

Schoolhouse Blocks

Building Foundational Executive Functions

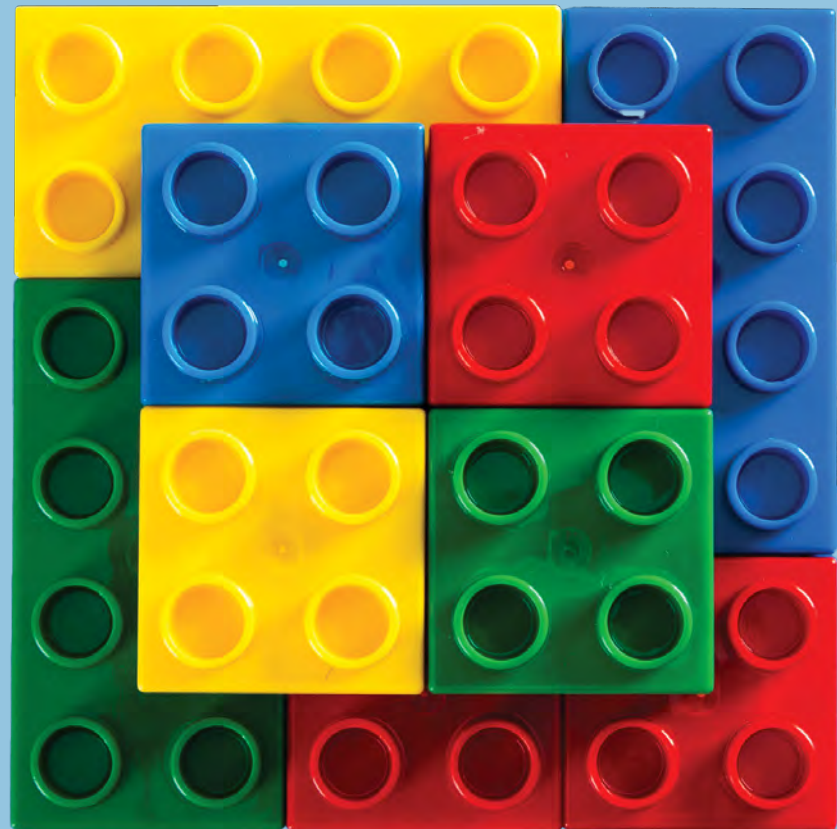
EXECUTIVE FUNCTION (EF) DEFICITS are commonly mistaken for—and exacerbated by—ADHD symptoms. The reverse is also true, making EF and ADHD inextricably linked yet also distinct. To address a student's challenges, teachers and parents must first understand their origins. For example, disorganization may be a manifestation of core ADHD symptoms like hyperactivity and inattention. On the flip side, physical fidgeting may be a sign of being overwhelmed in a student struggling to break apart and solve a problem due to weak EF.

Whether the challenge is EF or ADHD, or both, educators and parents should take these steps to help a student build skills and confidence, from elementary through high school:

- > **Create learning environments** that lessen the impact of deficits.
- > **Modify assignments** to minimize the impact of weaknesses.
- > **Teach skills** that relate to the specific assignment and minimize the impact of deficits.

In the following pages, learning experts offer actionable strategies to sharpen core executive functions in the classroom and at home. Use this action plan to kick-start academic success for your hard-working student with ADHD.

(Continued)



EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

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3 Learning Hurdles, 9 Teaching Strategies

How EFs affect reading, writing, and math performance—and solutions for each subject. **by Jerome Schultz, Ph.D.**

“If a student resists revising an essay, allow him to tell the story by recording it instead.”

EF CHALLENGE #1:

Reading Comprehension

The student reads a chapter of a history book but can't stay focused on the content and can't answer any of the comprehension questions at the end. In this case, ADHD inattention causes or worsens EF difficulties with memory and organization of thoughts.

EF Solutions

- > **Activate more senses and learning styles** by using graphic novels, supplementary videos, or even historical action games to tell the story.
- > **“Prime” the student to focus on what matters** by reviewing the comprehension questions before reading. This helps with organizational or comprehension challenges.
- > **Encourage the student to listen to the audio version** of the literature assignment while reading along.
- > **Have each student transform one chapter into a dramatic audio play** so that other students may listen along while they read the full book.

EF CHALLENGE #2:

Writing Essays

A student turns in an accurate essay that's fairly well written, but it rambles and misses the central theme of the assignment. She thinks she's covered the material and gets upset and frustrated when an evaluation suggests otherwise. Her motivation decreases.

EF Solutions

- > **Provide “external scaffolding”** by giving the student a bare outline with sections to flesh out. This provides an essay structure on which they can hang their facts and ideas. From this organized, sequential, and meaningful outline, the student can create a fuller narrative and increase confidence that she can complete the assignment.
- > **If a student resists rewriting, allow her to record herself “telling the story,”** using the outline as a guide. This will help the child experience success while practicing effective organization skills that may be replicated when she tackles subsequent assignments over the course of the school year.

EF CHALLENGE #3:

Math Burnout

The student “runs out of steam” after doing a few math problems, and then starts making careless errors, complaining, and getting disruptive—which are all signs of cognitive overload related to poor executive function skills.

EF Solutions

- > **Ask the student to estimate the task difficulty** on a scale of 1 (really easy) to 3 (way too hard). Then ask, “What can we do to move a task from level 3 to level 2?” (The answer might be: “Start with the problem that looks easiest,” or “Just do one at a time.”)
- > **“Seed” the assignment** by including one problem that the student successfully completed last time, and start with that. Anchoring a child in an earlier success will help him move toward—not away from—the task.
- > **When your child completes a math problem successfully, ask her, “How did you feel after solving that?”** This triggers a success mindset: “This is not too hard” and “I'm pretty sure I can do it!” At home and at school (indeed—in life!), success leads to increased motivation, better focus, and a brain that wants more success.

A Daily Plan for Smart Self-Talk

How to develop the metacognition that powers confidence, persistence, and positive self-esteem. **by Richard K. Cohen**

METACOGNITION IS THE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION THAT HELPS US REFLECT ON AND manage our thoughts, attention, effort, organizational skills, and emotions. It is the internal dialog that tells a student, “You’ve done work like this before; you can do it again.”

When a child with ADHD says, “I can’t do math” or “I hate writing,” that is a sign of under-developed metacognition skills that require intervention strategies and supports—namely, structured, open-ended questioning. Guided questioning eventually leads children to do their own thinking, direct their own attention, and recognize and regulate their emotions.

Paired with common daily struggles, the recommended questions below are the same for teachers and parents. That is intentional. Through repetition and experience, children begin to internalize these questions and develop a metacognitive strategy to guide their own self-talk through any struggle—academic, social, or emotional.

EF Skill	Day-to-Day Challenges	Questions
Emotional regulation	Feeling frustrated, stressed, overwhelmed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > How do you feel? > What can you control? > What can you do to help yourself?
Initiation and activation	Avoiding assignments, procrastinating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What is the task or assignment? > What is the question asking? > What are you supposed to be doing?
Planning and organizing	Feeling unsure of next steps in a multi-step math problem, forgetting homework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What do you think you could do first? > What do you think you could do second? > What do you think you could do next? > What else?
Sustaining attention, effort, and working memory	Feeling distracted or unmotivated, getting stuck on complex text, not completing assignments, falling off-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > What is important? > What is your goal? > When you get distracted, which strategies help redirect your focus? > Which strategy could help now?
Self-monitoring	Failing to calm down and/or complete work, handing in assignments filled with errors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > How is it going? > Is your strategy working? > Do you need to go back and revise your strategy? > Is your plan working? > Do you need to revise the plan?

5 Steps to Forceful Self-Advocacy

How to help a student with ADHD understand and communicate his or her learning needs. **by Jerome Schultz, Ph.D.**

SELF-ADVOCACY IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPACTFUL SKILL FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH ADHD and learning disabilities, but it's seldom taught in middle or high school. When children, adolescents, and young adults with ADHD learn and use the skills of self-advocacy—a set of behaviors to communicate that they are competent, and willing to take on challenges—they almost always do better in school, in social activities, and eventually in the workplace.

Self-advocacy is built on a foundation of self-awareness that exists only when students have a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Even young students (no later than grade 3) need to understand their ADHD and/or LD well enough to explain it to others, including teachers. You will know your child is practicing self-advocacy when you hear him say, "I think I can do that! But can you please write the steps you just said on the board? That will help me do it a lot better."

Here are some practical strategies for helping a child build self-awareness:

1 Create a Success File of work done well, done extremely well, and not done well at all. Code the samples accordingly and use them as tangible evidence of the student's abilities and capabilities—and the factors that contributed to poorer output.

2 To evaluate Success File work, develop a checklist

that includes criteria like:

- I was interested in the topic
- I felt confident that I could do the work, with
 - a lot of help
 - a little assistance
 - no extra help
- I was right about the amount of help I needed
- The work was as difficult as I expected it would be
- I planned for the right amount of time to finish the work
- I needed to explain to someone why the task might be challenging for me
- I knew why this might be difficult, but I worked through it myself.

3 Develop a personal self-advocacy plan to encourage your student to assume responsibility for and ownership of his future.

> **Help the student identify several personal goals** ("go to college," "become a nurse," "work with animals").

> **Encourage him to research or interview people** who have achieved similar goals to find out

how they accomplished them.

> **Ask him to identify the factors** and personal traits that contribute to reaching—or not reaching—the goal.

> **Help the student develop strategies** to maximize his success factors and to minimize his potential impediments.

4 Create a Situational Action Plan (SAP) to address any specific circumstance in which the student feels someone is depriving her of her rights or preventing her from reaching her goals. A good SAP will define the problem ("My teacher won't allow me to give oral answers on a test, despite my verified problems with written expression"), and enumerate strategies for addressing the problem.

5 Encourage students to keep a journal in which they record incidents of self-advocacy, including a description of the situation, the skills they used, an assessment of the result, and what they'd do differently next time.

“Take a picture of the student raising her hand and tape the photo to her desk.”

Solve Behaviors Rooted in EF Deficits

An educator’s guide to solving disruptive classroom behaviors caused by executive dysfunction.

by **Chris Dendy, M.S.**

TALKING TOO MUCH. LEAVING AN ASSIGNED SEAT. BLURTING OUT IN CLASS. THESE disruptive behaviors—commonly associated with ADHD—are often misperceived as intentional misbehavior. In truth, they are clues that point to a child’s delayed brain maturity and executive dysfunction.

Disciplining or punishing disruptive behavior will do very little. To influence change, parents and educators must look deeper to solve the executive function deficits at the behaviors’ core. Below are common school behaviors rooted in impulsivity, and strategies for each. Keep in mind that younger students with ADHD may lack the language skills to understand instructions or to express their emotions. They may become easily frustrated and scream, cry, bite, or hit others.

CHALLENGE #1:

Talking Too Much or Blurting Out in Class

- > **Post and regularly review a Voice Level Chart:** outside voice, presentation voice, partner & group work, whisper, silent (for classwork).
- > **Remind students that “work time”** is “silent time.”
- > **Teach students to take a quick water break** and stretch if they feel tempted to talk during “silent time,” or quietly move away from a classmate who disrupts them.
- > **Take a picture of the student** raising her hand and waiting for help. Tape the picture to her desk as a reminder.
- > **Give the student a small color-coded flip chart** that indicates three levels of work status:
 - > **Green**—“I’m working fine.”
 - > **Yellow**—“I need help but I can keep working.”

- > **Red**—“I need help and I can’t keep working.”
- > **Teach students to write down comments** or questions, especially during “silent time.”

CHALLENGE #2:

Leaving an Assigned Seat for Fidgeting

- > **Seat a fidgety student at the end of the row** for more mobility and allow him to stand, kneel, or even to sit on his knees at the desk.
- > **Assign two workstations** so the student can move desks for different subjects.
- > **Take a snapshot of the student sitting at her desk** and tape it somewhere she can see it. Discuss and practice the desired behavior.

CHALLENGE #3:

Losing Focus and Finding Distractions

- > **Increase activity levels** and student interactions in lessons, and give students five-minute brain breaks between sessions.
- > **Use a variety of teaching strategies within each lesson**—lecture, worksheet, white board work, and team collaboration or game play.
- > **Pre-record a 10- to 12-minute lecture** so students can work at their own pace with ear buds. Assign students to groups to discuss answers and complete worksheets together.

6 Ways to Develop Emotional Control

Emotional regulation yields benefits in school, work, and relationships. Use these simple strategies to help kids recognize, name, and manage their intense ADHD emotions. **by Caroline Maguire, ACCG**

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL WALK IN LOCKSTEP. STRESS AND emotional flooding affect how children with ADHD learn, play, engage with classmates, follow directions, and retain information. When a child enters a heightened state of arousal, his ADHD brain wiring can interfere with social-emotional learning and sabotage self-regulation, making it difficult to access the curriculum, respond appropriately, reframe challenges, react with strategies, or problem-solve. Here are six strategies to promote emotional control:

1 Create a “pattern interrupt” by engaging in an exercise shown to reduce cortisol and adrenaline levels, increase dopamine levels, and release endorphins to induce a calmer state of mind. Shift a classroom’s internal chemistry by doing jumping jacks, jumping like a frog, walking like a bear on your hands and knees, stomping like an elephant, stretching to touch the sky, walking up and down the stairs, or touching toes.

2 Model emotional coping strategies by leading and posting regulation strategies in the classroom. Create a Zen corner and engage in mindful meditation practices to demonstrate their daily utility. Give each student a code word to alert you when he or she is struggling.

3 Reflect on and talk about book characters’ emotions to build a culture of empathy. Connect a character’s emotional state, reactions, and decision making to students’ inner emotional worlds. Build lifelong relationship-management skills by teaching students to reflect on their emotional state, recognize and share feelings, and step into others’ shoes.

4 Each morning, ask students to take a deep breath, then gauge and name their emotional state or

point to an emoji chart. Offer calming strategies to begin the day. This five-minute exercise will pay dividends as children free up mental and emotional energy for the day’s curriculum.

5 When friends or frenemies clash, prompt children to step into each other’s shoes and take their own emotional temperature. Prompt them to consider whether they need space to be less reactive and suggest centering strategies like quietly repeating a mantra such as, “I am OK.”

6 Improve students’ emotional vocabulary by posting a rich word bank for various nuanced emotional states—in book characters and in themselves. Alternatives to “angry” might be “disappointed,” “irritated,” or “annoyed.” Alternatives to “happy” might be “relieved,” “giddy,” or “content.”

☺ Create a Zen corner in the classroom where stressed students can take a mindfulness break. ☺

4 Steps to Building Motivation

Strategies for training focus, combating procrastination, and prioritizing effectively to drive future motivation.

by Sharon Saline, Psy.D.

WHEN KIDS WITH ADHD ARE UNMOTIVATED, IT'S OFTEN BECAUSE THEY EXPECT failure. They've given up on themselves because they've received and internalized too many negative messages. Ultimately, having self-motivation means you believe that you can do a task because you've got the necessary resources.

Use these strategies to collaborate with your child on tools that will inspire his or her participation and buy-in.

1 Choose Meaningful Incentives

Instead of threats or punishments, use earned privileges that link effort to satisfying accomplishment. For example, finishing half of the reading assignment earns a student a short snack break. Completing the full assignment earns her the privilege of chatting quietly with a friend or shooting hoops.

> **What does your child love?** Make a list together of small and big incentives.

> **Link the “have-to” tasks to the “want-to” activities.** Assign preferred activities to follow specific, unpreferred tasks.

2 Measure Capacity for Focus

Focus is the spotlight of attention. Many kids with ADHD are aware when they return from drifting off, but not when focus begins to fade.

> **Create coping strategies** your student can employ when they realize they have been distracted. Do they have a note-taker so they can listen better without writing? Will you help them fill in the gaps?

> **Brainstorm specific ways to deal with distractions** when they arise.

> **Agree on a way to cue students** to return to work that doesn't feel humiliating.

3 Improve Initiation

It is tough to get started on a task that seems insurmountable to a child, so begin by meeting your student where he is—noticing and rewarding effort as much as outcome.

> **Break down assignments and chores** into smaller parts—a few science problems or a page of reading to warm up. Set realistic goals.

> **Create, laminate, and post sheets with the steps for getting started.** These should include visual cues and explicitly list the resources and tools needed to complete a task. Instead of repeating instructions over and over, refer students to the lists of steps.

4 Confront Procrastination

Procrastination is the sometimes debilitating byproduct of anxiety and negative thinking. Many kids with ADHD give up before they start trying. Procrastination is an attempt to limit mistakes and reduce future shame.

> **Encourage your child to do a small portion of a daunting task** without editing or throwing it away.

> **Address negative expectations** based on past struggles and explore what's different now. Notice all efforts in a positive way.

> **Decide which tasks are easy, medium, and hard.** Establish an order for approaching tasks that make the most sense to the student. 📌

11 Strategies That Improve Emotional Control

Emotional regulation is a life-long skill that yields benefits in school, work, and relationships. Here are simple strategies for teaching kids to recognize, name, and manage their intense ADHD emotions. **By Caroline Maguire, M.Ed.**

How Parents Can Promote Emotional Control

- 1 Teach your child how their brain works.** When the thalamus perceives a threat, stressor, or danger, the amygdala will sound an alarm and create a cascade of heightened emotions. When children understand how this flooding affects them, they can better identify the sensations of fight, flight, or fear — such as a pounding heart, sweaty palms, and so on.
- 2 Help your child differentiate a thinking brain** — one that can problem-solve, learn, and pay attention — from a reactive brain that argues, yells, becomes snappy, or feels flooded with emotions. When a child understands how they act in different emotional states, they are better able to catch and reverse actions or tone synonymous with a reactive state.
- 3 Label emotions** with detail. Teach your child to identify, name, and process emotional nuances, such as feeling hopeful, overwhelmed, disappointed, or frustrated. By labeling emotions accurately, children are empowered to take the first step in processing them.
- 4 Some children ruminate and catastrophize**, labeling every setback or challenge “the end of the world.” This happens due to an overactive cingulate gyrus — the gear shifter in the brain. If this gets stuck, cycling from thought to thought or activity to activity can be hard. Help your child get un-stuck by showing them how to do an emotional temperature body scan and asking, “Am I ruminating?” “Am I stuck?” If the answer is yes, engage in mindfulness practices to de-escalate the effects of rumination.
- 5 Challenge perceptions when your child seems reactive and overly emotional.** Help them impartially compare the context of the situation to the story replaying in their head. Teach your child to double-check, not assume. Maybe he didn’t fully understand the comment, intention, or act. “What evidence is there that this story is true? What else could the answer be?” Now, work with him to alter his inner story by replacing negative thoughts with neutral thoughts. Replace “I know she is ignoring my text” to “She is probably busy and can’t respond right away.”

10 Ways to Improve Working Memory in Children

WORKING MEMORY IS THE ABILITY TO TEMPORARILY HOLD INFORMATION IN THE mind so as to recall it when needed. It's an executive function that allows us to store and use items on our "mental shelf" to get things done. In school, students rely on working memory to answer questions about a text they've read, and to solve multi-step math problems. At home, working memory helps a child follow directions and stay on task. Working memory fails when the volume of information to juggle surpasses storage capacity. The best way to improve working memory is to lighten the mental load by following the strategies below.

Build Memory at School

- > **Break tasks into small steps.** Too much information is overwhelming and quickly forgotten.
 - Test reading comprehension using shorter texts.
 - Check each step of a math problem to ensure accuracy.
- > **Provide written information.** Do not rely on oral instruction alone to deliver important information about homework, projects, tests, and more.
 - Write assignments in the same spot on the classroom blackboard and/or post them in your online education portal.
- > **Use visual aids.** Hang posters that cover important information and concepts that students can easily reference.
- > **Provide a framework for information.**
 - Prime students by saying, "I want you to remember this" before giving details.
 - Provide a count of the details to be remembered (e.g. 10 vocabulary words).
- > **Experiment with memory.** Use music, poems, visuals, and other mnemonic devices to increase recall.

Build Memory at Home

- > **Develop routines.** Following the same schedule eliminates guesswork and worry, freeing the mind from having to remember.
 - Develop a visual timeline or checklist of morning tasks.
 - Stick to the same bedtime routine even in summer and on weekends.
- > **Assign a designated space** for your child to put important items – keys, backpacks, sports equipment, etc. – as soon as they get home.
 - Use a reward chart to increase motivation to use the system.
- > **Use checklists.** These versatile lists are useful for jogging the memory and reducing nagging. Parents use them to codify and illustrate
 - Weekly chores
 - Daily schedules
 - Morning and evening routines
- > **Keep directions simple.** Avoid quickly listing tasks, especially if your child is in the middle of one. Simplify instructions or wait until one task is done before listing another.
- > **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** Your child's memory will falter if they're tired, hungry, and stressed. Make sure your child is eating nutritious meals, getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and practicing mindfulness.

5 Academic Challenges Rooted in ADHD Executive Dysfunction

A teacher's guide to facilitating learning and growth in students with executive function deficits. **By Chris Dendy, M.S.**

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION IS DIFFICULT TO RECOGNIZE. WHEN MANIFESTED IN THE classroom, EF challenges are often mistaken for disobedience, laziness, defiance, or apathy. Here are five common (and commonly misinterpreted) EF hurdles — and proven strategies for each.

EF CHALLENGE #1: Getting Started

- > Prompt the student to start working by giving them a private signal like tapping your head or pulling your ear.
- > Ask a classmate to tap on the student's desk as a reminder to keep working.
- > Set an alarm reminder to start or resume work.

EF CHALLENGE #2: Finishing Work

- > Encourage students to complete and submit their work in Google Docs that automatically save and can't be easily lost.
- > Alternatively, allow students to submit complete homework via email with a scan attachment.
- > Assign student pairings to mutually double check work completion.
- > Religiously put completed assignments in the book bag each evening after homework.

EF CHALLENGE #3: Forgetting Homework

- > Designate row captains to check that homework is turned in and that new homework assignments are written down.
- > Send homework assignments to students and parents via an app like Remind.
- > Designate a student to write down all assignments and distribute the list at day's end or via email.

EF CHALLENGE #4: Following Directions

- > Post concise class rules.
- > Write assignments on the board or print out instructions for each student.
- > When lining up to leave the classroom, ask a fidgety student to lead the line and > set an example for others.

EF CHALLENGE #5: Regulating Emotions

- > Give students a sheet of five or six basic emoji icons and ask them to circle how they are feeling each day.
- > As a class, read the flipbook, I Know what to Do When I'm Feeling, which offers tips for handling common feelings and emotions.
- > Conduct a class-wide check on students' emotional health by asking them to place one Post-It each on a chart displaying five or six feelings: "I'm great." "I'm OK." "I'm meh." "I'm struggling." "I need a check in." To maintain confidentiality, students should write their names on the back of the Post-It.
- > Hang a poster offering 10 self-calming tips — for example, take deep breaths, count to 10, listen to music, or walk it off.

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resistance, avoidance, or oppositional behavior signs of lack of motivation — or are they something else? How do we transfer the passion some kids have for video games, music, or skateboarding into the classroom? In this webinar, we'll explore what sparks kids' interest and keeps them motivated, and how to help them get into gear more easily and more often..

“Rev Up Your Child’s Executive Functions for a Successful School Year”

>> <http://Additu.de/318>

In this hour-long webinar, learn practical ways to get your child's brain back in “school mode” so they are ready for a successful school year, no matter how that looks. If you have tried teaching executive functioning strategies that never seem to “stick,” there is good news: This webinar will offer evidence-based approaches to reboot your child's brain to listen, pay attention, and follow through at school.

“Discipline with a Twist: How to Manage Challenging Behavior Problems in Children & Teens with ADHD”

>> <http://Additu.de/353>

Because ADHD is a neurological disorder, difficult behaviors are sometimes our child's way of telling us something isn't working for them. They are confused, overwhelmed, tired, or afraid. To change their response away from lying, defiance, and emotional outbursts, a new approach is necessary. In this webinar, you will learn to solve behavior problems with a multi-tiered approach.

“How to Become an Executive Function Detective: Solving ADHD Problems at School and Home”

>> <http://Additu.de/289>

In this webinar, Moms and Dads will learn to gather evidence from their child (what, where, when, why), interview witnesses (teachers, family members), and consult with experts (teachers, doctors, and therapists) to determine the causes of executive function shortfalls. Many families have found success and avoided conflict using our “detective method” of identifying and improving executive functions.

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