



LEARNING AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

**HOW PARENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF CAN WORK TOGETHER TO
SUPPORT NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN**

Psychology in Schools Team, Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

Essex Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools - Essex
Child and Family Wellbeing Services

How would you rate your current understanding of skills such as planning, organising and remembering in children?



How would you rate your current confidence in supporting your child with planning, organising or remembering things?



Today's workshop

What is executive function?

Executive function differences

Supporting executive function skills

Supporting planning and organising

Supporting memory

Working together (parents/carers and schools)



The Brain House

Upstairs brain

- **The control tower – “executive function”**

Downstairs brain

- The alarm system – fight, flight, freeze or collapse response



Illustrated by Dr Hazel Harrison

What is executive function?



INHIBITION



ATTENTION



EMOTIONAL
CONTROL



INITIATION

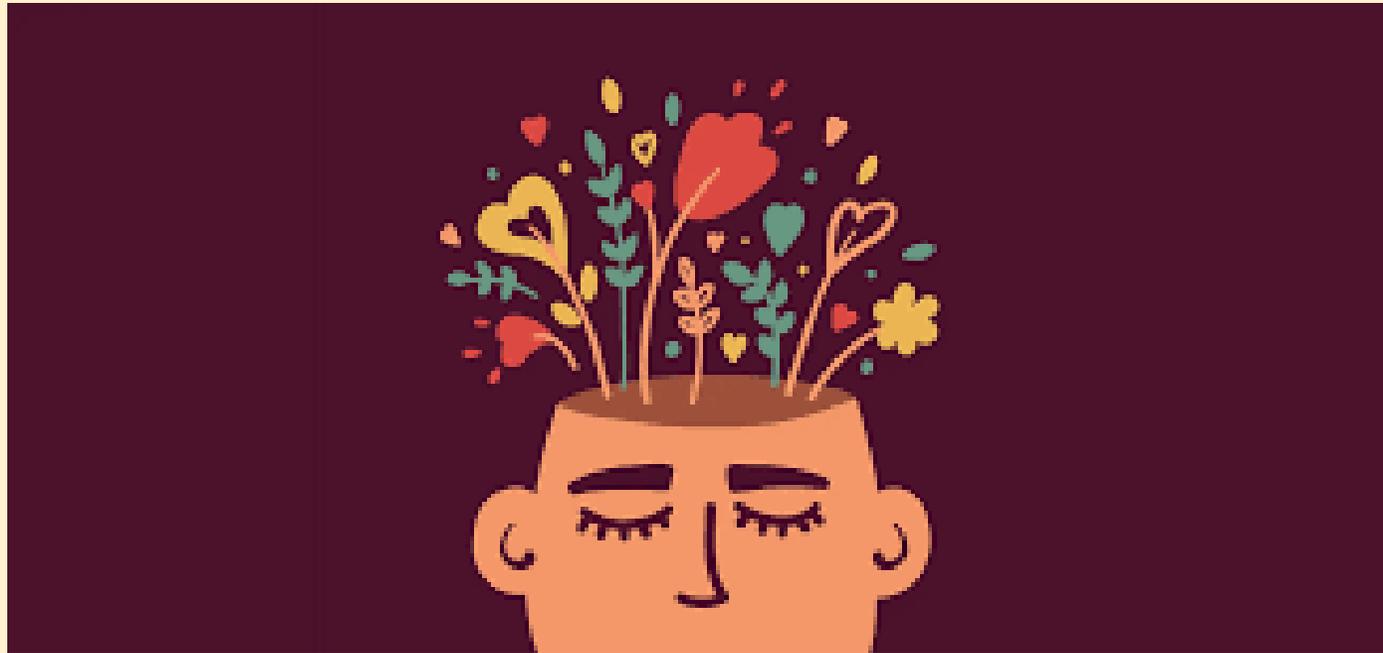


WORKING
MEMORY



PLANNING

Quick self-reflective question





Executive functioning is difficult!

Executive function difficulties

Inhibition	Attention	Emotional control
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor impulse control• Difficulty waiting their turn• Speaking/acting before thinking• Interrupting in conversation• Risky behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty focusing• Easily distracted• Seeming forgetful• Unable to remain on task• Struggle to follow instructions• Making seemingly careless mistakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easily overwhelmed and upset• Swinging between high and low moods• Emotions felt very intensely• Struggle to cope with emotions• Big emotional reactions

Executive function difficulties

Initiation	Working memory	Planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty starting activities• Seeming unmotivated/ unengaged• Unable to start tasks without help• Not asking for help	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forgetful• Incomplete recall• Failing to follow instructions• Losing track of place• Abandoning the task	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Disorganised• Untidy/ messy• Struggle to complete tasks to the end• Difficulty planning ahead• Difficulty making big decisions

Activity: What difficulties in executive functioning do you notice in your children?



Activity: How does this impact them at home and school?



Brain house in neurodivergent children

More sensitive
to some stimuli

Impulsivity

Innate difficulty
with emotion
regulation

Difficulty
understanding
big feelings

More frequent
negative
experiences

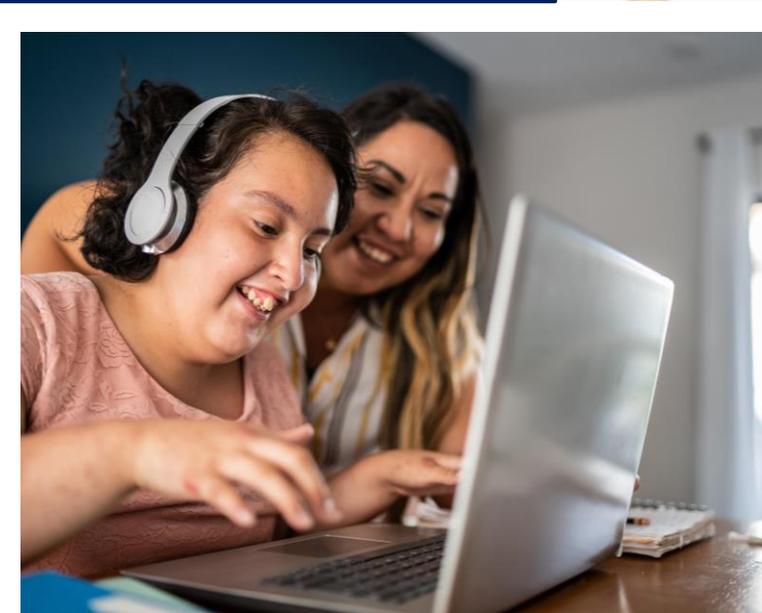
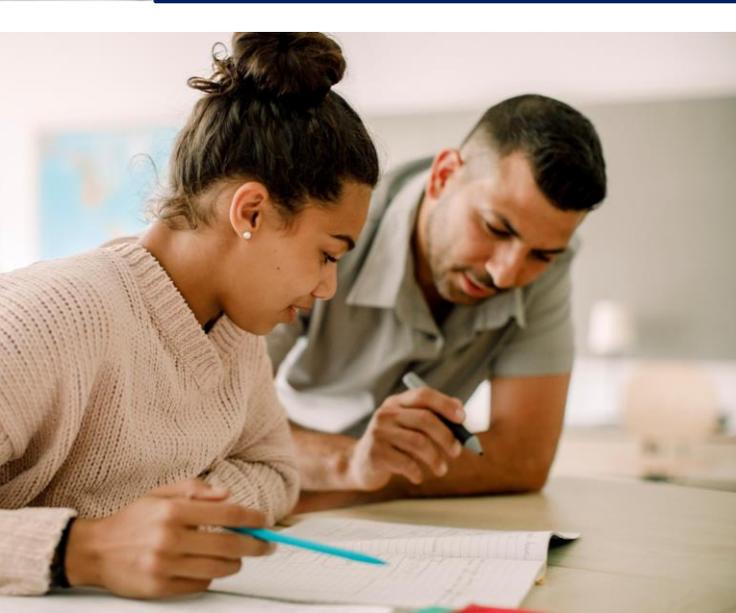
Neurodivergence and Executive Function

- Both ADHD and autism are associated with similar executive function difficulties:
 - Attention
 - Flexibility
 - Working memory
 - Processing speed
 - Response inhibition
- *E.g. Townes et al. (2023), Demetriou et al. (2017), Willcutt et al. (2005), Sonuga-Barke (2003)*





Supporting your child and students with executive functioning



Large group discussion: What skills do you need to play Monopoly?



The power of games!

- Playing games is an effective and fun way of helping your child develop executive function skills
- Games for younger children help practise basic skills like waiting your turn, emotional control and remembering rules
- Games for older children help practise high-level skills like planning and organisation



Small group discussion: What helps your children with planning and organising?



Supporting planning and organising

- Routines
- Making plans when feeling calm
- Using a checklist to simplify a task
- Using a calendar and/or planner
- Setting reminders



Task initiation

- Start with the smallest, easiest step
- Start 'doing', then shift momentum to the avoided task
- Turn the task into a game
- Create the illusion of urgency but do allow for extra time
- Make space for sensation seeking



Prioritising

- Set a timer and support the child to describe what needs to be done for a task
- Write down the steps needed to complete the task
- Cut out each step and physically order the tasks in front of you



Scaffolding

- Model how to do it
- Ask open questions
- Encourage thinking out loud
- Give hints and praise
- Offering a range of possible answers
- Break it down into steps
- Pitch a task just above current ability



Learned helplessness

- Repeated failures will impact on confidence and self-esteem
- Learned helplessness makes it difficult to engage in new tasks
- Create opportunities for success and scaffold to support this
- Focus on strengths and special interests



Small group discussion: What helps your children with their memory?



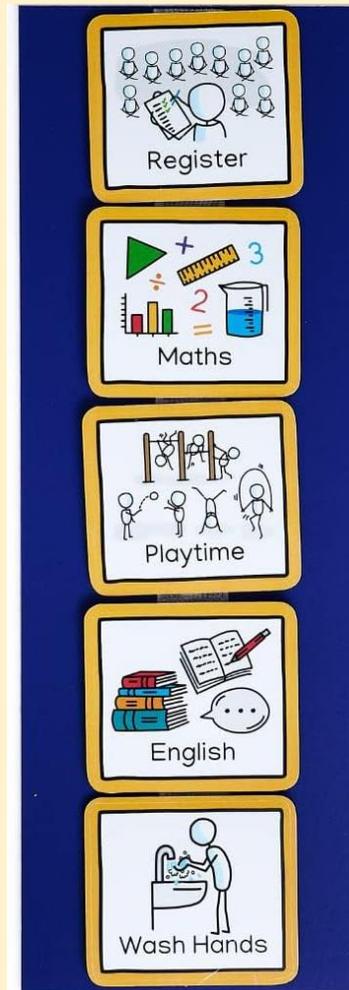
Supporting memory

- Reduce the amount of information to be remembered
- Break things down into small steps
- Re-present information if needed



Supporting memory

- Using memory aids/visuals
 - Visual timetable
 - Wall charts for regular tasks
 - Voice recordings for instructions
 - Setting timers and reminders



Supporting memory

- Other memory strategies
 - Rehearsal – practice makes perfect
 - Creating stories from the to-be-remembered information
 - Using rhymes or mnemonics
- Working memory training is available, but research shows this doesn't seem to improve 'real-life' memory



Working together across home and school

- Share difficulties in executive functioning you are noticing both at home and school
- Discuss and formulate ways to support your children across both environments – Don't forget to share what already works!
- Have ongoing communication to evaluate strategies put in place
- Support should be needs-led



Supporting Your Neurodivergent Child'
[Neurodiversity | Essex Family Forum](#) - Pages 178-182 are relevant and include practical tips and ideas.

KEY MESSAGES FROM OTHER PARENTS

“Understand your neurodiverse child's brain is wired different so don't expect them to respond or change to your ways. It's NOT a disorder it's just a different order to you.”

“Clear simple instructions. One instruction at a time. If they get overwhelmed take a step back, wait for them to calm and then approach them explaining the situation.”

A close-up photograph of two hands, one larger and one smaller, gently cupping a bright red, glossy heart. The hands are positioned as if offering or protecting the heart. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

“Ask for support. Do not try to do things alone”

“Have a good structure but allow flexibility and communicate to your school regularly”

“Every child is different. You've just got to find what works”

Resources on Supporting Executive Functioning

Further resources

- [Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children](#) by the Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
- [How You Can Manage Your Executive Dysfunction · ADHD/ Autism \(youtube.com\)](#)
Irene, The Thought Spot
- [What is Scaffolding? – YouTube](#)
- [Managing Impulsive and Risky Behaviour – Episode 6 ‘ADHD, A Young Person’s Guide’ – ACAMH](#)
- [Organising and prioritising - a guide for all audiences \(autism.org.uk\)](#)
- [Childhood Neurodiversity: How the Brain Develops \(youtube.com\)](#)

For schools

- [The EPIC Strategy Booklet: a guide for teachers \(adhdfoundation.org.uk\)](#)
- [Working Memory: A Practical Guide for Teachers](#)

Key sources of support and resources in Essex

- Supporting Your Neurodivergent Child [Neurodiversity | Essex Family Forum](#)
- Essex Family Forum [Home | Essex Family Forum](#)
- Multi Schools Council [Home - Multi Schools Council](#)
- Essex Local Offer Roadshows [Essex Local Offer Roadshows | Essex Local Offer](#)
- Ordinarily Available Targeted Support Framework [What good support in school looks like | Essex Local Offer](#)
- EXTRA [Extra Support for Families | Welcome to Extra Support for Families](#)
- MAZE [The MAZE Group | SEND Parenting Support Group in Essex](#)
- SNAP [SNAP Charity - Registered Charity No.1077787](#)
- Families in Focus Essex [Home - Families InFocus Essex](#)
- KIDS Autism Hub [Kids Autism Hub – A new support service for Essex, Southend, and Thurrock Aimed at 12–25-year-olds but families of younger children can be referred by their school](#)
- Autism Central [East of England delivered by Essex County Council | Autism Central](#)
- Essex Short Breaks [What are Essex Short Breaks?](#)
- Essex SEND IASS [Essex SEND - Information, Advice and Support Service](#)
- STRM Support [STRM Support – Send the Right Message](#)
- PACT Autism Support | [PACT For Autism | England](#)

Small group discussion: What can school, and home do differently to support children in this area?



Psychology in Schools' Team Free Workshops

From our childhood neurodiversity series...

- [What You Need to Know as a Parent/Carer](#)
- [Understanding and Supporting Sleep Difficulties](#)
- [Understanding and Supporting Eating Difficulties](#)
- [Understanding and Managing Behaviour](#)
- [How the Brain Develops](#)
- [The Impact of Early Life Stress](#)
- [Supporting Social Relationships](#)
- [Supporting Language and Communication](#)
- [Understanding and Supporting Sensory Needs](#)
- [The Benefits and Problems with Using Technology](#)

From our mental health series...

- [Understanding the adolescent brain - Supporting our teenagers with emotions](#)
- [Building Understanding and Supporting Your Child with Tourette's Syndrome/Tics](#)

Upcoming live parent/carers workshops:



www.nsft.uk/workshops
Eventbrite page

[Parent workshops | Norfolk and Suffolk NHS](#)

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FEEDBACK FORM

PINS Feedback Survey



[Click here](#)