

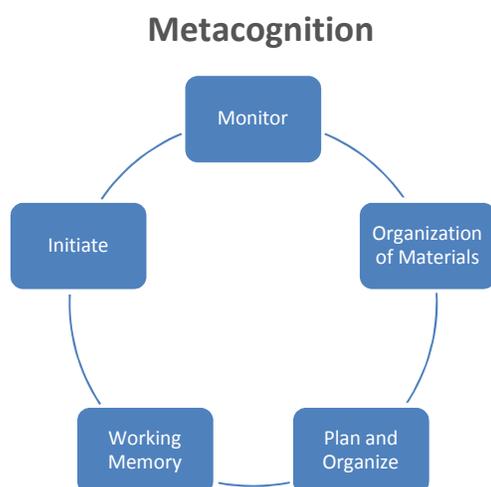
The Importance of Teaching Executive Functions by Dr. Kirstina Ordetx

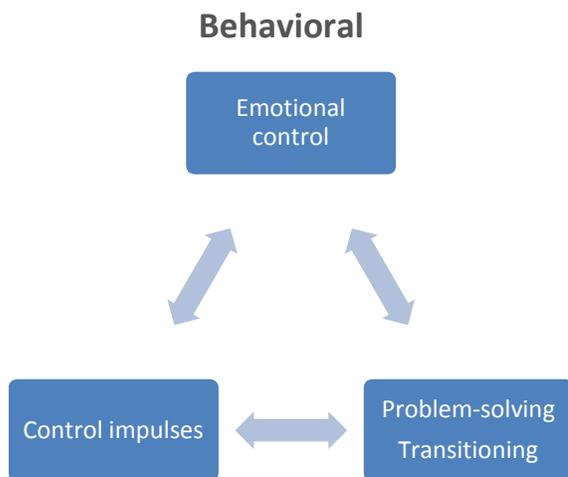
Students who have executive function deficits will have difficulty being organized, getting started and finishing work, remembering homework assignments, memorizing and later recalling facts, writing essays or reports, working math problems, being on time, controlling emotions, completing long-term projects and setting goals. They may make careless errors, interrupt others (so they do not forget what they want to say), frequently lose things, and are notorious for putting off projects. They may have messy rooms and disorganized backpacks as additional evidence. Sound familiar?

Executive function skills can have a profound impact on a student's school performance, social relationships, and self esteem. Weaknesses in this area may be associated with ADHD, processing disorders, or other specific learning disorders or they may exist as an isolated problem.

It is important to recognize that intellectual ability is different from executive capacity. In fact, very bright and gifted students can exhibit weak executive functions. When this is the case, students who have a high IQ and lack executive functioning skills are often referred to as "lazy" or "underachieving". So, how do you explain this consistent disorganization?

Executive function is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills that are responsible for mental control and self regulation. Mental control may also be referred to as "metacognition". This describes our ability to "think about thinking" or to be able to formulate a plan. Self regulation is the ability to think before we act. Both of the subskills of these functions are outlined here:





The development of executive functions is related to both brain maturity and experience. During the elementary school years, weak executive functions may be misidentified as immaturity and hyperactivity, despite the building of symptoms. Weakness in this area may not become evident until middle school, when the student faces increased homework assignments and tests, is required to demonstrate more responsibility, transitions across multiple classes, and is reliant on good organization and note-taking skills to maintain grades.

At this point, these students will not just develop these skills on their own. In an effort to help students keep their grades up, parents will often hire tutors to assist with homework. They will come to find that this does not address the problem and only creates continued dependency on adults.

Once the problem has been identified, explicit instruction in executive functions must be applied. Students will rely on the development of new habits, routines, and strategies to build a foundation of skills. Organizational systems and cues are critical components of executive functions treatment and must be embedded throughout school and home life.

In the Summit School, executive function training begins in preschool. The early years focus on self regulation and problem-solving, while middle and high schoolers immerse themselves in daily practice of effective strategies and self monitoring. We agree with the growing research that indicates that executive functioning skills are more important than academic test results and IQ scores in leading our students to reach their full potential.