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Getting to the Root
of Academic and
Behavior Problems



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these six functions and the problems you are likely to see if students' development in a particular one is delayed.

Planning and Problem Solving

Tyler has known about the math project for a week, and it's due tomorrow. Mom will hit the ceiling again when she checks his notebook tonight. He wants to do well in school, but whenever he gets long, complicated assignments, his brain goes into a stall. He cannot imagine where to begin, so he doesn't. It never occurs to him to ask for help.

To help you better identify with Tyler's problems, let's transfer his executive dysfunction to an adult scenario and pretend that you too have delayed development of your planning and problem-solving skills. What happens to you now? Well, like Tyler, you will frequently get lost in the goal setting and visualization of steps required for good work completion. A complex task like balancing your checkbook freaks you out. Your inability to break this big task into manageable parts makes the job look overwhelming and distasteful, so you tend to put it off. Now you find yourself sitting with three months' worth of receipts and bank statements in front of you, and you just can't bring yourself to get started because you cannot imagine where to begin. If you do get under way and something doesn't work out, you can't think of a plan B. It's easier to just say, "I simply can't do this," and so you stop.

Many students with faulty problem-solving skills are repeatedly unsuccessful in getting started or meeting goals and accessing resources, which can lead them to become more and more reluctant to set and stick with goals that challenge them. They begin to think they are not as smart or capable as other people. To avoid this downward spiral, adults need to consider the possibility that the lack of initiative may be due to executive dysfunction. If this is true, the problem is an "I can't" rather than an "I won't" issue, and support, not punishment, is what is needed.

The experience of feeling overwhelmed by complex problems is understandable, but it's risky to allow the pattern of not getting started or not following through to become a habit. Without direct support, this problem is likely to happen repeatedly, even when there are severe consequences. You will find a variety of specific suggestions for supporting the skills of problem solving and planning in Chapter 2.

When planning and problem solving is causing trouble, there is generally a related issue in the memory system.

OK. People often underestimate the time needed for a new task. Don't let that stress you out. Just make sure you adjust and keep going. The estimate doesn't have to be spot-on the first time. How will you use what you learned to help you make a closer estimate next time? Great. Do you want to adjust some of your time estimates for the next two steps, or will your plan still work? The difference between successful and unsuccessful people is not how many mistakes they make; it's how well they learn from their mistakes. You are right on target for learning how to plan your work and estimate your time, and that will help you in all your classes. What, other than adjusting time estimates, will you keep doing to meet your goal? Anything else you want to change to make your plan work even better?

Recognizing patterns of thinking and behaving that work well and seeing their own growth both serve to fuel students' future achievement. Having a list of small tasks written down gives a student the reward of having something to check off. Comparing time estimates with the reality of how long something actually takes helps the brain become more aware of both timing and pacing.

Building step-by-step plans and anticipating tough issues are essential for students with executive function delays. Remember, they will need ongoing guidance and corrective feedback for a long time as these skills develop.

Five-Step Problem-Solving Case Study: Poor Planning and Problem Solving

Now that we have explored root causes of failing to formulate and launch a plan and possible interventions, let's take a look at the whole five-step problem-solving process (Searle, 2007). The steps of this protocol will take you all the way from first spotting a problem to choosing an action plan to solve it. Although we'll be focusing on one case study student, Sara, the five steps can be used for any student, at any grade level, for any academic or behavioral problem. Let's meet our student and teacher and begin.

Sara is in social studies class and has had four reminders to start her assignment. Each time her teacher, Mrs. James, walks by, Sara is either reading her novel or doodling. When Mrs. James asks Sara why she is not doing the assignment, Sara sighs and

don't have these issues. Chances are you have had students in your class who are a lot like these two.

The first step in any solution is to identify specific reasons why the problems have been so difficult to solve. It's not that teachers haven't been trying to teach good organization and effective writing skills, so it must be deeper than what good basic instruction can accomplish. Talking about poor family support or a possible disability does not fall within our circle of influence, so our discussions will steer clear of those issues. Diagnosing possible reasons for poor organization and looking for specific gaps in writing skills is our plan of attack.

Use Figure 4.1 (p. 72) to help you identify the possible root causes of incomplete assignments due to poor organization. Which causes do you think fit our two students?

In Julio's case, the factors listed under "Cannot organize space and materials" will be the focus for his intervention plan. We'll see his teacher help him with sorting and classifying, identifying simple rules or patterns, and understanding why organizing space is important. For Loretta, teachers will concentrate on better organization of time (to help with meeting deadlines) and ideas (to help her break down complex tasks). Her problem-solving team will choose a few of the related causes listed under these focus issues to address one at a time. The column of factors under "Procrastinates" on the flowchart will be important for both students.

Let's look at a sampling of what research suggests are effective interventions for students who have trouble with organization, and select the ideas that are the best match for our case study students.

Interventions That Help with Organization

When the following research-based strategies are modeled and practiced, they help students unclutter their thinking and organize their time and work.

Getting Started: Prepare, Do, Check

I mentioned in Chapter 1 that although I am presenting the categories of executive function as distinct from one another, they often overlap, and the relationship between organization and planning is a prime example. A significant portion of organization has to do with planning and time management. I will offer one planning

before echoing what she hears. The keys to her success are short sessions (about 10 minutes long) and lots of positive feedback from Mrs. Barton to keep Cheree's motivation high.

RADIO READS. There is something about reading a passage over and over that can put kids' brains into a coma. A fun way to change it up is to have students read and perform from a script. Once Mrs. Barton's students knew they had a certain part to read in the "radio reading" broadcast, they were more than willing to practice the same material repeatedly to get their parts right for the performance. They were especially excited when they were encouraged to add sound effects and record their broadcast.

Knowing and Using Reading Strategies Appropriately

Poor readers are often unaware when their comprehension breaks down, and some don't know what to do when they do notice that the text doesn't make sense. For students to select and use reading strategies flexibly, teachers need to model the strategies, provide scheduled oral practice, and give corrective feedback (Honig, Diamond, & Gutlohn, 2008). As students verbalize their thinking, the teacher will be able to catch their errors and redirect them. Mrs. Barton uses partner reading as the research-based approach to introduce and practice these strategies (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000).

CUE CARDS. Have students write out a key question to focus their purpose for reading and use it as a bookmark. For example, the cue card could ask, "Why was there a dispute about whether or not the United States should enter into the war?" or "Who in this story would be a good friend for you, and why?" Before reading each page, they should use the cue card to remind themselves of what information they should be looking for.

RETELLING. Many students with focusing problems have a hard time "connecting the dots" as they read. As a result, they just keep reading even when the text doesn't make sense to them. They completely miss things that would help them make sense of the material, like patterns in the sequence of the plot, character development, the structure of the writing, and clues for drawing valid inferences. Retelling increases students' ability to listen to what they are reading or hearing and then summarize a deeper-than-literal understanding of the key ideas in their own words.

In her 2nd grade class, Mrs. Barton generally starts teaching this skill by using short books that include predictable patterns and just a few characters. She focuses students before they start reading by saying, "When we are finished with

collaboration and problem-solving skills go a long way toward creating productive relationships and high-performing classrooms. The 7th grade teachers with their three impulsive students are on the way to enjoying collaborative student-centered classrooms.

Establishing Routines and Accountability

As a result of teaching emotional awareness and coping skills, the 7th grade teachers' discussions now have less to do with investing in Ritalin dart guns for controlling behavior and more to do with developing ways to increase the type of student engagement that promotes independence and student responsibility.

Research (Lambert & McCombs, 1998) shows that successful students are actively involved in their own learning, monitor their thinking, think about their learning, and assume responsibility for their learning. The team knows this research and is now able to shift to a student-centered instructional approach. The teachers allocate at least 50 percent of each period as student processing time, during which students actively engage in applying skills and synthesizing knowledge for problem solving. During this time, cooperative learning, conferencing with students, and small-group instruction come into play.

While teachers are giving small-group instruction, other students have time to work on assignments at various stations. When routines and procedures are carefully taught and consistently reinforced, students actually stay on task for the most part. The stations hold challenging and engaging assignments that take the place of boring, one-size-fits-all worksheets and end-of-chapter assignments. These tasks reinforce and extend what students learned in class. Each station is set up in tiers of color-coded activities. Yellow-coded assignments are entry-level tasks that students may use if they need prerequisite and practice skills before taking on more challenging work. Green-coded assignments are application-level assignments requiring students to solve two-step problems that apply skills in combination. Blue-coded tasks are the most challenging problems and may require more than one class period to complete. Mr. Zornes and Miss Kenny give guidelines based on assessment results that help students figure out which stations they need to do first and which level to start with. Not all students are expected to complete all levels of all stations, but there are enough options available that there is never downtime. Before students were taught to monitor and control their own behavior, this would have been a risky plan. Now it works like a charm

Students who experience persistent failure often try to hide their embarrassment by pretending not to care. In older students, this often sounds like “This is boring, and who needs it anyway?” or “I didn’t really try.” Repeated failures have led them to believe that trying hard and doing what is asked aren’t enough to please the adults or to feel good about accomplishments. They come to believe that giving some effort and turning in the assignment are as much as a reasonable person should expect. It is not unlike the feeling you would experience if you felt you were totally incapable of skiing down a mountain with beautiful form. Just the fact that you tried and got to the bottom without killing yourself would seem worthy of applause in your mind. Any negative lecturing talk from your instructor—“I’ve told you how to do this 12 times. Now try harder!”—is likely to elicit an ugly reaction from you.

When effort is followed by a positive outcome, it is more likely to be repeated, so it is important to quickly reinforce even small attempts at growth. Specific and immediate feedback has positive effects (Marzano et al., 2001). Remember, if this is a new learner in the area of executive functioning, the lack of strong skill means this student is more in an “I can’t” situation than an “I won’t” one, just like the toddler.

10. Don’t Settle for Just a Label

Although a student may need a label to access some services at school, labels do little to identify exactly where learning or performance breaks down. Only when you identify specific barriers and missing skills can you plan appropriate short- and long-term interventions. This is not unlike when a patient complains of abdominal pain. The doctor must do more than label the problem and choose a generic remedy. Figuring out the root cause or causes of the pain is the only efficient, effective way to ensure that the intervention is appropriate. Once the cause is clear and the matching intervention decided on, it is essential that the patient (or the student, in our case) follows the plan to the letter and for the right amount of time.

If medication is part of the student intervention plan, remember that medication is only part of the solution. You don’t learn new ways of acting and thinking from medication. Medication may reduce symptoms, but a carefully designed intervention plan is what provides the essential skills and habits for long-term growth.