



This NEPS Handout has been developed by educational psychologists and is based on current knowledge in this area. It is intended as a guide only. Not all the advice here may apply to any one student or situation. Teachers and parents may wish to identify the strategies that will work best for them.

Executive Functioning Skills

Classroom Strategies – Primary and Post-Primary

What does executive functioning (EF) mean?

Planning

Organisation

Time management

Working memory

Metacognition

How executive functioning is present at different ages

Pre-school examples. The child's ability to:

- Run an errand (Go up to your room and fetch your shoes, your jumper and your bag)
- Clear dishes

Primary school examples. The child's ability to:

- Tidy their room
- Complete homework
- Write a story
- Save money for a present

Post-Primary School examples. The student's ability to:

- Navigate around the school
- Complete assignments on time
- Revise for and sit exams
- Completing projects and assignments on time
- Plan after school activities
- Respond to feedback after work has been corrected

Example: Writing task

Executive functioning level	Signs of Difficulty
Starting (activating)	S/he does not know how to begin a writing project
Organising	S/he has poor concept of how to outline an essay
Prioritising	S/he writes too much about things that are of minor importance to the story
Sequencing	S/he presents facts in a disorganised order/manner

Strategies to develop executive functioning

Goal setting

Encourage the pupil to think about the following:

- What do you need to do to achieve the aim of the task?
- How are you going to do this?
- When will you start the task?
- How long will it take?
- How will you break the task into smaller steps?
- How will you cope with obstacles that may occur?
- Don't Give Up- Keeping going even when things are hard is really important!

Scaffolding (providing a temporary frame to support pupils in their learning)

- Writing frames (a template is provided to pupil with headings to assist writing)
- Assignment templates (a template is provided to pupil with headings specific to a task)
- Verbal scaffolding (teacher/parent provides headings for a task orally)
- Diary reminders (reminders of what to do are written in a pupil's diary)

Planning

- Visual timetables (timetable of what to do is provided in a picture format)
- Subtask practice (the pupil practices a small/basic part of a task before completing a larger and more complex task)
- Meetings/ 'To Do' notes written into a diary
- Templates for completing regular tasks/assignments (a template is provided to the pupil with headings to assist in tasks)

Organisation

- The space (where the pupil is working. Is it quiet, warm etc?)
- The person (the pupil has all the necessary equipment for work and is aware that they are required to sit for a set length of time)
- The activity (knowing what the aim of the work is and having a writing frame for completing work)

Metacognition (thinking about what is involved in learning)

- Seeing the solution (what does the pupil want to achieve)
- Problem solving (asking questions and using prior knowledge to solve a problem)
- Dealing with choice making

Initiation (Starting a task)

- What is the plan of the task
- What is the estimated time frame (how long will the task take)
- Decide on what cue to signal the start (accepting a signal to start work)
- Reward for starting on time

Working memory (providing a reminder to help complete task)

- Verbal reminders (saying a word/phrase to act as a reminder)
- Alarm on pupil's watch
- Note book/computer 'To Do' lists
- Place cues prominently (written clues are put about room to act as a reminder)
- Check they are using the cue (ask the pupil, '*Did you remember?. ... What happened..?*')

Sustained attention (keeping concentration)

- Clear start and stop signs provided to/by pupil (example: use of a timer)
- Reminder boosters during the task
- Supervision and positive prompts (*Well done, you are working very well*)
- Decide the best time of day to study
- Reward at the end of task

Self regulation (The management of one's own behaviour without prompts)

- Anticipate that problems may occur and know steps of how to deal with them
- Teach relaxation strategies (such as deep breathing)
- Break tasks into smaller chunks
- Positive self statements (*I am good at maths, I can do this*)



General principles for all strategies

1. Teach the skills specifically
2. Remind the pupil with a list or schedule
3. Encourage personal mastery
 - establish routines
 - break down tasks
 - build in choices
 - negotiate
 - ask pupil to rate their skills -*What would a better score look like?*
4. Provide support until pupil has gained mastery. Fade support out rather than stop abruptly
5. Move from external to internal locus of control

Internal locus of control: children take responsibility for their own actions and achievements. They become internally motivated. **External** locus of control: children receive motivation through praise or rejection. They are therefore dependant on others to help keep their motivation going.