

Why So Many Students Flounder

By Stephen Rudin, MD & Marcia Eckerd, PhD

“It’s raining kids in my office,” says Dr. Roy Boorady, Assistant Professor of Child and Adult Psychiatry at NYU’s School of Medicine and Child Study Center. Every spring psychiatrists, and psychologists doing neuropsychological testing, are inundated with middle school and high school students who are floundering. This year’s annual spring deluge seems to be even more extreme as many New York-area professionals report a huge increase in referrals.

A large number of these children attend prestigious private schools and top public schools. And the reasons for their visits are often the same: they are struggling to swim in the swift currents of their competitive educational environments.

Often, such children are diagnosed with learning disabilities or ADHD and interventions are prescribed. Many improve, sometimes dramatically. But others, despite timely professional intervention and medical help, continue to have problems. Some fall further and further behind; others simply burn out and give up trying. The vexing question, of course, has been “Why?”

In addition to whatever learning or attention deficit problems such children exhibit, many also display what are known as “executive function” deficits. And while therapists’ and evaluators’ reports typically highlight these executive function problems, many families often dismiss them as less critical than other learning issues or challenges. However, it is increasingly clear that effective executive functioning is a key factor in remedying academic difficulties.

Executive functions are the skills that an individual of any age must master to deal with everyday life. They include a vast array of critically important abilities, including handling frustration, starting and completing tasks, recalling and following multi-step directions, staying on track, planning, organizing and self-monitoring. The last of these is particularly important for many students as it governs their ability to evaluate their work and behavior in real time. It is the critical differentiator of successful students – they learn from previous successes and mistakes.

“Executive functioning includes learning how to balance sports, music and other social activities with academic demands,” says Susan Micari, President of the NY Chapter of the Association of Educational Therapists. “It often requires the student to recognize that he or she needs extra support from teachers, and to be able to ask for it.” Micari also notes that executive function deficits are thought to play a significant role in ADHD and dyslexia.

The transitions to sixth and ninth grades are critical for students. In the span of one short summer, two things happen. For sixth graders, the structure provided by elementary school has been removed. For sixth and ninth graders, the level of expectations goes up dramatically. Students with strong verbal abilities who would have been expected to perform at a high level across the board stumble badly if they have previously unrecognized executive function issues. Those verbal skills are no longer enough, and students are left to navigate the tricky currents of their school universe without a working compass.

Traditionally, it was assumed that all students “picked up” executive function skills as they matured. We now know that this is not true. Some students require intensive intervention that takes time, ranging from several months to several years. This training actually changes brain processing, and it’s important to start by middle school if at all possible.

It is crucial for parents, educators and therapists to address overlaying executive function issues as well as underlying learning problems in order to best serve struggling students. But all too often the learning difficulties are remediated while the executive functions are ignored. This approach is akin to repairing a car’s broken transmission but ignoring its faulty steering. The car may move, but its rider will lack any ability to control its direction.

Executive Function Deficits and Symptoms

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION	SYMPTOMS OF EXECUTIVE FUNCTION DEFICIT
Inhibition	A. Difficulty resisting impulsive tendencies or being unable to stop a behavior
Shifting	B. Having trouble transitioning from one activity to another
Emotional Control	C. Difficulty regulating emotional reactions
Initiation	D. Difficulty getting started on tasks, even those one enjoys doing
Working Memory	E. Difficulty holding information in mind in order to do a task
Planning/Organizing	F. Difficulty anticipating needs, setting goals, developing steps to carry out an activity and managing one’s time
Organizing Materials	G. Difficulty having one’s materials on hand in the right place or at the right time; difficulty organizing one’s work space
Self Monitoring	H. Difficulty checking one’s own work or being aware of the impact of one’s behavior

This list is based on Gerard A. Gioia, Peter K. Isquith, Steven C. Guy, and Lauren Kenworthy’s “Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function.”

In many cases, parents “get” the idea that their child may have learning difficulties or ADHD. They’ve heard about these issues and understand the range of therapeutic responses, some involving medication, available to address the conditions. Unfortunately, the take-home message about executive functioning almost always gets lost. “Parents simply can’t understand why their children aren’t able to work independently or become more organized. They often assume that their child should just ‘pick up’ these executive function skills once he is shown what to do,” says Dr. Marianne Findler, Assistant Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical Center. “And what parents often hear about executive functioning gets translated into purchasing a new planner or electronic organizer.” Similarly, schools often address the executive function needs with little beyond checking homework and calendars.

During the twenty-five years we have been working with students, most of them have previously benefited from private tutors helping them with math, English, history, science and foreign languages. However, they still struggle to work independently. They have difficulty initiating work assignments, balancing multiple course demands, and managing time successfully—all of these being executive function skills.

Who then should provide this executive function support? Pre-teens and teens generally don’t want to be nagged by their parents and no parent wants to join the “homework police.” More importantly, parents typically don’t have the knowledge or skills to address underlying executive function challenges. And whether a child’s school has the internal resources or time to really help with executive function skills is hit or miss, even at elite private institutions and top-rated public schools. Most traditional tutors are in general not equipped to do this specific type of remediation. Students with executive functioning deficits need coaching and feedback from professionals who understand the challenge and how best to teach the skills to address it.

A school’s active participation is critical in understanding and responding to a student’s executive function vulnerabilities. And for the remediation team to be as effective as possible, it is most helpful for the school to provide them with a summary of the main subject topics a student will be covering. It is also important that they directly provide the team with specifics related to homework assignments, quizzes, papers and exams so that good executive functioning can be modeled based on accurate information.

How should parents have their children’s executive function problems identified? While a child in the bottom 20% of his or her class would likely benefit from full-scale neuropsychological evaluation, testing on such a scale is expensive and sometimes unrealistic. A full neuropsychological test typically costs \$3500 to \$5000. Many parents and schools simply don’t have the resources.

Fortunately there is an alternative for identifying executive function problems. The Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF) is a respected evaluative tool that costs a fraction of a full neuropsychological exam. It uses a written survey which is administered to the children, their parents and their teachers as well. It is quick, easy-to-administer, and most important, accurate.

And, while it is not a substitute for comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation, it offers useful information about information about executive functioning in situations where more complete testing is not possible.

Good executive function skills are not an absolute guarantee of school success, but their absence is almost always a predictor of significant academic difficulty at some point, and the loss of self-esteem that follows in its wake. It's no wonder then that so many students are floundering. Despite large sums of money that parents and schools may spend on helping to remediate learning disabilities and getting the right diagnosis and treatment for ADHD, that help will be undermined if their executive function skills are not working.

Struggling students shouldn't have to flounder because a choice is made between remediation of their academic learning difficulties or their executive function skills. We need to give our children both types of help so they can go on to succeed in school and beyond.

If your child has executive function problems, here are seven steps you can take to help:

1. **Identify the EF skills with which your child has problems.** See “Executive Function Deficits and Symptoms” (page 2).
2. **Explain the cause of EF problems to your child.** Go stepwise through the process that results in no homework getting done. It's important to remember that students with EF problems usually don't know what's going wrong or how to fix it. Helping them understand the problem, without any blame, will engage them in finding a solution.
3. **Tackle one problem at a time.** Even though your child may suffer from a laundry list of EF deficits at home and school, working on more than one at a time is not productive.
4. **Break down the problem into small steps.** It is very common for a child with EF deficits to feel that a task is too big and as a result become overwhelmed or decide to quit. Difficulty following a teacher's directions or an important part of a question may be helped by breaking the task down into smaller parts rather than having the student break down in frustration.
5. **Create strategies *with* your child.** Talk with your child about how he can create solutions that work for him. Simply presenting a child with solutions that you have created does little to prepare him to do better the next time. Strategies to focus on may include how he can best:
 - Set a specific time or routine that will cue him to get started.
 - Create a work environment in which he will best succeed. What will be the best location? What will be the energy and noise level of the space? Some students work best in a quiet room while others prefer mild background noise or music (TV is usually too distracting).
 - Ensure that he reads the complete assignment. Some students prefer reading aloud, highlighting key phrases, and/or occasionally receiving prompts from someone else.
 - Organize unclear directions into explicit, organized steps.
 - Brainstorm and organize ideas for writing. Some students, for example, benefit from a framework to help them differentiate main ideas from supporting points.
 - Make sure a task is manageable in terms of the amount of material that must be covered and time allotted. For example, students sometimes need to ask if extra time can be granted.
 - Deal with anxiety by building in breaks and using relaxation techniques.

6. **Provide needed support.** Just as your child benefits from your help when he is practicing piano, math, or Spanish, he will need help to tackle his EF vulnerabilities. Try to provide enough support to prevent burnout but be careful not to do his work for him.
7. **Reward incremental progress.** Do not wait for a final product or culminating accomplishment to give praise. Instead, take a process approach and reward each of the steps along the way. Beyond this, it can be beneficial to simply reward a child's effort or improvement over a previous attempt. Research shows that providing tangible rewards can help a student do better assuming he is capable of completing the task. Conversely, nothing is gained from promising rewards for a task that is beyond a child's ability.

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