

Do you have a child who seems smart but struggles to organize and regulate their behavior or emotions?

Why does this happen?

Often when children fail to meet our expectations we feel frustrated. For example, you ask your child to clean their room, twenty minutes later you check on them and they are playing around and have made no progress. What gives? Or maybe you send them to their room to get their shoes, put them on, and come to the front door because it is time to go to school. Fifteen minutes later, you go to see what happened to them, and they are in their room fooling around with something they found. Or how about the child who blows up when it is time to turn off the video game?

These children are often viewed as oppositional, defiant, or lazy. What is really going on is they are struggling because they lack the thinking skills to adapt successfully to changes in the environment or organize and regulate goal-directed behavior. These thinking skills are called executive functions.

When we ask a child to clean their room and they openly resist or obediently go to their room but don't get the job done, we often conclude they are unmotivated or defiant. We often fail to realize the child who is not getting the room picked up may lack the thinking skills necessary to organize the task. They look at all the stuff in their room, and they don't know where to start. It's not that they won't or don't care, it's that they simply don't know how. The child who does not return to the front door with shoes on may have a weak working memory, again a thinking skill or executive function, and they forget what they are supposed to be doing. The child who blows up when it is time to turn off the video game may have weak skills in flexibility and emotional control. The good news: these are teachable skills.

What are executive functions?

Everyone has their own unique profile of stronger and weaker executive functions, or thinking skills. These skills help us organize goal-directed behavior, solve problems, comprehend language, regulate emotions, socialize, and adapt to changes.

Inhibit

Working Memory

Emotional Control

Initiate

Sustain Attention

Plan/Prioritize

Organization

Time Management

Persistence

Flexibility

Metacognition

Self/Other Awareness

When a person has weaknesses in some of the above skills, they often appear to struggle to perform to the best of their ability. People who struggle to organize their behavior as expected are frequently diagnosed as ADHD, ADD, or if the difficulties are extreme, we may call it an autism spectrum disorder.

The truth is, you can't separate out autism or ADHD as a separate entity, something a person "has" that is making them have problems. These are people who are bothered by the problems of weak executive functions, creating a constellation of symptoms we group into a diagnostic category for treatment.

In subsequent newsletters, I will be providing details of how you can identify and remediate, or teach, the thinking skills you or your child needs to navigate the world more successfully.

For more extensive research here are some resources:

google "Tools for the Mind" and look at the long term study done by the University of Colorado

Relationships Between Executive Functions and Language Variables.

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[convention.asha.org/2007/handouts/1137\\_1011Hungerford](http://convention.asha.org/2007/handouts/1137_1011Hungerford)

Or see Congressional Medal of Honor winner Michelle Garcia-Winner's book about [Teaching Social Skills: A politically incorrect view...](#)

or Smart but Scattered by Dawson and Guare

or Boys of Few Words by Adam Cox

