

Learn to Scaffold: Build Your Teen's Executive Functions All Year Long

Your teen is forging his own identity and fighting to stand on his own two feet. But he's not quite there... yet. Negotiate a balance of support and independence by working with your teen to put in place structures for success.

BY [SHARON SALINE, PSY.D.](#)

Scaffolding is not about making excuses. Or protecting your child from every one of life's harsh lessons. It's about facilitating learning and making adjustments for [executive functioning weaknesses](#). It is about demonstrating, teaching, and slowly abdicating control.

The aim is to reach goals that may overwhelm your teen at first, and to do so in a measured, meaningful way. If the bar is too high or the timeline too fast, your teen may fail — and lost the motivation to try again. Building in small successes along the road to independence, however, will trigger his reward system and give him a blast of dopamine and positivity that will help him to keep pushing forward. Here is how to set up that system:

1. Set aside 30-45 minutes to talk.

Make time for a calm, planned conversation about the school year at a neutral time, like after a meal or on a weekend. You may need two meetings to cover everything.

2. Ask your child to answer these questions:

- What worked well last year?
- What were your challenges?
- What would you like to continue?
- What would you like to see changed?

Share your observations and write everything down.

3. Pick one thing to maintain, and one thing to work on that you both named.

Remember, people can only change one thing at a time. Maybe it's baseline grades, or turning in homework, or going to after-school help weekly. You are the parent, so you get the final say, but your teen's buy-in is important.

For example, say you choose grades, and your teen agrees that keeping all subjects at 80 or above is a reasonable goal. Let your child make some suggestions first, and encourage her to follow her own ideas and pursue the things that matter to her. Then offer your input, and forge a solid path forward together.

4. Set up a weekly check-in plan.

Each week, meet to assess how things are going. Expect pushback, and be prepared to ignore it. It's a normal part of being a teen. Put on your Teflon suit and let the insults and rejection bounce off. Keep your sense of humor. Teens are interested in the process of problem solving, not just the solution.

5. Create a homework plan.

Collaborate to decide:

- Where is homework going to be done?
- When will you start?

- How long can you work before you start to lose steam?
- In what order should you work on things? Start with something easy, or the reverse? For kids on medication, starting with hard tasks before it wears off is ideal.

Plan specific breaks and times for study. Ask your child, “How long do you think you can work before you need a break?” That period becomes the timed work period before a break.

Determine:

- How long the break will be
- How you will notify your child when the break is over
- What your child is allowed to do during the break

The break should be incentive-based – something your child likes to do (read: not washing the dishes). It can be a time to check her phone, get a snack, go to the bathroom, or do some jumping jacks. It should not involve things that kids can’t stop to return to work, like video games. If your child can’t transition back to homework afterward, it’s not a good incentive. The break should be rejuvenating, not another argument waiting to happen.

Identify the things your child likes, and make a list. Write it down so you can refer back to it. These are your incentives/rewards so when the “have to” is finished, she can turn to the “can do.” Then after the break is over, reset the work period.

Identify things that don’t work. Say, “We have Snapchat on our list of incentives, but I have noticed that you’re arguing with me about that, so it’s not a good incentive anymore.” Own it, and name what is happening — namely, that your teen is not following the plan you agreed upon because she isn’t returning to work. This helps her to develop accountability.

Often “family work time” helps kids get started. Your child is at the kitchen table doing work, and you are at the kitchen table doing work at the same time. You can guide her when she gets off track without intruding because you are all already in the same room. Also, in a family workspace your child can’t say, “I need to text because I don’t understand this.” They can ask you.

If you see her veering off track, or slowing down and spacing out, you can say, “It seems like you could use a five-minute break to re-focus. If you need help, I’m here.”

6. Overcome your teen’s resistance.

If your child refuses to engage in your plan, you may have to remind him of the privileges you have given him. Usually this means computer, phone, or gaming. Teens often come to see these privileges as their rights.

Remind your teen that if he wants to continue to have his gaming hour every day, then he has to sit down and talk with you. That’s just how it works. That’s the trade-off. It can be as simple as, “If you want computer time, we meet once a week for 20 minutes to talk about school.” Collaborating is non-negotiable.

Frame it as, “Your record at school shows me you need support. I understand that you don’t want me breathing down your neck, but my job is to help you develop and become the most independent adult you can be. So I am going to step in, and it is best if we can agree on the way.”

“If you choose not to talk to me today, there won’t be game time today. Tomorrow you can do the same thing, or you can choose to do it differently.” Don’t be afraid to say, “I’m your parent and I love you. This is my job. We’re going to connect.”

7. Improve your teen’s follow through.

Use the rule of three. When you give an instruction to your teen, you need to:

1. Make eye contact
2. Say the instruction
3. Ask them to repeat it back to you

Your teen will probably roll her eyes at you or say, “Whatever.” It doesn’t matter. Make sure she repeats it back because this is how you’re going to build this skill. Repeating it back is more likely to encode the instruction in her working memory.

Ignore the negativity. Refer back to your mutually agreed upon plan for success, and meet every week to reassess and review how things are going. Change things if necessary.

8. Don’t forget the pat on the back.

Remember to praise your child for the little things. He is working hard to do this for you. He spends all day at school trying to hold it together, and now he’s home and trying to pay attention more.

His brain is tired and his energy is waning, so it helps to nudge him along with positivity. Offer a small incentive each time your child completes a step. This could be points toward a pair of sneakers. “Each time you get to school on time, you get 25 points.” Taking away all technology doesn’t tend to work.

Work together. Your teen will develop the motivation, organization, and persistence you both want to see. Your teen will feel more capable, and you will see the development of the resiliency and independence that you want to nurture.

This advice came from “[Organized and Motivated: A Parent’s Guide to Executive Function Fixes for Teens with ADHD](#),” an ADDitude webinar lead by Sharon Saline, Psy.D. in September 2018 that is now available for free replay.

The ADHD Brain Processes Rewards & Consequences Differently

Traditional carrots and sticks don’t motivate students with ADHD – that much is clear. But the neurological underpinnings behind this behavior still mystify many parents and teachers. Here, understand why the ADHD brain is tough to motivate, and how you can adjust your teaching and/or parenting accordingly.

BY [JEROME SCHULTZ, PH.D.](#)

Why Is It So Hard to Motivate Kids with ADHD?

Traditional motivational techniques — namely, rewards and consequences — don’t work for children with ADHD. This truth we hold to be self-evident. But why is it so? [ADHD brains](#) differ from neurotypical ones in a few important ways that impact motivation:

- The parts of the brain that manage [executive functions](#) and emotions have different levels of activity.

- Electrical activity differences make it harder for ADHD brains to filter out irrelevant stimuli, and focus on the task at hand.
- ADHD is linked to low dopamine activity, which impacts desire — and reactions to rewards, success, and failure.

These differences mean that kids with ADHD have to work harder to acquire information and pay attention. That can mean kids with ADHD experience more frustration and failure than they do success, which negatively affects self-perception and increases stress – only further paralyzing the brain. That can look like:

- **Lack of Desire:** *“I don’t want to do this.”*
- **Irrelevance:** *“There is no value in doing this!”*
- **Shame Avoidance:** *“If I do this I will look/feel stupid (again).”*
- **Success Avoidance:** *“If I do this boring task correctly, I’ll just get more of it”*
- **Desire to Retain Control:** *“You can’t MAKE me do this.”*

A child’s negative perceptions about his or her ability to complete a task may become a barrier to getting started — and result in less efficient processing because all that stress makes the brain shut down.

Therefore, kids with ADHD require a different approach to process stimulation, jump-start motivation, and manage the [emotional effects](#) of their challenges. Not because of an attitude problem – but because of their neurobiology.

How to Help Your Child Identify Motivational Problems

Fixing motivation is a long process that begins by helping your child understand his brain chemistry and the challenges it creates. From there, you must learn to position tasks in a way that makes them relevant for your child’s unique neurochemistry.

The three-step process for parents, teachers, and mental health specialists is as follows:

- **Name it.** Make sure your child knows she has a condition that can make certain situations more difficult or challenging. Help her understand that ADHD is real, but her fate is not sealed.
- **Explain it:** Teach your child that certain challenges are related to his condition, for example: getting organized, starting a task (initiating), keeping a flow of competing thoughts in the background, or completing a task.
- **Frame it:** Your child’s motivational difficulties are not related to intelligence. ADHD is a neurological difference. Say, “This doesn’t mean you’re not smart. It means your brain is working differently.” ADHD can present a challenge, but it doesn’t have to be a disability. It’s a skill deficit that *can* and *must* be overcome if students want to achieve greater success and live up to their fullest potential.

Some people with ADHD can independently address and overcome their challenges. But for *most* children, it takes guidance, education, and practice.

In order for a student with ADHD to successfully tap into his motivation, he must have or develop **self-awareness and self-advocacy**. That means a student is able to say the following:

- *I have this condition.*

- *I can explain my condition to other people — and that what looks like poor motivation is often related to my ADHD.*
- *I understand that my cognitive style and my biochemistry are unlike those of others.*
- *This makes tasks that are manageable for others very difficult for me.*
- *I may be more motivated by some tasks than others. This has to do with my history of experience with the task, and my mindset.*
- *Yes, I want to strengthen my ability in this area. I don't want to be like this. It's OK that I have ADHD, but I don't want to deal with the consequences. I want to get better at this thing.*

How to Help Your Child “Fix” Motivational Problems

1. **Help your child develop new skills.** Give your child the opportunity to acquire and use metacognitive strategies that can help her override disorganization and distraction — and improve executive functioning. She wants to be able to say, “I am working on this, and I am improving because of the effort I put into it.” Help her get there.
2. **Find a mentor or coach** — as in sports, or acting, or just about any skill — most people don't become proficient on their own. This coach could be a parent, teacher, or counselor, any adult the child trusts.
3. **Teach the value of honest self-appraisal**, and how to accept and use feedback from other people. Compare your child's current performance and use of skills to his previous efforts. Then, help him use the skills he's learned in the past to propel him further in the future. One of the simplest things we can do is ask our kids to rate the difficulty of the task being put before them on a scale of one to five – one being really easy, and five being really hard. Second, you should ask, “How capable are you of doing this task?” After helping your student complete the task, ask him to rate it again.
4. **Find a community of support for students**, a group of others (of different ages) working on the same life goal – in person or online. A great resource for this is [Eye to Eye](#), a non-profit that provides mentee/mentor program to schools across the U.S.
5. **Log accomplishments.** The brain wants to avoid failure, but it finds success addictive. So keep a record of “wins” for your child (like the ribbons and trophies on the wall of an athlete). That's part of what keeps people going. Our kids don't have a lot of trophies; let's think of how to turn that around.
6. **Focus on process, not product.** The former will lead to the improvement of the other.
7. **Cultivate a growth mindset (ala Carol Dweck).** “*I can and I will vs. I can't so I won't.*” Get your child to externalize what her brain is saying to her at the beginning of the task, and see if you can help her change that message at least for that task.
8. **Build in many opportunities to experience the joy (and the good “brain juice”) that comes from success** in an area of strength (sports, music, theater, electronics, dance, lyrics, poetry, et al). Let your child do the things that he does well. It will build good brain chemistry, which in turn makes his brain more ready and able to take on challenges.
9. *This advice came from “[How Parents and Teachers Can Use Brain Science to Increase Motivation in Children with ADHD](#),” an ADDitude webinar lead by Jerome Schultz, Ph.D. in August 2018 that is now available for free replay.*

