

Supporting executive function in neurodivergent children

Supporting Executive Function in Neurodivergent Children

Executive function is the brain's management system, helping with planning, organising, remembering, and staying on task. For many neurodivergent children, including those with ADHD, autism, and dyslexia, these skills can develop differently. Instead of expecting them to try harder, we need to provide the right tools to help them work with their brains rather than against them.

1) Break tasks into manageable steps

Large tasks can feel overwhelming, making it difficult to get started. Breaking them down into smaller, clearer steps reduces stress and provides a clear starting point.

- Instead of: *"Clean your room."*
- Try: *"Put all the books on the shelf first. Then pick up clothes."*

2) Use external supports

Memory and time perception can be tricky for neurodivergent children. External tools can provide valuable support.

- Visual schedules and checklists provide structure and routine.
- Timers, such as the Time Timer or Pomodoro method, help with time management.
- Alarms and reminders assist with transitions and important tasks.

3) Reduce decision fatigue

Too many choices can lead to overwhelm and inaction. Simplifying decisions can ease stress and encourage independence.

- Lay out clothes the night before.
- Pre-plan meals and snacks to avoid last-minute choices.
- Offer two clear choices rather than open-ended options (e.g., "Do you want to start with maths or reading?").

4) Support task switching

Transitions can be difficult, especially when shifting between preferred and non-preferred activities. Providing structure and support can make these moments smoother.

- Give warning time before switching activities (e.g., "Five more minutes, then we pack up.").
- Use movement breaks between tasks, such as stretching or a short walk.
- Have a clear next step to ease transitions and maintain focus.

5) Build emotional regulation strategies

Big emotions can shut down executive function, making tasks feel impossible. Supporting emotional regulation can help children navigate these moments.

- Co-regulation techniques, such as breathing exercises and sensory breaks, can provide immediate relief.
- Naming emotions helps children process their feelings and find solutions (e.g., "I see you're frustrated. Do you want to take a break or keep going?").

6) Lean into their strengths

Many neurodivergent children excel when engaged with their interests. Harnessing these strengths can make learning more effective and enjoyable.

- Make learning engaging by incorporating their special interests.
- Use strategies that align with their preferred learning style, such as movement, visuals, or music.

Executive function is not about willpower—it is about understanding the brain's needs and providing the right scaffolding. With the right support, neurodivergent children can build confidence, develop independence, and thrive.

As always, contact me through my website or on nurtureandthrive24@gmail.com if you'd like to explore this topic further.

Charlotte xx