

Hello again parents of St Pius!

Over the last couple of weeks I have been chatting to my social work colleagues about something called Executive Functioning (or as I like to call it how to get kids to get dressed, brush their teeth AND remember their library book).

Executive functioning and self-regulation are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. The brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses. We all use executive functioning and self-regulation everyday but we are not born with it, it is something that we learn and is not really consolidated until we reach the ripe old age of 25.

When kids have issues with executive functioning, any task that requires planning, organization, memory, time management and flexible thinking becomes a challenge. The more you know about the challenges, the better you'll be able to help your child build her executive skills and manage the difficulties.

A couple of things to consider:

1. It's your child's executive functions that are the greatest indicators of mental, emotional and physical health and
2. Executive Function issues are overwhelmingly misconstrued as poor or disruptive behavior and responded to as such.

So what are Executive Functions??

1. Working Memory

Working Memory allows us to hold bits and pieces of information in our mind and mentally work things out. It helps us reason, solve problems and plan. We need to be aware of the capacity of our child's working memory which can vary depending on their stage of development. For example: If you ask your child to "get off the couch, go and get your reader, but first wash your hands, don't forget the soap, and bring me a pen for your diary", would working memory be big enough to handle those instructions? You may find them in the bathroom washing their hands, completely forgetting that they needed to go and get their reader and a pen (which were in two separate locations in your house)? It is easy to get frustrated or feel that they haven't listened but maybe their working memory is not up to holding so much information yet.

2. Self Regulation (also called inhibitory control or self control)

Self regulation involves self-control, discipline; being able to manage interference and distractions while staying focused on a task. As core Executive Functions, our self regulation and working memory work together to help us stay focused on a goal or carry out a plan, as we block out internal and external distractions. (This can be tricky for kids (and for us) in this digital age where there is so much competing for our attention and so many distractions). For example self regulation may be about whether kids can stay seated in class, not call out in class etc.

3. Mental Flexibility

Mental Flexibility is linked to creativity and involves being able to think in different ways, see new possibilities and perspectives. Often children can feel frustrated because their original plan has failed and they are unable to conceive of an alternative way of solving the problem (welcome to meltdown city). Kids with mental flexibility usually roll with the punches, get along better with others, and recover from setbacks.

If you suspect your child is having some issues with their Executive Functions it may manifest as the following:

- Easily distracted;
- Doesn't listen;
- Acts out and is getting into trouble;
- Won't do what they're told;
- Appears vague, disruptive or defiant.

(OR they may just be behaving badly. You know your child better than anyone so it is for you to decide but it may be just something to think about).

At school they may:

- Find it hard to figure out how to get started on a task
- Focus on small details or the overall picture, but not both at the same time
- Have trouble figuring out how much time a task requires
- Do things either quickly and messily or slowly and incompletely
- Find it hard to incorporate feedback into work or an activity
- Stick with a plan, even when it's clear that the plan isn't working
- Have trouble paying attention and is easily distracted
- Lose a train of thought when interrupted
- Need to be told the directions many times
- Have trouble making decisions
- Have a tough time switching gears from one activity to another
- Not always have the words to explain something in detail

- Need help processing what something feels/sounds/looks like
- Not be able to think about or do more than one thing at a time
- Remembers information better using cues, abbreviations or acronyms.

Now we know what Executive Functions are what can we do to support our kids?

On a general level we can facilitate the development of a child's executive function skills by establishing routines, modeling social behavior, and creating and maintaining supportive, reliable relationships. It is also important for children to exercise their developing skills through activities that foster creative play and social connection, teach them how to cope with stress, involve vigorous exercise, and over time, provide opportunities for directing their own actions with decreasing adult supervision.

Other practical things include:

Cogmed - computerised brain-training program is proven to boost children's Executive Functions.

Mindfulness + Meditation - try the Smiling Mind website.

Martial Arts Traditional martial arts, such as Tae-Kwon-Do, are proven to increase executive function in children (Mr Miyagi was on to something!).

Harvard University also has a list of great activities to boost Executive Functioning. A combination of old school board and card games, physical exercise and some computer based games.

[Executive Function Activities for 5-7 year olds](#)

[Executive Function for 3-5 year olds](#)

[Executive Function Activities for 7 to 12 year olds](#)

I hope I haven't freaked you out with the information about Executive Functions. I know that sometimes I feel that my sons are deliberately trying to drive me nuts by not getting dressed in the mornings. Now I feel that maybe I can approach the issue differently (I can't believe I am going to have to play more I Spy!)cca.

As always – Good luck!



"Of course I forgot what I learned last year.
I have to make room in my brain for
the new stuff."