Understanding executive functioning

positive partnerships
Working together to support autistic school-aged students

Executive functions are mental processes that help us manage information, direct attention and organise actions towards a goal. We use them in everyday activities, learning and responding to change.



Planning

Identifying a goal, deciding what is needed and arranging the steps in a useful order.



Organisation

Arranging materials and information so they can be found and used when needed.



Time management

Estimating how long activities may take, noticing time passing and planning when to begin or finish.



Working memory

Holding information in mind briefly and using it while carrying out an activity.



Emotional regulation

Managing emotional experiences and finding or returning to a manageable state, with support where needed. Movement, rest, connection and changes to the environment can help.



Attention regulation

Directing, sustaining and shifting attention. Interest, energy, sensory experiences and interruptions can affect attention.



Cognitive flexibility

Shifting between ideas, approaches or activities as circumstances change. Predictability and processing time can make a difference.



Metacognition

Thinking about our own thinking. This includes noticing how an activity is going and recognising what we understand or need help with.



Task initiation

Getting started on an activity. Knowing what to do and wanting to do it do not always mean being able to begin.



Persistence

Continuing or returning to an activity towards a goal. This can include pausing, seeking support or changing the approach.

Development over time

Executive functions develop through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. Development varies across people and areas. Support needs may continue throughout life.

Capacity in the moment

Capacity varies with stress, sleep, health, sensory demands, interest and available support. Knowing how to do something does not mean being able to do it in every situation.

Support and participation

Adjusting the activity or environment can reduce demands and support engagement and wellbeing. Ongoing support can remain useful as skills develop.