

Help your Child with ADHD/Anxiety Develop 3 Key Executive Functions

When you have a basic understanding of how ADHD and anxiety influence your child's executive functioning, you can start to understand why your child behaves the way they do, and what you can do to shift their behavior slowly over time.

Here's an overview of the three main executive functions, how they affect your child's behavior, and what you can do everyday to help your child build these critical skills.



#1 WORKING MEMORY: The ability to keep information in mind long enough to apply it.

Your child's working memory is their brain's desktop. It's where they juggle relevant information in real time, long enough to apply it to what they're doing. For example, asking your child to pick up their toys, make their bed, and wash up for dinner puts a strain on your child's working memory as they have to keep all of those directions in mind at the same time in order to execute those tasks. Children with ADHD have an extremely difficult time maintaining focus and juggling multiple things in mind.

How to improve working memory over time

First, if there's something important you need your child to do, don't assume it's as simple or easy for them as it is for you. Break it down into the most simple steps, and make sure your child understands clearly what you expect. Then **WRITE IT**, and **POST IT** in a visible place in the home.

You can use a checklist, a picture, or a timer to help your child manage their tasks. This is especially effective if the task you're asking them to do is repetitive. One of the best ways to boost working memory is to create a consistent routine - this puts less pressure on working memory as habits are formed and helps to pre-set your expectations in advance.

#2 COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY: The ability to see or think about something in more than one way, and to switch from one task to another.

The ability to think through problems logically and keep an open mind is a skill that takes a lot of practice over time. In order to develop our mental flexibility we need to develop our metacognition, or the ability to reflect on our past actions and emotions and learn from our mistakes.

Your child's ability to have multiple perspectives, to solve problems, and to transition from one activity to another is hindered by their impulses and emotions - especially when they are feeling anxious or fearful. Most of the time, their fear comes from the belief that they aren't good enough or smart enough to do something right. They may be afraid of the consequences of failure and may tend to avoid things that are new, scary, or not preferred.

How to build cognitive flexibility over time

The most important thing to remember here is your child is unable to think logically if they are in an emotional state. The first step in building cognitive flexibility is creating a safe space for your child so that they feel safe to try new things, to make mistakes, and to come to you for help.

Asking the right questions will help your child practice this vital skill over time. Some sample questions include: "How did that make you feel?"/ "What will you do differently next time?"/ "What's another way you can do that?"/ "What will you do next?"/ "What did you learn from this mistake?"

Having a nightly conversation about the high and low points of their day is a great way to reflect back on the day and celebrate victories. Sharing stories from your past about your challenges and triumphs is a fabulous way to model this skill and help your child develop their own resilience.

Research also shows that playing games is a great way to help your child practice flexible thinking in a fun and safe environment. Games allow your child to make mistakes, deal with failure, and plan ahead to the outcome they want.

#3 INHIBITORY CONTROL: The ability to regulate emotions, resist distractions, and regulate impulses.

When your child is fearful or frustrated (or in an emotionally dysregulated state) they are literally unable to hear logic or reasoning. Even though they may be physically safe, their brain is sounding an alarm and telling their nervous system that they are in danger or a life or death situation. This is what happens when their Amygdala (fear center of the brain) is activated. In this state, your child goes into fight, flight, or freeze mode.

How to build inhibitory control over time

For kids with ADHD, regulating impulses and emotions is extremely challenging. The most important thing here is that you practice holding a safe space for your child to help them stay calm and co-regulate with you. This means meeting their needs before you expect them to meet your needs.

As with the other executive functions, you must be able to model inhibitory control around your child in order for them to follow your lead. To do this, stop and think before reacting to your child's emotions and make sure you are emotionally regulated before responding to them.

To do this, recognize what actions trigger your emotions, practice self-care or meditation, and take care of your own issues so you can be present in the moment with your child.

Building skills takes time, patience, and practice!

Just like learning how to play the piano, executive functioning skills take lots of practice over time to develop. This process is about growth in millimeters so do not expect your child to have a big revelation overnight. You've taken the first and most critical step which is understanding the problem and becoming aware of how your actions influence your child's.

With this knowledge, you can take confident steps every single day toward the solution and toward creating a healthier and higher-quality relationship with your child.