For others, adjusting to the changed circumstances can lead to anxiety. This information sheet aims to equip parents and students with some tools to help them work within these new circumstances.

Home learning doesn't need to involve strictly sticking to set tasks if these do not suit your child's needs – it can be an opportunity to adapt, experiment and enhance your child's learning experience. Many of these tips will continue to be useful for supporting children when they return to the classroom.

### Working with children to complete their learning tasks

Learning to work in a different way, for example, via e-learning, will lead to some challenges for many children and their families. For example, if your child has the added complication of an attention deficit disorder and the executive planning problems that usually accompany this (e.g., organising and planning an activity, staying on task, meeting deadlines, adapting to change, solving a problem) they will require additional support.

Structure will be key and learning opportunities can be created in the home environment to help you to use this time to build your child's attention and executive skills, without placing too many extra demands on the family.



## Create structure: This will be your most important strategy to adopt

All children benefit from structure, and children with attention/ and/or executive problems especially need it. School usually provides this for most of a child's day, so many children may flounder without school and this can cause acting out behaviour and stress. Starting each day by making a plan together, then ticking off each activity as it is completed will go a long way to improving harmony in the home as well as helping your child to learn, self-regulate and develop.

## Make structuring the day fun and practical at the same time

- Begin each day by sitting down with your child and asking them to help you 'plan the day's adventures'.
- Create a timetable/checklist together using pictures and words. Break this down into half-hour increments (or less if your child's attention is very restricted).
- Intersperse school learning tasks with fun activities – this will help motivate and sustain your child's focus.
- Mix up the activities so that some are child-driven (to teach them to play/create independently) and some are carried out together so that they get to share your company and guidance.
- Some of the 'fun' activities may have a learning component – which can be particularly helpful if your child isn't engaging consistently with school work – e.g., science experiments; reading; writing a story or comic book together; watching YouTube or TV shows about science, history, nature, current affairs designed for children.
- Include meal times within the list – you can make these fun sometimes too – especially if your child is a fussy eater – e.g., lunch in a cubby day; create your own lunch day; everything on the plate will be orange day; picnic in the garden day.
- Allocate jobs within the list – you can also make these fun – see how fast you can pack up your toys; make your bed and add something different that mummy/daddy has to find when they check it.
- Add bedtime to the list and include practising a relaxation strategy – this is an important skill for restless children to learn.
- Keep screen time to a minimum.

## Create learning opportunities at home

Use this time together to help your child build habits to assist them get more out of their learning experiences. With all of you at home together, the child is in a consistent environment. It is easier to learn, rehearse and become familiar with a skill when the setting is constant, and the person providing the support is constant too. You can view the home-learning time as an opportunity for your child to develop these important skills. Here are some ideas:

- Use what is described as 'executive language' overtly. For example, say "let's *plan*"; "can you help me *organise* this cupboard?"; "I must *stop, think* and *do*"; "this is important – I should *focus my attention*"...
- Demonstrate the behaviour and talk through the steps out loud, so that your child can learn:
  - "How should I organise this? First I should do this, then this..."
  - "What you are saying is important – I need to pay attention – I will look at you now and listen"
  - "Oops I will make a mistake if I rush – I must stop and do things slower"
  - "Hmm... let me think carefully how should I begin? Right, I am ready now to do this"
  - "This is difficult. I had better write myself a checklist – and tick off each step so I don't miss anything".
- Ask your child to help you with a task. Encourage them to contribute to the ideas and steps from beginning to end. For example, make a cake together and talk through how to get organised, how to follow the plan, how to check for mistakes or missed steps, and how to be flexible if something goes





wrong along the way.

- Create games that practise these skills: e.g., “let’s build a cubby – first we need to plan it; then we need to follow the steps and tick off each one so that we don’t miss any”.
- Make paying attention a part of key daily activities so that this is regularly practised.
- For example, at the dinner table have listening time, where one family member tells a story while the rest listen and then each person can ask a question.
- Create attention games:
  - The ‘*stop, look, listen*’ game – the children (or a parent and child) dance to music and when it stops they have to *stop, look at the game leader and listen to a trivia question*. The first to answer (who is standing still and making eye contact) wins that round.
  - The ‘*stop, look, catch*’ game – as above, the children dance to music, when it stops, they have to *stand/stop, turn to leader and be ready to catch a ball*. They won’t know if the ball will come to them or someone else – so all have to be ready.
  - The ‘*sitting still challenge*’ – have two or more people challenging each other to a sit without wriggling challenge while someone times them and watches for movement.
- Tap into your child’s interests to create learning opportunities that appeal to them. For example, if your child likes drawing and stories – create a cartoon together where you can teach them to plan the story and the steps. Or if they just like stories, create a story together that you can help to plan, and

type up. You could even make the characters in the story learn about a skill (e.g., how Oliver learnt to pay attention). Or plan a sport activity together, invent a game, plan an experiment – all the while pointing out when and how they need to pay attention, plan, get organised, stay on task, check for errors, slow down and problem-solve.

### Reduce distractions and keep motivation up

Online learning will likely prove to be a new distraction challenge for your child. The following are things you can do to help.

- Set up a clear learning space in a quiet room without distracting objects or pictures, and where you are nearby (e.g., watch for things your child might fiddle or play with, avoid swivel chairs, keep away from noise (siblings or appliances). And while windows are nice, they can sometimes enhance daydreaming.
- Set up their device so that games on it are disabled/put in the cloud, to reduce temptation.
- Allocate game time as a reward instead – if necessary – and ideally on a different device if you have the option.
- If needed have a fidget object on hand to reduce the chance that your child may keep touching the screen or keyboard unnecessarily.
- During listening tasks your child may need to sit on their hands to avoid pressing buttons on their device.
- Use this as an opportunity to practise and reward efforts to ‘stop, look, listen’ – make a stop, look, listen reminder poster with your child that they keep in their workspace.
- Break the tasks into smaller parts so that your child doesn’t

feel overwhelmed – and check in that they have understood the instructions before they begin.

- Avoid long periods of concentration.
- Watch out for signs of fatigue or frustration and schedule a break *before* an emotional reaction occurs.
- Have healthy food and water at snack time, both of which are essential for concentration, as are regular wriggle times and exercise breaks (get outside if you can).
- Don't worry if they can't complete all of the tasks – replace them with fun learning opportunities around the home and communicate with their teacher.
- Create a calm corner where your child can go if they feel overwhelmed (e.g., with cushions, music, colouring-in, soft toys).
- Reward all efforts with praise, a sticker or a 'well done' note, and playtime.



## Additional resources

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2010). *Executive skills in children and adolescents: A practical guide to assessment and intervention*. Guilford Press.

Dawson, P., & Guare, R. (2011). *Smart but scattered: The revolutionary "Executive skills" Approach to helping kids reach their potential*. Guilford Press.

Gallagher, R., Spira, E. G., & Rosenblatt, J. L. (2018). *The organized child: An effective program to maximize your kid's potential--in school and in life*. Guilford Publications.

Meltzer, L. (2010). *Promoting executive function in the classroom*. Guilford Press.

Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2012). *The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*. Scribe Publications.

The APS has other information sheets in this series to support children and teens with learning difficulties and disabilities. To access, visit: [psychology.org.au](http://psychology.org.au) for more.

## Finding extra support

If your child needs assistance with regards to their learning challenges referral to an appropriate psychologist for a detailed assessment and advice may be warranted. For example, a paediatric neuropsychologist can provide a differential diagnosis and strategies, and direct you to a special education tutor or other healthcare specialist that may be required.

## Acknowledgments

This resource was prepared by the:






A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client's care needs and priorities
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties

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