**Improving EF Skills**

No single strategy will work with every student, nor is there one magical strategy that will solve one student’s EF problems. It’s always going to involve multiple strategies implemented in concert. Successful teachers are dynamic in their approach, too, adjusting EF strategies as students mature.

Here are some of the strategies that promote EF success:

* *Exercise daily.* In her PBS online article, "The Science of Smart: A Surprising Way To Improve Executive Function," Annie Murphy Paul, author of the forthcoming book, , says, "Aerobic exercise can grease the wheels of executive brain function." She contends that "regular exercise and overall physical fitness have been linked to academic achievement, as well as to success on specific tasks like safely crossing a busy street while talking on a cell phone."
* *Analyze and break down tasks*. Ten-page paper? Forget it. With EF-challenged students, break assignments into smaller chunks so each piece is much more doable. Students can experience a sense of accomplishment and monitor progress more often. Give students struggling with EF issues practice in breaking down tasks such as preparing a bibliography, doing an Internet search, washing their P.E. uniform, and getting themselves ready for a musical, athletic, or theatrical performance.
* *Confirm, reconfirm, and reconfirm again all directions.*
* *As often as possible, cue from afar.* "Communicate indirectly (for example, note, text message). The idea is to create distance between you and your teen so that the cue can work without the two of you being in the same space at the same time," according to Guare, Dawson, and Guare.
* *Announce upcoming events and changes to the regular schedule well in advance and do it repeatedly.* No surprises, if possible. If we are actually going to have a surprise visitor to the classroom, we may tell students struggling with EF skills about it ahead of time.
* *Practice transitions from one activity to another, both as individuals and in small groups.* Yes, this is important, even with middle and high school students.
* *Record all due dates at the top of every assignment or the opening page of any electronic file.*
* *Remove clutter and distractions from the immediate visual area of the student while he works.*
* *Do a book bag dump and clean out once a week and on the same day of the week.* If everything is on an iPad, do a folder and file clean-out and confirm the current organization is helping, not hindering the student’s success.
* *Provide effective, constructive, and frequent descriptive feedback.* Focus on decisions students make, not the quality of the work. It’s specific feedback that motivates and matures, not the label on the performance.
* *Make every goal transparent.* Provide lots of examples of the final product for every standard. Provide students with ample experience critiquing others’ products and attempts at the learning goals. In doing this, they build a robust internal editor that helps them compare their own work with given exemplars in real time. They monitor their own progress and adjust their efforts without feeling threatened.
* *Provide a compelling visual aid* for everything students have to learn.
* *Help students identify risks involved in their decisions.* This is done in many ways, including role-playing; self-talks; ropes course initiatives programs; encouragement to try out for new sports, clubs, and programs; and reading short passages about risky behavior and discussing potential outcomes before reading the final descriptions of what happened. Risk-taking can increase dopamine production in adolescents, which creates pleasure, making it very attractive. Helping students connect with their core values as the individuals they want to be, the people their families want them to be, will provide an effective metric of risk assessment.
* *Show progress towards goals visibly and often.*
* *Create a successful emotional atmosphere.* Let all students know that they are accepted as fully valued class members. Operate as an advocate for students, not an adversarial "gotcha" taskmaster. Know that humiliation for EF shortcomings kills motivation and enflames resentment.

*Demonstrate how EF skill success leverages students for what they desire in life*. For example, help them make a plan for making enough money to purchase something of value.

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