



Executive Functioning

Turning Support Into Skill-Building

A Caregiver Resource by 2villages



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Executive functioning: the brain's management system

Executive functioning is a set of brain-based skills that develop over time and influence how children start tasks, stay organized, regulate emotions, manage attention, and adapt to change.

When executive functioning skills are still developing, everyday moments can feel surprisingly hard.

What may look like resistance, avoidance, or emotional outbursts is often a child navigating a skill gap and not a behavior problem.

Skills can be supported.
Skills can be strengthened.
Skills can be taught.

This guide introduces practical tools and strategies designed to support each core executive functioning skill.

The tools included here are intended to help caregivers translate daily struggles into opportunities for skill-building.



Important Reminder

Children have varying needs, abilities, communication styles, and cognitive profiles. Not every strategy works for every child. There are no cookie-cutter solutions.

Executive functioning support requires:

- ✓ observation
- ✓ flexibility
- ✓ experimentation
- ✓ problem-solving with your child

Be solution-driven, not behavior-driven.

Starting Tasks

(Initiation)



Common struggle: Staring, avoiding, freezing.

Tools:

- Use First-Then boards (“First homework, then Lego”)
- Set a 5-minute launch timer (focus only on starting)
- Sit nearby as a body double
- Provide a visual start cue (first step checklist/picture)
- Use countdown prompts (“Starting in 3...2...1...”)
- Identify the first step together

Working Memory

(Holding information in mind)



Common struggle: Forgetting steps or instructions.

Tools:

- Create visual checklists
- Write steps down (dry erase boards, sticky notes)
- Break tasks into smaller chunks (1–2 steps at a time)
- Build routine anchors (same order every day)
- Practice repeat-back strategies (“Tell me what’s first.”)
- Rehearse with trial runs before challenging situations

Emotions Control

(Managing big feelings)



Common struggle: Meltdowns, shutdowns, overwhelm.

Tools:

- Designate a Positive regulation space
- Teach coping strategies (breathing, grounding, movement)
- Use feelings charts or scales
- Provide sensory supports (fidgets, weighted items, movement)
- Build predictable routines
- Prepare by previewing expectations
- Lead with co-regulation first

Self Control

(Impulse control / thinking before acting)



Common struggle: Grabbing, interrupting, reacting.

Tools:

- Teach STOP strategies (Stop, Think, Observe, Proceed)
- Use hand signals or quiet reminders
- Practice waiting games (Simon Says, Red Light/Green Light)
- Create physical boundaries (tape lines, space markers)
- Offer replacement actions (“Hands in pockets,” “Squeeze ball.”)

Mental Flexibility

(Handling change / shifting gears)



Common struggle: Rigidity, difficulty with transitions.

Tools:

- Use visual schedules
- Preview transitions ahead of time
- Offer limited choices within structure
- Practice Plan B thinking
- Use transition objects
- Create Social Stories for predictable challenges
- Identify coping strategies in advance

Being Organized

(Managing tasks and materials)



Common struggle: Messy spaces, lost items, incomplete work.

Tools:

- Involve your child in planning systems
- Establish consistent organization systems
- Use color-coded bins, folders, and labels
- Create daily visual routines
- Break tasks into mini-steps
- Use pictures of the desired outcome
- Build end-of-day reset routines

Staying Focused

(Staying focused / resisting distraction)



Common struggle: Starting tasks but drifting quickly.

Tools:

- Use focus timers (short work bursts)
- Provide a visual focus target
- Capture distractions in a parking lot
- Adjust the environment (reduce noise/clutter)
- Incorporate movement or sensory supports
- Introduce focus supports (Focus Shield / defined workspace)

Being Self Aware

(Noticing & adjusting performance)



Common struggle: Rushing, repeating mistakes, limited awareness.

Tools:

- Build check-your-work routines
- Use before/after reflection prompts
- Model self-talk strategies
- Provide visual success criteria / rubrics
- Use video or photo feedback when helpful

Managing Time

(Understanding & Managing Time)



Common struggle: Underestimating duration, abrupt transitions.

Tools:

- Use calendars and visual schedules
- Introduce visual timers / countdown clocks
- Map time expectations (“This takes about 10 minutes.”)
- Anchor routines to predictable cues (songs/playlists)
- Provide structured transition warnings
- Track elapsed time together

Sticking to Goals

(Sticking with hard things)



Common struggle: Giving up quickly, frustration intolerance

Tools:

- Break tasks into success-sized pieces
- Track visible progress
- Use effort-focused encouragement
- Normalize productive struggle
- Schedule regulation breaks

Planning

(Organizing steps before starting)



Common struggle: Feeling overwhelmed, not knowing where to begin, skipping tasks

Tools:

- Break tasks into mini-steps
- Create visual checklists
- Identify the first step together
- Use backward planning (start with end goal → work backwards)
- Use planning templates (“What do we need?” “What comes first?”)
- Rehearse plans before challenging situations
- Externalize planning (write/draw instead of verbal only)