

Parent Guide: Success is about executive function, not motivation

In this guide, I'd like to share with parents what I've learned after interviewing thousands of families and after coaching both typical and out-of-the-box learners. More specifically, I'd like to answer the question, "What do successful students have in common?"



I would also like to explain why most motivation techniques fail to work, and share my three-part guide for parents who would like to help their child develop the executive function skills necessary for them to grow as students and adults.

I sincerely hope that sharing what I've learned will help you become an effective coach and an enthusiastic cheerleader for your child. Before we dive into the guide, I'd like to point out an important difference between education and schooling.

Education v Schooling

Education is the PRACTICE of passing down knowledge and traditions from one generation to the next. Schooling is the SYSTEM by which we institutionalize learning. Public schools in America have evolved very little since the mid-nineteenth century; with standardized content, lessons, and tests divided into individual subjects and then taught according to age.

Against many odds, dedicated and passionate teachers work tirelessly to guide their students through our current system of schooling; one that boils down your child's growth and progress into a few letter grades and test scores. One that rewards already successful students, and sadly fails to accommodate many kids in need of more individualized approaches to learning.

For a child who has trouble sitting still, regulating emotions, or focusing on a subject that doesn't hold their interest, the school day can be a long and arduous one. For a parent who sees nothing but negative comments and low scores on

report cards, helping your child through school can be just as frustrating and overwhelming.

What I'd like to say to parents whose child is struggling right now is that your child's lack of success in school does not necessarily translate to a lack of success in the world. That low grades do not reflect your child's ability to create a happy and fulfilling life. And that it is important you celebrate your child's talents, achievements, and positive characteristics at every opportunity.

It's Not About Motivation; It's About Executive Function

The most important lesson I've learned over the last seven years is that your child's ability to do well in school over time is not determined by their IQ. In fact, many of the kids who struggle the most in school are incredibly bright and even gifted.

Instead, what I discovered is that the students we call 'motivated' or 'successful' have one thing in common—they have developed the executive function skills necessary to navigate the current school system. What is executive function, and what role does it play in learning?

Executive function (ef), put very simply, is your child's ability to get stuff done—especially stuff that they find challenging or boring. Whether it's simple stuff like boiling an egg, or something more complex like writing a research paper, your child's ability to set a goal, organize materials, start, self-monitor, and finish a task relies on ef.

While we are not born with these skills, we do have the capacity to develop them over time (reaching full maturity in our mid to late 20's!). The part of the brain responsible for ef is the pre-frontal cortex (also the part of our brain that houses our imagination, self-expression, and emotional regulation).

This is important: When your child feels stressed out, the emotional center of their brain (or the amygdala) sends a fight, flight, or freeze signal to their body that literally hijacks and shuts down their pre-frontal cortex (or the part of the brain responsible for ef).

The reason that 'motivation' techniques fail is because they don't address your child's lack of ability to execute their tasks when they are experiencing stress. Struggling students are often labeled as 'lazy' or 'underperforming,' but the real issue is that they simply do not have the ability to manage their emotions, to plan ahead for the future, and to keep track of details.

Unfortunately, these kids are also the last to ask for help. Students labeled 'unmotivated' often don't feel understood by the adults around them. They believe that their past failures define their future potential. Many have said to me, "If only my grade depended on understanding the subject, I would get an 'A'."

How to Tell If your Child Struggles with EF

Students who struggle with ef tend to have signs of a dysfunctional routine—one that does not allow them to successfully reach the expectations placed upon them both in school and at home.

If your child is disorganized, stays up for hours finishing homework, or if they try to avoid homework at any cost, then they most likely struggle with ef. Their inability to manage their day successfully makes them feel overwhelmed and not in control.

Students who are overwhelmed tend to cope with stress by avoiding things that stress them out and instead seeking activities that give them pleasure. Common avoidance behaviors include:

- Spending too much time online or on video games.
- Taking long naps.
- Spending hours cleaning & organizing their room/desk until it's perfect.
- Rushing through homework.
- Avoiding tasks for fear of failure/making mistakes.
- Procrastinating on assignments or studying.
- Being argumentative.
- Lying about their homework & grades.
- Missing/Losing/Skipping assignments.

Three-Step Guide to Developing Executive Function

As a parent, it can be frustrating to witness your child avoiding their responsibilities and struggling to keep up in a system that doesn't meet their

needs. You may find yourself micro-managing your child, taking away distracting electronics, or spending hours negotiating with them to change their habits.

Often, you feel like you are choosing between confronting your child's behavior (causing tension), and avoiding the subject altogether (keeping the peace). How can parents help struggling, bored, or confused kids succeed (or survive) in an environment that doesn't adapt to their needs? The short answer is you can help them develop and maintain their own systems for coping with stress, and managing their materials, tasks, and time.

I believe parents play a vital role in creating an environment for their child that helps your child feel SAFE and FREE to be themselves, to fail, and to grow.

Here's how you can create that environment for your child and help them shift their habits to create a more functional routine over time.

1. Communicate without passing judgment

When your child is emotional, they are incapable of hearing logic or reasoning. All they know is that they feel overwhelmed and afraid. If your child is struggling in school, there may also feel anxious or have trouble processing their emotions. They may also feel ashamed for disappointing you or not living up to your expectations.

To get them to accept your help, you must first acknowledge how they feel and let them know you are there to help them figure things out, not to punish them.

Next time your child is expressing fear, frustration, or doubt, use the below phrases to acknowledge their emotions. Remember to take a deep breath, stay relaxed, and give them plenty of time to reply.

"I understand that you're feel [insert emotion]. What can I do to help?"
"I'm sorry that you're feeling [insert emotion}. Let me know how I can help."

If your child is being defiant or acting out, help them understand how their behavior is affecting you, and tell them what they can do to help themselves get what they want. Use an 'I' message to avoid passing judgment:

"When you [insert action] , I feel [insert emotion], and I would like you to [insert expectation]. "

Example: "When you interrupt me, I feel upset/get confused, and I would like you to let me finish my thought before you reply."

The best part of using this assertive tone instead of a bossy or authoritative one is that your child will feel SAFE to share their feelings with you and learn to communicate more effectively based on your example.

Both of the above approaches to communication disarm your child's defense mechanisms and help relieve the tension between you. They also help your child effectively communicate their emotions.

When your child feels safe to express themselves or fail without the fear of being judged, they will be more likely to confide in you and seek your support.

2. Help your child design their day

Telling your child to get something done rarely translates into them taking action. To a child who struggles with ef, the very idea of managing the number of details it takes to complete their tasks causes them to feel overwhelmed and avoid the work altogether. You may notice that when it's an activity they prefer to do—like building a 2,000-piece Lego fortress—they have no trouble focusing! This is because that activity brings them joy, even if it presents a challenge.

If you can help your child develop a routine that balances their obligations with their preferred activities, they will be much more likely to focus on completing tasks they find difficult or boring. This is less about your child being extrinsically motivated by their preferred activity, and more about them having the FREEDOM to take ownership of their day.

Planning their work and fun activities also lets them focus on their tasks without rushing—knowing they have set aside plenty of time to unwind and enjoy their evening.

Before following the below steps, ask your child to set aside 15 minutes for a chat at a certain time that you both agree to. The purpose of this chat is to put together a plan for their afternoon/evening.

Why? Because you want to help make sure they get to have a fun and relaxing evening, and writing down their tasks is a great way for your child to gain your trust and gain more FREEDOM.

Writing things down is also a great way to visualize their to-do list, manage their time, and relieve stress. Practicing this habit daily helps your child create a routine that enables them to transition into work-mode and sustain their focus.

Here's how to do it step-by-step

What you'll need: a piece of lined paper and pencil; a timer.

Ask your child what fun activities they have planned for their afternoon/evening and what time they plan on getting ready for bed. Ask them what tasks they absolutely need to complete so that they can relax and enjoy their free time.

STEP 1. On a sheet of paper, in a single column to the left, ask your child to list their "tasks" and their "fun activities" in the order they wish to complete them.

STEP 2. Ask them how much time (realistically!) each task will take and write that down in a column to the right of each task.

Tip: If your child struggles with ef, they will most likely overestimate or under-estimate how much time a task takes. They may also need to chunk activities in larger segments of time and take fewer breaks in order to help them sustain focus. They'll most-likely need to experiment with this to see what works best for them.

STEP 3. Write the start and end time for each task in a third column.

Tip: Make sure they have enough time to enjoy their evening before bedtime, and even a little bit of wiggle room in case something takes them longer than expected.

STEP 4. Help them organize the materials they need to complete each task.

Tip: This may get messy as kids who struggle with ef often have disorganized backpacks. The key here is to be patient, and let your child take ownership over how they organize while you encourage them and offer guidance.

STEP 5. Once this process is done, your child should set a timer and get to work.

Tip: using the microwave is fine, but it's great to have a timer on hand. Setting a timer is a great way to help your child stay focused and on task. Having healthy snacks to munch on, relaxing music, and a clutter-free study space are all great for improving focus.

Many times students avoid their work because they over-estimate how much time it will take. Other times, they procrastinate because they under-estimate the time

they need. Both approaches lead to stress and more work-avoidance. The more your child practices managing their time, the better they will get at it.

Remember, if your child avoids their responsibilities to “sneak” in free time, it may be because they believe they won’t have enough time for their preferred activities later on. Helping them design a schedule that balances work and play will make it more likely that they choose to delay their gratification.

Don't forget that developing new habits takes lots of PRACTICE and GUIDANCE. Don't expect perfection; instead use every hiccup as a learning opportunity. There will be lots of trial and error, and that's expected!

3. Notice and appreciate even the smallest steps in the right direction

Do your best to notice and encourage when your child puts in real effort—no matter the outcome. The more you acknowledge and encourage their actions the more warm and fuzzy you'll make them feel. On the other hand, if most of the communication from you is perceived by your child as negative, then they'll simply avoid you and any help you try to give them will fall on deaf ears.

Make sure not to give false praise, and to focus on your child's effort and improvement. Try using these sample phrases below to help your child celebrate small victories and to reinforce positive behaviors:

“You put your homework into your backpack without a reminder, awesome!”

“I'm so proud of you for sticking to your plan, you've got the rest of the night to relax!”

“I see you're studying two days before your test, that's smart!”

“Thank you for sharing how that made you feel, I will be more conscious in the future!”

No matter how small the gain, emphasize the massive effort it took your child to take that first step toward a better habit.

Changing a habit—especially one that gives your child immediate gratification—is extremely difficult. So, don't just notice when there is a positive outcome, but pay attention to the real efforts your child makes to meet a goal.

RECAP

Executive functions are a set of skills that enable your child to plan ahead, organize, start, and complete a task. Remember:

- Your child's ability to do well in school over time is not determined by their IQ.
- Habits can form either a functional routine that helps your child address daily challenges and reach goals, or a dysfunctional routine that results in your child avoiding responsibilities in order to relieve stress.

You can help your child develop better executive function with three proven techniques that create SAFETY, FREEDOM, and a ROUTINE.

- Communicate without passing judgment.
- Acknowledge your child's emotions and use the 'I' message to communicate assertively.
- Help your child design a simple routine that gets them through the work they don't feel like doing so they can get to their favorite activities.
- Recognize each small step in the right direction, and each bit of effort your child sincerely applies to reach their goals.
- These techniques will not create a perfect routine, but a functional one—do not expect perfection, only progress.

No two situations are the same—once you understand why these techniques work, you and your child can adjust how to apply them in a specific way that works for them.

The reason why the techniques above are effective is because they help you develop a positive relationship with your child, and help your child to adapt and adjust to challenges instead of avoiding them.

Therefore, it is important that you focus on increasing your child's emotional well being while decreasing their stress so that they feel safe to face their challenges and take the small steps every day to help them reach their long-term goals.