



# Executive Functioning in Early Years

## St John's Primary School



### What Is Executive Function?

Executive function includes the child's ability to:

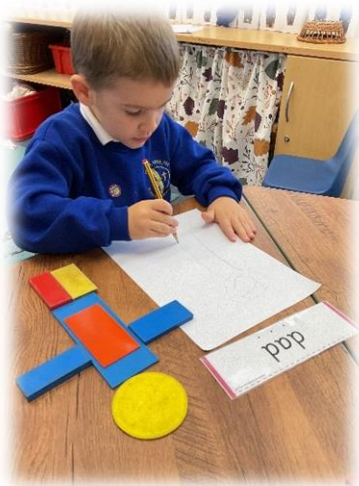
- hold information in mind
- focus their attention
- think flexibly
- inhibit impulsive behaviour.



'Executive function is largely controlled by basic maturation of the nervous system'. (Working with the Revised Early Years Foundation Stage Principles into Practice, pg.53)

It is important to first gain a deeper understanding of executive function because it plays an important part in children's ability to self-regulate. If they can develop good levels of executive function, they are more likely to be able to regulate their thoughts and feelings.

There isn't an agreed definition of executive function, but using the explanation given in the Development Matters guidance, executive function refers to cognitive processes like short-term memory, keeping attention, being flexible and controlling impulsive behaviour. These skills all help children to develop their ability to problem-solve, reason and plan. (Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a review of the evidence, p.17)



NO ONE IS BORN WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS,  
BUT NEARLY EVERYONE CAN LEARN THEM.



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### Why Is Executive Function Important?

It is important that children learn to develop these skills for their short and long-term attainment. Research has shown that executive function skills are needed for children to make effective progress, and can be more impactful than early reading or maths skills on later development and ability. (Getting it right in the EYFS, p.17)

It is for this reason that it is so important that the impact of executive function is fully understood, so you can ensure the best for children in your care. By developing these skills, you are supporting children to grow as learners and work towards long-term positive outcomes.

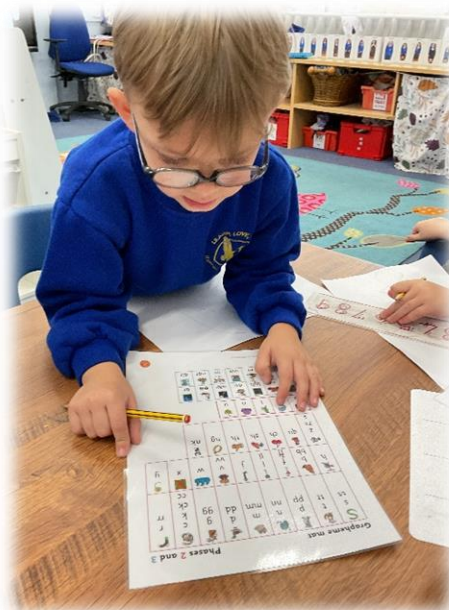


## BUILDING CHILDREN'S EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS BENEFITS EVERYONE.

Executive functioning skills, such as regulating behaviour, will also help children to deal with change and new experiences. Especially through transitions, which can be a key moment in children's educational experience and considerably impact their well-being and attainment.

As stressed by this quote from the literature review, "Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: A Review of the Evidence":

'Executive functioning...has been found to be powerful predictors of school readiness and of subsequent academic achievement.' (p. 26)







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By developing these different abilities and encouraging children to focus and think about their behaviour, you are helping them to better understand the role they have in the learning process.

Developing children's executive function also helps narrow the attainment gap. These cognitive skills can enable disadvantaged children to have a greater chance to positively develop as they can work on their ability to focus, hold information and plan their play.

If children cannot focus their attention, keep information in their minds and regulate their behaviour, they will find it very challenging to learn effectively and make the best progress possible. It is, therefore, vital that the importance of executive function is appreciated.

### How Can We Help Develop Executive Function?

Children are not born with executive function and self-regulation skills and need the opportunity to develop them. If they are not given the chance to do so at home, it is key that plenty of modelling and scaffolding is provided so that they are given the chance to do so in supportive settings.

To develop good levels of executive function, secure attachment and positive relationships are essential. It is important to recognise how to develop secure attachments with children in your care and understand the profound impact insecure attachments and adverse childhood experiences can have on children's development. They need to feel safe and secure to learn.

Understanding professional love and what it looks like for you can be a useful source of reflection to ensure that children can develop secure attachments. Learning how to 'tune in' to children's needs and feelings will help you understand their experiences better and support them through challenges.

Pedagogical approaches like modelling and scaffolding will also help children through difficulties in play and develop their patience and reflection. Talking through difficulties that you experience and modelling good practice through these moments helps children understand how they can do it too. This understanding is also crucial to help develop children's ability to self-regulate.

