Hampshire County Council
Virtual School

Executive functioning: support and interventions at school

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PEP toolkit – executive functioning: support and interventions at school

Introduction

Research suggests that many care-experienced children demonstrate some challenges relating to their executive functioning due to experiencing developmental trauma. These executive functions are the skills that underpin learning and form the basis for the problem-solving skills of everyday life. The following are often noted as being areas of need (Allen, 2008). **Often, teachers struggle with the fact that, at times, a pupil seems to manage behaviour or situations that, on other occasions, they do not manage. It can appear that this behaviour is a deliberate attempt to thwart adult authority. However, this is not necessarily the case.** It is usually related to the pupil's complex needs in the following areas outlined in Box 1 and in the green section of the needs analysis:

Box 1 – Definition of Executive Functioning (Gerard et al, 2023).

- **Inhibition.** This relates to the ability to stop one's behaviour at the appropriate time and not act on one's immediate impulse. This can include shouting out in class and appearing out of control. They may have specific difficulties with unstructured periods and need the presence of an external regulator to assist them in managing their impulses.

- **Initiate.** This relates to the ability to start tasks independently, even things they enjoy. Pupils may find it difficult to generate ideas and produce problem-solving activities.

- **Working memory.** This is the ability to use working memory to hold information in one's mind in order to complete a task. Pupils with needs in the area tend to forget complex instructions and cannot manage multi-step tasks. This can also impact the correct sequencing of information.

- **Planning and organisation.** This is when pupils have difficulty setting goals in their learning. They have trouble planning steps needed to reach a goal and work through these steps in a timely manner, planning their work and breaking down work into smaller tasks. Pupils may tend to avoid work they think they cannot do.

- **Organisation of materials.** This is when pupils find it difficult to organise the materials they need to start a task.

- **Task monitor.** This is when pupils have difficulty reflecting on their schoolwork in order to make changes and further improvements.

Strategies and interventions

Physical and emotional containment

For example:

• a reliable and predictable routine – visual timetables
• consistency and predictability of personnel (changes to be managed with warnings/OOPS cards)

- consistency in the application of rules/rewards and consequences from all adults in the school (from the head to the caretaker)
- a **physical space where children feel physically 'contained'** (a small room or partitioned part of main class)
- an **agreed signal the pupil can give to the adults to show they are beginning to feel anxious and may require a movement or a rest break and structured play**

The following strategies have been reproduced with kind permission from Marion Allen for Family Futures, (2008): Attachment, developmental trauma and executive functioning difficulties in the school setting

- In the classroom setting, these problems manifest themselves in many ways. **Changing routine and just moving from one lesson to another** can be difficult. **Daily visual planners, using visual timers, two-minute warnings** for the end of each activity, **consistent routine for beginnings and endings** and warnings if there is to be an unfamiliar teacher can all help

- **Starting tasks** can be very **daunting.** These pupils often need **support** at the **beginning of the task** to help them focus. **Chunking of work, interactive, hands-on learning, verbal prompting and encouragement, prompt sheets, visual examples of expectations** ("here's one I did earlier!"), idea-generation strategies (**mind-mapping**) **and a teacher monitoring the progress** of long-term tasks are all supportive strategies. These pupils often have more success with computer games because they give instant feedback, and instructions are usually foolproof.

- Difficulties with **working memory** can cause problems across a range of subjects and everyday actions related to remembering the sequence of expected events and the processing and retrieval of complex instructions. Tileston focuses on the child's use of memory in their learning and suggests that teachers can facilitate learning by ensuring that the lesson relates **to previously acquired knowledge and relates to the pupil's life,** thus having relevance for the learner

(2004, as cited in Allen, 2008). This also enables connections to be made to information already processed. Lastly, she suggests incorporating emotion into the learning by arousing sensory receptors. Good practice within schools ensures all learning styles – **visual, auditory and kinesthetic** – are addressed. She lists strategies such as **mind mapping, peer teaching, chunking, mnemonics, using symbols and incorporating music into classroom learning, all of which can be integrated into education plans as class-wide strategies.** Difficulties with working memory, of course, also infringe on the pupil's planning and organisational skills. Pupils with deficits in these areas find it difficult to plan their working, playing and relaxing activities.

- **Self-evaluation** can be built into the lesson, using the plenary for the class to express (individually) how they feel they managed the lesson objective. **A show of thumbs up, sideways and down, smiley factsheets, or a traffic light system all work well in the class setting.** Grading a piece of work to one criterion can focus the pupil's mind on the specific learning objective. The pupil can grade their work themselves first, with the teacher having input afterwards, explaining why the grade agrees or disagrees with that of the pupil.

- Pupils who **find planning difficult could be provided with planning formats.** For example, a list of steps for common routines, ensuring the pupil understands the goal of the activity. A structure of **goal, plan, do and review** can be implemented for the whole class, a small group or individual pupils. For individual pupils, this approach can be used to support them with everyday tasks. Involving the pupil in the process is vital to the success and the pupil can be given a verbal mantra to help them internalise the process. Many of these pupils have **problems organising** themselves and need structure and routine to help them stay focused. They also need adults around them, who they can practise being dependent on rather than trying to control everything themselves.

- Strategies can also support those pupils who find it difficult to organise their personal materials. Itemised lists, where t**he pupil can tick off resources as they collect them, visual organisers,** and personal support and guidance can help here. **Sand timers, water timers and stopwatches that provide good visual clues** can be helpful in determining the beginnings and endings of different activities. Also, these children may have difficulties with the concept of time so need visual reminders.

- The organisation of resources is a skill that has to be learned, but because these pupils do not feel good about themselves, they show this in the disorganised, haphazard manner in which they live. Most pupils will have been given opportunities to learn these skills in the protective and guiding environment of primary school; however, some pupils may not have been ready at that time and could not make full use of the available support. It might be helpful for a trusted member of staff to go through the day's timetable with the pupil, as many traumatised children have difficulties organising themselves.

The following is adapted from Cocking and Georgiades' 'Working with Adopted and Fostered Children in Education' (2003) and reproduced with their kind permission

Teachers, classroom assistants and mentors may need to show children where objects belong, where things can be found and be prepared to do some tasks with which the child is too anxious to cope. This may seem to go against the ethos of a secondary school where there is an emphasis on self-reliance. However, staff need to be mindful of this.

Managing transitions

Pupils with executive functioning difficulties can find it difficult to stop a task before it is finished (shifting from one activity to another). This is because they have not had adults to prioritise their needs and so have had no sense of what a priority is, what is not a priority or what can be left until later. Adults will need to work closely with the children and young people in this area of need and teach them how to prioritise using visual steps. In addition, the adult needs to reassure the child/young person that they can finish their activity at another time, perhaps storing it somewhere so the child knows where it is (it is not 'gone').

A key time that may include great anxiety for children who have experienced inconsistent attachments and trauma is during transitions.

There are three types of transition:

1. **Small scale:** a change of task, a change of seat in class, nearing completion of work (this ending may be seen as a threat since their expectation may be that they will be given more or harder work to do next).
2. **Medium scale:**
    - change in staff (supply teacher, new art specialist, different classroom assistant)
    - change in the layout of the room and other changes to the physical environment including improvements to parts of the school building
    - moving between lessons (such as going out to gym, music, drama)
    - moving to the next task
    - being unexpectedly interrupted before a task is finished
    - having to stay in for wet playtime.
3. **Large scale:** moving up a class, moving school, moving home and other major changes outside school (such as the arrival of a sibling, separation of parents, loss of placement)

Strategies to manage transitions

Pupils need to know about the transition well in advance. They need to be given the opportunity to mourn the loss of the old way of being and have an introduction to the new. Enough time needs to be given to complete this in small, manageable stages. **The following provides some helpful ideas:**

Beginnings and endings are highly charged situations for pupils with attachment needs. The practice of not telling pupils until the very last week or day who will be teaching them next year, or the pulling apart of the classroom on the last week of term can have particular resonance for these pupils. Beginnings and endings on a smaller scale, such as the beginning and end of the school week and moving from the classroom into the playground, can also raise anxiety and affect behaviour. **Low-key but consistent checking in** with the pupil to say goodbye or welcome back and reminding them what is going to happen next may help the pupil to stay focused and relaxed and make transitions smoother.

Transitional objects can be used to remind a pupil that although they are separated from a carer, they are still in mind. The transitional object can be anything like a cuddly toy, a blanket with a familiar smell, a photo or a note. The **invisible string resources** in the adult relationships chapter has some wonderful ideas.

Changes to the school routine, such as the introduction of a supply teacher or when a planned event is cancelled, need to be supported. **A familiar member of staff** can act as a link to help the pupil negotiate the change. This may need repeated explanation and reassurance to keep anxiety at bay.

Is it possible for the **pupil to start school a day earlier** than other pupils so they

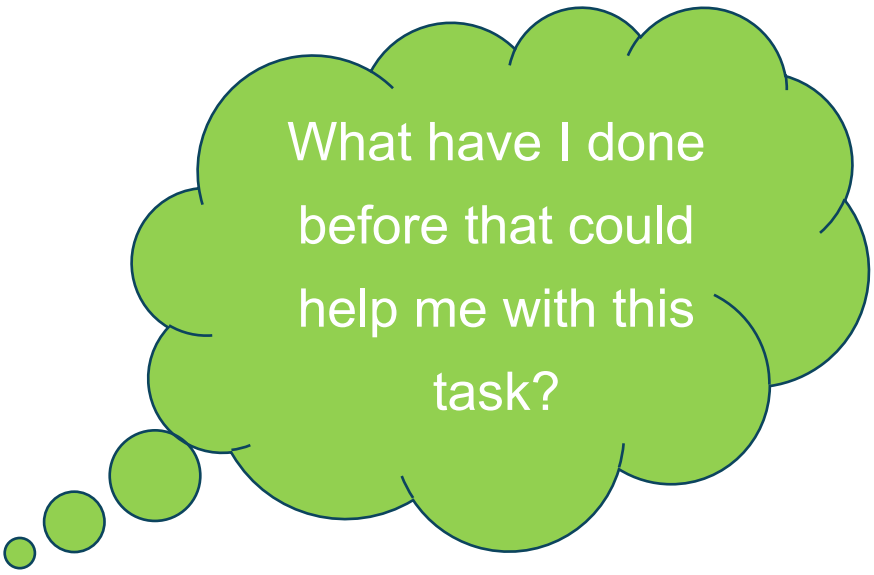
have time to prepare themselves for the transition from home to school? This will give the pupil time to check out their environment and enable them to concentrate more on the learning tasks by the time the school day officially begins.

Something as simple as where a pupil sits in the class may have a big impact on the pupil's ability to focus, such as **sitting at the front of the class** so that there are fewer distractions and more opportunity to relate directly with the teacher, and/or near a wall, where the pupil may feel there is less danger.

The development of self-monitoring and meta-cognition

Develop self-reflective functioning skills: ask pupils to share things they have done and what they found hard – how did they overcome this? How can they apply this process again?

Self-evaluation: what have you achieved? How do you feel? What was the memorable part of the lesson? What skills have been mastered? What was difficult? What are you proud of?



Box 2 – Strategies to Develop Metacognition.

Ask your students to think of something they recently did at home or school that was difficult and where they had to think hard. Ask them to swap stories with a partner, sharing their responses to the following questions:

- What did you do?
- How did you think your way around the problem?
- Did you try to think of something that you had done before that might
- help?
- Did you make a plan?
- Did you keep checking you were on the right lines?
- Did you have to stop and think and perhaps try a new way of doing it?
- Did you talk to yourself? What did you say?
- Did you make a mental note of how you did it so that you could do it again or do it better another time?
- Another option would be to tackle a difficult problem or puzzle in front of the class yourself. As a whole class, try to get your students thinking about difficult problems and ask them what they did while working on the task. Did they engage in any planning, checking, replanning or reviewing?

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