

What are

Executive Function Skills?

Executive Function skills help us organize information, manage time, act appropriately, and complete steps to reach a goal.



Pathways.org

Key Areas of Executive Function

Working Memory

- Takes in new information and uses it to complete a task
e.g. follows simple instructions from adults without reminders
- Remembers and organizes key pieces of information for activities
e.g. plays a board game using the rules

Self-control

- Thinks before acting and keeps feelings in check
e.g. raises hand in class instead of yelling
- Manages time by starting and completing activities when needed
e.g. begins a morning routine like getting dressed without getting distracted

Mental Flexibility

- Adjusts to changing situations especially when things don't go as planned
e.g. easily switches from play time to dinner time
- Considers different points of view
e.g. uses problem solving to fix a homework mistake

Note: these are three commonly recognized areas of executive function.

Activities to Develop Executive Function Skills

Your child develops executive function skills through social interactions, play time, and everyday activities. Here are some tips and activities you can do to help your child learn and improve upon their executive function skills.

6-12 Months

- Play Peek-A-Boo to practice remembering where an object is, even if it can't be seen
- Talk to baby often to help build attention and focusing skills
- Provide age appropriate toys and household objects, like spoons or pots, for baby to explore
- Use imitation games, e.g. clapping hands, to build memory skills and teach baby how to copy you

13-24 Months

- Play pointing games, e.g. point and say the name of objects, to practice paying attention and learning how words and objects relate
- Provide simple directions to improve listening skills, remembering instructions, and starting new tasks
- Try finger painting with different colors to encourage creative thinking
- Scoop and pour beans from one bucket to another using a plastic cup, which can help kids learn to concentrate on a specific task

2-3 Years

- Sing songs and play games that include instructions, e.g. Mother May I?, to practice taking turns and remembering words to complete an action
- Play in different environments to practice adjusting to new experiences
- Put away toys and games after play to help build organizational skills
- Play Follow the Leader to develop listening skills, the ability to follow directions, and learning how to wait for a turn

4-5 Years

- Encourage imaginary play to practice decision making
- Have craft time to build creative thinking skills
- Use storytelling to reflect on the order and details of events
- Ask questions while completing puzzles or games to help with ability to think through steps
- Build shapes or figures together with building blocks or clay to develop planning skills and complete tasks with multiple steps

5+ Years

- Play games that use matching, sorting and memory skills, e.g. Go Fish
- Engage in activities that require following instructions, e.g. board games
- Play games like Simon Says to practice remembering rules and thinking flexibly to adjust to different scenarios
- Use structured physical activities, like group soccer, to build focused attention skills
- Provide opportunities to practice decision making, e.g. deciding on an activity to do and figuring out how to complete it
- Play guessing games like I Spy to practice remembering previous guesses and understanding the end goal of the game



Pathways.org is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.