Executive Functioning

Executive functioning refers to the mental processes and cognitive skills needed to manage and regulate oneself to achieve goals, including planning, organizing, initiating tasks, prioritizing, focusing attention, working memory, emotional regulation and self-control. These skills are crucial for everyday activities at work, school and home.

Executive functions can be divided into organizational and regulatory abilities. **Organization** includes gathering information and structuring it for evaluation. **Regulation** involves evaluating the available information and modulating our responses to the environment.

Organization	Examples: attention, planning, sequencing, problem solving, working memory, cognitive flexibility (also referred to as flexible thinking), abstract thinking, rule acquisition, selecting relevant sensory information
Regulation	Examples: initiation of action, inhibitory control (including self-control), emotional regulation, monitoring internal and external stimuli, initiating and inhibiting context-specific behaviour, moral reasoning, decision making

Signs of executive function challenges or differences

Difficulties with executive function can affect people in different ways. Students struggling with executive functions skills may find some of the following challenging:

- Starting, completing or prioritizing tasks
- Trying to retain what they just heard or read
- Following directions or a sequence of steps
- Accommodating changes to rules or routines
- Switching focus from one task to another
- Moving from task to task predictably and productively
- Controlling emotions and thinking flexibly
- Organizing their thoughts
- Refraining from speaking out or interrupting others
- Keeping track of their belongings
- Managing their time

Source: healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca

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Strategies to support students' executive function skills

- Use visual supports
  - Neurodivergent learners may grasp concepts better through visuals like pictures, diagrams and colour-coding.
  - Visual supports reinforce direct teaching by mapping out processes visually.
  - This multi-sensory approach, pairing engaging visuals with structured language, allows neurodivergent students to effectively comprehend, retain, and apply the content.

- Provide checklists or visual supports for everything from morning routines to what goes into students' backpacks every day.

- Use a dedicated binder for each subject.

- Use a timer to provide a visual reference for the amount of time students have for each task they need to complete (e.g., Time Timer app, visual clock).

- Use online or paper planners and calendars to keep track of short- and long-term projects and break down assignments into bite-sized tasks.

- Break larger projects into smaller, defined tasks and steps with visual representations, and shorter, more defined assignment dates for completion.

- Reduce demands. If a student has not demonstrated the ability to complete a task, break the task into smaller steps, remove some steps, and focus on finding success with fewer demands or expectations before adding more.

- Create predictable routines and structures so that expectations can be met through frequent practice and repetition.

- Frontload for transitions and consider stressors or triggers in environment for them.