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Certificated Gifted and Talented Educator

Academic Skills & Executive Functions Assessment

Strategy Development \* Academic Enrichment \* Family Support

*When “Lazy” Doesn’t Make Sense:  
How Executive Functions Impact Achievement*  
**Symptoms, Understanding & Coping Strategies**

**THE SYMPTOMS:**

Difficulty starting a task; staying focused on school tasks, managing simple routines, great ideas without follow-through; late work, and lost work: Sound familiar? Then read on! There are many reasons why students may have these difficulties, from disengagement due to boredom; learning disabilities; or processing and perceptual difficulties. Yet our brightest students are often labeled “lazy” or “stubborn” when they have difficulty managing their world: a realm that requires strong executive functioning skills.

Tasks which seem mundane to adults may be overwhelming to a fast thinking, deeply pondering child. Gifted individuals already cope with intense emotions, sensory awareness, the ache to be in constant motion, intellectual depth, and visual awareness depending on their areas of giftedness. Many of our gifted students get caught between their accelerated intellectual development and their delayed physical coordination, social abilities, or overall coping abilities. This mismatch is confusing not just for parents, but for our children as well.

**Executive functions** are like threads of a tapestry that are colored by setting, environmental factors, social context, the motivational forces of the task, and the desires of the student. Understanding how executive functions effect the learning and retrieval process using a strength-based model, families can discover the tools to support a child’s atypical learning style common to many of our special needs students. It is through our strengths that both adults and children can gain the self confidence to make changes.

**WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?**

Think of the Pre-frontal lobe of the brain, where executive function originates, as the keyboard of a computer. One simple keystroke is rarely sufficient, even to turn on the computer, but needs to be accompanied by a series of strokes. From typing a sequence of letters to create a correctly spelled word, to adding a *shift*, *control* or *function* key to produce or retrieve information, there are countless combinations. None of us are perfect, and each of us has strengths and weaknesses when using a computer which varies day to day, and task to task. Our dexterity depends on our mood, our environment, and the complexity and familiarity of the task at hand. Those of us who have great skills using computers, or have strong executive functions, are unstoppable in what we can accomplish, even if our ‘computer’ is a bit slow. Those of us, whom just can’t get the knack of the keyboard or how to use those shortcuts, suffer with slow production, high frustration, and avoidance.

**Executive function is a stronger predictor of academic success than IQ** because it impacts one’s ability to remember and store information; to read and understand text; to process multi-step mathematical equations, to self-regulate behavior and emotions, to inhibit thoughts in order to get to sleep, and to successfully complete a myriad of tasks. These tasks get more complex as our children

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move from kindergarten, where the teacher and parent do many of these tasks for the child; to middle school, where the child is faced with multiple classrooms, multiple teacher styles, and more complex tasks in content areas.

Everyone has stronger and weaker functions on a given day due to exhaustion, stress, and energy levels. And none of us has perfect functioning in all areas. The question to consider is: Does a function *impair* a child's day-to-day coping abilities or academic success on a *consistent* basis?

Acquiring Executive Function skills is a developmental process, like walking and talking. For our very brightest children, development in this area of the brain may be delayed 2-3 years all the way into their late 20s to early thirties. Whether the difficulty is a delay or a life-long impairment, intervention helps students develop key skills and confidence, boosting their potential for success.

### **HOPE: A STRATEGY TOOL-KIT**

Before you begin take note: Even professionals, with assessment data in hand, will experiment with different strategies and work with the family to assess their effectiveness. This is a parenting adventure! So trust yourself, laugh with what fails, embrace what works, and enjoy learning about yourself and your family.

- Become a partner and coach to your child. Seek creative solutions together.
  - Embrace your child's gifts and intensities and discuss them with your child.
  - Embrace patience. This is a long process so settle in for the long haul.
  - Understand that your child may not quickly transfer strategies from one situation to a new one.
  - Encourage effort over product, especially when starting.
- Attention takes practice, patience and understanding.
  - Check with your child to be sure that you have their full attention, through touch, or a special signal you devise together.
  - Check that the task was heard, and that a child (or adult) is not mindlessly repeating your words, but attending to what you are saying;
  - Turn away or move away from distractions before trying to communicate;
  - Sometimes a child needs to move to remain engaged: allow a child to use a squishy ball to help keep them focused.
- Support Memory and recall by studying in multiple places.
  - Location variety produces more opportunities to imprint memories using sensory information.
  - Link new information to something the child already knows.
  - Have the child practice for short periods in multiple ways (writing, listening, speaking, drawing, or reading).
  - Working intensively for 5-10 minutes and then taking a short break can be more efficient than trying to remember too many facts at once.
  - Make it a game and have fun!
- Taking the stress out of Homework:
  - Plan breaks.
    - Plan to take a 10 second stretch break every 5, 10, or 15 minutes as needed.

- Plan and decide on an activity for a 10-15 minute break after 30 minutes, or so, of active engagement: Be sure that this break is active, different, enjoyable, but easy to shift away from (not a computer game).
  - What awaits the child *when* all tasks are completed with time before bed? What will they miss out on if they don't finish?
- Creating a Plan:
  - Recognize that organization takes time.
  - Play a game to see how many steps a task takes and then see how long it takes to accomplish it. What may seem like a simple task to you may be more complex to the child.
  - Use a monthly calendar, along with a weekly calendar showing the “regular routine” along with special due dates and adventures.
  - Draw or cut out pictures to help your child visualize the task.
  - Before bedtime and again at breakfast, discuss tasks for the day ahead.
  - Make a list of the day and the week and post it where the entire family sees it.
  - How much time will each task take? Guess, and then record real times for future reference.
- Set Priorities
  - What tasks are optional and may need to be dropped?
  - What tasks are the same every time? Chores, music lessons, sports, etc.
  - How much time will each task take?
  - When is bed-time; dinner time? How much time is needed for each?
- Time!
  - Place analog clocks everywhere and teach your child how to use this visual reference.
  - Keep track of time on task, time complaining, time thinking, and time procrastinating. Help your child become aware of the true time needed for a task.
  - Work with teachers to develop a homework plan that will support your child as they work to improve their production skills (i.e. time limit for completion; fewer problems but better results, etc)

My kids are my inspiration, my enigma, and the source of many “ah-ha” moments. But be clear: YOURS WILL BE DIFFERENT. Your situation, your child, your classroom is unique. As you gather advice; and observe what others do, I ask you to trust your instincts and observations of your child, and let them guide you.

Remember: Change Takes Courage \* Change Takes Practice \* Change takes Time

*Ms Cynthia Hansen, M.Ed., works privately to mentor students of all abilities who need specific, systematic support with sustained focus, organization, and study strategies, in addition to working with gifted populations at multiple schools. She received her Masters of Education and Teaching Certificates from UCLA and her post-masters certificate in Gifted and Talented Education from UCSB.*

*Ms Hansen presents workshops on Gifted and Talented Intensities, Executive Functions, and Time Management Skills for GATE communities, and for the Tri-County GATE Council's Best Practices series. **She will be presenting her program on Executive Functions at the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) National Convention in November, 2012.***

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