

## Executive function:

Changing how we look at Study Skills training for ADHD Students

### HOW HOMEWORKCOACH CAN HELP THE ADHD STUDENT SUCCEED



We address the Executive Function deficits that impact an ADHD child

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Self-Regulation</b>
 Planning and problem-solving	 Control of focus
 Organizing materials	 Inhibition (impulsiveness)
 Time management	 Initiation
 Cognitive flexibility	
 Working memory	

*HomeworkCoach has always expected its coaches to instill study skills as they help with school assignments, especially if the student is ADHD or disorganized. Now, as the concept of Executive Function casts a new light on ADHD, so should tutors (and teachers) modify their approach to teaching study skills.*

There's been a shift in the way both parents and school psychologists talk about ADHD. Increasingly, the "attention deficit" part of ADHD, which gives the disorder its name, is seen as just one aspect of a range of issues that impact a child's ability to succeed in school. It can be more useful to look at an ADHD-diagnosed child as having impaired or delayed "executive functioning."

Executive Function (EF) means the ability to regulate or control one's attention, mood and behavior in order to complete complex tasks well. EF includes the brain processes needed to organize, strategize, modify behavior based on consequences, and manage busy schedules. A person's executive function abilities are influenced by physical changes in the brain and by life experiences. The findings show that people with executive function deficit – which includes most of those diagnosed as ADHD – can benefit from direct instruction to overcome those deficits.

HomeworkCoach and our sister division In-Home Tutors are devoting considerable energy to developing training materials to help our tutors and coaches strengthen their students' executive functions. This, of course, will benefit the students' ability to study effectively and succeed in school.

### Some Concrete Ways Executive Function Deficit can Impact a Child

EF is a slippery concept with many different facets. There is no official list of executive functions, and those with weak EF skills are not necessarily weak across the board. One ADHD child may be frustratingly impulsive but generally have no trouble completing homework, while another has great trouble getting started on an assignment, but causes her mother no concern about her ability to exercise good judgment.

The following list serves as a representative but incomplete list of ways EF deficits are apparent in an ADHD child.

**Impulsive behavior.** This is a biggie, often associated with hyperactivity in younger ADHD children (they cannot resist the impulse to jump out of their chairs) and with risky behaviors in ADHD teens as they are exposed to alcohol, drugs or sex. A teen with strong executive function can stop and consider the consequences of particular behaviors and make more deliberate choices.

**Unable to control focus.** As any parent knows, there is sometimes no deficit in the attention their ADHD child can give to something that interests them (video games!). In terms of EF, it may be more accurate to see ADHD as being unable to control focus of attention. Any distraction can pull the child off task. But conversely, if they are absorbed in something, they find it hard to redirect their attention to something else.

**Inability to sustain focus** when distracted or tired. Having good executive function is being able to say to yourself: Yes, I know I'm tired, and I can hear that the football game has started, but I can finish this project in 10 minutes. I'll make myself complete it, then I can relax. This is difficult for many ADHD kids, which can result in a meltdown when parents push their child to complete homework too late in the evening.

**Disorganized.** This is, of course, another major characteristic of the ADHD child, and a crucial executive function failure. The student struggles to make lists or manage multiple homework assignments. They cannot process information in a linear, orderly way. Their mental disorganization will typically carry over to their surroundings, e.g. a messy desk or a bookbag stuffed with unfiled pieces of paper.

**Poor working memory.** This is another slippery concept, referring to the ability to act upon, or draw conclusions from numerous pieces of information. A simplistic example is keeping a phone number in your head while you dial it. More relevant for the ADHD child might be reading a complex passage. You have to remember and make inferences from the information in the first two sentences in order to understand the point being made at the end of the paragraph.

**Weak time management,** especially when it comes to estimating how long a task will take. These are the kids who insist that they can delay a large project until the night before it is due, not realizing it will

take several hours. Another time they will be overwhelmed by the amount of work they think they have, when really it can be completed in less than an hour, if they could only stay focused that long.

**Difficulty planning large projects.** It's common for an ADHD student to become overwhelmed when contemplating a long term project. They often need to be led through the various components of the project and shown how to create a simple schedule for tackling each piece sequentially.

**Being able to see the forest for the trees.** Parents report their frustration when their child spends an hour working on the cover of her book report without starting on the report itself. A child with strong executive function, by contrast, would know to prioritize the important part of a project then spend any remaining time on less important aspects like coloring the report cover.

**Unable to get started.** It's very common for ADHD children to procrastinate and struggle to get going on homework. Often they do fine once they are underway but it may take consistent nagging (or the presence of a homework coach) before the student settles down to work. Learning specialists might say such a child has trouble with *Initiation*.

**Sluggish cognitive tempo.** Some psychologists feel this is a new attention disorder, separate from ADHD, but parents of ADHD children may recognize the symptoms of daydreaming and being unable to stay focused on boring tasks. Their kids may be "space cadets," easily confused; they struggle to process information as it comes in, but once they understand the task at hand will typically have no trouble completing it.

**Inflexible.** This aspect of executive function relates to the ability to adapt behavior as new information comes in, or perhaps simply to move on when stuck. Examples include children who seldom complete a test because they don't seem to be able to pace themselves. Or, somewhat related, they do not adapt when something is not working but keep on trying the same method or behavior

**Poor self-awareness.** A multitude of issues fall under this category, from emotional overreaction to what others may see as a small setback, to inability to self-monitor performance and know whether you have met the goal or standard that is expected by your parent or teacher. This might also explain why some ADHD children struggle to fit in socially – they are unaware of how their actions are affecting others.

None of this is black and white, and clearly there is some overlap in the various facets of executive function we have described. But we believe it provides a richer way for both parents and tutors to understand why their student struggles rather than simply labeling them ADHD.

### How an EF analysis can modify the way we teach study skills

To return to where we started, we believe it is useful for a parent or tutor to identify areas where their student has specific weaknesses so that they can work on improving those particular behaviors. Armed with an EF profile of their student, the tutor can select specific areas to work on. Here are two examples:

**Expanding the “chunking” method.** A tried and tested way for getting ADHD students moving on a long-term project is to help them break the project into a series of manageable tasks, perhaps one per day, so that they are not left having to tackle the entire project the night before it is due. This is an important technique, but not useful to a child who has no feel for how long each step might take. A tutor in this case would first have the student practice estimating how long a task takes, so that the student is chunking the project into pieces that can realistically be accomplished in one sitting.

**Narrowing down the material on index cards.** Students everywhere are told to prepare for a test by creating a study guide or a set of index cards. A tutor aware of their student’s executive function weakness might first take time to help the child narrow down the material to the most important pieces needed to pass the test. Only then would they create index cards.

### The HomeworkCoach approach

At HomeworkCoach, we provide our tutors with an EF deficit checklist to understand their students’ strengths and weaknesses. And then we show them how to use this EF inventory to adapt their study skills training to address the underlying deficits.



**We would be happy to help your child! Just call us for a free consultation at 877-715-5442.**