

Executive Function Every Day

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The idea of executive function may seem abstract, but it's a very practical concept. The words sound as dry as chalk, like what a bunch of academics debate over stale doughnuts. Yet it represents how each of us figures out how to manage life. The brain evolved a perspective that supervises and keeps track of the big picture, and EF is it.



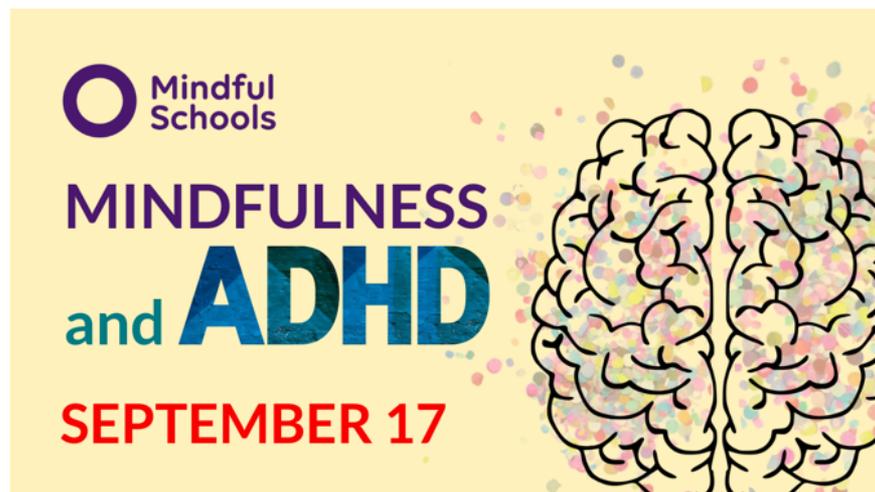
Put yourself in a child's shoes and consider these real-life situations:

- *A teacher assigns a several-page project. How do you pace your work so it's not done last minute, and also avoid throwing a fit each time a part takes longer than anticipated?*

- *You have chores and homework, and you want to go play. How do you figure out where to start, stay on task, and avoid distractions while all the other kids play outside?*
- *A child takes the toy you've been playing with for the last half hour. You need it to continue your game, and she refuses to give it back. How do you resist knocking her down and grabbing it?*

The bottom line is that EF represents a variety of skills needed to overcome obstacles and make good choices. It includes the ability to focus attention when needed, and for as long as needed. It involves learning from mistakes, coordinating activities, and planning for the future. It includes managing emotions and behavior. Kids need time to figure out the nitty gritty while wading through all the increasingly complex situations life throws their way. That's why kids need parents (and teachers and mentors) acting as their brain manager, so they can take their time growing up.

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When you look at things this way, it's understandable that without grown-ups, most kids wouldn't eat as well as they should. They probably do not realize that staying up late means being cranky and tired the next day. They may not consider the consequences of carving their initials into the dining room table. They're kids, after all, and getting in trouble for wrecking furniture is one way they learn. Without us, and without limits and discipline, it would take a long time to see the implications of much of anything.

Understanding Developmentally Appropriate Expectations

Expecting kids to act more maturely than possible at any particular age can be quite counterproductive. The phrase "You can't walk before you run" may be a cliché, but you also can't read before you achieve several steps that precede fluent reading — which, in part, relate to EF. The same goes for writing, math, homework, and morning routines.

Tracking the developmental trajectory of EF helps us better comprehend our children's lives. You would not expect a four-year-old to organize getting out the door for school. A preschooler could probably list the steps: Get dressed, have breakfast, brush teeth. But a preschooler cannot coordinate time, remember the details, or stay on task, whereas most teenagers manage mornings on their own. Much of what changes relates to EF.

Let's reflect for a moment on consequences of rushing children's development. In preschool, children advance around both social and life management skills that eventually serve them in a classroom, though most aren't ready for actual academics. A generation ago reading and writing were six-year-old skills, with a big push in first grade, not kindergarten. Society's expectations shifted, but nothing much has changed about our kids. Development still happens at its own unhurried pace.

Overly high expectations that can't be met create false fears that a child is

behind developmentally. Not every kindergartener can sit in a structured academic setting, then listen and learn; they're geared for play. Many perfectly brilliant five-year-old students aren't ready to read or write. One common consequence of pushing children academically too early and expecting young children to behave like older children is the misdiagnosis of ADHD, or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. ADHD itself is a disorder of executive function. For all the children who actually have it, false expectations around development make it seem that others have fallen behind when they have not, potentially leading to misdiagnosis.

These expectations ramp up stress for both parents and kids. If someone suggests that reading is supposed to happen by age five, that creates a false benchmark, and you may end up wondering why your child struggles. If you've been led to believe that middle schools should assign two hours of homework, you may compare your own child's behavior to those misleading expectations. Unreasonable demands challenge students. Well-meaning kids who want to please adults also become stressed as they reach to handle more than whatever made sense in the first place.

The same applies when setting overly high expectations for older students. If a high schooler strives toward competitive colleges or other lofty goals, guide them toward a viable resume but also around personal health and a balanced lifestyle. Support a broader perspective, because the expectation of the high school and extended community — even for something as basic as sleep — may be utterly off base. Teens need lots of rest, but they encounter both crazy early school start times and huge homework loads. Place value on downtime and family time and whatever else contributes to overall well-being, because with a teen's EF, she may find it hard to do that herself. Support her goals, but neither you nor your child are going to gain from an unrealistic expectation that she has the life skills of an experienced CEO while wading through the pressures of high school.

A developmental view even explains why technology has potential benefits

but a distinct downside when under-monitored by adults. Screen time looks like intense concentration from the outside but provides constantly shifting content that encourages little sustained attention. Too much screen time has been linked to disrupted attention, compromised EF, and other childhood concerns. Well-used and well-moderated tech time is fine, but the implied assumption that anyone lacking a mature brain manager (all children) would handle screen time on their own sets up a developmental risk for kids.

Until recently, kindergarten screening included a child's ability to write their name, recite the alphabet, rhyme, and count. That's still appropriate, though some schools have added reading and writing into even pre-kindergarten settings. So how do you determine what your child needs? Take care of the bare facts, accept you'd rather your kids not be pushed at all, and then stick to your own personal view of what's best.

Helpful Tips for Setting Age-Appropriate Expectations

Here are some guidelines for sustaining age-appropriate expectations while acting as the loving brain manager your child requires to thrive:

1. Focus on building EF. In younger children, encourage skills through traditional play, along with lots of exposure to spoken language and books. Language is another major predictor of school success. Thankfully, another direct way to build organizational skills at any age is through the routines parents create. In other words, when life gets busy, the short-term solution of adults adjusting family routines (everything runs easier) is the same as the longterm solution (more independent kids with better EF).
2. Monitor the big picture. Allow for discussion and options, but keep a bottom-line focus on what makes sense. Don't expect kids to make rational choices about scheduling and daily health routines until they

show those skills themselves. Talk to your kids often about, and demonstrate to them, whatever your family values most in life.

3. Be selective in scheduling. Plan activities, but stick to only a few. Specialization in sports, in particular, is not recommended for most children until late middle school. Too much baseball by age eight means they may burn out, get hurt . . . or fail to realize that tennis is their thing.
4. Seek support when children fall behind. Consider specific developmental intervention, academic classes, or tutoring if your child seems behind; early catch-up is better than later. Some children benefit from academic interventions or services like behavioral therapy, speech language therapy, or occupational therapy.
5. Trust your own judgment. Whatever external pressures exist around you, come back to your own sense of what feels natural. Put your child's temperament first. If you are in a demographic that pushes kids faster than you would like, stick to your own ideals whenever possible. Find a middle path when you can between the reality of your community and your own perspective. Most concretely, act as the brain manager whenever needed because your child's ability to thrive greatly depends on that.

Watching development unfold requires patience and more patience. We'd love our child to have more mature EF, because we know how important it is. The same goes for reading, writing, soccer, dance, or any other skill. We teach what we can when we see an opportunity. At the same time, we can't force development to progress any more quickly than it wants. Resiliency builds from early success, and success itself relies on appropriate childhood expectations along the way.

Consider This

Don't worry that you must get everything right because that is, of course, entirely impossible. Kids are remarkably resilient and will do well across a

wide range of life experiences. There's no perfect — just an opportunity to explore, make mistakes, and adapt along the way. Notice when you find yourself comparing your child to other children or someone else's arbitrary expectation. Pause and make choices founded in what you feel is accurate and true.

Content in this blog includes adapted excerpts from Dr. Bertin's book *How Children Thrive: The Practical Science of Raising Independent, Resilient, and Happy Kids* (Sounds True 2018).

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