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## **Executive Function Action Plan: 10 Steps to Independence**

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One hallmark of ADHD is executive function trouble. Our kids aren't the best planners, organizers, or self-regulators. And that can get very frustrating very quickly. Parents, follow these 10 simple tips to boost all 7 executive functions — and help your child gain more independence.

### **Children and adults with ADHD tend to struggle with these 7 core executive functions:**

1. Self-awareness
2. Inhibition
3. Non-verbal working memory
4. Verbal working memory
5. Emotional self-regulation
6. Self-motivation
7. Planning and problem solving

Here's how you can help your child build up these muscles, gaining more control over their ADHD symptoms and taking strides toward independence along the way.

### **1. Enforce Accountability**

A lot of parents wonder how much accountability is appropriate. If ADHD is a disability outside of my child's control, should she be held accountable for her actions?

My answer is an unequivocal yes. The problem with ADHD is not with failure to understand consequences; it's with timing. With the steps that follow, you can help your child bolster her executive functions — but the first step is to not excuse her from accountability. If anything, make her more accountable — show her you have faith in her abilities by expecting her to do what is needed.

### **2. Write It Down**

Compensate for working memory deficits by making information visible, using notes cards, signs, sticky notes, lists, journals — anything at all! Once your child can see the information right in front of him, it'll be easier to jog his executive functions and help him build his working memory.

### **3. Make Time External**

Make time a physical, measurable thing by using clocks, timers, counters, or apps — there are tons of options! Helping your child see how much time has passed, how much is left, and how quickly it's passing is a great way to beat that classic ADHD enemy, "time blindness."

### **4. Offer Rewards**

Use rewards to make motivation external. Someone who struggles with executive functions will have trouble motivating herself to complete tasks that don't have immediate rewards. In these cases, it's best to create artificial forms of motivation, like token systems or daily report cards. Reinforcing long-term goals with short-term rewards strengthens a child's sense of self-motivation.

### **5. Make Learning Hands On**

Put the problem in their hands! Making problems as physical as possible — like using jelly beans or colored blocks to teach simple adding and subtracting, or utilizing word magnets to work on sentence structure — helps children reconcile their verbal and non-verbal working memories, and build their executive functions in the process.

### **6. Stop to Refuel**

Self-regulation and executive functions come in limited quantities. They can be depleted very quickly when your child works too hard over too short a time (like while taking a test). Give your child a chance to refuel by encouraging frequent breaks during tasks that stress the executive system. Breaks work best if they're 3 to 10 minutes long, and can help your child will get the fuel they need to tackle an assignment without getting distracted and losing track.

### **7. Practice Pep Talks**

You know that locker room pep talk before a big game? Your child needs one every day — sometimes more often. Teach your child to pump herself up by practicing saying “You can do this!” Positive self-statement push kids to try harder and put them one step closer to accomplishing their goals. Visualizing future rewards and talking themselves through the steps needed to achieve them is another great way to replenish the system and boost planning skills.

### **8. Get Physical**

Physical exercise has tons of well-known benefits — including giving a boost to your child's executive functioning! Routine physical exercise throughout the week can help refuel the tank (even make the tank bigger!) and help him cope better with his ADHD symptoms. Exercise can be found anywhere — try an organized sport, a bi-weekly park playdate, or a spur-of-the-moment run around the backyard!

### **9. Sip on Sugar (Yes, Really)**

Sugar has sometimes been known to exacerbate ADHD symptoms, but when your child is doing a lot of executive functioning (like taking an exam or finishing a big project), it may be a good idea to have her sip on some sugar-containing fluids, like lemonade or a sports drink. The glucose in these drinks fuels the frontal lobe, where the executive functions come from. The operative word here is “sip” — just a little should be able to keep your child's blood glucose up enough to get the job done.

### **10. Show Compassion**

This is a big one, folks. In most cases, ADHDers are just as smart as their peers, but their executive function problems keep them from showing what they know. The key to treatment is changing their environment to help them do that. So it's important that the people in their lives — especially parents — show compassion and willingness to help them learn. When your child messes up, don't go straight to yelling. Try to understand what went wrong — and how you can help him learn from his mistake.

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