

Executive Functioning, Self-questioning, and School Success

By Michael Gladstein, Ed.S., M.Ed.

With essay writing, do your students say, “I don’t know how to get started!” Do they stare at the computer screen not sure how to begin? With studying, do they simply flip through the pages in a few minutes? Do they view long-term projects as a one-step process to complete the night before they’re due? Do your students forget to turn in completed homework? If so, they are like most students who require explicit instruction in how to develop executive functioning, or self-monitoring, skills.

Executive functioning is fast becoming a common, yet often misunderstood, term in education. Executive functioning is much more than simply cleaning out one’s locker or using color-coded folders. It’s about one’s ability to accomplish goals. Specifically, it refers to the cognitive processes used to plan, organize, prioritize, and self-monitor in order to reach a future goal.

Instead of completing “here-and-now” tasks such as learning math facts or gaining reading fluency, executive skills help our students complete multi-step, goal-oriented tasks. Among these are writing research and essay papers, doing science experiments, and pacing the rate of reading an assigned novel. It’s no wonder middle school presents such daunting organizational challenges.

Students struggling with executive skills are often described as unmotivated, underachievers, or students who are simply not meeting their potential. Chronic challenges include starting academic tasks, losing papers, forgetting to turn in completed work, and so forth. Often, students don’t know how to begin. Because they don’t know how to break an assignment down from its whole into its parts, they procrastinate assignments away.

All students struggle in the development and acquisition of effective executive skills. In fact, these are

some of the last developmental skills to master. All students need some explicit instruction in executive skills. What differs among students is the frequency, duration, and intensity of the instruction they require.

Executive Functioning = Self-monitoring

Instead of viewing executive functioning as a set of skills to acquire, it’s more useful to view executive functioning as self-regulation — having the ability to self-monitor in order to reach specific goals. A child with well-developed executive skills can self-monitor his or her own behavior to keep score — to know what behaviors need to be changed and how to start making the changes. This ability to self-monitor leads to self-direction — the ability to purposely modify one’s behavior to reach a specific goal.

How exactly does a student self-regulate to reach a future goal, for example, to study for the big test or turn in completed work? Bashir & Singer (1999), leading experts on the relationship of language to executive functioning, explained through their research that self-regulation is modulated through self-talk. In other words, we change our behavior and complete future goals by asking ourselves a series of questions. Self-questioning monitors, guides, and regulates our emotions and future actions to reach these goals.

As adults, we use self-talk every day. When you wake up in the morning, are you on auto-pilot? Not really. You are constantly self-questioning to make life more predictable and to guide your actions to meet specific goals. For example, when you find yourself a bit sleepy in the morning, you might automatically initiate a specific self-questioning script like this:

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“Do I have time to grab coffee to make it through my 8 am meeting?” Yes, I have 20 minutes.

“Which coffee shop?” The one across the street from work.

“Is there time to sit down or do I need to do take out?” Take out so I won’t be rushed.

In conducting this internal dialogue, you didn’t automatically apply your executive-functioning skills. Instead, you regulated your behavior via a series of self-questions and answers. This internal conversation eased your anxiety about the morning because you created a predictable action plan.

Dr. Russell Barkley, an influential researcher in the field of AD/HD and executive functioning, described the previous example as purposeful engagement in mental problem-solving. By engaging in a series of self-questions, we engage in self-control to reach a desired goal. Barkley described the following as the steps individuals must undertake to self-regulate to meet future goals:

1. Self-direct their attention to produce self-awareness
2. Visualize past experiences
3. Engage in self-talk to modulate their future behaviors
4. Inhibit and modify their emotional reactions to challenging events
5. Restrain knee-jerk reactions to challenging events
6. Use self-talk to manipulate information from its whole to its parts.

Self-monitoring in the Classroom

Barkley’s general executive-functioning concepts make sense, but what do they look like for fifth-grade students who are perpetually disorganized or can’t get started on their research papers? Let’s define these in more student-specific terms.

1. **Self-direct their attention to produce self-awareness.** Students must keep score by continuously asking questions like these: Am I behind in my planning? Am I disorganized? Am I anxious and procrastinating the research project? In order to change, students must know what the problem is. Self-awareness results from good attention. Students must be able to step back, attend to their behavior, and attend to the task at hand. Distractibility only limits a student’s attention to the given task. With poor attention, it’s quite difficult to be self-aware, or to keep score of what behaviors need to change. Following a self-questioning script, such as the sample questions just given, provides a path to follow and attend to.
2. **Visualize past experiences.** What exactly does the past have to do with a future goal? Organized students constantly modify and refine future behaviors based on past experiences. With each assignment, they visualize what worked in the past, what didn’t work, and what actions they need to change. For example, with a math assignment, if the calculation problems were a breeze, but the word problems took a long time, organized students recall and visualize this challenge, resulting in behavior changes. They may use self-talk to say, “I’m going to start with the word

problems because I always run out of time. Then I can quickly finish the easier part – the calculation problems.”

3. **Engage in self-talk to modulate their future behaviors.** Good questions result in good answers. For students to effectively change their behavior, they must ask the right questions. For example, to begin a research essay, it would be helpful for a student to engage in a scripted Q & A session like this:

“What is my topic?” The Declaration of Independence (DOI).

“What were the causes of the DOI?” Quartering Act, Tea Act, Sugar Act.

“What do these acts have in common?” Unfair practices of King George III.

Instead of aimlessly researching the Declaration of Independence and producing 50 note cards that are, at best, tangentially related to the topic, the student only attends to and researches the Quartering, Tea, and Sugar Acts that prove King George III was unfair. The research is clearly defined and purposeful. Now, the student knows what to do. Good questions produce good answers that change one’s behavior.

4. **Inhibit and modify their emotional reactions to challenging events.** Students must manage their negative emotions to a given task. Difficult academic tasks can cause students to feel overwhelmed, which often results



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in withdrawal and procrastination. These students are not showing a lack of motivation or even laziness. Underachievement is often the manifestation of anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. Ask yourself, how would you look if you had to do your taxes every day? Would you look lazy or simply overwhelmed?

Difficult tasks do not go away, but they can be managed over time. Prior to beginning any assignment, students can use self-talk to manage their feelings by predicting academic anxieties. The purpose is to ask themselves questions that predict the difficult tasks they will have to perform. The more predictable the challenges, the less anxiety they will feel, and the quicker they will get to the point of saying, "Now I know what to do." A script might look like the following:

What is my assignment? Research and write an essay on global warming.

What emotion do I feel? Overwhelmed — I don't know how to start. What do I do?

What parts will be hard? There are a million books on global warming. How do I narrow down what to look for?

What do I self-question to start? My teacher told me to explain the causes.

What are the causes of global warming?
Carbon dioxide, methane gases, deforestation.

Ok, now I know what to do — find only books about these three causes. I'm not so overwhelmed because I know the plan.

5. **Restrain knee-jerk reactions to challenging events.** Because students react to overwhelming academic tasks in their own way, it's important to teach them to identify their own patterns of behavior. Do they withdraw, occupy themselves with other work, or use some other tactic to avoid overwhelming tasks? Help students see these avoidance patterns and replace them with new scripted patterns based on self-questioning.
6. **Use self-talk to manipulate information from its whole to its parts.** Again, with the help of scripted self-questions, students can transform a vague assignment into specific steps that they can take. The result is an action plan, a set of concrete behaviors. For example:

What is my project? To research and write an essay on the American Revolution.

What are the categories of the project?
Research, outline, rough draft, PowerPoint.

What are the research requirements? Two Internet sources and two book sources.

What are the three key Internet search terms?
Causes, battles, consequences.

Conclusion

Explicitly teaching self-questioning to modulate students' executive-functioning skills essentially arms them with self-regulation tools. Students best develop executive-functioning skills by using specific skill-related questioning scripts for writing, math assignments, planning reading, turning in homework, etc. This internal dialogue of questions and answers focuses their attention, enabling them to keep score of their needs, visualize past behaviors to change, manage emotions around challenging tasks, and know what they need to do. Executive functioning and school achievement are enhanced when students know what to do.

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