

Cue-less NOT Clueless!



Executive Functioning Disorder has been identified as one of the significant contributors to the academic and social problems students with nonverbal learning disabilities are plagued with. What do you do when your child displays an Executive Functioning deficit?

I am a writer piecing my next article. Your niece is singing the alphabet in order as you try and aim for the pigs with your very Angry Bird. Your spouse is sorting out his flight schedule. Everyone here has got a goal and mission to accomplish. Everyone is banking on past knowledge, experience, social cues, a purpose, and even that sense of readiness. We are all regulated, in-sync individuals because our Executive Function is functioning well.

Meanwhile, you hear the neighbour yell at his son to get his act together. But he does not know how and when, because he likens this to having to produce a movie with a script but without a cast. This means his Executive Functioning (EF) is dis-regulated and somewhat absent. EF has a strong presence in everything we do and when it is missing, the “how”, “where” and “when” has no meaning.

Children with an EF deficit demonstrate difficulties in planning, organising, working memory and self-monitoring among other difficulties. They are the ones who find reading comprehension (identifying main ideas, inferences, and other sub-skills required in comprehension) extremely challenging.

Where do a significant growing number of parents turn to for answers when their child has no organisational skills, no sense of time-management and quite simply, no goal (and this is after spending countless hours with the school disciplinarian, counselor and a slew of tutors)? They turn to educational psychologists. Parents consult, tests are implemented, a report comes out, and now you know what is “wrong” with your child.

Staring at you are the words “deficient executive functioning” and it sounds like it belongs in Human Resource Management and quite rightly so to some degree.

What is Executive Functioning?

EF is commonly referred to as a frontal lobe planning process, which is where the front part of your brain is and where many beginnings take place. One can thumb through endless literature on EF and without finding the term’s true operational definition. Vague

general descriptions of EF includes “executive positions”, “social intelligence”, goal-directed action”, “cognitive control”, and “effortless processing”.

Tests which assess EF list considers the child’s inhibition, nonverbal and verbal working memory, planning, problem-solving, strategy development and execution, emotional self-regulation and self-motivation.

The process of Executive Functioning

So what does EF really ask of an individual? According to an article by Seana Moran and Howard Gardner, it involves three parameters: “hill”, “skill” and “will”. Your “hill” is what you intend to accomplish (goal), your “skill” is the abilities and ingredients required and your “will” is your motivation that is inspired by that hill and skill. Firstly, one must have an intention to do something. Then one must be able to formulate a goal. With that goal in mind, the next step is formulating a plan of action. It requires fairly concrete step-by-step actions. It is about sequencing the chosen plan of action.

That taken care of, it is time to execute it as smoothly as possible with as few hiccups each and every step of the way. Reaching the finishing line, it is time to pause, evaluate and re-evaluate the outcome in relation to the goal and objectives. If one succeeds, great! If not, it means having to turn back to the stage where one formulates the plan of action because something is missing.

When do we use Executive Functioning?

EF is a mix of internal and possibly external procedures that are necessary to carry out intended behaviour and achieve goals. The EF is required when one or more of the following conditions are present:

- ★ The brain is introduced to a new task as opposed to one that it is familiar with or has had practice with
- ★ The brain is given a cognitive task that is now challenging to a point of being plain difficult
- ★ The task has several conditions that vary in nature without any constant form of stability and predictability
- ★ When behaviour is no longer on auto gear
- ★ When a quick response is needed

So when we feel like we are disorganised, not in control, lack structure and time-management skills, at loss for prioritising and cannot stay focused, it is an EF deficit (similar symptoms to attention deficit disorder “ADD”).



What does one do with an Executive Functioning deficient child?

Through restructuring, we can help the child to reverse the EF deficits. Work on self-discipline because it really is not about a clueless child but a cue-less child. A lack of self-discipline results in poor self-control which then translates to impulsivity. Develop that foundation of EF at home and school, and consistently reinforce it until it is etched in the child’s memory because only then can the child adapt, adjust and achieve.

It begins with structure and routines associated with time management. It involves meeting deadlines and learning to prioritise. When the expertise sets in and strategies are in place, then aim for “fexpertise” – a shift towards flexibility allowing for shifting strategies and a readiness to self-monitor.

A typical example of EF in place can be found in any good classroom that promotes social-emotional skills first. A teacher aware of her learners’ needs will have strategies that address EF incorporated in the subject matter. These list objectives which help evaluate a student’s use of EF processes in an assignment from the planning stage to drafting and finally checking. As Binet and Simon put it so eloquently back in 1916, it is a lesson on “mental orthopedics” - learning how to learn. ¹⁴

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