



THE  
**HOUSSON CENTER**  
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

8100 Lomo Alto Dr., Suite 100 · Dallas, Texas 75225  
Office: (214) 351-0053 · Fax: (214) 351-5581

## Executive Function

**Executive functions** are mental skills that we all use every day. Organization, problem-solving, planning and memorization are all executive functions. Some kids (even very bright ones!) have trouble with executive functions. Kids with executive functioning issues often have trouble keeping track of schoolwork and staying organized. They might forget to write down assignments, lose homework, and have trouble following directions.

### Symptoms

- Being very distractible or having trouble focusing on just one thing.
- Focusing too much on just one thing.
- Daydreaming or “spacing out” when a child should be paying attention (such as during a conversation, meeting, class, etc.).
- Trouble planning or carrying out a task because of trouble visualizing the finished product or goal.
- Difficulty motivating oneself to start a task that seems difficult or uninteresting.
- Struggling to move from one task to another.
- Getting distracted or interrupted partway through a task, causing misplaced items or losing train of thought (like losing keys because another action item came up before leaving the house)
- Problems with impulse control, like snacking when trying to manage a diet.
- Struggling with thinking before talking, causing you to blurt out the first thing that pops in your head without considering that it might hurt someone’s feelings.
- Having trouble explaining your thought process clearly because you understand it in your head, but putting it into words for others feels overwhelming.

## What will testing look like?

**Task approaching:** This measures how a child approaches a task that doesn't have a lot of structure to it. For example, when they are presented with something they have never seen before, and they don't know what the expectation is, how do they devise a strategy for solving this problem? Do they come up with a good, organized strategy or a haphazard, impulsive, ineffective strategy?

**Parent questionnaires:** Parent and teacher questionnaires that parents and teachers complete to share their impression of what the child's organizational issues are. Are they pervasive, meaning they're present in all aspects of the kid's life — at school, at home, even recreationally? For example, parents can say if a child is also losing their equipment when they're playing sports, and things they care about at home.

**Clinical questionnaires:** Clinical questionnaires are used to compare a child's responses to thousands of other kids to see what's normal and what's a problem.

## Risk Factors for Children (or Adults)

- Addictions (especially alcohol use disorder and drug use disorder)
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Depression
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Schizophrenia

## Treatment

<p><b>Learning specialists:</b> Working with a learning specialist to help memorize facts, digest information, organize thoughts in writing, or solve multi-step problems</p>	<p><b>Psychotherapy (mental health therapy):</b> Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a very common form of mental health therapy for conditions that cause executive dysfunction. It's common for treatment to involve only therapy or in combination with medication treatment.</p>	<p><b>Medication:</b> Medication(s) depends on the underlying condition. Potential medication types include stimulants (especially for ADHD), antidepressants and antipsychotics.</p>
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## How Can I Help My Child?

- This is a helpful podcast episode for parents: **Parenting for the Present Episode:** <https://open.spotify.com/episode/16S9WlhiAJC7r1hFziiEum?si=ffb4c70ed2bb4106>

## Resources:

- [Executive function in children: Why it matters and how to help - Harvard Health](#)
- [Executive Dysfunction & Learning Disabilities in Kids with ADHD \(additudemag.com\)](#)
- [How Do I know if My Kid Has Executive Function Issues? \(childmind.org\)](#)
- [ADHD and Executive Dysfunction: Link, Symptoms, and Tips \(psychcentral.com\)](#)
- [Executive Function Disorder in Children \(parentingpod.com\)](#)
- [Executive Dysfunction: What It Is, Symptoms & Treatment \(clevelandclinic.org\)](#)

## Extra Helpful Resources (Books)

- *The Whole Brain Child* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.
- *How to Talk so Little Kids Will Listen* by Joanna Faber and Julie King
- *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *No-Drama Discipline; the Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture your Child's Developing Mind* by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.
- *Breaking Free of Child Anxiety and OCD* by Eli R. Lebowitz, Ph.D.
- *Freeing your Child from Anxiety* by Tamar E. Chansky, Ph.D.