

# the executive functioning workbook for teens

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help for unprepared,  
late & scattered teens

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To my husband Steve: Thanks for being my rock and believing in me,  
even when I sometimes don't.

To my daughter Kylie: Be proud of who you are. I am proud to be the  
mother of such a strong young woman,

To my son Christopher, the inspiration for this book: I always knew  
you could do it, and you did. I am proud of the amazing young man you  
have turned out to be. Now, go get the world!

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# for teens

Just as we all have different fingerprints, we all have very different brains. Some people's brains are very good at remembering things. Other people's brains are incredibly creative. Still other people's brains are extremely organized. Whatever kind of brain you have, it's yours and you need to learn how to work *with* it, instead of against it.

Do you ever feel as though other teens understand things more easily than you do? Do others your age seem to "have it together," while *you* sometimes feel as though you'd lose your head if it weren't attached to your body?

At times, you may have felt lost, confused, unprepared, or scattered. This can be a normal part of growing up. However, for some teens, these feelings indicate weakness in executive functioning.

*Executive functioning* is a set of skills that include self-understanding, organizational skill, time management ability, emotion control, behavior control, flexibility, initiative, attention, working memory, and persistence. A person may have a weakness in any one of these areas or multiple areas. What does weakness in executive functioning look like, sound like, and feel like? Well, that depends.

A teen with a weakness in organizational skill may have a very hard time keeping his binder or locker in order. Another teen with a weakness in working memory may not be able to remember that she has homework. Still another teen with a weakness in behavior control may blurt things out in the middle of class. Sound familiar? If so, this book may prove very helpful.

While this book is meant for you to use on your own, I highly encourage you to find an adult whom you trust who can help you as needed. Ideally, this person should be your parent, but it doesn't have to be. It might be a trusted teacher or your school counselor. The more you practice the activities in this book, the

better your skills will become; and a helpful adult may be able to give you valuable pointers.

Our goal as humans should be to effectively manage our lives, make positive decisions, and move ourselves toward a bright and rewarding future. I hope that you find the activities in this book helpful in making that future come true for you.

Best of luck!

SHARON HANSEN

## for parents

When my son Chris was born, I envisioned that he would be intelligent, well-behaved, and a good student. Now a high school graduate, Chris is indeed very intelligent, and most of the time he is well-behaved. However, in school, there were times his grades were less than stellar.

Throughout school, Chris had a hard time completing homework, remembering to bring things home, and taking any kind of interest in school. By fifth grade, neuropsychological testing indicated that he had weaknesses in organizational skill, processing speed, and working memory—abilities that contribute to what is known as *executive functioning*.

Executive functioning is a set of skills that help people organize, plan, and control their life to make sure things get done. Teens who have weakness in executive functioning have a hard time starting tasks, sustaining effort, and finishing what they start.

Chris is not less smart than other students his age; his brain simply does not work the same as that of a teen who is a stellar student. Just as some people are short and some are tall, some people have better executive skills than others do. If your child has trouble with tasks that require executive skills, she is not “abnormal”; she is just a different kind of normal.

In many teens, the area of the brain where most executive functioning takes place—the prefrontal cortex—is still developing. The most recent brain research indicates that this prefrontal cortex is not completely developed until a young person is in his or her mid- to late twenties. This is important, because it means that there are many things you can do to help improve your child’s executive skills. Just as it took your child lots of practice before he was able to walk, talk, ride a bike, or do anything else well, he can develop his executive skills through practice.



Your child may be strong in some areas of executive functioning, but weaker in others. The first activity in this book will help gauge your child's ability in different areas. Once you and your child know her strengths and weaknesses, you can help her choose which skills to work on.

While the activities in this book can help your child improve his executive skills, they must be repeated several times before they “sink in” and become habits. For most people, it takes about twenty-eight days to learn a new habit. For teens who have difficulty with tasks that require executive skills, it can take twice or three times as long. As well as a struggle for these teens themselves, this can be frustrating for anyone trying to help them (you, for example). Therefore, while this book is meant for teens to use on their own, I strongly encourage you to participate in the activities as much as possible and to act as your child's “executive skills coach” until he is able to consistently perform the tasks expected of him. With this “scaffolding” in place, your child is much more likely to be successful.

I wish you luck on your journey, and although you may at times become frustrated in your efforts to support your child's development, please remember to be gentle with your child.

SHARON HANSEN

# executive skills self-assessment

## for you to know

**E**xecutive function disorder (EFD) is a term that applies to people who have a hard time performing certain tasks required to carry out their daily responsibilities. These include, but are not limited to, analyzing, organizing, deciding, and planning. At school, teens with EFD may have difficulty getting assignments done and turned in on time; keeping their folders, binders, and lockers organized; and managing their time while resisting distractions. At home, teens with EFD may have difficulty handling their emotions, following a series of directions, or keeping their room clean.

Just as some people are short and some are tall, some people have better executive skills than others do. You're not "abnormal" if you have EFD; you're just a different kind of normal. It may be better to think of "average" as opposed to "normal." Just as a grade of C is average—middle of the range—you can think of most teens as having average brains.

The assessment that follows will allow you to determine your areas of strength and weakness in executive functioning. You can then use this information to plan which sections of the book to work through first. After tackling your weakest skills, you can proceed to those areas that don't need quite as much attention. The better your executive skills, the more effective you'll be in life.

## for you to do

Read each of the following statements. Circle those that are true for you, based on what you know about yourself or have heard from other people. (The areas are numbered for now but will be identified shortly.)

### **Area 1**

- I hurry through tasks just to get them done.
- I dislike tasks or games that require the use of problem-solving skills.
- I need to have directions repeated.
- People have told me that I am unaware of how my behavior affects others.

### **Area 2**

- I have a hard time remembering to bring home items needed to complete my assignments.
- I have a hard time finding my completed assignments.
- I have a hard time keeping my room, backpack, locker, or desk clean and orderly.
- I have a hard time finding needed items on a regular basis.

### **Area 3**

- I have a hard time starting assignments or chores early so that they get done on time.

- I have a hard time fitting new events into my schedule.
- I have a hard time accurately estimating how long something will take to complete.
- I often miss due dates or deadlines for assignments or tasks.

#### **Area 4**

- I have frequent temper tantrums.
- I feel nervous more often than others my age do.
- I have a hard time controlling my angry feelings.
- I get upset by small issues.

#### **Area 5**

- I interrupt conversations.
- People have told me that I make inappropriate comments or remarks.
- I start tasks without waiting for or reading all the instructions.
- I blurt out answers in class without being called on by the teacher.

#### **Area 6**

- I have a hard time handling unplanned changes in a

schedule.

- I have trouble moving from class to class or transitioning from school to home at the end of the day.
- I give up on a task if my first attempt is not successful.
- I have a hard time asking for help if something is not clear.

### **Area 7**

- I have a hard time starting tasks without being told.
- I need reminders to finish tasks like chores or homework.
- I need reminders to follow classroom or house rules.
- I have a hard time moving from one task to another.

### **Area 8**

- I have a hard time completing tasks, especially if they get difficult.
- I feel overwhelmed by large assignments or projects.
- I have a hard time ignoring small distractions in my environment.
- I talk to nearby people instead of working on a task.

### **Area 9**

- I have a hard time remembering a verbal list of three or more things to do.
- I forget to hand in all my homework.
- I have a hard time remembering to bring home items that I need to complete work.
- I answer only the first part of a multiple-part question.

## **Area 10**

- I have a hard time returning to a task if I am interrupted while doing it.
- I have a hard time staying “on task” if the task is boring to me.
- I am easily distracted while trying to focus on work.
- I have a hard time setting goals in school or at home.

If you circled more than two statements out of any group of four, you may have weakness in that particular area of executive functioning. For every area, there are three activities in this book that can help you improve your skills:

**Area 1—Self-Understanding** (the ability to assess how well you understand yourself and how you do things): Activities 2, 3, and 4

**Area 2—Organizational Skill** (the ability to establish and maintain order and keep track of things): Activities 5, 6, and 7

**Area 3—Time Management Ability** (the ability to