

What Executive Function Skills are Expected in High School?

High school in most school systems in the US encompasses grades 9-12, or from about the ages 14 to 18. This is an important time for applying and expanding the foundational Executive Function skills that began in middle school and elementary grades. These include:

- **Self-regulation** - managing strong emotions and inhibiting impulsive behaviors
- **Attention** - sustaining focus, especially for lengthy or challenging tasks that may have many components
- **Task Initiation** - starting a non-preferred task and overcoming a desire to procrastinate
- **Organization** - keeping track of materials at home and in school, [organizing ideas and information for essays](#) and research papers, managing digital data and files
- **Planning and Prioritizing** - mapping out multi- step tasks such as long-term class projects, and tackling assignments in order of importance
- **Time Management** - allocating time for schoolwork and other commitments such as sports, clubs, family, friends, part-time jobs, volunteer work, and other involvements
- **Cognitive Flexibility** - taking the perspective of teachers and peers and formulating different solutions to problems
- **Metacognition** - the ability to reflect on one's own learning and have self-awareness that drives good choices

While some students seem to develop these skills seamlessly, many struggle and benefit from a level of direct 1:1 instruction and support that is often unavailable in most high schools. With the stakes being higher, in terms of the college application process, many students who got by adequately in middle school often face roadblocks in high school. They can be unprepared for the rigor and productivity expected for college prep level courses.

What are the signs of Executive Function problems in High School students?

Parents often see signs of Executive Function challenges in their child in high school, when students face increased demands for self-management.

Parents and teachers may notice:

- **Organizational challenges** - the student has difficulties organizing class materials, keeping track of and turning in homework, or approaching writing assignments and long-term projects
- **Behavior or emotion management challenges** - the student may have poor relationships with teachers, be unable to resist distractions, have difficulty settling down to do work, or give up easily on challenging or tedious tasks
- **Time management challenges** - the student [leaves work until the last minute](#), causing panic and stress at home, may be overscheduled and stressed
- **Academic challenges** - the student lacks persistence or often does not complete or even start assignments, may do poorly on tests due to ineffective study habits, may lose credit for late assignments, may not know how to [take notes in class](#)

Parents of high school children who are struggling may wonder:

- Why does my child often forget to do homework?
- [How can I motivate my child to do well in high school?](#)
- [Why does my child stay up so late doing homework?](#)
- Why does my child wait until the last minute to do projects?
- Why does my child do poorly on tests, despite studying?
- Will my child be prepared to succeed in college?
- [Why won't my child seek the teacher's help?](#)

Why is it important for High School students to work on Executive Function skills?

Executive Function plays a central role in shaping student achievement. In high school, students must adapt to the expectations of many different teachers at once, who may schedule project due dates and tests on the same day. Moreover, teens have to be productive amidst the distractions of phones and computers, which is challenging even for many adults. Adding to the stress, parents see that their high school students may insist on managing their academics independently when they are unequipped to do so, given underdeveloped Executive Function skills. Finally, parents know that the clock is ticking, as by 12th grade, these self-management skills are needed for [a smooth transition to college](#), where heightened school demands compete with new freedoms and extracurriculars. Unaddressed, a deficit in the critical [foundational area of Executive Function skills](#) can have long-term effects on a student's success and, consequently, their self-confidence as a learner.

What does it feel like to be a High School student with Executive Function challenges?

High school can be a challenging time for even the most able students. But for [adolescents with Executive Function challenges](#), daily life in high school can feel downright unmanageable without the proper supports. Consider below some common scenarios that high schoolers face.

Morning Mad Dash: 6:57 AM - Scrambling Out the Door

Olivia has to catch the bus at 7:30, and she likes to sleep in until 6:45 ... and maybe hit the snooze button one or two times after that. That leaves her about half an hour to madly dash about the house eating breakfast, choosing an outfit, brushing her teeth, packing her lunch, changing after reconsidering her outfit, texting her friends, returning to the original outfit, and - if time allows - packing her homework from the night before. With this routine, Olivia has felt frustrated a few times when - despite assuring her teachers that she *really, totally* did the homework the night before - she hasn't been able to actually turn it in and get credit.

Mid-Morning Attention Drain: 10:46 AM - Chemistry Class

Olivia doesn't entirely mind school. She's got friends she can chat with, and most of her classes are at least kind of interesting. But there's one exception — chemistry, where Ms. Glurtman has a tendency to drone on for the full hour in a voice that's somehow a combination of white noise and nails on a chalkboard. As much as Olivia would love to just tune her out completely, she has a chemistry [quiz every week and tests twice a month](#), and she really needs to be able to hear and process what Ms. Glurtman is saying.

Afternoon Work Delays: 3:24 PM - School's Finally Over (sort of)

After Olivia has stepped off the bus and enjoyed an afternoon snack, she is confronted with the routine reminder that the school day isn't quite over yet. Now, it's homework time. Since Olivia used up so much mental energy trying to focus during Chemistry

class, she's feeling wiped out. Even though Mr. Calgary went light on the math problem set - Olivia's favorite subject - the thought of getting started overwhelms her. She tells you she'll start at 4pm, but when you ever-so-casually stroll by her room at 4:30, you see that she's texting with a friend. She tells you she's just about to start, but then your stealthy walk-by at 5:00 reveals a daughter mindlessly scrolling her Facebook page. At dinner, you ask again, and she assures you she's totally ready to get started, but you hear YouTube videos when you walk past her room at 8:30pm. By now, you're frustrated with Olivia, and she's getting sick of seeing you walk by her door.

Although [Olivia faces Executive Function challenges](#) throughout the day, she has many options for how to address each one. Once she understands that these [tough moments can be managed with the right strategies](#), it's easier for Olivia to imagine the benefits of using better ways to plan her time, manage her attention, and [resist distractions when she needs to get work done](#). A day in the life of a high school student doesn't have to be so bad after all.

Case Study: Nate, a 9th grade student with demanding classes and weak study skills

Nate* was a bright and disorganized boy who never had to work hard in school until freshman year. Because middle school had been easy for him, he never learned how to study effectively and stay organized. Now that he was taking honors level classes as a freshman, he was unprepared to manage the demands of high school expectations.

Nate's Challenges

Nate was a disorganized and easy going student who did his work at the last minute - or sometimes not at all. He never had to study in elementary or middle school and did not develop good work habits as a result. He was enrolled in challenging courses, but his parents were concerned that he was unprepared for the work involved. His older sister had required very little support or monitoring in high school - and his parents knew Nate would not respond well to them overseeing his schoolwork. Nate's parents also worried that he could be vulnerable to risky behaviors, given that he was depressed because of a physical condition prevented him from playing sports and was unwilling to talk about his emotions.

Parental Involvement

Nate's parents are both busy professionals who were very eager to engage the support that was necessary for him to keep pace at school. Up to this point, Nate had never needed any academic support. His parents had a largely hands-off approach to Nate's school life. His mother identified herself as having similar organizational difficulties as Nate, but had learned to compensate over time and hoped he could find methods that would work for him.

How Executive Function Coaching Helped Nate

An Intake Meeting Provides a Roadmap: The intake specialist met with Nate and his parents, identified Nate's Executive Function challenges, and made a plan for his coaching support.

Agreed on Goals and Priorities: Nate's initial goals included better organization of his space and belongings, strategies for planning and prioritizing his homework, and learning how to better manage his time.

Nate's Progress with Coaching

Coaching Approach: The coach's approach changed as Nate matured over the four years he received coaching. Humor was important in making a connection with him. Nate needed limits and directions presented in a friendly and positive way. As he got older, he was less receptive to direction regarding his schoolwork, but very receptive to the support in the college application process.

Established means of support: The coach, after noting Nate's behaviors and habits, recommended that Nate receive a full neuropsychological evaluation. As a result, Nate was diagnosed with ADHD-inattentive type. Nate's district put him on a 504 plan at school. His parents were relieved to have a name for his challenges. Nate chose not to consider any medication for his ADHD. This choice made coaching particularly important for Nate, as developing good habits became central to managing his ADHD. During Nate's freshman year, Nate met with his coach two times a week for an hour and a half each session. By junior year, the coach saw him once a week for one-hour sessions.

Six-Month Progress Update: After six months, Nate was using and maintaining consistent organization strategies such as color-coded notebooks and folders for his classes. He sometimes used a written planner to write down his assignments, although at first he had been insistent that he did not need to. When he couldn't remember assignment details, he contacted friends in his classes to find out what was required. When Nate missed an assignment, it wasn't because he wasn't aware of it; it was a result of making choices with how he used his time. His coach continued to help Nate understand the repercussions of those choices through reflection exercises aimed at building his self-awareness.

Long-Term Outcome: Nate stayed with his coach until he graduated from high school. During his junior and senior years of high school, Nate was successful in resisting a number of temptations that could hinder his progress. Senior year was devoted to organizing Nate for the college application process. During his last year in high school, Nate started a job that consumed a great deal of his time but through discussions with his coach, understood it was best to scale back his hours so that he could better manage his schoolwork. Through his job, Nate and his coach noted that he gained confidence and maturity. While Nate was not accepted to his first choice college

, he was accepted to a small, competitive college in South Carolina and was very pleased with the outcome. As a college student, Nate is able to successfully find and use resources as needed to be independent and successful.

Case Study: Anna, a 10th grade student with time management difficulties

Anna* had attention challenges that interfered with her work habits and led to late nights and poor sleep.

Anna was very engaged with her schoolwork but had difficulty sustaining her attention for lengthy tasks. It was also hard for her to get started with her work, manage her time effectively, and advocate for her needs with teachers. Additionally, Anna struggled to get sufficient sleep each night, which caused tension with her parents and diminished her ability to focus on her work. She worked hard to balance her social and academic responsibilities, but found that her grades were not reflective of her capabilities. Her brother excelled in school, and she was frustrated at being unable to achieve a similar level of success.

Parental Involvement

Anna's parents both worked full time, so their involvement was infrequent, but they prioritized making time to focus on and support her success in school. Their expectations for Anna were high, and they remained engaged in her academic and social life, but were often not home during the afternoons or early evenings to provide direct support for her.

How Executive Function Coaching Helped Anna

An Intake Meeting Provides a Roadmap: Anna's parents were present and involved at the intake. They highlighted Anna's terrific personality, creativity and love for life. They also explained that she has excellent friendships and enjoys her teachers. Despite these wonderful attributes, her parents expressed concerns about her inability to complete homework assignments and the fact that her grades were not what they felt they could be. During the meeting, the intake specialist helped Anna and her parents to understand these struggles through the framework of Executive Functioning. Together Anna, her parents, and the intake specialist agreed on the following coaching priorities: time management, task initiation, sustained attention, goal-directed persistence, organization, study skills/test preparation, and planning and prioritizing. Anna's parents also expressed their desire for her coach to assist her in advocating for her needs, such as when she might not understand something in class.

Established Means of Support: Anna's coach was able to work with Anna at her home after school for 1.5 - 2 hour each week. Given both Anna's personality and areas of

difficulty, she was matched with an energetic and enthusiastic coach who had experience assisting students with planning, time management, organization, and test-preparation skills.

Anna's Progress with Coaching

Coaching Approach: During initial meetings, Anna's coach worked on normalizing her experience, helping Anna to see that her areas of difficulty were a challenge for many students. In doing so, the coach often shared her own anecdotes and how she had to work on developing her own skill set. This personal sharing established a positive rapport, and it shifted the attention away from the comparison Anna was making between herself and her brother. The coach then worked on identifying the issues that were most important to Anna to help her make progress that she would value, and thus get her some small wins at the start. Anna's most significant issue was lack of sleep resulting from not planning enough time for her homework. Using Anna's love of her iPhone as an advantage, the coach helped Anna explore and test out a few apps which would help her create a nightly plan for work and reminder her to return to her work if she was distracted. In order to encourage Anna to utilize these apps as part of her new daily routine, the coach checked in via text messages to gently remind and support her through this process of acquiring a new way of managing her time and work. Once Anna consistently used - and benefitted from - the phone apps, she became engaged in the process of researching other ways she could support areas of difficulty. She found an online studying tool and a sleep tracking tool on her own. Anna's coach helped her to see that identifying her own areas of difficulty and seeking out apps to help her out was a form of self-advocacy, and that inspired Anna to eventually try asking her teachers for help, which had always felt very uncomfortable for her.

Six-Month Progress Update: After a half-year of coaching, Anna consistently scheduled her homework in the afternoon, included time-bound breaks (such as watching a single TV episode) and was getting sufficient sleep on four out of five school nights. She was consistently using her test preparation app, though she was inconsistent with meeting with her teachers for assistance with challenging material. Anna was continuing to manage her attention through both strategies and medication. Her developing mindfulness of when she was engaged (and what helped that) and when she was disengaged (and what distracted her) allowed her to make better choices about when, where, and with which materials she completed her homework.

Long-Term Outcome: When Anna graduated from coaching, her coach wrote the following note to her parents: "As we wrap up our coaching work together, Olivia notes that that one of her remaining weaknesses is feeling overwhelmed about getting her work done, but that she feels confident about her series of go-to approaches to manage that." One important element in the student/coach reflection was Olivia's acknowledgement that she's made a significant amount of progress and yet realizes she's not "perfect" at sustaining her attention or getting started on her homework. Perfection, the coach told her, was never the goal; rather, they discussed how critical it is to think of this as a lifelong, mindful practice of checking in with her attention,

selecting the tools and techniques that she finds the most helpful, and then encouraging herself to use them. She did such a fantastic job of developing this awareness and self-management that this mindful practice is a habit for her now. In addition, Anna has also learned to seek out tools independently to support herself in areas that were not discussed during coaching. The ability for Anna to locate a tool or change her approach will serve her well as she takes on new challenges in the future.

What Can Parents Do to Help Their High School Students Develop Executive Function Skills?

When the morning rush is too stressful

A student's tendency to use the snooze button isn't the main issue; there's [a lack of planning](#) on their part that makes the morning routine more frantic than it needs to be. If it's wardrobe indecision that's driving the morning crush, we might even suggest enlisting the help of Snapchat for this (bear with us, here). Each night, the student could pick out three potential outfits and Snap them to friends. Whichever gets the votes goes right to the on-deck area for the morning. Students can also [set up daily alerts for 8:30pm](#) the night before that walk them through a check-list of items they need to pack up: lunch, homework folder, planner, textbooks, and gym clothes. This way, they can get to school with homework in hand and a lot less stress.

When classes feel too boring

Although it's tough to maintain your attention when a subject that you find uninteresting is presented in a dull manner, learning to do so is part of developing Executive Function skills. Students can't change a teacher's voice or teaching style or the subject, but they can change what they do when they listen to it. That might start with posture. Sitting upright rather than slouched over can help students get more oxygen into their lungs to feel more alert. So might the way they take notes — by finding a method that works for them (jotting down key words, diagramming concepts, connecting chemistry to other aspects of her life). Other students have success by challenging themselves to participate in class a given number of times or by popping a strong tasting mint to boost alertness.

When procrastination is a problem

Students' tendency to put off their homework until the last possible minute is understandable. The amount of energy and attention students need to focus on classes all day leaves them with little gas in the tank to begin a homework session. Add in distractions from friends texting and a younger brother watching cartoons in the next room and students' task initiation skills are put to the ultimate test. A student could start by setting up a to-do list for the evening. If the distractions are the real barrier to getting started, they can try reducing their effect. They might try [the Forest app on their phone](#) to “plant” a tree on their phone so that while they works, it grows. If they touch their phone, the tree dies. If the distractions come through on the computer, [installing Freedom](#) might do the trick as this widget can block the user's access to tempting

websites for a set amount of time. And, of course, they need to be mindful to relocate away from sources of distraction like siblings watching TV or overexcited pets who want attention.

Strategies to beat test anxiety

1. **Write it down.** During the test, write out your reasoning, even if you don't know the exact answer. Get partial credit where you can. If the wording for a question is ambiguous, write down how you interpreted it in order to answer the question.
2. **Use imagery.** If you can't remember a fact during a test, close your eyes and picture where that information is in your notes or in your book. Was it highlighted? Did you doodle something right next to that piece of information? Was it near a graph or table in the textbook? Sometimes picturing the context in which you saw the information can help you recall it.
3. **Get psyched, stay psyched.** Coach yourself before and during the test. Say positive messages like: "I know the material and will remember it easily." Henry Ford said, "If you think you can, you can. If you think you can't, you can't. Either way, you are right." Unleash the power of your mind to keep you focused on what you want to accomplish, and not what you fear if you don't do well.
4. **Keep your perspective...it is not all or nothing.** One single test will not decide your future. Think of tests as a snapshot of a student's ability to show what he or she knows on a particular day and time, given competing priorities and other factors that can help or hinder performance. That grade is not a reflection of how "smart" you are, but rather how well you prepared and maintained your focus during the test.
5. **Show all work.** Avoid strictly mental calculations when doing math. This allows your teacher to get a glimpse into your problem-solving process and pinpoint where you may be going off the rails. It can also help to not only avoid simple errors, but to get partial credit when one small error early on throws off your answer.
6. **Stay physically and mentally healthy – rest, eat well and exercise.** It sounds simple, but so many students neglect the very things that keep brains functioning at peak performance. You wouldn't try driving a car with an empty gas tank, would you? How can you expect to execute the sharp mental turns necessary for a calculus test on 2 hours of sleep and half a Pop-Tart?
7. **Get tricky: use mnemonics for recalling material.** Creating funny memory tricks can help a student easily access the material when it comes time to take an exam. Need to recall a list of words for a test? Whether it's planets, states, or presidents, this handy little [mnemonic generator](#) will create a suitably ridiculous sentence based on the first letter of each word you type into the text box
8. **Uncover your error patterns.** Scrutinize your previous tests. What went wrong? Do you always mix up timelines? Practice writing out key events in order. Were some unexpected questions on material from a handout or Powerpoint? Make sure you track down and review those handouts in addition to the textbook.
9. **Hunt for clues.** Dig through your notes and on your class website. Did your English teacher mention The American Dream every day for a month? Chances are this will feature prominently in the exam; be able to describe it in great detail, with examples from your readings. Justify what you spend time reviewing. "Well, I have this underlined

in my notes, so I can tell Ms. Jordan really wants us to know tectonic plates for this test.”

10. **Study in a small group.** Don't be content to “look at notes” to prepare. Active studying requires quizzing yourself -- better yet, in a small group of classmates, quiz each other on essential terms, formulae, themes, etc. Even the ability to create questions for your study group peers will show what you know about the important ideas for the test.

Organizing school supplies

- [Use a 5 subject notebook and binders](#) with tabs to consolidate course notes when allowed.
- Color code supplies by subject. For example, make the composition book, folder, and binder for class X all red. Textbooks can also be color coded using [book sock covers](#). Color coding makes supplies easy to track and sort. It's an especially helpful strategy when there's an extensive supply list or your child is using a locker and transitioning between classrooms.
- Label all binders, notebooks, and folders with their respective subject. Add the student's name and homeroom to the inside flap of everything so it can be returned if it's ever lost.

Organizing the backpack

- Prepare the backpack the night before and station it by the front door for school the next morning to minimize frantic morning searches.
- Sort through and clean out the backpack and its contents at least once a week. This will prevent loose papers and old snacks from collecting and provide you the heads up when you need to replenish supplies of pens or paper (before it becomes an emergency).

Organizing Homework

- Use a weekly homework planner and update it consistently. Highlight important due dates in a noticeable color, and cross off assignments as they are completed. An important tip for making planners work well for a student is to write “no homework” when nothing is due the next day rather than leave a subject blank. Why? It's a great double-check strategy - when students actively note “no homework” days, they are both reminding themselves that they checked and teaching themselves that a blank space in their planner needs further investigation.
- Use a paper clip, binder clip, or personalized bookmark to mark the page or week inside the planner so it's easy to flip to in a hurry.

- Have an expandable 7-pocket file folder or accordion folder divided by subject for all homework. Keeping all homework in one folder divided by subject makes it easier to remember and carry between classes or to and from school.

Maintain organization consistently

Students who are organized are equipped to perform better in school. And just as you need to maintain your house (or your health) with regular attention, students also need to maintain their organizational systems on a regular basis.

Encourage your high school student to reflect and set their own goals

High school students are building greater self-awareness as they gain an understanding of who they are as learners. This ability, known as metacognition, is an important Executive Function skill for lifelong success. Parents can encourage self-awareness by helping their students consider carefully about what they'd like to accomplish for any given time period. Goal-setting does not need to be only for January 1st or the start of a new school year! Here are 6 steps to effective goal-setting with your high school student.

1) Take Ownership: Offer to brainstorm with your high schooler some of the challenges they face. Remember, to see results, your child's goal needs to emerge from them truly wanting to improve something about their life. (In other words, just because you may want them to finish their homework by 8:00pm doesn't necessarily mean they want that as their goal.)

2) Keep It Simple: Focus on one goal area at a time. Even though we may have several things we want to improve, if we get overwhelmed by trying to accomplish too much, we will be right back where we started. So what is it that your child believes they could benefit from most?

- Being more organized?
- Managing your time better?
- Staying focused in class?
- Planning ahead?
- Managing frustration?

3) Make It SMART: When we think of SMART goals, we think of goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. SMART goals provide the roadmap to how you'll work toward your objectives. SMART goals can often start with a fuzzier big-picture goal. Below, you'll see some examples of how to turn "fuzzy" goals into something sharp that invites real action.

- **BIG PICTURE GOAL:** *I want to be more organized.* While an admirable goal, do you notice there's no "how" here? There's no way to judge whether you're working toward the goal when you keep at this vague level.
- **SMART GOAL:** I will stay organized by filing important papers into different colored folders for each subject and recycling unneeded papers at the end of each school day, leaving no loose papers in my locker or backpack.
- **BIG PICTURE GOAL:** *I want to manage my time better and get my school work done.*
- **SMART GOAL:** In order to better manage my time, I will start homework as soon as I arrive home at 4pm and avoid my phone and TV until 6pm or until all homework is complete.
- **BIG PICTURE GOAL:** *I want to stay focused in class and ignore distractions.*
- **SMART GOAL:** During class times, I will ignore distractions by keeping my cell phone in my backpack, sitting in the front of the room, and taking detailed notes in a notebook designated for each class.
- **BIG PICTURE GOAL:** *I want to stop procrastinating.*
- **SMART GOAL:** As homework, the day a project or assignment is given, I will break the project into steps and create personal deadlines leading up to the due date in order to plan ahead and [avoid procrastination](#).

4) Track your progress: SMART goals are measurable, so each week encourage your student reflect on their progress. Ask your high schooler:

- Have you stuck to your goal? If not, what is holding you back?
- Is it a realistic goal for you or is there something you need to change to make it more attainable?
- What specifically will you do next week to make sure you come closer to success?

5) Celebrate your accomplishments: Each week as you and your child reflect on progress, be proud of the small things they are accomplishing. They may not have all the pieces in place yet, but take the time to recognize those attempts forward.

6) Continue owning that new habit: This is not just a goal; this is your child's new self! They have accomplished what they thought they couldn't! Encourage your child to keep it up, create new goals, and continue to improve their life.

Build self-advocacy skills to prepare for a successful transition to college

Students in high school need to be able to advocate for themselves. Though these skills tend to be more difficult for students with ADHD and Executive Function challenges, fortunately, all of them are teachable. Particularly for tests, papers and projects, the following self-monitoring and self-advocacy skills are critical:

- The student checks the due date in the instructions and confirms it with the teacher to recognize the relative urgency of a matter, so he/she tackles the project in a timely way.
- The student paraphrases instructions to be sure that he/she understands them and knows what all of the different parts of the assignment are.
- When frustrated or upset, the student suspends disbelief and tries assuming that the teacher wants all students to succeed if they work hard, including her/him.
- Both in class and at home, the student determines any points of confusion and makes notes for questions to bring to the teacher for clarification.
- The student communicates with the teacher (by email if possible) to set a time for help on specific questions.
In a meeting with the teacher, the student has a reliable method to record (notes, recording pen/app for example) any new information.
- The student asks follow up questions when the explanations aren't making sense to her/him.
- The student constructs a timeline and gets support from someone (a parent, the teacher, or a professional Executive Function/ADHD coach) to ensure follow through.
- The student shows the teacher progress at least once or twice (more for bigger projects) for quality control.

While no single tactic guarantees success, these approaches give students the best chance possible to build a relationship with the teacher, to understand the assignment, and to stay ahead of deadlines. These steps will also help them advocate for themselves for years to come, so they can manage themselves effectively in high school and, beyond that, in college.

Source: Executive Function in High School Students. Retrieved from: Beyond Book Smart