

EMPOWERING YOUR MIDDLE GRADER

Understanding Executive Functioning and
Your Temperamental Preteen

THE
WILLOW
SCHOOL



Do you notice your child wanting more independence?

Does he experience rapid changes in mood?

Does she find it difficult to stay organized or hand in assignments on time?

Answering “yes” to any of the above questions should not come as a surprise. Middle schoolers deal with a lot of changes - both physically and mentally - that lead to rapid shifts in moods and emotions. During these years, their social world opens up, and their desire to disconnect from “childish” behavior surges. It can all happen quickly!

By the time your child reaches middle school, he may be more concerned with his social status than academics. Your middle grader is also likely to be more sensitive, self-conscious, expressive, and moody. He’s a little impulsive. He can seem rude and dismissive of others at times. He is disorganized about homework and other tasks that used to be routine.







You may be nodding your head **YES** at this point. As adults well past our adolescent years, we may not remember the stress and anxiety that preteen emotions can bring. So, what can you do to get through these years? Take a deep breath and read these three key points:

1. Understand executive functioning (EF) and the skills related to it.
2. Understand indicators of executive functioning deficits and how EF deficits might impact your child.
3. Arm yourself with practical information that you can use to help your child improve his or her executive functioning.

I. Understanding Executive Functioning

Executive Functioning (EF) refers to the set of brain processes that are necessary for cognitive control of behavior - i.e. the skills that make us functioning members of society. These skills make up the foundation of a successful academic and professional career. They include being able to think clearly, begin and stop activities, make decisions, multi-task, and manage our impulses in a range of situations. **Basically, it’s our ability to plan, set goals, and get things done.**

Essential EFs for preteens include:

Attention Control The capacity to decide what to pay attention to and what to ignore.		Working Memory The facility to hold new information and use it in the short term.	
Emotional Control The ability to read social cues adequately and react with the appropriate feelings.		Flexible Thinking The competence to move from one thought process to another with ease and without frustration.	
Self-Regulating Skills The power to manage behavior in accordance with the situation at hand and evaluate oneself.		Planning and Starting Tasks Taking the proper initiatives to begin activities and prioritize them in order of importance.	

It's easy to take these abilities for granted – yet it's vital to stay aware of how these skills are developing in your child. Early detection of concerns and the proper assessments can make a big difference.

2. Understanding Executive Functioning Challenges

Although it's normal for adolescents to struggle slightly with school projects and controlling their emotions, adolescents with EF deficits have greater difficulty completing simple tasks, planning ahead or prioritizing, and starting or shifting activities.

The prefrontal cortex part of the brain doesn't mature until way after middle school years, therefore executive skills can and usually do get better with time. However, most schools don't teach EF effectively, therefore kids who struggle tend to be overlooked, misunderstood, or labeled as "trouble-makers." Also, children dealing with EF challenges are probably unaware. They're likely to compare themselves to others, and feel "dumb," "lazy," or "inadequate" when they are not able to keep up academically or socially with their peers.

Challenges with EF become easier to spot in middle school, when school schedules change and academic expectations increase.

The CEO of the Brain: The Prefrontal Cortex



The prefrontal cortex is responsible for cognitive processes such as reasoning, planning, judgment, and self-regulations. You can think of this part of the brain as "the area of sober second thought." You may want to exhale in relief thinking that this part of the brain can be trusted to guide your preteen. Unfortunately, the prefrontal cortex doesn't completely develop until ages 25-30. That's right: you're not adequately thinking with your brain's most rational part until your late 20s.



Signs Your Middle Schooler May Have Executive Functioning Challenges:

- Gets overwhelmed or frustrated easily
- Has trouble following instructions or remembering information
- Repeats homework mistakes often corrected
- Seems rude and dismissive of alternate ideas
- Has difficulty “rolling with the punches” or thinking of things from opposing viewpoints
- Takes criticism very personally
- Lacks organizational skills, despite constant guidance
- Tends to leave work to the last minute, causing panic and stress
- Misreads or misinterprets social cues or emotions
- Blurts out inappropriate comments

3. What Can You Do About Executive Functioning Challenges?

It's important to remember your child's EF challenges are not a reflection of your parenting style. Correlating any learning disorders to your efforts as a parent will only lead to frustration for the entire family. Instead, work with your child's teachers to help create an environment where he feels supported and empowered to speak up about his needs and take control of his learning.

Practical tips that you can start today*

- Help your child recognize wants vs. needs. One way to do this is to make “enough” a positive word instead of a negative. Focus on gratitude. This will help your child learn that not having something or having more of something doesn't make it better.
- Have your child explain things (homework, what happened at school, daily chores, etc.) to you in his own words. This is particularly useful in helping him understand and retain information.
- Set 5-minute goals for common household activities.
- Ask middle school teachers how essential EF skills are fostered and strengthened at school and how your child's middle school supports students with EF challenges.
- Encourage your child to use the planner at the end of this book.

**If you suspect your child may have EF deficits, we also recommend that you speak to your doctor.*



The Willow School and Executive Functioning

The Willow School's experienced teachers and faculty place executive functioning at the forefront of their middle school curriculum. Educators are trained to assess how each individual student learns best and offer the appropriate learning activities, homework options, literature choices, and more.

The Willow community also develops key executive skills in every student through collaborative projects, open and respectful dialogue between peers, and reinforcement of critical cultural virtues that are embedded into school life on a daily basis.

[CLICK HERE](#) to schedule a tour of Willow and see if it's the right environment for your middle schooler.

Be sure to add info@willowschool.org to your contacts to receive more topics and tips on middle school challenges delivered to your inbox throughout the next four weeks.

Next week's email: Empathy – A lifelong skill your child should learn in middle school.

THE EF MIDDLE SCHOOL PLANNER

Strengthen Your
Executive Functioning Skills

THE
WILLOW
SCHOOL

Plan Your Assignments

Break down your upcoming responsibilities (both in school and at home) into manageable deadlines.

Is this a school or a home assignment? _____

What is it? _____

When is it due? _____

<p>First Step to Complete:</p>	<p>Start time: __/__/____</p> <p>End Time: __/__/____</p>	<p>Do I need help finishing this step? If yes, who will I ask?</p>	<p>DONE</p> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Second Step to Complete:</p>	<p>Start time: __/__/____</p> <p>End Time: __/__/____</p>	<p>Do I need help finishing this step? If yes, who will I ask?</p>	<p>DONE</p> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Third Step to Complete:</p>	<p>Start time: __/__/____</p> <p>End Time: __/__/____</p>	<p>Do I need help finishing this step? If yes, who will I ask?</p>	<p>DONE</p> <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Fourth Step to Complete:</p>	<p>Start time: __/__/____</p> <p>End Time: __/__/____</p>	<p>Do I need help finishing this step? If yes, who will I ask?</p>	<p>DONE</p> <input type="checkbox"/>

Prepare For An Upcoming Test

Subject: _____ Date of Test: _____

What's the format of the test? _____

(Short Answers, True/False, Matching, Essay, Multiple Choice, or a combination)

What will be on the test? List the chapters/topics and make sure you have all of your notes. Check them off when you've studied them.	
What chapters do I need to study?	Do I have all my notes? Check box if yes. (If the answer is no, ask a teacher for help.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What Days Did I Study? Use the chart below to help you keep track of study days/time.		
Date	How long did I study?	Do I feel prepared? Check box if yes. What do I need to review again tomorrow?
		<input type="checkbox"/>
		<input type="checkbox"/>
		<input type="checkbox"/>

Daily Calendar

Use this calendar to help track your weekly and monthly goals.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
TO DO					
HOMEWORK	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____ _____
AFTER SCHOOL PLANS					
MONTHLY GOALS	PERSONAL	ACADEMIC	HOW CAN I HELP OTHERS THIS MONTH?	WHAT AM I GRATEFUL FOR THIS MONTH?	HOW CAN I VISUALIZE POSITIVE CHANGES?