

# PARENTING BRIEF

Oregon School Readiness Research Consortium

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## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO BUILD SKILLS FOR SCHOOL READINESS AND SUCCESS

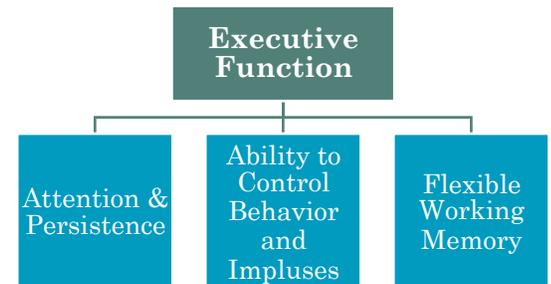
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When children are able to pay attention, control their impulses, plan, reason, and solve problems they tend to be more successful in school and also in other aspects of life. Children gain these “Executive Function” skills bit by bit each day, with the help and support of their parents and other caregivers.

The first five years of life are an important time for the development of executive function skills. These skills are crucial to the child’s school readiness and academic success<sup>1</sup>. Parents can have a great impact on the development of these executive function skills!

Here are three key ways parents and other caregivers can help: (1) **responding sensitively to children**, (2) **stimulating their thinking**, and (3) **scaffolding**<sup>1</sup>.

*1) Parent/caregiver sensitivity* helps children develop executive function skills. Parenting behaviors such as providing comfort, support, and positive feelings to children promote the development of the skills. For example, parents can comfort their child when they are having a hard time completing a task. A parent can ask them “Is



everything alright? How can I help you?” or can encourage them by saying “I am so impressed that you are working so hard to do this!” This type of encouragement supports the child’s involvement and persistence. Parent sensitivity can also include praising children for tying their shoes correctly or cleaning up their room.

Providing children with choices is also a characteristic of parent sensitivity. Choices provide children the opportunity to learn how to manage situations and understand the consequences of making decisions. One way of providing simple choices is to let the child pick out his/her own clothes from two weather-appropriate options. You might ask “Which would you rather wear, the green jeans or the purple pants?”

### HELPFUL TIP:

If your child is having trouble tying his/her shoe, one way to show sensitivity is to support the child’s effort.

“Keep trying! I know you can do it!”



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Another way parents can show support for their child is by creating simple, daily routines that children can follow. For example, you may choose to always read a book after breakfast or before bed at night. By developing these routines, a parent allows the children to know what lies ahead and what to expect. These activities support a child's executive function by helping them learn to shift their attention and manage their impulses.

*2) When parents are sensitive to and understand their child, they can engage in interactions that stimulate children's thinking*, which support the development of memory skills. Parent stimulation includes reading to, talking to, and teaching tasks to children. Parents might do this by providing culturally-relevant and creative materials, such as books or puzzles<sup>1</sup>. Reading and talking to children can increase children's vocabulary. This helps children learn to think out loud, which can help them learn to control their behavior. For example, when reading a book together, parents might as their child, "What do you think will happen next?" or "How do you think that character feels?"

*3) Scaffolding* is another way that parents can strengthen children's executive function. Scaffolding happens when parents provide initial support and then decrease this support as children master skills. For example, if a child is working on a puzzle and keeps trying to put the square in the circle, a parent may say, "Does the square have straight sides? Does the circle look like it has straight lines? Why don't we try it over

here?" This helps children reflect on what they are doing and learn something new.

The development of executive function is very important for children's school readiness and academic success. Parent sensitivity, stimulation, and scaffolding can help a child become better focused on completing tasks, more capable at solving problems, and better able to control their own impulses. These foundational learning skills will help children be better prepared for school.

#### Other resources:

- Center for the Developing Child (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>), Enhancing & Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children
- KITS: Kids in Transition to School ([www.kidsintransitiontoschool.org/](http://www.kidsintransitiontoschool.org/))
- Vroom (<http://www.joinvroom.org/>), Brain Building Basics

#### Fun Activities to support children's Executive Function

- Allow children to serve their own dinner
- Give children responsibility, encourage them to clean up their own messes and pick out what clothes they are going to wear
- Play card games like "Go Fish" or memory games like "I Spy"
- Play make-believe and pretend to be a teacher, firefighter, doctor, dinosaur, fairy, veterinarian, or nurse you're your child. The possibilities are endless!
- Do puzzles together

## HELPFUL TIP:

Playing games like Simon Says support children's executive function.



<sup>1</sup> McClelland, Acock, Piccinin, Rhea & Stallings, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Fay-Stamback, Hawes, and Meredith, 2014; Landry & Smith, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Bradley, R. H., McKelvey, L. M., & Whiteside-Mansell, L., 2011