5 Reasons Why Every Parent Should Be Familiar with Executive Function

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The brain's executive function is a kind of internal "air traffic control system" that is a group of skills that helps us to focus on multiple streams of information at the same time, monitor errors, make decisions in light of available information, revise plans as necessary and resist the urge to let frustration lead to hasty actions.  The development of solid executive function is one of the key learning tasks of early childhood, and a significant contributor to later success in life.

In his recent webinar on the topic, Scientific Learning Chief Scientific Officer and Co-Founder Dr. William Jenkins dug deep into the three interrelated skills which comprise this air traffic control system: working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive/mental flexibility. These three skills help us keep information in mind, master our impulses, and remain flexible in the face of change—and are crucial building blocks for the development of both cognitive and social interaction skills in young children.

Dr. Jenkins outlined a number of reasons that parent should take an interest in helping their children develop sound executive function skills in early childhood:

**1. Strong executive function skills provide the best possible foundation for school readiness.**

In many ways, executive function skills could be called the "biological foundation" for school readiness. It has been shown that children with strong working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive/mental flexibility skills make greater gains in academic areas than peers with weaker executive function skills.  Coming to school with these foundational skills well-developed is just as important, if not more important, than fluency with letters and numbers.

**2. Executive function skills begin at home.**

Executive function skills are not automatic. These skills are built over time through practice, and can be observed in infants as early as six months, when some infants can understand and obey a simple directive such as "don't touch that plate." Parents can support (or "scaffold") the development of these skills from early childhood by teaching and reinforcing common concepts such as taking turns and using "inside" and "outside" voices. In addition to the home, executive function skills continue to be developed in childcare programs, pre-schools, elementary school classrooms, and other social settings, into adolescence.

**3. Understanding executive function helps parents collaborate with educators.**

As Dr. Jenkins notes in the webinar, elementary school teachers are keenly aware of the importance of executive function. Parents who are actively, consciously participating in the development of their child’s executive function skills will have a richer understanding of the importance of all activities and expectations revolving around classroom life, from the way one lines up for lunch to the way one studies for a spelling  test.  This has the potential for a dynamic, integrated educational experience for the student, teacher, and parents, working together to build a better brain for each child.

**4. Executive function skills help lay the foundation for the kind of student, citizen, and social being a child will become.**

Ultimately, the skills that cohere into executive function are the skills we use to navigate family, school, and work settings for our entire lives: retaining and using information, filtering thoughts and impulses, focusing on a task at hand, recognizing errors, changing plans, and understanding how different rules apply in different settings are all skills that require stewardship from birth to adulthood. Parents armed with this knowledge are more apt to take an active part in the development of these skills from an early age.

**5. Understanding executive function gives parents a fuller understanding of a child who is struggling.**

It is a mistake to immediately brand a child who struggles with things like inhibitory control as a "bad kid". Understanding the concepts behind executive function gives parents a fuller picture of what is happening with their child when he or she is having difficulty controlling impulses, focusing on a given task, or understanding that different rules may apply at different times. This will help parents decide if outside help may be needed to help their child (studies show there is at least short-term effectiveness in interventions that support executive function development).

Interested in learning more?  [Listen to Dr. Jenkins’ webinar here](http://www.scilearn.com/company/events/webinars/on-demand.php?url=http://bit.ly/z6YPqr&name=JenkinsExecutiveFunctions)for more in-depth information on all aspects of executive function and its importance in early childhood development and brain fitness.

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