Executive Functioning Skills In Schools: I Can Do Hard Things, But I Can't Do Easy Things

Blue Jeans Conference 2025

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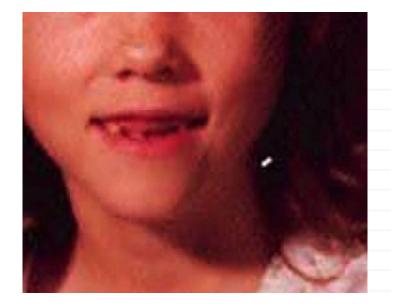
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Life in the Fast Lane!



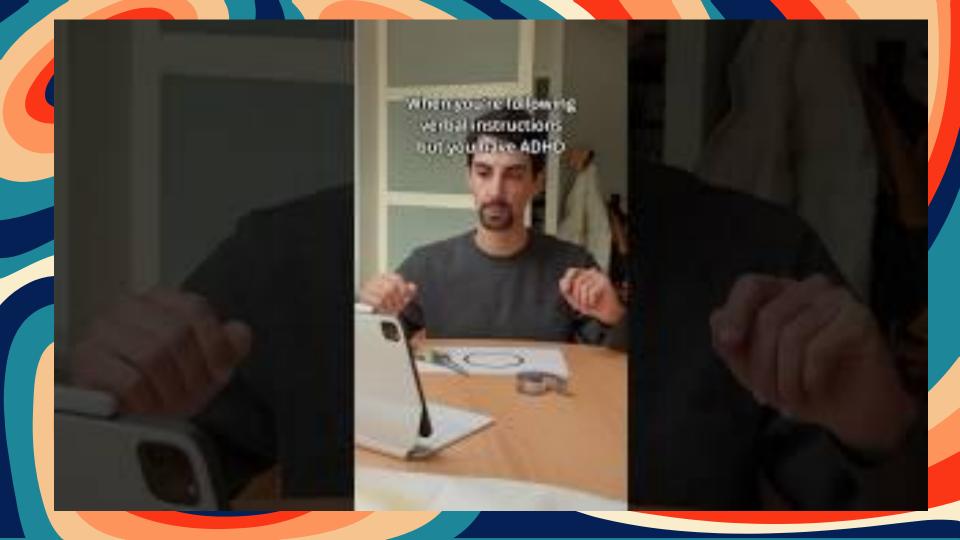
Kittens turn

into cats





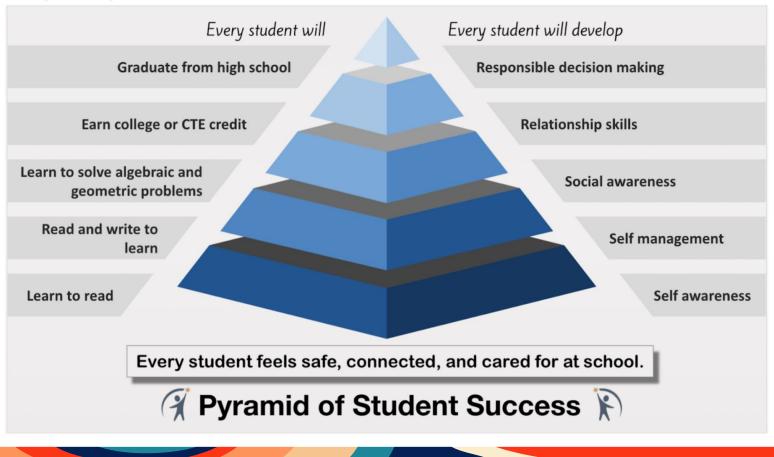




Official Definition

A set of cognitive processes that are necessary for cognitive control of behavior, selecting and successfully monitoring behaviors that facilitate the attainment of chosen goals.







"In the best of times—and in students without learning challenges—they take a minimum of 25 years to reach full maturation. For students with learning challenges, that timetable is generally delayed to start with, and more susceptible to disruption.

Until they are fully developed, adults act as surrogate frontal lobes for kids. Teachers do this by providing schedules, structures, and routines, by maintaining contact with students to help them manage time and tasks."

Five Steps for Embedding Executive Functioning Skills into the Classroom

This photograph sums up the current Generation Gap



Has anyone else noticed that students have changed?

This new generation "hits different"

CORE ASSUMPTIONS:

Students Do Well When They Can (OR) If Students Could Do Well, They Would do Well

Kids are not exhibiting behaviors because they want control us, to annoy us, to ruin our day, are psychopaths or hate us

Motivation and willpower are fleeting and unreliable

Waiting until you "want to do the thing" or "are motivated to do the thing" is a huge mistake When the district surveyed teachers of all grade ranges, their top five behavioral concerns in their classrooms, teachers reported:

- 1. absences;
- 2. not turning in assignments/delaying assignments;
- 3. not starting tasks;
- 4. being tardy and
- 5. talking to other students during instructional time.

- 1. Absences (Planning, time management, emotional control)
- 2. Not turning in assignments/delaying assignments (Task initiation, planning, organization, working memory, goal-directed persistence)
- 3. Not starting tasks (task initiation)
- 4. Being tardy (Planning, time management)
- 5. Talking to other students during instructional time (Response inhibition, emotional control, goal-directed persistence, metacognition)



These skills progress in order

We want to start with Trapper Keepers and planners, but most kids aren't ready yet! (Planners end up in the trash, with the homework!)



Definition The ability to stop and think before acting; to resist the urge to say or do things



Problem Student blurts out, acts impulsively, ignores requests

Tips

- Create scenarios to practice
- Teach replacement behaviors
- Reinforce 4-1 positive to negative

Teaching Response Inhibition in the classroom grades 1-3

Handouts and resources

Response Inhibition



Response Inhibition



Response Inhibition Tips

- Cue: This is the trigger that initiates the habit. It can be anything from a specific time of day, an emotional state, a location, or even the presence of certain people. The cue signals your brain to go into automatic mode and prompts the behavior that follows.
- 2. **Routine**: This is the behavior or action that follows the cue. It is the actual habit itself, which can be physical (like exercising), mental (like thinking positively), or emotional (like feeling happy). This is the part of the loop that gets repeated.
- 3. **Reward**: After the routine, there is a reward, which reinforces the habit. The reward can be anything that satisfies a craving or need, such as a feeling of accomplishment, enjoyment, or comfort. Rewards help your brain decide if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future.

Definition The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks.

> Problem Struggles with multiple steps Has a hard time using strategies Forgets items and assignments

WM handouts and

resources

Visualization—have kids use vivid visual imagery to help them remember

Movement—have kids act out what they're trying to remember

Teach rehearsal strategies

Use rhymes, songs, or other mnemonic devices to help kids remember

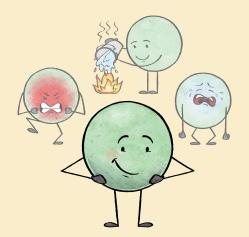
Model your own use of memory strategies (e.g., checklists, post-it notes) and explain why you're using them

Multitasking with Music?

The age-old question: Does listening to music impact studying? Here's the TLDR answer (summarized for you):

- If you are learning new material, you should only listen to music without lyrics
- If you are listening to music while doing any other language-based task (reading, writing), stop - music will likely interfere.
- 3. Only listen to music while studying for a test if you can listen to the same music during the test
- 4. If you are completing math problems that you basically know, doing "busy work", crank up the tunes. It can be motivating and block out extra sound.
- 5. If you currently have work you need to do, but you aren't doing because it's boring, go ahead and listen to music while working to increase the odds you will do the thing (sometimes the reduced productivity is worth it like watching Netflix while working on reports)

Emotional Control



Definition The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.

Problem

Student lacks the self-regulation skills to engage in learning or interact socially. This can be due to depression, anxiety, trauma

<u>10 Classroom Strategies to Support</u> <u>Emotional Control</u>

Handouts and resources

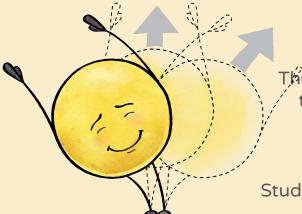
A very brief introduction to CTFAR

CIRCUMSTANCE occurs. This circumstance determines: What you THINK, which determines: What you FEEL, which determines: What ACTION you take, which determines: Your RESULTS

Definitions

Circumstances: Those things in life that you have no control over (your entire past, other people). A circumstance is so neutral that it can be proven in a court of law. Thoughts: A one sentence statement about your circumstances. Feelings: A one word description of how you feel. Actions: Any action that you take (or don't take) and any reaction. Results: What the action created in your life.

Flexibility



Definition The brain's ability to shift between different tasks or thought processes quickly and efficiently

Problem Student is inflexible, has rigid thinking patterns, melts down if plans change

The "Hard Times" Board

Handouts and resources

HARD TIMES BOARD



What Makes Me Mad--

1. When I get a math or writing paper to do

"Can't Do's"

- 1. Complain in a loud voice.
- 2. Crumple or tear up my paper.
- 3. Not listen to my teacher.

When I'm having a hard time I can:

- 1. Ask for help.
- 2. Take a break for 2 minutes and look at a book or draw.

Beware the Firehose



Some children live in a state of chronic stress due to homelife issues. Hypothetically, if we are at our house and the smoke alarm goes off, we don't automatically assume that the house is on fire. We investigate and see possible reasons the alarm went off (burnt toast, alarm too sensitive, etc). For children that live in chaotic households, these children often live in "panic mode" of what MIGHT happen. If the smoke alarm goes off, the house IS on fire and the firefighters ARE coming and they WILL spray down the house. So now the child has to deal with the fact that the fire hoses drenched their entire house, even though there was NEVER a real fire.

Task Initiation

Definition Being able to independently start tasks



Handouts and resources



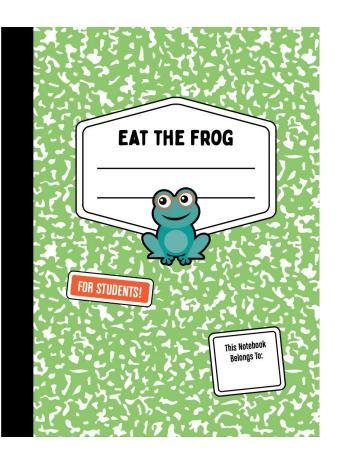


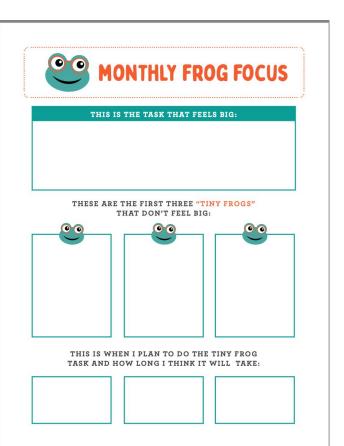
Step 1: Identify your frog -- the hardest but most important task of the day.Step 2: Eat the frog. Do it first thing in the morning. Don't put it off for later.Step 3: Repeat every day.

(This will work for those who are neurotypical –SOME of the time)

Eat the Frog Digital Journal for Kids Eat the Frog Digital Journal for Adults







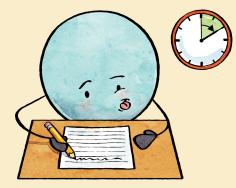
Why do We Procrastinate?

- We underestimate how long a task will take
 We fail to create a schedule or timeline
 We struggle to initiate tasks in a timely
- manner
- 4. We allow distractions and less important activities to interfere 5. We lack motivation or ability to persist through challenging tasks

Procrastination Like Hacks

- 1. It is always easier to renew something than it is to re-apply for something after it's expired.
- 2. If something takes less than 1 minute to complete, do it now.
- 3. Just start: Open Schoology. Find the assignment. Do one problem. If you want to, you can now stop.
- 4. Some easy prompts:
 - a. I want to get this done so I can ______.
 - b. Why does this task matter to me?
 - c. How does this task align with my role or values?
- Recognize perfectionism: You will never be in the mood to do the task and that's okay. Waiting until you feel like it is a form of perfectionism. You don't need to feel comfortable to get started or keep going.

Sustained Attention



Definition the ability to focus on a task or activity for an extended period of time, especially when it's repetitive or monotonous

Problem "Technology-induced ADHD" and etc! Student is easily distracted and loses focus

Sustained attention handouts/resources



The Impact of ADHD on Behavior

Factors that influence the ability of someone with ADHD to focus: ICNU (Interest, Challenge, Novelty, Urgency)

Example: doing the dishes

- INTERESTING? Not even close
- CHALLENGING? Not really
- NOVEL? Nah
- URGENT? Not yet

Will the dishes get cleaned? Only when they're needed *right now*

Take my cell phone, please!

A recent study found that the mere presence of a smartphone reduces a person's ability to focus. In the study, college students asked to leave their phones in another room did better on cognitive tests than those who were asked to silence their phones and leave them face down on their desk or in a bag. In the experiment, even students who said they weren't thinking consciously about their cell phones still experienced a loss in ability, which means some of this distraction is happening on an unconscious level.



We have made it through the foundational skills and are on to the Advanced skills!

(We should be 30 min in right now)

Planning/Prioritizing

Definition

Creating a roadmap to reach a goal or complete a task. Deciding what is important and what is not.

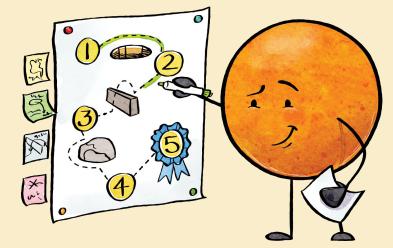
Problem

Student can't plan ahead and make sure that she has enough time to finish them.

Tips

- An idea is not a plan
- Not every activity is of equal importance
- (Or . . . one item on your to-do list may be more valuable than the other nine combined)

Handouts and resources related to Planning and Prioritizing





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CHRONOTYPE





55% of the population

Strengths

Follows the solar cycle Alert in the morning Extroverted

💋 Weaknesses

Inconsistent sleep routine Vulnerable to social jet lag Risk for obesity

Wake up

7 AM

ShutEye



 $\heartsuit \heartsuit$

CHRONOTYPE





15-20% of the population 12 PM

ShutEye

Strengths

Flexible working hours Creative Natural risk takers

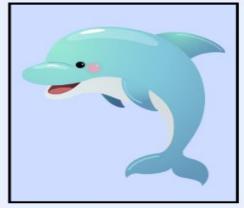
Ø Weaknesses

Sluggish in the morning Face sleep deprivation Impulsive

Wake up

 $\heartsuit \heartsuit$

CHRONOTYPE





10% of the population

Strengths

Highly intelligent Cautious Detail-oriented

🧭 Weaknesses

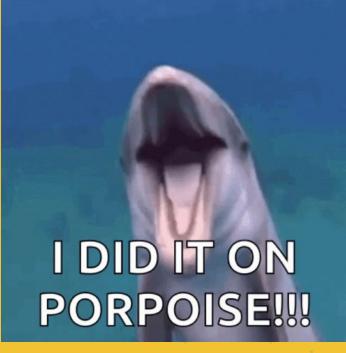
Tend to be restless Struggles with anxiety Feel tired throughout the day

🕨 Wake up

6:30 AM

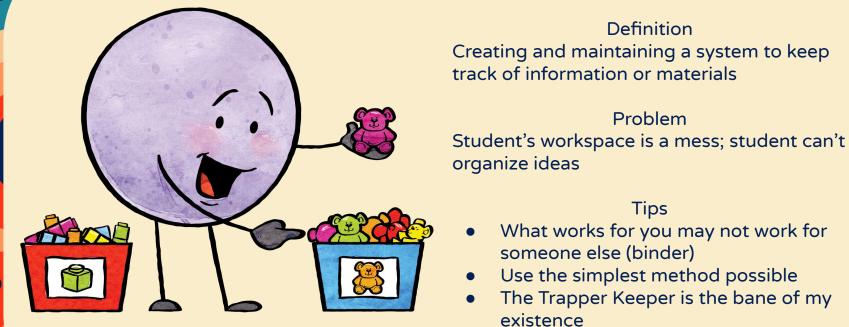
ShutEye

The Dolphin Chronotype and Behavioral Disorders





Organization



Resources and handouts for Organization

Tips

Problem

Definition

- What works for you may not work for someone else (binder)
- Use the simplest method possible
- The Trapper Keeper is the bane of my existence

Organization



Who can we thank for designing a binder that we are going to give to a student with **ADHD** that takes 7 steps to find a sheet of paper?

Class behaviors associated with organization

- Places materials in a specified place in notebooks, backpacks, desks, and study areas
- Puts personal belongings in designated places in the classroom and other locations at school
- Doesn't lose homework, permission slips, notices from school, personal belongings
- Successfully brings home needed items for homework and turns homework in within expected amount of time
- Contains activity materials to workspace
- Keeps workspace tidy
- Successfully brings home needed items for homework and turns homework in within expected amount of time

When Things Simply Don't Add Up

• When I surveyed the students in the high school intervention study skills class where I was teaching EF mini-lessons, their highest area of EF strength was **Organization**. The students in this class were failing most of their classes, so this was shocking to me! I hypothesize that this is because some students take so much time "getting ready to study" that by the time they are actually cracking the books they are burned out and tired of the idea. Can we relate to this when we empty a closet full of clothes to "organize", get overwhelmed, give up and go watch Netflix?





Time Management



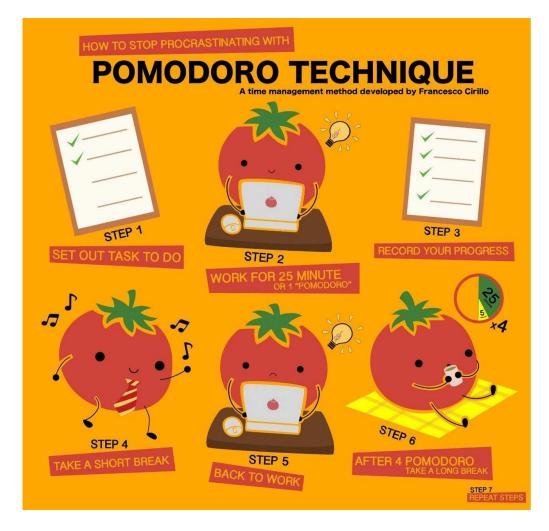
Definition Estimating how much time you have and how to stay within time limits and deadlines

Problem Student's "Inside Clock" is busted

Tips

- Big calendar
- Time blindness
- Computing real time
- "Try In" to get "Buy In"

Handouts and resources for time management



Are stress and anxiety always bad?

Many of us assume that stress is ALWAYS bad -- not so! Some stress is necessary to motivate us to turn off Netflix, put away the Cheetos and get to work! This kind of positive stress is called eustress. The negative kind of stress is distress -- stress that becomes debilitating and makes it MORE challenging to get stuff done. Some students (and adults) with executive functioning issues lack the ability to plan out how long a project will take and to predict how long it will take to complete. This is the student who says he has "three whole days" to work on his book report, but when "real time" is computed, has about four hours total.

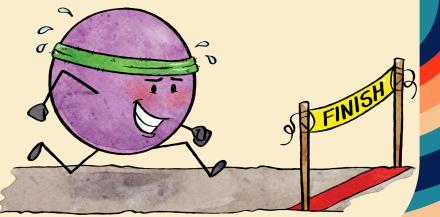
Goal-Directed Persistence

Definition Following through to the completion of a goal without being distracted by competing interests

Problem Student struggles to plan or think long-term

Tips

- Grit and resilience (sort of)
- Choose your Hard
- What will future you thank present day you for doing?



Handouts and resources related to GDP

Choose Your Hard:

<u>Hard:</u> Choosing to study or complete assignments when friends are hanging out without you.

<u>Harder</u>: Putting off an assignment and having to pull an all-nighter, not doing your best work.

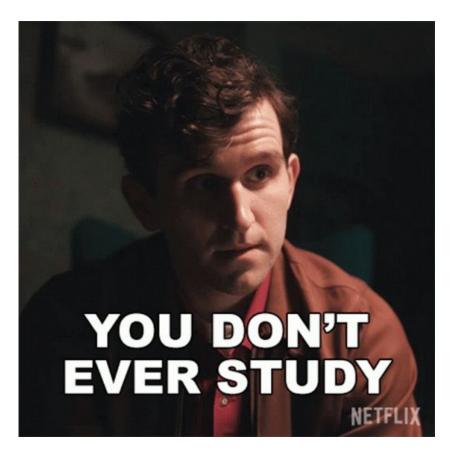
<u>Hardest</u>: Completely blowing off the assignment, failing the class and having to repeat the class.

Short-term You:

Wants to avoid discomfort. It is the lover of all things Tik Tok and YouTube. Short-term you assumes that Future You will be more dedicated and harder working than Short-term You.

<u>Future You</u> is really just Short-Term You, in the Future.

Future You is the sum total of all the decisions that Short-Term You makes now.



What is the relationship between marijuana use and Goal-directed Persistence?

1. **Anecdotal reports:** There have been anecdotal reports of individuals who use marijuana heavily experiencing symptoms similar to amotivation syndrome, such as apathy, lack of motivation, and social withdrawal.

2. **Dopamine dysregulation**: Marijuana use has been associated with alterations in the brain's dopamine system, which is involved in motivation, reward, and pleasure. This dopamine dysregulation may contribute to the development of amotivation-like symptoms in some individuals.

3. **Cognitive impairment**: Heavy, long-term marijuana use has been linked to cognitive impairments, including deficits in attention, memory, and executive functioning, which could contribute to amotivation and apathy.

4. **Confounding factors**: It is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between marijuana use and amotivation syndrome, as there may be other confounding factors involved, such as pre-existing mental health conditions, polysubstance use, or environmental and social factors.



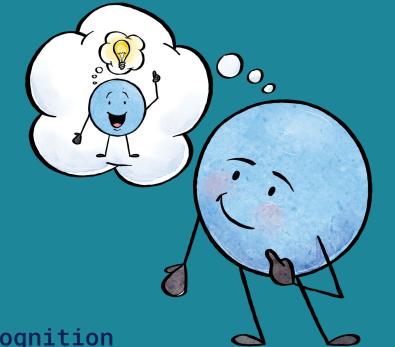
Metacognition

Definition Noticing how you're doing. Thinking about how you're thinking

Problem Student seems unaware of how his or her behavior impacts others

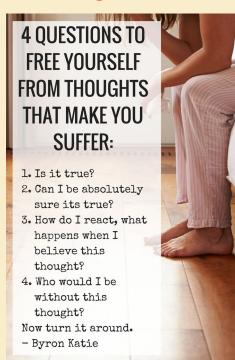
Tips

- Thought download
- Thoughts are not facts



Handouts and resources for metacognition

Metacognition (After doing your thought download, ask yourself:)



How to Conduct a Thought Download

- 1. Grab a paper and pen
- 2. Write down every thought you are having about a certain topic. Write without judging the thought (example, my girlfriend broke up with me)
- 3. Examine each thought



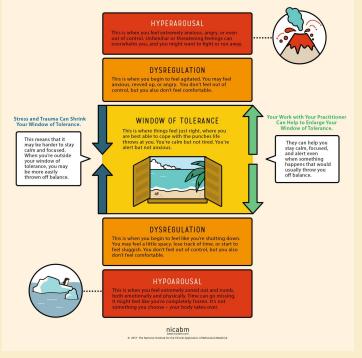
Stress Tolerance

Stress Tolerance is the ability to thrive in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands.

() Executive Functioning Success

Stress Tolerance

How Trauma Can Affect Your Window of Tolerance



Stress Tolerance

- **Recognizing Triggers** : Understanding the Window of Tolerance helps individuals identify their triggers and recognize when they are moving out of their optimal zone. This awareness can help them implement coping strategies before reaching a state of hyperarousal or hypoarousal.
- **Coping Strategies** : Techniques such as mindfulness, deep breathing, physical activity, and grounding exercises can help individuals stay within their Window of Tolerance or return to it when they feel dysregulated.
- **Supportive Environments** : Educators can create environments that promote safety and support emotional regulation, helping individuals remain within their Window of Tolerance.
- **Trauma–Informed Practices** : Understanding how stress affects behavior and emotional responses can inform teaching practices and interactions with students, allowing for better support in the classroom.

An Incomplete List of Resources

Overall/All Executive Functions Executive Functioning Toolkit All my Executive Functioning handouts for each function in google slide format Build 10 Executive Functions (Rebecca Brandstetter) Al Tools for Executive Functioning Peg Dawson's Executive Functioning Dropbox link Executive Functioning definitions with clipart Laziness or Executive Functioning? Identifying How I Get Things Done Quiz Teaching Executive Functioning at School (a whole ton of activities) Five Steps to Embed Executive Functioning in the School Day (probably the best presentation on this I've ever seen)

Response Inhibition <u>Teaching response inhibition/modifications</u> <u>Teaching Response Inhibition in the Classroom Grades 1-3</u>

Working Memory <u>Teaching working memory/modifications</u> <u>Understanding Working Memory: A Classroom Guide</u>

An Incomplete List of Resources 2

Flexibility Teaching flexibility/modifications

 Task Initiation

 Some thoughts for teachers on helping teenagers develop task initiation

Planning/Prioritization Eat the Frog Digital Journal for Kids Eat the Frog Digital Journal for Adults

My Favorite People/Researchers/Influencers/Authors in this Space

- <u>How To ADHD</u>: Book, YouTube, Instagram, etc: This very creative woman with ADHD has millions of followers her channel is a joint venture with a psychologist. Her new book is a best seller and is a game changer in this field
- <u>ADHD Love</u>: Book, YouTube, Instagram, etc. This UK couple is hilarious but also very insightful
- <u>Additude Magazine</u>: This is a great resource for gaining better understanding of ADHD and learning disabilities.
- What Were You Thinking book series for kids:
- <u>Clark the Shark book series</u>: Not directly related to Executive Functioning, but a fun series about Clark (the shark) trying to learn to behave at school.
- <u>Healthy Gamer</u>: He was rejected from 125 medical schools because he wouldn't stop playing video games. He finally broke the habit, became a psychiatrist and now has millions of followers across his platforms where he shows people how to game and still have a life.
- <u>Russell Barkley</u> He is the GOAT of ADHD. His book about adult ADHD has been named the best book for understanding adult ADHD
- <u>Peg Dawson</u>: An amazing researcher in Executive Functioning in schools. She is the author of the popular Smart but Scattered books. You can click <u>here</u> for her Dropbox link – she adds to it frequently.