

Beyond Backpacks: Setting Up for School Success (Part 1)



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As summer starts to wrap up and the back-to-school excitement kicks in, most of us are thinking about new backpacks, fresh school supplies, and meeting this year's teacher. Those things matter—but there's something even more important that often gets missed: executive function skills. These behind-the-scenes brain skills are what really help kids start the year strong, no matter what grade they're in.

As a special education teacher, I know that school success isn't just about what kids *know*—it's about how they *use* what they know. That's where executive function skills come in. Think of them as the brain's "CEO"—they help kids plan, stay organized, manage their time, stay on task, handle emotions, and roll with the punches when things change. These skills are a huge part of how kids do in school, with friends, and even at home. And here's the best part: they're not set in stone. We can help kids build and strengthen these skills with the right

support and practice.

With the start of a new school year upon us, now is the perfect time to intentionally cultivate these vital abilities. Here's how you can support your child's executive function skills for a smoother, more successful academic journey.

The Power of Planning: Establishing Routines and Organization

A predictable routine provides a sense of security and significantly reduces mental load, freeing up brainpower for learning.

Create a Centralized "Command Center": Dedicate a visible spot in your home (a bulletin board, a whiteboard in the kitchen) for a family calendar. Mark school holidays, extracurricular activities, project due dates, and even family appointments. For older students, encourage them to maintain their own digital or physical planner.

Morning and Evening Rituals: Establish consistent routines for before and after school. This isn't just about brushing teeth; it includes packing lunches, laying out clothes, organizing backpacks, and deciding on a consistent homework time. Write these routines down for younger children using pictures, or a checklist for older ones.

Designated Study Space: Help your child set up a clutter-free, consistent workspace. This doesn't need to be elaborate; it could be a corner of their room or a specific spot at the kitchen table. The key is

that it's reliably available and conducive to focus, equipped with necessary supplies.

Time Management: Making Time Tangible

Time is an abstract concept, especially for elementary students. Making it concrete helps them manage tasks effectively.

Visual Timers: For younger children, use sand timers or visual timers that show time ticking down. This helps them understand how long 10 or 20 minutes really is for a task.

"Chunking" Tasks: Large assignments can feel overwhelming. Help your child break down big projects into smaller, manageable steps. Instead of "Write a report," suggest "First, research topic. Next, create an outline. Then, write introduction."

Estimating Time: Practice estimating how long tasks will take. "How long do you think it will take to clean your room? Let's set a timer and see!" This builds self-awareness and improves future planning.

The Pomodoro Technique (for older students):

Encourage focused work sessions (25 minutes) followed by short breaks (5 minutes). This can dramatically improve focus and prevent burnout. Check out your phone's app store and grab a timer for free.

These executive function skills are not just helpful for school. They are critical for life. My next blog will describe the power of planning, how to sustain

attention, and increase our child's working memory.