



Parenting during pandemic

Day 38: Teaching children how to learn as well as what to learn

Alongside the content of the individual subjects that children learn in school, one of the other things they learn, often more indirectly, is how to learn. This is something that can be reinforced at home as well whether it is around doing homework or home schooling during the pandemic.

Executive function is the name given to lots of skills involved in goal-directed problem solving and mental flexibility. This includes things like planning, organising, time management and other skills that can be helpful in setting us up to learn.

For example, if we are going to sit down to do some homework, it can be helpful to make the first step a planning step where children have to think about what is expected in the task, what materials they might need, how much time this will take and so on. These planning and organising steps can mean they approach the homework task with a clear structure and knowing exactly what is expected. Another technique is to split tasks up into smaller steps and record these on a checklist or “to-do” list system. This means children practice planning and organisation but it also gives them a chance to have a list that will be full of ticks by the end, rather than just getting recognition for completing the overall task which would only give one chance to notice successes in their work. By allowing children to notice their successes, this can build self-esteem and allow a positive self-concept and image of themselves as learners.

Developmentally, executive function is one of the later skills to develop and there is evidence that it is still developing into our 20's. This is thought to account for some of the risk taking behaviours associated with adolescence because the part of the brain that plans and inhibits responses isn't fully formed while other functions are more developed at that stage. Very young children have not yet developed their executive functions and that's why parents tend to do the planning and organisation at that stage. As children develop, they start to take over some of the responsibilities. For example, when learning to get dressed, children often need help with some motor aspects of the task but also with organising the task and knowing what to put on first, next and last.

In terms of age and stage at which it might be helpful to try to support development of executive function at home with children around things like homework tasks, evidence suggests that around the age of 8 is when children have some measurable executive function skill.

Teaching children to use diaries, calendars and other organisation tools can be helpful and there are many apps and online ways of recording when things are happening or are due to be completed. If executive function skills can be supported in children then they learn these skills for use later when the amount of work they are expected to do is increased. For example, if they already know how to use diaries, calendars and “to-do” list systems then they should find it easier to create study timetables for exams later on. At the time of studying for exams, you are likely to want them to focus as much time on the content of their learning as possible and be able to fairly quickly create a timetable system to manage it all.

We hope these tips are helpful. Well done on managing another day off school and we hope you will join us again tomorrow.

Please contact us with questions, comments or topics you’d like to see covered. We’d love to hear your feedback.

Wishing you a safe and healthy path through this pandemic.