“Organizationally Challenged?”
How Developing Executive Function Can Help the Gifted

Presented by:

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Focus on Executive Function

“Complex cognitive processes that serve on-going, goal directed behavior.” (Denkla, 2007)

The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal, and not be put off by or distracted by competing interests.

The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information or mistakes. (Mach, Vatcha & Harris, 2008)
Executive Functions (Behavior)

Definition - The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, control and direct behavior

- Inhibit competing actions
- Shift strategies
- Self-monitor, check and regulate emotions

(Mach, Vatcha & Harris, 2008)
Executive function is an integration of three facets of human psychology:

**Hill** – establishment of a goal

**Skill** – abilities and techniques for attaining the goal

**Will** – volition to begin and persevere until the goal has been reached

(Moran & Gardner in Meltzer, 2009)
Executive Function Processes

THE FUNNEL MODEL

- Planning
- Organizing
- Prioritizing
- Shifting
- Memorizing
- Checking

(Meltzer, 2004)
Executive Function Processes (Educational Implications)

Organizational Skills
- Setting & managing goals
- Planning
- Organizing
- Time management
- Initiating
- Inhibiting actions

Higher-Order Learning Skills
- Metacognition
- Monitoring, including goals
- Self regulation
- Reflection & self-evaluation
- Thinking and acting strategically: socially and cognitively

References citing relationship between executive functions, attention, and working memory: Barkley 1996, 1997; Esslinger, 1996; Pennington, Bennetto, MCAleer, & Roberts, 1996
Functional Tasks Related to Education

- Getting and staying organized
- Turning in homework
- Math problems; extended response
- On time to class; meeting
Typical Behaviors Found in Students with Executive Function Issues

- Does not manage time well
- Skips steps in multi-step tasks
- Difficulty identifying important information when taking notes
- Loses important papers or possessions
- Has difficulty with transitions
Typical executive function problems for gifted students:

- Study skills may be nonexistent; inability to “know” how to study
- Major difficulties with written expression; math problem solving (just pops in my head)
- Organization and planning concerns interfere with school performance (homework particularly)
- Time management is lacking; long-term projects are often last minute
- Sequencing in oral and written expression may be inaccurate or jumbled
- Inability to express how he/she “got the answer”

(Kane, 2009)
More problems for gifted students?

- Difficulties with self-concept (global and academic)
- Frustration, low tolerance for personal errors
- Dealing with expectations of self and others
- Impulsive decisions; decisions lack the depth one would expect
- Long-term goals are elusive; lack of knowledge of how to create goals
- Lack of others’ understanding for their inability to express feelings/thoughts accurately
- Pessimistic, often gloomy view of the future

(Kane, 2009)
Why are gifted kids so often “organizationally challenged?”

- They have good memories and, for awhile anyway, are able to rely on remembering where they saw something last.
- They have so many interests and so many things going on at once that their lives simply spin out of control.
- They are typically internally-motivated and resist all external efforts to get them to conform to anyone else’s ideas of how they should live their lives.
- They are unaware of the knowledge and/or lack the skills that would help them be more organized.
- Organization requires mundane work, and their brains aren’t wired that way.

(Fiedler, 2007)
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS, COUNSELORS, AND PARENTS
It’s Worth a Try . . .

• The brighter kids are, the more likely it is that they will have issues with executive functions and organization.
  – Or, rather, the more likely it is that the grown-ups in their lives will have concerns about their not being organized.

• Due to the development asynchrony of younger children, they may have even more challenges with executive functions and organization.

• Frustrated parents, counselors & teachers need help.

• The following strategies may (or may not) help gifted kids get more organized and develop better executive functions.

  (Fiedler, 2007)
Find an Organizational System that Works!
Color-coding

- Kids use different colored folders/stickies/index cards/markers for different categories of things they need to keep track of in their lives.
  
  – *Note:* The kids need to figure out what those categories might be and decide which colors should be used for which.

- Some kind of chart or “key” can be posted on the wall of their room or in some other convenient location (e.g., kitchen or bathroom).

- Kids need to decide whether/where the chart should be posted.
Color coded notebooks, “stickies”, and folders
TIMERS & ALARM WATCHES

• Use a wind-up or electronic timer to keep track of when it’s time to change activities, quit doing whatever they’re doing, or whatever.

• Give kids an alarm watch and (if need be) teach them how to set it.
  – Then, they can list situations in which it might be useful to have it go off to remind them of what they need to do at a particular time.
  – They can also decide how much of an “advance warning” they think they might need.

• Set a “trial run” for a week; then, talk about how it’s working/what they might change to make it better.
Technology

• Most gifted kids love using technology and are good at it.
• Smartphones, iPads, and computers can be synced with each other (with or without Cloud technology) or can be used independently as stand-alone devices.
• Calendar Functions: Anything that you can think of that needs to be kept organized (and more) can be kept on a smartphone, iPad, or computer.
  – Appointments & other calendar events (with reminders as far ahead of time as the kids would like to be reminded of each)
  – Phone numbers & addresses (email & snail mail)
  – Notes (to do’s & all kinds of miscellaneous information that would get lost if it were on scraps of paper)
• Items can be color-coded, as well, using whatever system the kids find most useful for their purposes.
Appointment books/agendas/calendars

• Some kids like to have a hands-on master calendar for their school schedule, after-school activities, etc.
  – They also use it for notes about things to do, addresses, and other things they want to remember.

• These can either be the kind that hang on the wall or one that they carry with them (although there’s always the danger of its getting lost).
## Master Planner

### February 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Monday</td>
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<td>Tuesday</td>
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<td>Wednesday</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Thursday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Monday: 18th**
- Write Instructions (pg 474)
- School Talk (pg 340-341)
- Book report
- Science homework

**Tuesday: 19th**
- Write a summary for Pioneer Girl using 9 vocabulary words
- Book report
- WHW

**Wednesday: 20th**
- Double Bubble: Complete assignments
- Island mini-

**Thursday: 21st**
- Poverty, Ellis
- pg 351, 2-20
- WHW

**Friday: 22nd**
- pg 352
- WHW

**Saturday: 23rd**
- pg 353
- WHW
PRIORITIZING ASSIGNMENTS

- Organize by due date
- Start with the hardest
- Estimate time
- Check off when completed
Mind-mapping (or Webbing)

- Wikipedia defines a mind map as a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea.

- Try googling it. You’ll find millions of “hits”, including many sources for free mind-mapping tools:
  - Here’s just one of them: FreeMind - free mind mapping software (http://freemind.sourceforge.net).

- Mind maps are used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid to studying and organizing information, solving problems, goal-setting, making decisions and writing.
My GOALS

Social:
- To make new friends
- To keep in touch with old friends

Academics:
- To graduate
- To get good grades
- To go to the school of my choice

Family:
- To make my mom happy
- To make them proud

Physical:
- To lose weight
- To work harder

Spiritual:
- To go to church
- To pray more

Personal Interest:
AREAS FOR GOAL SETTING

S.P.I.C.E.S.

- Social
- Physical
- Intellectual
Role Models/Mentors

• Help kids find how successful adults manage their lives.
  – Encourage them to find a wide range of methods.
  – Then guide them in choosing those that they think would be useful for them to try, themselves.

• A related idea is to look at the lives of remarkable individuals from history (e.g., Leonardo da Vinci) and find out how they kept their lives organized.
  – Have them imagine what those people might have done to stay organized if they had the resources available to them that are available now, including technology.
Creative Problem Solving

• The Creative Problem Solving Model (CPS) is a tried-and-true method of breaking complex problems down into manageable stages:
  – Mess Finding (actually now called “Objective Finding”)
  – Fact Finding
  – Problem Finding
  – Idea Finding
  – Solution Finding
  – Acceptance Finding

• CPS helps creative kids to get beyond the simple pleasures of generating ideas and actually select and implement solutions.
What else can teachers/counselors/parents do to develop students’ executive functions?

- Hold regular meetings where concerns can be addressed
- Create opportunities for kids to learn about cognition, emotion and age appropriate aspects of cognitive science
- Develop “social stories” for gifted kids; role play or rehearse potentially problematic situations (e.g. test anxiety)
- Provide emotional safety nets and plans of action when meltdowns seem imminent

Kane, 2009
What else can teachers/counselors/parents do?

- Help kids develop self-awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses
- Help kids understand their personal learning styles, learning modalities and preferred learning environments
- Develop study plans based on personal profiles; create learning opportunities where there are gaps
- Develop clear, realistic goals including ways to overcome obstacles
- Teach strategies directly so that kids connect executive functions with appropriate strategies
Still more that teachers/counselors/parents can do

- Create problem-solving and decision-making opportunities in classrooms and at home.
- Provide academic support in areas of need
- De-emphasize platitudes like “do your best”; help students become aware of effort and results.
- Work to develop a personal plan for reducing stress and knowing the physical manifestations of stress.

(Kane, 2008)
Finally . . .

• Remember that kids have their own agendas – i.e., what they want to do and how/when/if they want to do it.
  – Your influence may be more limited than you’d like.

• Therefore, in talking with kids, you might do well to begin by acknowledging that.

• Some of us (and therefore, some gifted kids) really DO work better under pressure.
  – However, some of these “deadline workers” run out of time as they push the deadline.
  – One idea that may help is to start the planning process with “Day Zero” (the due date) and plan backwards – i.e., what needs to be done the day before it’s due, the day before that, etc.

(Fiedler, 2007)
Organization = Less Anxiety
HOWEVER . . . CHECK THESE OUT!

William F. Buckley’s desk:
Nat Hentoff’s desk
And ... Albert Einstein’s desk:
References


Fiedler, E. D. (2007, April). *Intensity at home: What ’ s a parent to do?* Presentation at the 2007 Bay City Spring Conference, Bay City, MI.

Kane, M. M. (2009). *Executive functions: Another look at disorganization, meltdowns, lack of initiative and focus.* Presentation at the Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted, Sheboygan, WI.


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