

Executive Functions Impaired in ADHD – EF Deficits

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Executive functioning deficits are the problems individuals with ADHD experience in planning, organizing, following through, attending and generally accomplishing tasks they need to do in school or work. EF deficits is now a commonly used term and it has become synonymous with these difficulties. In fact all individuals with ADHD have EF deficits, but not all individuals with EF deficits have ADHD. Individuals with affective disorders (schizophrenia, depression, and mood disorders), dementia, and organic brain syndromes (stroke, vasculitis etc) can have EF deficits without having ADHD.

Different clinicians have described EF deficits with different terms. Below is my way of helping families remember what the executive functions are so they can best understand their child's or their own behavior. One helpful reminder is thinking of EF as the executive of the brain, i.e. what the CEO of the brain would have to do if in charge.

Inhibition – self control, being able to stop one's behavior at the appropriate time also known as impulse control

Shift – flexibility in thinking without getting stuck, being able to revise an idea or plan

Emotional Control – regulating and modulating emotions, feelings, and reactions

Initiation – beginning a task independently

Working Memory – holding information in memory to complete a task or activity

Planning/Organizing – systematic and coordinated approach to tasks and activities

Self-Monitoring – the ability to monitor one's own function and performance and modify behavior accordingly

Obviously these tasks appear different at different developmental stages. Self monitoring in a 5 year old is different than a 15 year old. The ability to achieve these tasks also varies with age. Some of the EF skills develop over time with maturation, others may remain impaired particularly in individuals with ADHD. When working with your own child or teen or trying to understand him or her it is important to keep this skill set in mind.

For more information on Executive Functioning, I suggest the following books:

Attention Deficit Disorder: The Unfocused Mind in Children and Adults by Thomas E. Brown, PhD.

Teaching Teenagers with ADHD, ADD, and Executive Function Deficits by Chris A. Zeigler Dendy