POSITIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Executive function in everyday life

Executive functioning refers to the mental processes that help us plan, organise, remember information, manage attention, regulate behaviour and work towards goals. These skills develop over time and can be influenced by stress, fatigue, sensory experiences, anxiety, health, environment and support needs. Executive functioning can vary from day to day and from situation to situation.

Executive function is one part of a bigger picture

Many things can influence how manageable something feels:

Communication and understanding	**Sensory experiences**	**Energy and capacity**
Attention and interest	**The environment**	**What else is happening**

We use it many times a day, often without noticing, such as when:

- getting ready
- starting work
- finding what we need
- managing time
- moving between activities
- responding when plans change.

Everyday activities often hold more demands than we might first realise

CAN ≠ CAN RIGHT NOW

- **Being able to do something at one time doesn't mean it will be equally accessible every time.**
- Capacity can change across days and within a day, with things like tiredness, stress, health, sensory experiences, and context. Capacity naturally varies. It doesn't tell us how hard someone is trying.

Ways to support executive functioning

Many Autistic children and young people already use strategies that support their executive functioning. These may include routines, visual supports, favourite interests, technology, family reminders, or environmental adjustments. Building on existing strengths is often more effective than introducing multiple new strategies at once.

1 Start together

Sometimes another person can help carry part of the load.

- Identify the first step together.
- Get materials ready together.
- Begin alongside the young person.
- Stay nearby if that helps.
- Problem-solve together when something gets stuck.



2 Adjust the environment

Consider what else around the task may be adding demand.

Sometimes the task isn't the only thing asking something of us. Small changes around a task can leave more capacity for the task itself.

Things to consider

- **Noise and competing information:** what could be turned down, put away, or covered?
- **Interruptions:** is there a time or place with fewer?
- **Where and when:** is there a spot, or a time of day, when more capacity is available?
- **Materials:** are things stored where they're used, and easy to find?
- **Other demands:** is the person also being asked to talk, wait or listen at the same time?
- **Movement, rest, or regulation:** would a break or some movement help, before, during or after?

In everyday life

At home or in the community	At school
Homework at a cleared table, with everything needed in one tub.	Only the current worksheet on the desk, and a choice of where to work.

3 Keep information visible

Keep useful information available to see and return to.

Spoken information disappears once it's said. When information stays available, a person doesn't need to hold it all in mind and can check it at their own pace, as often as they need.

Examples of visual supports

- **Visual schedules**, including now and next
- **Checklists** for routines
- **Written instructions** that stay up after they're explained
- **Calendars** with important events marked
- **Photos, examples, and models** of what's being asked
- **Labels, maps,** and **visual reminders**



Information is most useful **where and when it's needed**: a checklist by the front door, instructions on the desk, the bus time on the fridge.

At home or in the community	At school
A checklist beside the front door: hat, lunchbox, water bottle, plus library bag on Tuesdays.	The day's schedule on the board with the current activity marked, and task instructions left up after they've been explained.

> **Visual supports are one option, not something every Autistic person needs.** Information can also live in a phone, a written note, an object, a routine, or another person.

4 Make important information clear

Help the important information stand out.

Instructions often hold several pieces of information at once, some needed now and some later. Sorting this takes effort. When the important part stands out, more capacity is available for the task itself.

Ideas to try

- Share what's needed now and keep other information for when it's needed.
- Put key information first or highlight it.
- Separate now from later, such as a "Bring on Friday" box.
- Check understanding quietly, without putting the young person on the spot.

What this might look like

Instead of	Try
At school: "Pack everything away, grab your maths book, turn to page 12 and start question six."	Say: **"Pack away."** Then keep the next information visible: **Maths book** **Page 12 → Start question 6**
At home: "Go upstairs, get changed, put your uniform in the wash and bring down your library book."	Say: **"Time to get changed."** Then keep the next information visible: **Uniform → into wash basket** **Library book → into school bag**

- **Clear language doesn't necessarily mean fewer or simpler words.**
- Some people find more detail or knowing the reason for something, helpful.
- The aim is to consider how much information needs to be held, organised, and acted on at once.

5 Make the next step clear

Show where to begin and what comes next.

Everyday activities can contain many smaller demands: where to start, what order to go in, what's needed and when it's finished. A clear next step can support both starting and keeping going.

Ideas to try

- Identify the next useful step: "First, shoes."
- Show where to begin, such as circling the first question or highlighting it.
- Break larger activities into stages
- Have materials ready before starting (this also helps reduce movement and distractions).
- Use a checklist or sequence that can be ticked off or crossed out along the way.
- Show what "finished" looks like, and what happens next.

In everyday life

At home or in the community	At school
Clothes laid out in the order they go on.	A project broken into three stages, each with its own date.
A visual schedule that breaks down everyday tasks	Co-create daily routines and have them available in the places that they happen

> **Not every activity needs to be broken into small steps.** Too many steps can add load too.

6 Make time visible

Show when things will happen and how long they may last.

Time can't always be seen or touched, which can make it hard to keep track of. Showing it in a concrete way can make what's coming more predictable.

Ideas to try

- **Clocks and calendars** that are easy to see
- **Timelines** of the day or the lesson
- **Meaningful markers:** "after recess," "when Mum gets home"
- **Countdowns:** "3 sleeps until camp"
- **When and how long:** "at 2 o'clock", "two more songs", "about 20 minutes"
- **Important times and deadlines** where they'll be seen
- **Weekly calendars:** This can signal what is happening today, tomorrow, and later in the week



Showing time: an afternoon timeline

3:15	→	After school	→	4:00	→	5:30
Home		Afternoon tea		Swimming		Dinner

In everyday life

At home or in the community	At school
The bus time, and when to start getting ready, on a whiteboard by the door.	Assessment due dates on a shared term planner.

> **Timers can be helpful for some people and add pressure for others.**
> They're one option, not a universal strategy. Ask, try, and notice what helps.

7 Allow processing time

Give information time to land before adding more.

Taking in information and deciding what to do next takes time and that timing will be different for each person.

- Pause after giving information.
- Avoid immediately repeating it or adding more.
- If you do repeat it, consider using the same words.
- Offer information in a form the person can return to.

> **There is no universal amount of processing time.** Notice what helps this person.

8 Prepare for change

Show what's changing, what's happening next and what's staying the same.

"There's been a change" often leaves out the details that help a change make sense.

Ideas to try

- Share changes as early as is practical.
- Update the schedule or calendar, rather than only saying it.
- Preview new places, people or events with photos, maps, or a visit.
- Help them preview the menu for a new restaurant so they can choose a meal early without pressure.
- **Offer meaningful choice where possible.** When something outside a young person's control changes, a real choice can preserve some agency and control.

In everyday life

	At home: no swimming	**At school: a relief teacher**
What's changing	No swimming today. The pool is closed.	No Mr Thompson today. Mrs Bryce will be our teacher.
What's next	Park or library. You choose.	Mrs Bryce will teach our usual lessons.
What stays the same	Afternoon tea after school. Dinner at the usual time. Swimming is back next Tuesday.	Same classroom and seats. Recess and lunch at the usual times. Library after lunch.

Keep in mind

These are options, not requirements. What helps will vary between people and from one day to the next. Where possible, involve the young person in identifying what helps and how they'd like support to be available.



Independence doesn't have to mean doing everything alone.

- Adults use calendars, reminders, maps, routines, lists, technology and other people too. A useful support doesn't automatically need to be removed.
- The goal is not to remove support but to identify the supports that help each person thrive.
- Success might look like greater access, participation and agency, reduced effort, more predictability, and useful support being available when it's needed.

Something I could try

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