

9 Terms to Know If Your Child Struggles With Executive Functioning Issues

Here are nine key terms and phrases doctors and other professionals use to describe executive functioning skills and the way your child thinks and learns.

1. Cognition

The many different ways your child's brain automatically makes sense of things. When experts refer to cognition or to cognitive skills, they mean how your child thinks, knows, remembers, judges and problem-solves.

2. Emotional control

Your child's ability to connect what she thinks and knows to how she feels and reacts. Poor emotional control might cause your child to overreact or respond inappropriately to things that upset her. For example, if she loses her video game time because she didn't finish her chores, she may have a tantrum because her siblings still have their game time.

3. Flexible thinking

Your child's ability to think of alternate ways of doing things, integrate new ideas into existing thinking, and abandon what isn't working to try a new approach. If your child has difficulty seeing other viewpoints or gets stuck on ideas even if they're not the best plans, experts might describe her as a "rigid thinker."

4. Organization

The ways your child gathers and stores information to use in the future. When experts talk about organization, it's not just about lining things up or putting them away. They're also referring to how your child stores and manages information in her brain so she can pull it out of her "mental filing cabinet" when she needs to use it.

5. Self-monitoring

Your child's ability to keep track of her performance on a task, assess how it measures up to a goal, and catch and correct mistakes. Without self-monitoring skills, your child may set the dinner table without noticing that she's putting the silverware in the wrong place and then be surprised when the table doesn't look like it should.

6. Task initiation

Your child's ability to get started on an activity and come up with ideas or problem-solving strategies on her own. For example, your child may not be able to initiate the task of cleaning her room because she can't figure out the first thing to do or any of the steps after that.

7. Working memory

Your child's ability to hold onto information in order to complete a task or activity. Working memory is a combination of auditory and visual-spatial memory, and relies on attention skills, too. If your child has weak working memory skills, things may "slip her mind" or be "right on the tip of her tongue."

8. Visual-spatial working memory

Your child's ability to use her "mind's eye" to hold onto visual information long enough to use it. Visual-spatial memory is like a camera in your child's brain. It can take snapshots to help her do things like search through laundry to find a sock that matches one you've shown her. It helps her recall where new things are and where she is in relation to them—for example, finding the bathroom in the middle of the night at a friend's house without bumping into walls.

9. Auditory working memory

Your child's ability to hold onto information she hears long enough to use it. It's what helps her remember the five words she just read so she can understand how they fit together in a sentence. It's also what helps her remember a phone number someone just said to her long enough to dial it.