Today’s post is a shameless attempt to convince students (and their parents) that they should continue to be engaged with academics during the summer. And, to make matters worse, I’m employing the most overused tool in academics: the sports metaphor.

Athletes are athletes all year round. The season for any given sport doesn’t last all year, but training never stops. Athletes don’t allow themselves to fall out of shape during the off season. An exercise regimen is maintained. Skills are refined. New abilities are learned. The errors of last season are corrected. Practice continues.

Students, likewise, can be students all year round. Summer offers a break from classes, homework, and tests, but that doesn’t mean learning should stop. The brain is like a bunch of muscles, and too many students allow themselves to fall cognitively out of shape during the summer. A regimen of varied brain exercise can be maintained. Old skills can be refined. New ideas can be acquired. The knowledge-gaps accumulated during the previous academic year can be filled. Executive function and willpower can continue to be developed.

Athletes know that failing to exercise and practice during the off-season will put them at a serious disadvantage in the coming year: Muscles will atrophy and skills will become rusty. Likewise, students ought to see that their academic abilities don’t just stick around indefinitely. Rather, they have a tenuous existence: If you don’t use them, you’ll lose them.

Now, you don’t need to come see us in order to stay engaged with academics. There are plenty of things you can do outside of a setting where adults are supervising and encouraging your activities. You can read and write on a regular basis without anyone checking in on you. You can find resources to help you preview next year’s content. You can even *gasp* choose to practice math on your own!

But please don’t take this the wrong way. I’m not encouraging you to spend your whole summer working at a desk. And parents – I’m not asking you to force-feed your child academics all summer long. If your child is strongly averse to schoolwork, dragging him kicking and screaming to Kumon or to our office week after week will only create more resentment. It is much more powerful if students choose to stay engaged on their own, even if that engagement is only occasional. Your role should be that of facilitator, not drill sergeant.

One critical way parents can help encourage their kids to keep learning during the summer is, of course, leading by example. Since you’re not in school, it’s all “off-season” for you. So if you practice relentless learning all year long, this sort of behavior will seem more normal, which should lead to less resistance from your children.

Summer is also meant to be a time for rest and relaxation, a time to tap into the benefits of play, and a time to get outside and enjoy nature. Summer is a chance for kids to be kids, and also to grow up a little by practicing more independence. So I’m not advocating that the majority of the summer be devoted to academics. I’m just encouraging students to not completely check out from learning. And if you’d like Northwest Educational Services to assist you with your mission of continued learning, we’d be honored to help.

About the Author

Chris Loper has been an academic coach for Northwest Educational Services since 2014. He also writes the popular self-improvement blog Becoming Better, so if you liked this article, head on over to becomingbetter.org and check out his other work. Chris also offers behavioral change coaching, helping busy adults with habit formation and productivity. He lives in Seattle, WA.
Our motto here at Northwest Educational Services is “Learn how to learn.” And while that is quite different from “Learn how to get an A,” learning how to learn does tend to improve grades. After all, you are likely to score better on tests when you know the content. And we do keep grades in mind as a secondary goal. When grades are an issue, sometimes what a student needs from us is coaching, not on how to learn, but on how to play the game of school.

The Game

The “game” of school is all about points. Your grade at the end of the semester is determined by the points you've earned divided by the points possible. Yes, some classes weight different categories more heavily than others, and it’s important to pay attention to that, but within those categories it’s still a game of points.

For tests, points earned generally reflect how well prepared you are for the test. That’s why we’re constantly encouraging students to use the most effective study methods. But sometimes points get thrown away because students are unwilling to take risks and guess when they’re unsure. And there are many opportunities to use strategy to increase your score without any increase in knowledge.

For participation points, you generally just have to be in class and on task, though some teachers do insist on active participation. Asking questions is a very effective way to demonstrate that you’re engaged. Using your phone to text, play games, or check social media is now the #1 way to lose participation points. A simple solution is to spend the school day in airplane mode.

For everything else – homework assignments, papers, and projects – the way to get points is simple: Turn everything in, as complete as possible, on time. Usually, when a student is not adequately playing the game of school, this is what they’re neglecting. They may know the material and score well on tests, but their grades are low due to missing and late work.

Many teachers don’t accept late work. Those who do usually penalize late work with reduced points. For example, it’s fairly common for late work to be docked 50%. This means, if you’ve only completed 60% of an assignment by the time it’s due, you’re better off turning it in on time, incomplete, than completing it and turning it in late. Now, you’ll learn more and develop a stronger work ethic by completing the rest of the assignment, but from a pure points standpoint, you should just turn it in. Often students fail to make this calculation. Worse, many who say to themselves, “I’ll finish it tonight and turn it in tomorrow,” forget to do so, and end up with a zero.

It’s About Numbers, Not Letters

In most classes, the #1 thing that kills grades is zeros. If you don’t turn in the work, you’ll have a very hard time keeping your grades up. Let me show you the math for a hypothetical student to see how bad zeros are.

Let’s say there have been 10 assignments, each worth 10 points. Johnny has earned 100% on 8/10 of the assignments, but he failed to turn in two of them, earning zeros. So he has an 80% in the class, a B-. What if he had turned in poor work or half-completed work on those two assignments, and instead of earning zeros, earned 50%. Well then he would have a 90% in the class, an A-. In both scenarios, Johnny failed those two assignments: 0% and 50% are both failing grades. But letter grades aren’t what matter when you’re playing the game of school. It’s the points that matter, and in the second scenario, Johnny got significantly more points. The letter grades matter at the end of the semester, but all along the way, they actually distract you from the numbers that count.

Likewise, I could fail a series of minor assignments, and ace one project, and wind up with a very high grade. Let’s say that I’ve earned only 2/5 points on five minor assignments, but 95/100 on a big project. If those are the only points in the class, my grade is 105/125 or 84%. I failed 5/6th of the assigned work, but we calculate final grades by points, not by averaging the letter grades of each assignment, so I have a B in the class.

Turning in Garbage

Returning to Johnny’s example, we can see that the difference between the first scenario and the second one is that, in the second scenario, he gave himself permission to turn in garbage. We’ll give Johnny the benefit of the doubt and assume that he was simply too busy to do those two assignments well, but that he did have enough time to do a crummy job. In the first scenario, he decided that if he couldn’t do the homework well, he shouldn’t do it at all, and as a result, his grade suffered. In the second scenario, he decided it was okay to turn in garbage work, and this helped his grade significantly.

Many students struggle with this idea. They know they can do better, and they have an emotional resistance to turning in sub-par work. They don’t feel okay turning in work they’re not proud of. While this is an admirable instinct, it can actually be quite detrimental. Perfectionism can be paralyzing.
Of course we want to do our best all the time, but that’s unrealistic. We can only really hope to do our best most of the time, and sometimes we just do a half-way decent job and say “Good enough.” As many have noted, a big part of success is just showing up. In school, “showing up” means turning everything in.

Grade Management vs Learning and Curiosity

“Playing the game of school” is another way of saying “grade management.” And while managing grades is important we need to be careful that our conversations with students aren’t exclusively focused on grades. We need to demonstrate curiosity about the content they’re learning and express interest in the various activities, clubs, and sports that are also a part of the school experience.

There is a danger for parents and students to fall into a rhythm of only talking about grade management, and never talking about learning or the social aspects of school. When the only thing discussed is grades, children, especially teens, are quick to disengage from these conversations. They want to be seen as the complex human beings they really are, not as a collection of test scores and report cards.

When talking with your kids about school, you should be aware of the game of school, but it shouldn’t be the primary focus.

The Deeper Value in Playing the Game

Playing the game of school often does support the higher goal of learning. The game often requires that you repeatedly engage with content, creating a bit of spaced repetition because this helps form memories. Homework is usually an opportunity to take a step or two down the mastery path, which is true whether or not you already understand the content. Most of the work that feels pointless does actually, at least in some small way, support learning.

But far more important, I believe, are the general life skills students learn when playing the game.

Turning everything in on time requires that students learn to stay organized and meet deadlines. They have to plan ahead and practice estimating how long various tasks will take. Students also have to know how the weighted categories and late penalties work in each of their classes in order to make strategic decisions about how to allocate their time. All this helps develop their executive function.

And lastly, one of the forgotten purposes of school is simply learning how to work. Silver-spoon-holders notwithstanding, all children grow up to become adults who have to work. And even those adults who are blessed to have an ikigai – a passion-driven career that is a true calling – must regularly perform tedious labor that they don’t want to do. No one gets to avoid this part of life, and school helps train you for it.

The ability to do boring work that we don’t feel like doing is as fundamental to success as exercising is fundamental to physical fitness. And this ability is a component of willpower, which is a mental muscle that gets stronger with use. When we strengthen our willpower and build a track-record of getting things done, we develop a powerful sense of self-efficacy. We become confident in our own ability to get things done.

Sometimes the tedious work teachers assign really isn’t helping students learn the content, but getting the work done on time is teaching them valuable life skills that are universal to adult success.

About the Author

Chris Loper has been an academic coach for Northwest Educational Services since 2014. He also writes the popular self-improvement blog Becoming Better, so if you liked this article, head on over to becomingbetter.org and check out his other work. Chris also offers behavioral change coaching, helping busy adults with habit formation and productivity. He lives in Seattle, WA.

Posted in Learning & Studying, Parenting, Psychology of Success

Executive Function

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In the world of academics, “executive function” is, to put it mildly, a big deal. A student with weak executive function will probably struggle with staying organized, setting goals, prioritizing, turning in work on time, overcoming the impulse to procrastinate, following instructions, accurately judging the quality of his work, paying attention in class, resisting distractions, solving complicated problems, and deciding how to study when structure isn’t provided.

And outside of academics, weak executive function can contribute to a wide variety of issues, ranging from bad manners to depression to reckless, illegal behavior.
Most parents have at least some sense of what executive function is and why it matters. Less common, however, is a clear understanding of the role parents play in a child’s developing executive function. So let’s dive in.

**What is executive function?**

Essentially, it’s the CEO of the mind, the part of the brain in charge of what we think and do. It’s the planner, the organizer, and the decider.

However, if you dig into any of the literature about executive function, you’ll quickly learn that it has many components. Some don’t even refer to it in the singular, instead referring to “the executive functions.” I prefer the singular because I like the metaphor of the CEO who possesses all the necessary skills to run a company: Executive function is the collection of skills necessary to run your own life.

Executive function links moment-to-moment decision-making with long-term planning. It’s how we align our actions with our values. This is not a purely intellectual ability, and it is largely independent of IQ, though a high IQ might compensate for or mask some executive function challenges.

Executive function is a combination of social, emotional, and intellectual skills. These three categories overlap a bit and many of the aspects are interconnected, but we can still use these three buckets to sort out the primary components of executive function:

**Key intellectual components:**

- Deciding what’s worth focusing on and then paying attention to it
- Working memory – the ability to juggle several pieces of information in the mind at once
- Comprehension and creativity – putting the puzzle pieces together by seeing how they relate to one another
- Planning – thinking about the future, considering various options, and deciding on a course of action
- Troubleshooting – using flexible thinking and resourcefulness to navigate unexpected problems

**Key emotional components:**

- Awareness of your own emotions and the capacity for introspection
- The ability to distinguish yourself and your values from how you feel in the moment
- The ability to choose courses of action that run counter to how you feel in the moment
- Keeping your cool when things don’t go the way you planned
- Patience, willpower, and delayed gratification

**Key social components:**

- Awareness of other people’s emotions, desires, and perspectives
- Awareness of how you appear to others
- Consideration, politeness, manners, and waiting your turn
- Communicating – choosing your words carefully and thinking before you speak
- Asking for help when you need it

These are all very important skills for success in both school and life. And because executive function is composed of so many little skills, there is no magic pill or silver bullet that fixes executive function problems. Instead, there are countless little opportunities to help develop and strengthen these skills.

It’s another classic case of growing rather than fixing, and a fantastic arena in which to employ the philosophy of everything counts. Every moment is an opportunity to make progress, and every step in the right direction is worthwhile.

Also, because executive function is a constellation of skills and not a single characteristic, two individuals who are “weak” in executive function may have quite different skill-profiles, which would then result in different outcomes and guide us toward different approaches for accommodation and remediation. For example, someone may be very good at planning, but very poor at social-emotional comprehension, while another individual could have the opposite skill-profile. Both have executive function issues, but they are quite dissimilar. Hence, executive function work needs to be personalized to match the particular student in question.

**Where is executive function in the brain?**

Mostly, it’s in the prefrontal cortex. This is the part of the brain right behind the forehead. It is one of the newest and largest parts of the brain.

And for parents, probably the most important thing to know is that the prefrontal cortex develops last. It is still developing into our mid-twenties, which is partly why car rental companies don’t do business with people who are under 25. They’ve known that young drivers are more prone to reckless behavior for far longer than we’ve had the neuroscience to explain why.
Although development “finishes” during our mid-twenties, we’re still able to improve the prefrontal cortex throughout adulthood because it’s the most dynamic, malleable part of the brain. The prefrontal cortex, which is the primary seat of executive function, is the area of the brain with the most potential for growth. And, it’s worth noting that the most well-researched method for strengthening the prefrontal cortex is meditation, which is a classic example of neurogenesis. (Side-note: mindfulness and the four skills that it’s composed of are closely related to executive function. Click here to learn about those four skills and the benefits of mindfulness as a whole.)

Critically, however, the prefrontal cortex is also the part of the brain that is most vulnerable to hunger and fatigue, and it is the first thing to shut down when we’re experiencing an emotional crisis. This is the result of your brain’s history, as newer parts of your brain are prone to shutting down when our basic needs aren’t being met. This means that being well-rested and well-fed is a simple way to improve executive function.

This also means that even strong executive function skills can evaporate at certain times of day or during emotionally challenging situations. For example, I am not a morning person, so my executive function is horrendously low for the first hour or two of the day. For this reason, I have established a very consistent morning routine that sets me up to have a better day. I also map out my days the night before because I know that I’ll struggle with planning in the morning. This is self-imposed “scaffolding”: My routines provide a framework for me to lean on when I’m too tired to think straight.

So, another way to support executive function is to establish consistent routines for those times when your children are likely to struggle the most: times when they’re tired, times when they’re hungry, or times of transition. The three most classic are: the morning, right after school, and bedtime.

**So what’s the parent’s role in developing the child’s executive function?**

In many ways, the answer to that question depends on the age of the child.

Initially, parents must do everything for their children because babies are pretty helpless. But as time goes on, children can do more for themselves. So instead of doing everything for them, parents provide support, guidance, and boundaries. Children develop increasing abilities and independence using this scaffolding that parents provide. And as children become teenagers and teenagers become adults, the scaffolding is gradually reduced until it’s no longer needed at all.

The goal, of course, is for them to grow up into fully independent adults who are no longer reliant on you. This can only happen if they have opportunities to practice increasing independence as they grow up. Therefore, micromanaging must steadily give way to a more hands-off approach.

Let’s use the example of clothing to explore this transition from infancy to adulthood.

When your child is an infant, you dress her because she cannot put on her own clothes. At some point during toddlerhood, you shift to helping her dress herself. Eventually, she is capable of dressing herself, so she does it on her own, but you might still be choosing her clothes for her. Choosing clothes might then become a joint-effort between the two of you, but eventually she’ll pick out her own outfits. You might still exercise the power of veto if she chooses poorly or selects clothes inappropriate for a formal event. Later, this might just be a reminder to take a jacket if it’s cold outside. Throughout her childhood, you purchase her clothes for her, but at some point, she starts giving input while you’re shopping for clothes. Later, she buys her own clothes but uses your money. And lastly, she buys her own clothes with her own money.

This gradual decrease in parental support is relatively straightforward when it comes to clothing, but it can be much more challenging and much more complicated when it comes to such areas as succeeding in school or staying safe. For these, deciding how much control to exert and when to let go is very difficult, and there are no simple answers. Granting your child increasing levels of independence is necessary, but it’s also risky.

And with risk comes emotion. It’s hard to watch your child do something unsafe, and it’s hard to watch your child make choices that lead to low grades. But if your child is to develop executive function, she’ll need to have opportunities to screw up. And it’s often better to let her learn these hard lessons when the stakes are still relatively low.

**Finding the right balance between short-term success and long-term growth** is difficult, but it’s a worthwhile effort. It is possible to find a middle ground between helicopter parenting and laissez-faire parenting, between micromanaging and being completely hands off. This is very similar to the fruitful middle ground that exists between extremes of parenting styles. In between the extremes of doing it all for them and doing nothing at all, there are varying degrees of scaffolding. And, most importantly, there is always modeling.

**Modeling**

In addition to providing active support, parents also have the very important job of leading by example. Parents are the primary role models
for children, and your actions often speak much louder than your words. As Greg Smith likes to say, “Children are always learning, and parents are always teaching. It’s just probably not happening when you think it is.”

Young children might be open to taking your executive function advice, but older children and especially teenagers are likely to reject any advice you give. Indeed, sometimes telling a teenager to “be organized” or “use a planner” actually makes the problem worse because they’ll do the opposite of what you’ve advised in order to assert their growing independence. (See also: “Why a Teenager is Like a Chinese Finger-Trap”)

This means modeling is your primary tool for “teaching” executive function.

“You can preach a better sermon with your life than with your lips.” — Oliver Goldsmith

The trouble is, when you get really good at executive function, as most adults do, too much of it is done in silence, too much is done in your head. And when executive function skills are utilized in this way, your children don’t get to observe you working things out. You need to give them more opportunities to see and hear your executive function techniques in action.

This means verbalizing your thought processes more – not talking to your children, but talking in the presence of your children. It also means being transparent about your challenges with problem-solving, emotional regulation, and taking the perspective of others. And it means being deliberately open about the use of tools, techniques, and strategies to enhance your executive function.

Let your children see you using a notebook to write down your ideas. Let them see you relying on reminders rather than memory. Let them see you brainstorming a to-do list for the weekend. Let them see you using a calendar to plan ahead. Let them see you asking questions and learning from mistakes. Let them see you being an active agent in life.

They may not be ready to use any of these tools, or they simply may not want to. That’s okay. Telling them to use them would only create more resistance. Steadily lead by example so that, when they are ready, they’ll have a model to follow.

Grow Those Muscles

All the skills I mentioned in the detailed breakdown of executive function are like little brain muscles. These abilities become stronger with use. Difficult academic courses, chores, volunteer work, and jobs all offer opportunities to exercise those skills. So encouraging children to take on obligations and challenges is a great way to help them develop stronger executive function. Though they may not initially be ready for the tasks they take on, they’ll get stronger by struggling. Responsibilities make you more response-able; they cultivate self-efficacy.

There are, however, more enjoyable ways to develop executive function skills. Play and games of all types can support the growth of executive function. Strategy games in particular require the key intellectual skills of planning and choosing. And more interactive games and imaginative play help cultivate the emotional and social skills of executive function. Getting stronger can be fun!

More to Come

This is a big topic, and I’ve barely scratched the surface.

My goal here was to lay the groundwork for deeper exploration into executive function and provide a framework through which to think about supporting executive function development in children. Future blog posts will look more at specific strategies and tactics parents can use. In the meantime, you might peruse our list of recommended executive function books.

And you’re always welcome to dive into specifics in a one-on-one setting with either Greg Smith or myself.

Greg, through Northwest Educational Services, offers parent coaching. He would love to discuss how you can support executive function growth at home. We will also be offering a seminar devoted to this topic in August as part of our 5-part series on “Parenting For Academic Success.”

Or if you’re interested in developing stronger executive function yourself, you can work directly with me. Strengthening your personal executive function is essential to everything from career advancement to improving your mental health. Plus, you want to be adept at modeling executive function skills in front of your kids, right?

About the Author

Chris Loper has been an academic coach for Northwest Educational Services since 2014. He also writes the popular self-improvement blog Becoming Better, so if you liked this article, head on over to becomingbetter.org and check out his other work. Chris also offers behavioral change coaching, helping busy adults with habit formation and productivity. He lives in Seattle, WA.
I have drawn from numerous sources, all of which overlap with one another in some way. And my primary resource for this was none other than the owner of Northwest Educational Services, Greg Smith. So in lieu of a traditional works cited list, here are the books and websites I've drawn from:


*Posted in Parenting*
Sometimes parents don’t fit into just one category, so don’t despair if there are times or areas where you tend to be permissive and other times when you're more authoritative. The studies are clear, however, that authoritative parenting is the best parenting style. But even if you tend to identify with other parenting styles more, there are steps you can take to become a more authoritative parent. Category:Parenting. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search. The main article for this category is Parenting. Wikimedia Commons has media related to Parenting. Contents. Top. 0–9. A b C D e f g h I j k L M n o p q r s t u V w X y z. Subcategories. This category has the following 20 subcategories, out of 20 total. The parenting styles commonly used in psychology today are based on the work of Diana Baumrind, a developmental psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley, in the 1960s. Maccoby and Martin also contributed by refining the model in the 1980s. Diana Baumrind’s Parenting Styles Theory. Baumrind noticed that preschoolers exhibited distinctly different types of behavior. Each type of behavior was highly correlated to a specific kind of parenting.