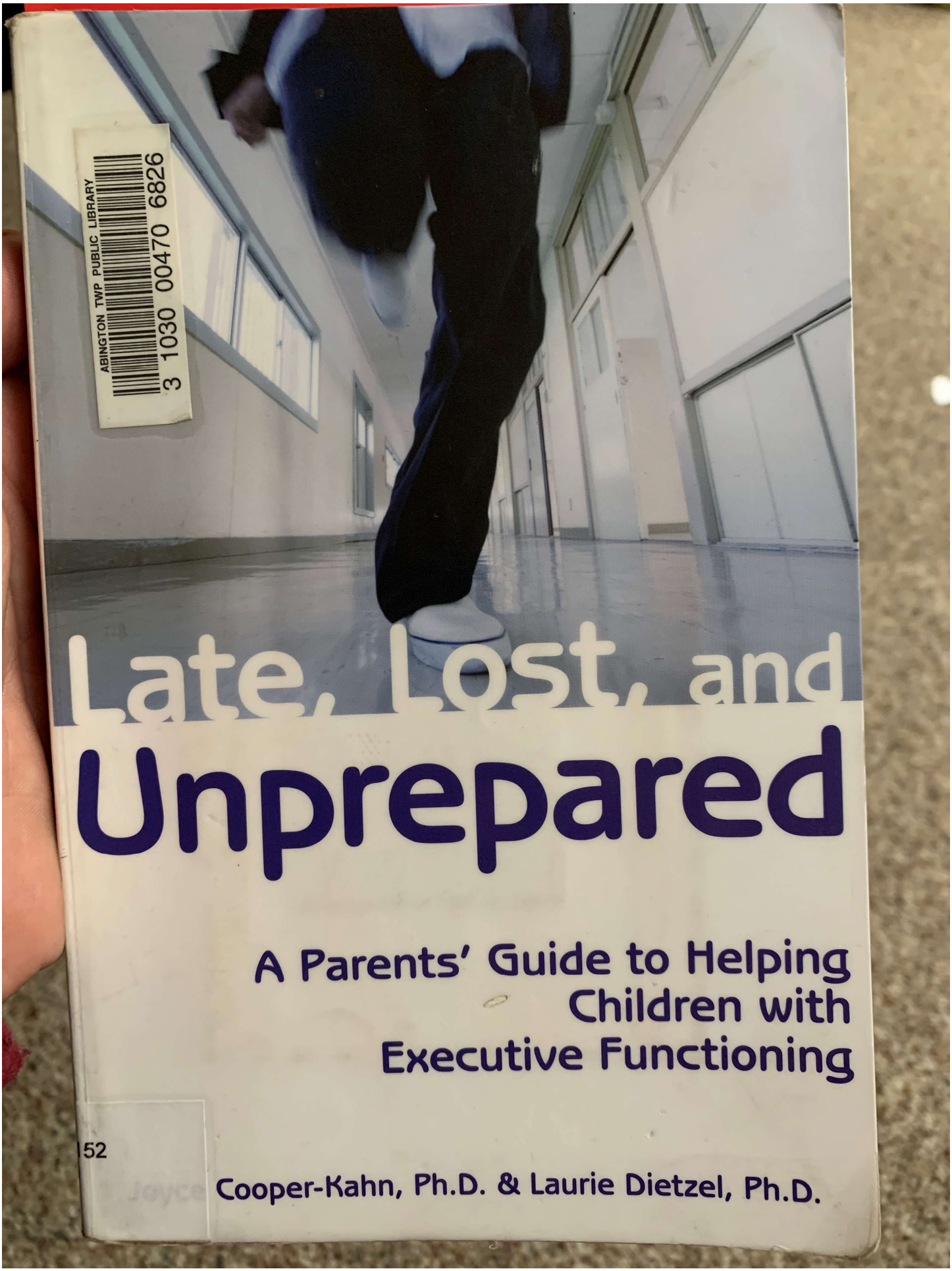

Late, Lost, and Unprepared

A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning

Cooper-Kahn, Ph.D. & Laurie Dietzel, Ph.D.

PARENTING / ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDERS

Is your child chronically late turning in papers? Does she show up for soccer practice without her soccer bag? Say things without thinking? Read something and forget what he read? Wait until the last minute and then get caught short of time to complete tasks?

Written by two clinical psychologists, ***Late, Lost, and Unprepared*** is a practical, down-to-earth guide for parents of children and adolescents who have difficulty with these skills—planning and organization, self-monitoring, impulse control, working memory, and initiating tasks. Drs. Cooper-Kahn and Dietzel help parents understand the developmental foundation of executive functioning, providing a friendly approach to managing disorganized children on a daily basis. The book offers both short-term strategies and ways to build skills needed for long-term, life-long success, whether a child has AD/HD, autism, learning disabilities, or no specific diagnosis.

"Here we have among the first practical manuals for parents that is replete with realistic, science-based, and compassionate recommendations for compensating for children and young adults' weak executive abilities. The authors are to be congratulated for their straightforward, clear, and concise presentation of the material, their grounding of advice in science, and their litany of parental recommendations for managing and improving the self-regulation problems of children."

—Russell A. Barkley, Ph.D.
Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC

"In their powerful and thoughtful book, Drs. Cooper-Kahn and Dietzel have hit a home run for the team of parents and children dealing with organizational issues! This extremely well-written and wide-ranging book will inevitably become the 'go to' guide for parents of children of all ages as they deal with the common problems of following directions, completing work, and monitoring their behavior."

—Patricia O. Quinn, MD
Developmental Pediatrician, Washington, DC
Author of ***Putting on the Brakes: Understanding and Taking Control of Your ADD***

"Drs. Cooper-Kahn and Dietzel have filled a very important need for parents—putting the essential concepts of the executive functions into practical words and actions. They have written a book that families have been asking about for years. This practical guide will be a tremendous help to children, teens, and young adults as they learn the key skills to better manage their learning and problem-solving."

—Gerard Gioia, Ph.D.
Director, Neuropsychology, Children's National Medical Center

*"**Late, Lost, and Unprepared** is so useful a book for parents and professionals that it's a wonder no one thought of it sooner. [The authors offer strategies] to help kids learn better social skills, get homework done and actually turned in, remember what they've heard and read, and plan and organize—in short, to manage the ever increasing expectations placed on children every day. Whether you're a parent raising a child that struggles to meet daily demands, or a professional helping these kids, this book is a resource chock-full of workable solutions."*

—Kathleen G. Nadeau, Ph.D., Director
Chesapeake ADHD Center of Maryland
Author of ***ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life***

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A Formal Definition of Executive Functioning

Now (drum roll please), here is a formal definition of executive functioning:

> *The executive functions are a set of processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources in order to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills involving mental control and self-regulation.*

What mental control skills are covered under this umbrella? Different researchers and practitioners have their own favorite lists, although the overall concept is basically the same. We use the list proposed by Drs. Gerard A. Gioia, Peter K. Isquith, Steven C. Guy, and Lauren Kenworthy. These psychologists developed their understanding of executive functions through sound research and created a rating scale that helps parents, teachers, and professionals understand a particular child and think more specifically about how to help. More on this is discussed later in this chapter.

Before looking at the list of specific characteristics encompassed by the broad category of executive functions, we'd like to provide an example that makes the concepts more concrete.

Understanding Executive Functions by Looking at Life without Them

Thinking about what life is like for someone with weak executive functioning gives us a better understanding of the way these core skills affect our ability to manage life tasks. In the interest of making the concepts immediately relevant and meaningful, our example focuses on an adult, since we assume that most people reading this book are adults, too. Throughout the rest of the book we've included mostly examples of executive functioning in younger people.

The Road Trip without a Map

We'd like to tell you a story about our friend, Robin, who lives life without the benefit of strong executive functioning. Robin is a composite of many individuals we have known, and she struggles with weaknesses in executive skills, despite her well-intentioned efforts to reform herself.

can do the pet sitting. The crisis pass

So, they're off. Robin's husband drives the first shift. He
the neighborhood, gets onto the main highway, and then asks, "So, what's
the game plan? What's the route?" Robin answers, "Missouri is west, so I
know we have to go west." He looks at Robin incredulously and says, "You
don't know any more details than *that*? Well, get out the map. We can't
just head west with no more information that that!" And, of course, Robin
says, "What map? I don't have a map." Robin's husband sighs and shakes
his head. "Oh no! Another road trip without a map! Why didn't you tell
me you were having trouble getting it all organized? I could have helped."
Robin replied, "I didn't have any trouble. Everything is fine. We're in the
car, aren't we? We'll get there. What are you so upset about?"

Do you think Robin had made reservations for where to stay along
the way? Do you think she had planned out how much cash they would
need for the trip or made it to the bank ahead of time? These and many
other details, of course, had escaped planning.

A List of Executive Functions

With this example as a base, let's turn back to the question of what specific abilities are covered under the umbrella term of executive functioning. Below is the list of executive functions from Dr. Gioia and his colleagues. We've included a specific illustration of each executive function from our case study of Robin in parentheses after each definition.

1. **Inhibition**—The ability to stop one's own behavior at the appropriate time, including stopping actions and thoughts. The flip side of inhibition is impulsivity; if you have weak ability to stop yourself from acting on your impulses, then you are "impulsive." (When Aunt Sue called, it would have made sense to tell her, "Let me check the calendar first. It sounds great, but

I just need to look at everybody's schedules before I commit the whole family.")

2. **Shift**—The ability to move freely from one situation to another and to think flexibly in order to respond appropriately to the situation. (When the question emerged regarding who would watch the cats, Robin was stymied. Her husband, on the other hand, began generating possible solutions and was able to solve the problem relatively easily.)
3. **Emotional Control**—The ability to modulate emotional responses by bringing rational thought to bear on feelings. (The example here is Robin's anger when confronted with her own impulsive behavior in committing the family before checking out the dates: "Why are you all being so negative?")
4. **Initiation**—The ability to begin a task or activity and to independently generate ideas, responses, or problem-solving strategies. (Robin thought about calling to check on the date of the reunion, but she just didn't get around to it until her husband initiated the process.)
5. **Working Memory**—The capacity to hold information in mind for the purpose of completing a task. (Robin could not keep the dates of the reunion in her head long enough to put them on the calendar after her initial phone call from Aunt Sue.)
6. **Planning/Organization**—The ability to manage current and future-oriented task demands. (In this case, Robin lacked the ability to systematically think about what the family would need to be ready for the trip and to get to the intended place at the intended time with their needs cared for along the way.)
7. **Organization of Materials**—The ability to impose order on work, play, and storage spaces. (It was Robin's job to organize the things needed for the trip. However, she just piled things into the car rather than systematically making checklists and organizing things so important items would be easily accessible, so the space would be used efficiently, and so that people and "stuff" would be orderly and comfortable in the car.)
8. **Self-Monitoring**—The ability to monitor one's own performance and to measure it against some standard of what is needed or expected. (Despite the fact that they're off to Missouri without knowing how to get there, with almost no planning for what will happen along the way, and without a map, Robin does not understand why her husband is so upset.)

child begin to think and plan. Most two- and
to delay gratification for a few minutes to attain a goal.

Jimmy is a three-year-old who loves playing with his train set. However, he has learned that he has to get dressed and brush his teeth before playtime. Jimmy still needs to have a parent close by who provides reminders to follow the routine, which is age-appropriate. In contrast to most one-year-olds and some two-year-olds, he can often stay in control of his impulses long enough to complete the less desirable tasks in order to get to what he most wants to do.

Elementary School:

Once a child enters school, he is subject to increasing demands for task completion and impulse control. Children whose executive skills are developing as expected begin to think more flexibly about solving problems, although they continue to be quite focused on the "here and now." As kids proceed through elementary school, they show steady development of their planning, organizational, and self-monitoring skills and become more efficient when completing work. Working memory (the ability to hold information and directions for a brief period of time) also continues to develop. It is reasonable to expect most second and third graders to be able to easily follow two- to three-step directions and to remain focused in class for relatively long periods of time. Many fourth and fifth graders are able to do a pretty good job organizing their notebooks, desks, and lockers, although they may still need reminders and "check-ins" from their parents and teachers.

Lance is a typical third grader. Although his ability to accurately record his homework assignments, complete in-class work independently, and get ready for school and bed is improving, he still needs reminders. Lance needs help a few times a week with organizing his backpack and cleaning his room and school locker. While he is becoming more independent with his daily homework, he still needs considerable assistance completing long-term projects and editing his written work.

The Child's Experience of Executive Weaknesses

THE BASICS

- Efficient executive functioning is important for managing the practical demands of daily life.
- Executive weaknesses affect a child both in and out of school so the impact of weak executive functioning can be quite profound.
- Executive skills, such as impulse control and cognitive flexibility, also play a crucial role in managing social situations and dealing with stress.
- Some effects of executive weaknesses are *direct* in that the child or teen has trouble meeting expectations. Other effects are *indirect*, affecting a person's self-esteem and attitude.
- As parents, it is important to put ourselves in our child's place to understand her experience and to maintain a compassionate, helpful approach.

As frustrating and worrisome as it can be to raise a youngster with executive skill weaknesses, it is all the more frustrating for the child, herself. Whether a child expresses this frustration openly

Special Situations

When the Apple Does Not Fall Far From the Tree

Imagine the following: You are sitting in one of our offices as we describe your child's strengths, and then we explain that the reason he is having such difficulty is because of executive function weaknesses. When we get to the part about recommendations and what he needs to be successful, you keep hearing an emphasis on the need for adult-provided structure and support for a longer period of time than is typical. But what if you share your child's weaknesses? Perhaps organization and timeliness are not your strong suits. What if you have trouble with planning and sticking to a structure yourself? Panic may be your first response! Feelings of guilt and self-blame may follow.

Perhaps we can help you to take a different approach to your experience, because there is a silver lining to your cloud. Remember that your child has the advantage of being raised by a parent who truly understands his difficulties, a companion on the journey of learning better skills for self-management. If you have first-hand experience with executive weaknesses, you may be able to understand your child's difficulties in a way that others cannot.

However, if you have executive weaknesses yourself, you likely need help to create the consistency, predictability, and order that your child needs. Enlist the aid of family members and other adults in your child's life. Although parents may be the obvious choice to provide the support that a child needs, other folks, including teachers, coaches, tutors, friends, and extended family members, can serve the same role. Seek professional resources for yourself if you need help with developing strategies for managing tasks.

Single Parents

Being a single parent presents a range of challenges. Having sole responsibility for raising a child who needs a high level of support and supervision can be tricky and exhausting. For single parents, identifying

assessment screens for these using a combination of interviews with primary caretakers, questionnaires filled out by caretakers and teachers, interview and observation of the child, and functional tests. "Functional tests" mean simply that we test how a child is doing in that area. These in-office tests are conducted one-on-one and involve asking questions, requiring the child to complete "hands-on" tasks, or to work independently. Whether testing is done by the school or a private professional, it should take place in a separate room which is relatively free of distractions.

2. The assessment process is important to determine which executive skills are problematic and to understand their impact on daily life.

The second purpose of an assessment is to understand the child's particular profile of executive strengths and weaknesses. As we outlined earlier, there are many different, but related, executive skills and it is rare for one, alone, to be out of whack.

Understanding a child's specific profile is much more helpful than saying generally that she has trouble with executive functioning. For example, what we do to help a child with working memory weaknesses may be very different from what we put into place for someone who has trouble getting started with work.

Often, for example, parents come to us stating, "I already know that my child has AD/HD, so I don't need any testing." Now, while people with AD/HD make up a very large percentage of those with executive dysfunction, simply knowing that someone does or does not have AD/HD is not enough information for developing a treatment plan. Unless the child has recently been evaluated and the report provides the data we need, at least a partial evaluation is required for good planning. A partial evaluation might involve interviews with the parents and the child, and collecting observational data from parents and teachers via structured rating scales.

A comprehensive evaluation outlines the profile of executive strengths and weaknesses both by gathering information about what others have observed regarding the child's executive functioning and by observing the child's behavior directly through testing. How does the child do on very structured tasks (such as simple questions) versus those with less of an inherent structure (such as those requiring longer

possible contributing factors can help to pinpoint other necessary ventions. Perhaps the whole family needs help with developing organizational strategies that work. These are things that should be considered by an evaluator.

You can always do a consultation with a professional to help you figure out if a full evaluation is even needed. In some cases you may already have a good enough understanding of the issues to move directly to intervention.

Who Does Testing and What Do They Test?

Neuropsychological testing? Psychoeducational evaluation? Psychological assessment? Help! What do these all mean, how are they different, and what professionals are qualified to give me the answers I need?

Let's keep it simple. Regardless of who signs the report and what the evaluation is called, you need someone who is qualified to address the following broad areas of development:

- Cognitive ability ("I.Q.")
- Language-based skills
- Visually-based skills
- Visual-motor integration
- Memory
- Attention
- Executive functions
- Academic achievement
- Social-emotional factors

A variety of professionals perform testing, including psychologists (school psychologists, clinical psychologists, and neuropsychologists), educational specialists, speech/language pathologists (SLP), occupational therapists (OT), and physical therapists (PT). Additionally, physicians (pediatricians, family practitioners, psychiatrists, and neurologists) contribute valuable information to the diagnostic process. Depending on the specific problem areas your child presents, one or more evaluators from different disciplines may be needed to get a full picture of your child.

Let us be clear about our bias: We are psychologists and we feel that well-trained psychologists who specialize in evaluation and child development are generally a good place to start in your efforts to help your child. An experienced psychologist may serve as a sort of case manager, coordinating the diagnostic team.

By experiencing success when the supports are in place, children learn that it is possible to succeed. With the guidance of adults, children can begin to understand the kinds of supports they need and where to find them so that, over time, they can learn to put these into place and use them as appropriate.

For most of the people we have worked with, the self-awareness and maturity to recognize the need for help and to seek appropriate support comes late in the game. Often, parental guidance continues to be needed into high school and, for some, into the college and young adult years. This guidance must be balanced with the need to allow the emotional and practical independence that our adolescents and young adults are seeking. That is no easy balance! It is important that adults evaluate on an ongoing basis whether they can scale back their direct involvement. In Chapter 10 we discuss ways to accomplish this balance.

Going the Distance: Building Executive Skills

If we only focus on short-term goals with our kids, then we are only doing half of our job. It is also important to provide the explicit teaching and the practice vital to increasing their executive competence. Building skills can be done with help from parents, teachers, tutors, therapists, and other important adults.

Long-term interventions focus on strengthening the executive system and building a repertoire of effective self-management skills to compensate for executive weaknesses. These interventions allow our children to be competent as they move out into the world on their own.

One of the most effective ways of building executive skills is by developing habits and routines that eventually become automatic. Building habits requires repetition, repetition, and more repetition. Here's the good news: Once you no longer have to think about doing something, you largely bypass the executive system. Here's the bad news: It really does require repetition, ad nauseum, for kids with executive weaknesses to internalize these behaviors. Remember, this is not a knowledge problem. As with adults who are trying to change their behavior (have you ever tried to lose weight?), kids often know what they should do, but tend to revert to their old ways. Once behaviors become automatic, they no longer require conscious effort. Until that point, independent performance of the desired behavior is likely to be inconsistent. This is why it is so important to provide the prosthetic environment while the skills are still developing.

An important part of helping disorganized kids is prioritizing what is getting in their way of academic or social adjustment. For example, although it may drive you crazy as a parent, her messy room may be less of a priority than her disorganized backpack. In order to be effective and supportive, we need to work on one goal at a time without becoming overwhelmed or sidetracked by blaming or frustration. Tackling one skill or issue at a time is not only practical, it also models how kids can best build strategies and skills.

Interventions are most likely to be effective when the child or adolescent plays an active role. Inviting collaboration can be challenging, particularly when adolescents are doing their best to separate from their parents. Sometimes the most unconventional approaches are the most effective. If a disorganized student remembers her binder because she puts it next to her lunch in the refrigerator, that is fine as long as it works for her!

This is why our work is exciting and fresh! The number of possible interventions is limited only by our ability to think outside the box. This is particularly true when trying to help kids who don't even know there is a box!

In the next few chapters, we present some of the interventions that we have found helpful for children with whom we have worked. Our goal, though, is for you to understand the principles well enough that you can design interventions that work for the specific challenges you and your child face. So, at the beginning of each intervention chapter, we list the general principles we apply to build better functioning in that particular area of executive weakness.

A FEW MORE THINGS ABOUT INTERVENTIONS

Interventions are not:

- Doing everything for the child
- Excuses for inadequate effort or bad behavior
- Praising or rewarding all behavior

Interventions often:

- Involve setting different expectations for a given child
- Change as a child grows up and encounters new tasks and demands
- Require ongoing adjustment.

problem-solving and monitoring how things are going. Kids help us understand what is getting in their way.

Focus on the Desired Outcome

Focus on helping the child to achieve a relevant, meaningful behavior rather than focusing on what is getting in the way. For example, squirmy and distractible kids often have trouble completing their schoolwork. Adults may assume that the problem with work completion is that the child needs to sit still and keep his attention on the worksheet. So, the child might be rewarded for sitting quietly in his seat and keeping his eyes on the paper. Unfortunately, that does not mean that the child is getting more work done!

If you want a child to complete more work, then focus on the goal of getting more work done! Now, there may need to be some other changes to allow that to happen. Ben may need to be moved away from the kid who encourages misbehavior. Ana may need to get up and walk around for a few minutes; she may be asked to hand out papers, run an errand, or be allowed to get a drink of water. Peter's concentration and work completion may be enhanced by letting him suck on a hard candy, chew gum, or use a fidget toy such as a squishy ball or piece of clay. However, all of these approaches should be evaluated in the context of whether or not the child is getting more work done. After we clarify just what the goal is for any intervention, we creatively generate possible ways to meet the goal. Whenever we can elicit input and cooperation from the child, the child's chances of success increase greatly.

Raise the Stakes

Concrete rewards, point systems and the like are all aimed at increasing the importance of a behavior from the child's perspective. Kids don't necessarily see the value of what we are trying to teach them. And if they don't see the value, they aren't likely to put much effort toward a goal. So, sometimes we need to make the behavioral goal more important to the child by tying it to a reward, or tethering failure to perform the desired behavior to a loss of privileges. Positive reinforcement for a specific behavior shines a spotlight on the goal, and it helps the child to maintain interest and sustain effort.

We understand that many parents have concerns about bribing or rewarding kids for what they theoretically *should* be doing. How-

For many kids and teens, behavioral plans help to build confidence, as they provide concrete evidence of their own competence when they meet the standards. Further, parents and kids, themselves, are less likely to make global, negative attributions about behavior when they see success with some behaviors despite not meeting all the goals.

Behavioral plans range from simple agreements, targeting just a few behaviors, to comprehensive plans that lay out expectations for the whole of the day at school and/or home. The more comprehensive plans are helpful for children who are unable to regulate their behavior without step-by-step guidance. Some kids also need the concrete and immediate feedback that a detailed behavioral plan offers. The key here is matching a plan to your child.

Matching a plan to the individual also includes choosing age-appropriate rewards for older children and teens. Reward systems work best, in general, when the child or teen contributes to the design of the plan by considering both the behavioral expectations and the possible rewards for improved performance. This is particularly important for teens, who will need to consider with parents what rewards would be meaningful to them. Perhaps more cell phone time? Perhaps they could save up points for an outing? Likewise, they will need to have input as to what privileges will be docked if they do not meet the standards.

Many plans incorporate a menu of rewards, since working toward the same reward repeatedly becomes less appealing once the novelty wears off. Reward menus for more comprehensive plans include some choices that require fewer points, such as what might be earned in a single day, as well as choices that would require points to be saved over a longer period of time.

For children and teens having behavioral issues at school, it is important that parents and teachers collaborate so that there is consistency and communication from one setting to the other.

The overarching goal of any formal behavioral plan is for the person to perform the desired behaviors so reliably and consistently that the plan is no longer needed. For many older children and teens, earning their way off the system is the biggest reward of all!

You will notice that the use of basic principles of behavior change, in general, and explicit behavioral plans, specifically, is incorporated into the suggestions we provide in Chapters 11 through 16. We also include some books in our reference section that you can turn to if you want to read more about behavioral plans.

Trust Your Child's Own Developmental Urges

Developmental unfolding is a powerful phenomenon, and most children have a strong need to be competent. If you can move out of a punitive perspective and align yourself with the part of your child that wants to grow up and be successful, then you will have fewer power struggles.

Practice these words: "Wow, you do have a problem. What do you think you can do about it?" Apply as needed when your child forgets to bring his book home from school, arrives at the beach in the summer with no bathing suit, et cetera. Help with problem solving, as needed, rather than taking over the problem or getting stuck in chastising, lecturing, or punishing.

When Should You Allow Your Child to Experience Natural Consequences for His Behavior?

Allowing your child to experience natural consequences *can* be a very effective way to motivate behavior change. For example, when a teen calls a week ahead of time to invite a friend over, his planning and initiation may be reinforced by the desired natural consequence because the friend was free to come over. The issues get trickier when the natural consequences are negative. Since many children and adolescents with executive function weaknesses do not yet have the skills they need to independently perform the desired behaviors, learning from experience may not be as effective as it is for typically developing peers. In such situations, negative natural consequences may be, at best, discouraging, and, at worst, devastating to continued development and success.

At times, we advise parents to intervene so that their kids do *not* experience the natural consequences of their behavior. Determining when you should intervene in the cycle of behavior and natural consequences is closely tied to your ability to set realistic expectations.

As an example, let's consider the developmental task of learning to cross the street independently. We assume that almost all kids eventually are able to cross the street without a parent present. This requires considerable executive skills as not all drivers stop at stop signs

and the child needs to be able to judge if a vehicle is far enough away to allow time to safely cross. All kids quickly learn the rule for street crossing: "Stop, look both ways, cross if it is clear." However, being able to recite the rule does not mean that a child is ready to perform this behavior. Is there a universal age at which all kids can cross the street? Of course not! Perhaps we should tell seven-year-old Jon, "Your brother crossed the street when he was seven, so we know you can do it too!" Some kids master this skill at seven, while others do not do so until age ten. (There are even some teenagers we worry about!) Now, the natural consequence of failure to cross the street according to the rules is simply too steep a price to let a child go if they are not ready, so we take an active role to make sure the child is safe.

Just as we would not expect a child to cross the street without a parent before he is ready, we should not expect that a child can independently complete a project, get ready for the day, or plan for the coming week before these skills and habits are developed to an adequate level of mastery.

Sometimes, negative natural consequences can motivate a child to start applying strategies he has been resistant to or even to seek new skills. For example, Matt might start using his checklist to pack up his soccer bag if he has to sit out a game or two because he did not bring his shin guards. However, when we consider whether or not to let a child suffer negative natural consequences, we must be attuned to two factors: whether success is within reasonable reaching distance, and the cost of experiencing the negative consequences.

Change Does Not Occur in a Smooth or Steady Uphill Manner

Expect slow progress with ups and downs along the way. If you have ever tried to lose weight, then you know how slow behavior change can be. If you have been successful at losing weight, you have learned to set realistic goals, to celebrate small victories, and to recover when you have a setback. These are principles that guide all behavior change. (And was it ever helpful to have someone chide or make fun of you when you had that piece of chocolate cake or skipped your aerobics class?)

Frustration and exhaustion are normal parts of the parenting experience (and the child experience). If you can accept that, then you will be better able to help your child and enjoy the progress along

Parenting is a tough, rewarding, always challenging twenty-four-hour-a-day job that, for most of us, extends well beyond our child's eighteenth birthday. We need to provide nurturance and support, and we need to help our kids develop into responsible, competent adults. For kids with weaknesses in executive functioning, the journey from childhood to adulthood can be rocky. As their peers are handling increasingly complex tasks with greater independence, the child with executive weaknesses may continue to rely heavily on adult-provided structure and guidance. Knowing that your child is out of synch with the standard expectations for her age, what guidelines do you use to set expectations? How do you know if the expectations you have set are realistic for your child or teen's unique profile of strengths and weaknesses?

Don't Try to Keep Up with the Jones

The good news is that you are the expert on your child. You have watched your child grow over the years and understand what your child needs to thrive. In this world of experts of every type and more self-help books than you can shake a stick at, you possess unique wisdom and need to "trust your gut" when setting expectations. Don't listen to your co-worker or sister who says that your child will never develop responsibility unless you demand more of her. It is often the case for kids with executive weaknesses that the intent and desire are there to meet age-appropriate goals, but the means for achieving those goals is not. Remember, executive dysfunction is a performance disability: there is a gap between ability/knowledge and independent, consistent behavior.

The Limbo Game of Setting Expectations

How do you know where to set the bar for your child? Here are some clues to help you figure out if your expectations are where they should be:

Clue #1

If your child continually underperforms or does not meet expectations, it is likely that the bar is set too high. Please delete the word "should" from your vocabulary, at least when discussing your child. Also, the fact that you did something when you were the child's age, or

that the child's olde
is not the criterion

Clue #2

If the bar is s
more times than n
tent; inconsistent b
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child can amaze yo
of seven times. If y
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to assume our kids
often than not the
to improve with p

Clue #3

If everyone
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performing in the

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a paper or test. M
very poor judges
forth adequate e
discouraging it is
because of inadv
So, don't assume
purpose. The chi
executive dysfun
as their peers do

Clue #4

If you feel l
consider that yo
tions. Often kids
and shame by p

that the child's older brother did not need extra help at the same task, is not the criterion to use to set the bar.

Clue #2

If the bar is set at the right height, your child should hit the goal more times than not. Don't expect your child to be 100 percent consistent; inconsistent behavior is the hallmark of executive dysfunction. This poses real challenges for setting fair expectations. It is like a trick; your child can amaze you with remembering to take out the garbage two out of seven times. If your child can do it sometimes, why can't you expect it to be done every time? Sometimes the child's essays are brilliant, while at other times it is hard to believe that the essay was written by the same child. And don't even get us started on the kids who spell a word three different ways within the same paper. Even though it's tempting to assume our kids are always trying to get away with something, more often than not they don't mean to be inconsistent. Look for the "hit" rate to improve with practice and repetition.

Clue #3

If everyone in your child's life seems to be in disagreement about how she's "doing," you may need to confer with a third party, perhaps by communicating with your child's teacher occasionally. Outside observations can provide a needed perspective on how your child is actually performing in the situation.

It is often instructive to ask students how they think they did on a paper or test. Many kids with problems in the executive system are very poor judges of their performance because they think they put forth adequate effort and did what was asked of them. Imagine how discouraging it is to believe that you studied hard but received a "D" because of inadvertently skipped items and seemingly careless errors. So, don't assume that your child is avoiding telling you the truth on purpose. The child may be clueless! (That is not to say that kids with executive dysfunction do not sometimes try to cover their tracks, just as their peers do.)

Clue #4

If you feel like you are on the brink of losing touch with your child, consider that your child may be having difficulty living up to expectations. Often kids with executive weaknesses cope with embarrassment and shame by pretending that they just don't care about school or

ability requiring a wheelchair to compete in a foot race with typically-developing peers, we shouldn't ask a child with executive dysfunction to independently manage certain tasks and situations.

We can best support our kids by helping them to understand that the executive functions are brain-based skills and that difficulties with them are not moral or personal weaknesses. You have great ability to understand your child and your child's needs. When you are unsure, consultation with a psychologist or other mental health professional may be useful.

Your Partner's Expectations

Don't be surprised if you and your significant other have divergent views on your child and where to set the bar. One of you wants to back down on expectations, while the other one thinks that providing stronger consequences is in order. This is quite common and may represent a situation in which it makes sense to consult with an objective third party. Last but certainly not least, blaming yourself or your partner as the biological source of these weaknesses is never productive. Feel free to take credit for your daughter's strong intelligence and artistic talent; acknowledge your shared executive weaknesses, if that is the case, but don't spend too much time there. More important is how you all move forward together.

Fading Support

Once you have provided external support for a period of time, it is important to "fade" out supports to see if your child can assume these functions. Fading supports means that you gradually reduce the amount of external support to the point where you are no longer involved at all. For example, perhaps you are working with your child on a daily basis to empty her backpack, sort the papers, and then organize them. To fade support, you might move first from doing the job with your child to observing and cuing as your child does it. The next step might be to back off from cuing, but to ask to see the backpack and notebook after they are organized. Then you might move to reviewing this every other day, then to random checks.

If your child continues to perform the task consistently and does the job relatively well, then you know that she is able to be independent on this task. However, if she falters at any step of the fading process,

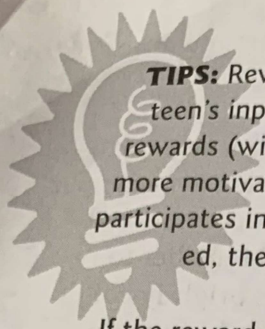
a large percentage of the time. You should continue expectations upward as the child's abilities increase.

TRY THIS!

When we work with families with impulsive children, we often introduce them to the metaphor used by authors Patricia O. Quinn, M.D. and Judith M. Stern, M.A. in their book, *Putting on the Brakes*. Even young children can understand that some kids, like cars, have weak brakes. We explain to the child that he must exercise his brakes to make them stronger and that his parents will help him to do so. It is a metaphor that translates into immediate understanding and lends itself to brief, direct verbal prompts. "Denise, you are moving so fast that you are bumping into people. You need to put on your brakes."

Strategies to Help a Child Control Runnin Off in Stores or Other Settings

1. Provide external structure by teaching rules that can be applied a variety of situations. For example:
   - "Jake, when we go for a walk you must always be within my sight. We need to be able to see each other's eyes. It is dang



TIPS: Reward systems should be created with the child or teen's input. If the child or teen has selected the possible rewards (with your approval, of course), then he will be a lot more motivated to work toward those goals. In fact, if he also participates in creating the target behaviors that will be rewarded, there is an even greater likelihood of success!

If the reward system that you create is not working well, you might benefit from a more systematic approach to your plan. Seek the guidance of a psychologist or behavior specialist, whether indirectly through reading up on reward systems (see the book on raising defiant children by Russell Barkley in our reference list), or if you need more direct help, by seeking a professional consultation.

CASE STUDY: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Trevor is a young boy who often interrupts his parents' conversations. A bright, verbal, and exuberant child, he both charms and irritates people with his constant stream of chatter.

Now, when Trevor comes bursting into a room, talking as he enters, Trevor's parents remind him to stop and listen to see if others are talking. They have taught him these rules: listen first, say "Excuse me" if others are talking and he wants to say something, then wait for the go-ahead. They still need to provide reminders, sometimes several times a day. ("Trevor, did you listen as you came into the kitchen?") Sometimes, they just put a finger to their lips to quiet him. When Trevor's excessive talking gets to be too much, they request quiet time. ("Trevor, my listener is feeling full right now. I need some quiet time for a few minutes. Please find something quiet to do on your own.")

When possible, Trevor's parents warn him ahead of time if they know they will need some adults-only conversation time. They help him to think ahead and to plan some things to do while the adults are talking.

Trevor's parents are very conscious of providing frequent feedback, praising him for controlling his talking. Trevor has been begging to have a sleep-over with a friend in a tent in the backyard. He and his parents have worked out a system wherein Trevor's self-control earns him points toward this goal.

Below, we've listed general intervention strategies that you'll want to employ with your child who has trouble initiating tasks. Further down, we've provided advice for dealing with more specific scenarios that you're likely to experience with your child or teen. Note that depending on the issue you are addressing with your child, you will typically use only a subset of the strategies discussed in this chapter.

SUMMARY: GENERAL STRATEGIES TO HELP YOUR CHILD GET STARTED

Provide external structure in the form of general guidelines, cues, and support.

Develop schedules and routines. Once an activity becomes automatic, the need for the initiation function is significantly reduced.

Use technology. Alarms, timers, and other external aids can help cue the start function.

Start the task with your child.

Use rewards (tangible, verbal, or otherwise) to motivate desired behavior. If rewards alone do not work, you may also need to take away privileges or, when appropriate, allow the natural consequence to occur. Be sure to let your child know in advance that he may lose privileges.

Strategies to Help Your Child Get Started with Homework

1. Provide external structure in the form of general guidelines, cues, and support. For example:
   - Convey the importance of homework by laying out guidelines in accordance with your values and your child's needs. ("Jack, I think it is good for you to get some physical activity before you sit down to do your homework. So, let's plan for a half-hour of outside play time after you get home from school. Then a quick snack and you start your homework. Once you have finished your homework and your chores, you can have some 'electronic time' for video games or television.")

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3. Use technology
   - A timer or
     begin a des

- Many people who have difficulty initiating tasks also have problems with planning and organizing. Their difficulty with getting started may be exacerbated by the fact that they are overwhelmed by the task and don't know where to start. They may need more guidelines and support to break down the task into component parts. (See Chapter 15: Helping Children Plan and Organize.)

2. Develop schedules and routines. For example:
   - Set up a daily homework time that is consistent from one day to the next (at least as much as other activities and demands allow). You may need to experiment a bit to determine what time works best for your child (i.e., after he's eaten a snack or had a chance to decompress after the school day).
   - Provide verbal reminders to help your child to monitor the time until the behavior becomes a routine. ("Jessie, it is three thirty now. If you want a snack, now is the time. You have fifteen minutes before homework time.")
   - Sit down together with your child each day and review his homework assignments. Plan out how long each task is likely to take and then plan out the afternoon and evening based on the homework demands and other activities.

TRY THIS!

Some children tend to rush through their homework in order to get to free time. For these children, we recommend that you designate not just a start time for homework, but a homework hour (or more, if this is an older child who tends to have more than an hour's worth of daily homework). So, homework time might be from five to six o'clock. If the child finishes his homework with time to spare, he can read a book that he picks out. Only homework and reading are allowed during the designated hour. That way, the child is less likely to rush through his work to get to video games or other preferred activities.

3. Use technology, for example:
   - A timer or watch with an alarm can be set to cue a child to [illegible] task. Watches with countdown timers can

be set so that an alarm goes off after a specific time interval, so that your child knows when play time is over and work time starts. The WatchMinder2®, a commercially available assistive device, is a digital watch that allows the child to receive reminders to complete tasks at given times. The Time Timer® and Time Tracker® Visual Timer & Clock are also excellent visual support tools that communicate the concept of elapsed time with an easy-to-understand graphic depiction of time remaining. Making the passage of time concrete, a tool like this can tell your child "how much longer?" before TV time is over and homework hour begins.

- To encourage independence, move from being the timekeeper to having the child set a timer or watch. You should probably monitor the time yourself, as well, so that you know if your child if fudging it or not. Be sure to offer lavish praise when your child starts homework without being cued!
- For older children who carry cell phones, consider using the alarm function that is often built into programs already loaded on the phone.
- Some older kids are real "techies" and might even embrace the chance to use a PDA (personal digital assistant) like a Palm Pilot or Blackberry. However, you might not want to purchase such an expensive piece of technology for a kid who loses everything!

4. Start the task with the child.
   - Some students spend an inordinate amount of time staring at their papers, just thinking, particularly when faced with a writing assignment. For such students, try talking through the assignment with them. Talk about what they will write, possible opening sentences, and then sit with them until they have started writing. Sometimes, to get them rolling, you might even try having them dictate the first sentence and you write it.

5. Use rewards and natural consequences to motivate desired behavior. For example:
   - Play "Beat the Clock": Measure how long it takes for the child to start a task once he has been given a directive. Reward the child for improving on his best time, e.g., if the child tends to sit at his desk for a long time before starting "morning work,"

Strategies to Help a Child with Written Expression and Other Complex, Multi-Step Tasks

1. Teach the use of concrete external storage systems to take the burden off of the internal working memory. For example:
   - Separate the process of brainstorming ideas from the mechanics of completing the project. Teach the child to take notes, either manually or using brainstorming software, while formulating ideas. For younger children, you may want to take notes while you talk together about their ideas. Some students benefit from voice-to-text software that allows them to talk into a microphone connected to their computers, while the computer creates a text file of these mental notes. (There are many voice-to-text software programs available commercially. All require some time to train the computer to understand the idiosyncrasies of an individual's voice, but the programs have improved substantially over the years.)
   - Those with working memory difficulties benefit from some of the same software that helps folks with planning and organization difficulties. Such programs, designed for brainstorming and organizing ideas into a visual schema, are great for capturing thoughts that evaporate too quickly from the minds of those with weak working memories. Such programs as Kidspiration®, Inspiration®, and Mindjet MindManager® are great tools for laying out written assignments. (See Figure 14.1.) More examples of how this software can be helpful appear in Chapter 15: Helping Children Plan and Organize.
   - Many schools now teach students to create visual organizers as the first step of the writing process. This is a way of formulating ideas and then working with those ideas to create a written response. The concrete visual format helps to reduce the amount of information that must be kept in mind while creating the response. Learn what types of visual organizers are being used in your child's classroom so that you can support this learning and use the same techniques at home.
2. Provide templates for procedures or routines that are repeated. For example:
   - Templates for writing tasks can be a valuable [illegible] students. They f[illegible]

Topic sentence--fairy tales have stood the test of time

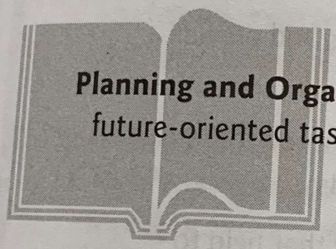
ure 14.1

- Teach the student to preview the material before jumping in to reading. The goal is to create a sort of general framework upon which she can hang the specifics of what she reads. ("Let's go through first and read all of the subheadings, look at any pictures, and read text boxes.")
- Teach the student to orient herself before reading a chapter by first reading the questions at the end of the chapter.

Strategies to Help a Child Who Has Trouble Taking Notes in Class

1. Accommodate working memory weaknesses by providing reasonable supports. For students with weak working memories, it can be very difficult to listen for learning and to write at the same time. For these students, taking notes may impede learning, and the notes that they do take are likely to be incomplete.
   - Set up a system for getting the day's notes from a peer buddy or from the teacher. This should be set up as a daily routine, rather than expecting the student to make the choice each day and then to arrange to get the notes.
   - Allow the student to use a voice recorder to record the day's lecture, and then she can review it later and take notes at home. Note that this requires a lot of extra time at home to review the day's learning. Not all students are willing or able to put in that much extra time.
   - Make the note-taking process easier and more productive by providing an outline at the beginning of the class with space for the student to fill in specific information. This serves as a preview of the new material and also highlights the important information that the teacher is expecting the student to take away from the lesson. Looking at that outline later also allows the student and the adults to determine whether or not the student has gotten all the most important information written down.
   - Minimize copying from the board. This seems like such a straightforward task, but can be very difficult for some students. Copying from the board requires students to keep information in their heads as they transfer it from the board to the paper. The children have to keep track of what they last wrote, keep that in mind as they look back up at the board, find where they left off, look at the next few letters or words,

15 Helping Children Plan and Organize



Planning and Organization = The ability to manage current and future-oriented task demands in a systematic, efficient manner.

People with weaknesses in planning and organization have trouble independently imposing structure and order on tasks and on ideas. So, they may have difficulty organizing information in their heads, as well as organizing their stuff or planning out a long-term project. When faced with a task, they have difficulty systematically thinking through the steps required, and they tend to underestimate the complexity and the time needed.

These folks also tend to have trouble seeing the natural organizational framework within a body of information. Not surprisingly, then, they have difficulty prioritizing information and focusing on the most important points. For example, they may read a chapter of a book but then have difficulty outlining what they have read. Their summaries tend to be a recounting of details, rather than an orderly synopsis of the main themes bolstered by supporting details.

Strategies reviewed in this chapter help children who:

- neglect to turn in completed assignments;
- arrive at an event completely unprepared;
- underestimate the effort involved in a project;

cess of settling into the classroom? Once you have identified the sticking point, consider what needs to be added to the routine to get past it.

- For those who lose track of homework at home, consider instituting the following routine (from *Enabling Disorganized Students to Succeed*, by Suzanne Stevens): "Homework is not done until your homework is in its proper folder or notebook, the folders and notebooks are packed into your backpack, and your backpack is on its launching pad." Try different ways of organizing homework to find the one that best suits your child. Some students do best with a separate homework folder so that everything that needs to be turned in is organized into one place. Others do better when they organize the homework by subject. If the teachers have set up a system that does not work for your child, talk with them about allowing alternatives. This can also be done as part of a formal individualized plan, like a 504 plan.

2. Develop templates of repetitive procedures. For example:
   - Teachers can create a checklist of things to be done upon entering or leaving the classroom.
   - Parents can create written checklists or photo charts for completing chores, preparing to catch the bus in the morning, gathering necessary stuff for sports practice, etc.

3. Provide accommodations. For example:
   - Involve your child's teacher(s) in building in reminders until the desired pattern of behavior (e.g., turning in homework as soon as the student walks into the classroom) becomes a habit. Teachers understandably balk at the idea of taking on responsibility for your child's job of turning in his work. However, repeated performance of a behavior is what makes it a habit; once the behavior is automatic, then the burden is lifted from the executive system. If you help the teacher to see this as a step in the process of building independent skills, with the prospect of fading out the teacher's prompting, it may encourage the teacher to get on board.

4. Teach the use of tricks and technology that help compensate for organizational weaknesses. For example:

before we go on vacation. We talked about some chores and also one summer reading project that you need to get done over the next two months. You may have some other things to add to the list. Let's review and plan after dinner tonight."

Strategies to Help a Child Organize His Backpack (and Locker, Desk, Bedroom, etc.)

1. Walk through the process with the child.
   - Consider together how and when materials need to be organized. Talk through each step of the process and find out where the process is breaking down. Then consider what steps need to be added or changed for the child to be more successful.

2. Offer organizational frameworks in advance.
   - Define what the organized space should look like. Where does each thing go? What belongs in a backpack or desk? Where do the other things belong? While it helps to talk a child through how you are organizing something as you are doing it, visual supports are also a very effective tool. Sometimes providing your child with a photograph of an organized desk or all the items that typically belong in his backpack can help him get a better grasp of what it means to be organized.

3. Provide accommodations at home and at school. For example:
   - Provide frequent monitoring and help with organizing materials. Hands-on help is often needed for younger children. For older children and for those who show that they are capable of more independent functioning, back off of direct help but provide frequent checks to ensure that the space is not getting out of control.
   - Some children need to have a scheduled time to organize their materials. For example, they may need to clean their desks or lockers every Friday and use some weekend time to sort all the papers and items they clear out. A daily or weekly backpack cleaning is often

independence by offering praise for using what she has learned. Support her

Our long-term goal is to help children develop a sufficient internal quality control system so that external monitoring is greatly reduced or no longer needed. We are looking for evidence that the process of self-monitoring is becoming more automatic and less effortful over time. When self-monitoring remains relatively weak, it is important for adolescents (and adults) to learn to enlist the help of others to provide feedback and support.

Educate Others and Advocate for Your Child

Kids who struggle with self-monitoring often demonstrate inconsistent performance and are prone to "careless" errors. Parents should talk with teachers to help them understand that such mistakes are not related to a lack of motivation but, instead, to developmental weaknesses in quality control. Since kids with certain temperaments attempt to manage self-monitoring problems by pretending not to care about their performance, we sometimes need to help teachers, coaches, and other important adults understand the need to look beyond a child's "surface" presentation to provide an appropriate level of assistance. And although it is tempting, no amount of lecturing ("It is important to work carefully.") has ever been an effective intervention.

Weak self-monitoring often occurs in combination with impulsiveness and poor regulation of attention. Teachers often encounter this cluster of behaviors and may have some good ideas to share. Both at home and at school, it is essential to provide these supports in a non-critical manner. Just as every best-selling author has a great editor, our kids with limited self-monitoring skills may need to have their work reviewed by a trusted adult.