

EXCERPT FROM

BUILDING THE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS
YOUR CHILD NEEDS IN THE AGE OF ATTENTION

YOUR KID'S GONNA BE OKAY

A GUIDE TO RAISING
COMPETENT AND
CONFIDENT KIDS

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Introduction

It seems like it was just a few years ago that we were living in the Information Age. Going to a top college meant having access to the best professors, who would share the most current knowledge with those privileged enough to attend. That emphasis on knowledge seems quaint now. It is a different world—one where being a walking encyclopedia does not guarantee success. Information is easy to attain; dealing with all that information is the new challenge. We are no longer in the Information Age, where knowledge reigns supreme. We are now in the Age of Attention, and, as a society, we are struggling to make the best use of the most precious commodities we have: our time and our attention.¹

To manage the infinity of well-designed grabs for our time, focus, and money, we and, even more so, our children, need to master a different set of abilities known as Executive Function skills in the Age

¹ As Harvard professor Bob Kegan states, “If contemporary culture were a school, with all the tasks and expectations meted out by modern life as its curriculum, would anyone graduate?” Bear in mind that he wrote this about *adult* development! For more, see his book *In Over Our Heads: Meeting the Mental Demands of Modern Life*.

of Attention.² In a nutshell, Executive Function skills are generally regulated in a part of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex (PFC)³ and help people set and achieve goals. More specifically, Executive Function skills include some of our most foundational abilities, such as being able to manage our impulses and emotions and being able to start tasks and stay focused on them. They also include more complex skills, such as being able to prioritize, plan, organize, problem-solve, and make adjustments when we're off base. As you can imagine, having problems with any one of these skills poses a challenge; if we see that our children have significant deficits in several of these skills, we naturally worry if they're going to be okay.

In this book, I will share with you the tools and strategies I have learned and/or developed over the past twenty-five years as a parent, teacher, school principal, and founder of the nation's largest Executive Function coaching company. I will also share a few of the many mistakes I made as a child, some just misguided, and others a bit more mischievous. The lessons I've learned were the result, not only of academic study, but of personal failures, journals full of reflection, and the ongoing decision to use myself as an experiment to see how much I could grow and improve.

My goal is to help you understand how children learn and grow, to add tools to your parenting repertoire, and to show you the skills you need to offer support in a way that your child will appreciate rather than resent. As a result, your child will become more capable and more confident both in school and beyond.⁴

² While the term "Executive Function" does not require capitalization, it tends to help those new to the term to see it as a title, so I will be using the convention of capitals for it throughout the book.

³ Tap your forehead, but not too hard. That's where the PFC is located.

⁴ If your child is at an age or has a temperament that makes them not receptive to your direct help, you can share some of the ideas found here with someone who may be in a position to exert greater influence in your child's life, such as a teacher or a favorite aunt or uncle.

Since academics are my own first love, they get the lion's share of examples in this book. As I've spent more than twenty-five years teaching, hiring and supervising educators, developing curriculum, and advising schools, academics are what I know best. In addition, school *is* where most kids spend a great deal of their time and energy: seven or more hours a day, 180+ days a year, for at least twelve years, not counting pre-school, kindergarten, college, and graduate school. Add in everybody's favorite activity—homework—and we are looking at the central part of a young person's life.

Moreover, school matters. Whether or not we remember and use the Pythagorean theorem every day, or discuss the ins and outs of ancient civilizations with our friends, we all need the broader Executive Function skills that school demands. To succeed in school, children need to learn how to control their impulses and treat others with respect, how to stay focused, how to break down directions, how to be aware of what they know and don't know and then seek help when they're stuck, how to stay organized and manage their time, and a host of other relevant skills that this book will explore. School matters because it's a training ground for life. School matters because it is a place where Executive Function skills, whether they are taught or not, are always expected.

The skills of managing frustrations, being persistent, and the rest of the Executive Function suite of tools apply anywhere we go. One parent, for example, recruited me to work with her son John, a junior in high school, on a host of issues. The goal was not only to do his very best on homework each night, but also to become a better writer and clean his room. He had no diagnosed learning disabilities, but he, like virtually all kids his age, still had Executive Function challenges, including starting "boring" tasks on time and staying organized. His mom was understandably concerned, since he was stalling out in several places. While she recognized that he

had a lot going for him—he was kind, articulate, a standout in club soccer, and a leader in an extracurricular program—the improvements she felt he needed to make left her worried that he wouldn't be very successful when he went off to college and had to run his own life in just a couple of years.

In talking to John, I could see that he understood his mother's concerns, but he was only interested in improving his writing; he had no desire to perfect his homework or keep his room neat. I accepted these initial limits and focused on the writing, and after a few weeks, his mother did, too. After all, homework was getting done—albeit not to refrigerator-level quality—and nobody had been injured yet in his messy room, so we put those concerns on hold. Then, on a Sunday morning, I received an odd phone call, which was especially odd since he normally didn't call but texted me for our check-ins.

"Can you come over today, actually, like, now, if you could, and help me clean my room?" he asked. There was a degree of panic in his voice, which I ignored.

"Wow! You saw the light," I said. "What happened?"

"The soccer scouts are coming," he said, "and I'm supposed to be watched today. I can't find my jersey, and the coach said that in no circumstances would he play anyone who does not have their uniform. I didn't think it would be a problem to find it, but I can't. The game is at three."

"So, you don't want to clean your room. You just want to find your jersey, right?"

"Basically, yes."

I rushed over. We used a few sorting techniques to avoid redundant searches and within thirty minutes . . . he remembered where he had put it. While he didn't want to clean his room for the noble purpose of being neat and organized, he had discovered that, at times, knowing where everything was had real benefits. He admitted that

his mother was right and that he wanted to do a better job on both the room and on his homework—maybe not at the level she wanted, but better than he had previously. He saw the benefit of being on top of things.

We spoke five years later, and I asked him how, as a young adult, he was doing with organization. He told me that for anything that really mattered, he had a dedicated space. He then added, “I’ve found that taking more responsibility for my life, such as doing my own laundry, has helped me since I have no one to blame but myself. I put the things down, so I’m more likely to know where they are.” He just discovered over time that the adults were right. He has a full plate now: tutoring part-time, working as a business consultant, and applying to business school. I had always seen his potential; now, with course corrections he learned from Executive Function supports at home and through our work, with normal brain development, and with some real-world experience, he is comfortably making the transition to young adulthood. The kid’s gonna be okay. So many kids are like this young man: They have strengths, but something is in their way.

This book untangles several of the most important obstacles to children’s growth, confidence, and success, and offers solutions for helping them. Whether your children are typical learners or have specific learning challenges, such as ADHD or dyslexia, the skills discussed in this book will help you help them. The book begins in chapter 1 with motivation, the prerequisite to sustained effort. By focusing on the values implicit in having a motivated child, I aim to shift the conversation away from rewards and punishments and, instead, toward finding and emphasizing the intersection of your child’s talents and passions. Chapter 2 uses an evidence-based model from psychology to explore how people change and how we can help facilitate that change in our children. Chapter 3 shows

how we can help our children manage their anxiety, as we learn to manage our own worries about them. It addresses the question of how to achieve the optimal state of peak performance where our children are sufficiently motivated without being held back by fear of failure. Chapter 4 looks at attention, a skillset that includes task initiation (getting started), sustained attention (staying focused), and goal-directed persistence (finishing the job). This particular challenge is especially acute in the Age of Attention, when time-sucking activities are almost irresistible and so readily available. Chapter 5 explores the higher-level, more complex Executive Function skills such as prioritizing, planning, time management, and organization. Finally, chapter 6 explores the capacity of reflection: how to learn and improve from experience.⁵ This skill, as it develops, can serve as the master key to improving other areas.

Scratch beneath the surface of kids who seem lazy, oppositional, or bored, and you'll usually see young people with opinions, drive, and skills. Removing the impediments to their success and showing them how they can achieve their potential has been my life's work, and I hope that some of the successes, failures, and strategies I share in this book will help you to help them.

⁵ While there are other Executive Function skills, such as processing speed (how quickly you can take in and make sense of information) and working memory (essentially, how effectively you can mentally juggle), this book does not attempt to cover every one. I have focused on the areas where I have found specific strategies that can garner the greatest gains.

An Overview of Executive Functioning

"Executive Functioning" refers to the self-management skills that allow us to get things done. While we may get from point A to point B with our legs or wheels, it is our Executive Function skills that allow us to get there efficiently, to learn from the experience and to improve our approach. In the parlance of ADHD expert Russell Barkley, Executive Function is "the use of self-directed actions (self-regulation) so as to choose goals and to select, enact, and sustain actions across time toward those goals."⁶ While the exact set of skills remains somewhat disputed among researchers, certain mental processes are imperative to managing ourselves and overcoming obstacles if we are to achieve these goals. These processes include the following:

- Controlling impulses and regulating our emotional state
- Starting tasks that we must do, even when we don't want to

⁶ Barkley, *Executive Functions*, 104.

- Directing our attention effectively
- Thinking flexibly
- Setting priorities
- Planning tasks and managing time limits
- Organizing
- Assessing our progress and changing tactics as needed

Executive Function skills follow a relatively consistent path of development. For example, toddlers can exert control over their impulses. However, they do not have the ability to determine priorities in a systematic way, a skill that does not typically begin until adolescence. Because of the variability among individuals, though, some people's Executive Function skills mature more quickly than others. As with physical development, these differences are readily observable by others. Unfortunately, unlike someone's physical growth, Executive Function weaknesses are poorly understood, so these kids often get labeled as "lazy" or "oppositional" instead of overtaxed, undersupported, and discouraged.

Until their challenges are understood, both adults and peers are likely to remain frustrated by kids with Executive Function difficulties. They may not think before speaking or posting on social media (impulse control), they may get upset easily since they often have difficulty managing their emotions (emotional regulation), they will find it difficult to focus for extended periods on challenging ideas and details (attention), and they're not usually aware of or committed to tackling their priorities. You can imagine the difficulty of running a household, managing a job, or being a strong student if these skills are significantly impaired.

Everyone struggles occasionally with being on top of things, or with one Executive Function skill or another. However, for some people, every day is a painful battle, and they feel like failures much of the time. For others, they are mystified by how much seems to go wrong, when their poor Executive Functioning is the cause of so many of the problems they create for themselves and those around them. It's not just losing the keys occasionally or being a few minutes late for meetings. For our kids, Executive Function deficits mean that they don't understand the directions in class. It means that they can't take notes without losing the thread of the presentation. It means that organizing themselves to write a paper, staying calm while studying for a test, or focusing on a book may be beyond their current abilities. Of equal concern, it may mean that people find them frustrating to be around since they don't follow through on commitments very well and often have trouble seeing the perspectives of others.

Fortunately, our Executive Function skills develop over time until our mid- to late-twenties.⁷ In addition, because of what is known as neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to learn from experience and to change itself—Executive Functioning can continue to be protected and even improved in some ways throughout our lives.⁸

Can we, as parents, do specific things to support our children's development of Executive Functioning, to make those skills stronger sooner? The answer is an unequivocal "yes." To begin, we and our children need a "growth mindset," a belief that abilities are not

⁷ "[The research of Dr. Jay Giedd of the National Institute of Mental Health] also showed that the brain areas responsible for more advanced cognitive processes—integrating information from the senses, abstract reasoning and judgment, and other "executive functions" (the prefrontal cortex) mature last—and not fully until the late twenties or early thirties." David Gleason, "Expecting Our Kids to Behave Like Adults."

⁸ "In terms of cognitive interventions, actual gains in neural volume relative to a control group were demonstrated . . . when older adults were trained to juggle for 90 days." Park and Bischof, "The Aging Mind."

permanent, but something that can be developed. This mindset is not wishful thinking but real-world magic. Carol Dweck, the Stanford researcher who popularized the idea of growth mindsets, has demonstrated through brain imaging and interviews that those with the growth mindset respond to challenges by “engaging deeply, processing their errors, learning from them, and correcting them,” while those who believe that ability cannot change “run from their errors.”⁹

According to Adele Diamond and Kathleen Lee, citing a compilation of studies carried out through the National Institute of Health, myriad solutions exist that strengthen Executive Function skills beyond their regular course of development. From the right school environment to taking properly taught martial arts classes, from exercise to games, we can provide opportunities that capitalize on our children’s strengths and others that help them improve where they struggle, being mindful that for every individual, the Executive Function profile is, indeed, a mix of strengths and challenges.¹⁰

Trying small experiments with our kids and improving the way we interact with them will help our children to develop these fundamental skills. Eventually, as they see the benefits of stronger Executive Functioning, they themselves will want to and be able to improve the skills on their own.

⁹ Dweck, “The Power of Believing.”

¹⁰ Diamond and Lee, “Interventions Shown to Aid Executive Function.”