



## Classroom Tips for Accommodating Students with Executive Dysfunction

### More Cues of Various Kinds

**Visual cues** such as writing the daily schedule on the blackboard are very helpful because they help the student literally see where they're up to and reduce any stress associated without having to actually remember what to do next.

- Check off each item on the blackboard as you complete it and throughout the day.
- Edit the visual schedule to highlight changes in the usual routine; point out any changes both visually and orally.
- Use daily to-do lists on the students' desks to help them keep track of their work; teach them to check off each item as it is completed.

**Verbal cues** such as "Now this is very important..." may help the student with EDF prioritize during note-taking and in terms of making even greater effort to sustain their attention. Also, even though you have written the homework assignment on the blackboard in the very same spot you always write it each day, do remember to verbally cue the students to record it each day!

**Cognitive cues** that help the individual remember the sequence of steps are especially important to those who can't seem to retain or follow multi-step or multi-element situations.

### Managing Time

Students with EDF will often plan their use of time poorly, underestimate how long projects will take, and forget to do things they intended to do. Here are some strategies or tricks:

- A multi-alarm programmable wristwatch that they program with specific daily alarms and reminders (e.g., set an alarm to take medication, set another alarm to start homework, etc.)
- Calendar software (or a PalmPilot type of device) that has repeating function so the student can enter repeating events once and have them recur on the desired schedule (e.g., "study for spelling test" could be programmed to recur every Thursday evening).
- Teach time management techniques such as the use of checklists, prioritized "To Do" lists, and prioritizing assignments.
- Teach students to estimate how long a task will take and then have the students check on the accuracy of their estimates.
- Teach the students to allow more time than they think they will need for any project.
- Work in a consultative fashion with the individual to break longer assignments down into smaller chunks.

- Teaching then how to "chunk" their work into meaningful units and time frames is preferable to just "chunking" the assignment for them.
- Establish intermediate deadlines for big projects. Make sure the intermediate deadlines are recorded in their planner or agenda. Have a student show you the intermediate work products on a regular basis.
- Teach the individual the use of word processors that facilitate editing on bigger projects.
- Make sure that the due date for each assignment is clearly written on the top of each page.

## Managing Materials

- Arrange for the student to leave a large supply of pencils or pens in the classroom so that there is always one available when he can't find the one he's sure he packed but that must have disappeared into the Bermuda Triangle.
- For younger students, establish one notebook in which all assignments will be recorded. The teacher should check at the end of each day to insure that the assignments are recorded properly and that the necessary materials to complete the assignments were packed. Insure that each assignment has its due date clearly written at the top of the page. Upon return home, the child's parent should initial the page to show that the child brought the assignment book home.
- For older students or adolescents, the use of a ring binder with organized sections or a 'day planner' may be helpful. Such organizers usually have headings such as "Assignments Due/Date," prioritized "To Do" lists, study guides, calendar, class notes, pockets for notices, etc. Those organizers that have a zipper are particularly useful in that papers seem to mysteriously "fall out" somewhere between school and home.
- Color code materials. Cover the textbook for one course in the same color as the notebook and/or workbook for that course so that the student learns to grab "all green things" for Science, "all blue things" for Math, etc. Have a folder of the same color for that subject in the notebook or organizer. Or use color coding to prioritize assignments (e.g., red for assignments that must be done right away, yellow for those due at the end of the week, etc.)
- Use colored bins in the classroom that are color-coordinated with the subject colors for notebooks and folders (e.g., "put all science (green) homework in the (green) bin").
- Establish a daily routine and stick to it, e.g., teach the younger student to turn in the entire folder to the teacher at the beginning of the day, to turn in the assignment book for checking and initialing at the end of each day, etc.
- Set aside extra time at the end of each period or day for the student to pack books and papers. They will generally need more time than their peers because of their distractibility, etc. High school students may need to leave class a few minutes early so that they can get to their next class and find their materials to be ready to start that class.
- For younger students, ask the parents to help establish or support a daily routine for the student in the home as to what time each day the homework will be started, having the parent initial the assignment book to show that it came home and/or to show that the assignment was completed.
- If the parents have a fax machine in the home, consider having the student learn to fax his/her homework back to the school as a backup. Note that it is not the parent's job to fax the homework, but the goal is for the student to recognize that they might lose their work before they can turn it in and so they can protect their grade and effort by faxing a back-up copy to the school that night. Knowing that they have faxed a copy of their homework over also reduces some of the stress the student is likely to experience in school each day when they find themselves pulling out tons of papers in a futile effort to find the assignment that mysteriously got misplaced in the book bag.
- For students who keep losing their assignment pads, consider allowing them to send an email home with their assignment listed in the email.

## Teaching Styles

Students with EDF tend to do better when there are more routines and consistent structure. Having some degree of choice or control is important, but if there are too many choices, or too much unstructured time, they are more likely to experience difficulty. Hence:

*Emphasize the structure and routine in your classroom and in activities. Use key transitional phrases such as, "As we always do when we start to write an essay, we begin with..." or "OK, what's the first thing we do every morning?"*

When you give a large assignment:

- First show them an example of what a completed project will look like, so they can see the 'big picture.' Then take them through the steps or part. Because students with EDF often get overwhelmed when they see a big project, reassure them (before showing the completed project) that you will completely explain each step and assist them at each step of the way.
- If the students get to pick the topic, give them clear limits of the range of acceptable topics and give 3 to 5 examples of acceptable topics.
- Have a worksheet attached to the project that breaks the assignment down into component tasks or parts, with a clear description of the task for each part and a due date for each part.
- For younger students, have parents initial each component part as it is done. For older students, have them show you the work for your initials as each component is due.
- Provide a template or visual organizer (such as Mind Mapping) to help them organize their content and ideas.
- Note that some students with EDF will never quite "get" how to write an essay and will need to be re-taught this skill every year. If you find a template or system that works for the student, try to have all teachers (current and future) working with the student use exactly the same template or system.

### **Other Pointers**

- For the "terminally" disorganized student, arrange for an extra set of textbooks and workbooks to be left at home. This one can be tricky, as I once had the experience of going through my son's book bag with him to discover two identical books in there from one of his subjects. One was marked "To be left in school!" The other was marked "To be left at home!" Neither one of them should have been in there.
- Praise progress rather than reprimand for disorganization; reward approximations to the goal.
- Teach organizational skills to all students as a content area; use separate lesson plans to teach editing and other executive skills as a topic.
- Teach note-taking skills and provide partial notes that the students then elaborate or expand. Be sure to cue important statements that you want them to record.
- Teach students to color-highlight important material and to take notes in margins.
- Engage the child who has organizational deficits in figuring out a system that will work for her.
- Use a homework buddy system in the classroom so that every student has a buddy and they check each other's recording of the assignments.
- Remember that a student with executive dysfunction is not being lazy. He or she has a neurocognitive problem. Children or adolescents with executive dysfunction may require a comprehensive neuropsychological assessment to help the school determine what accommodations and/or types of remediation the student needs.