

As a parent of special needs children I actively seek strategies and solutions to many day to day issues that are easily mislabeled as being unmotivated, lazy, unorganized, having ADD or ADHD and numerous other labels. It is easier to label a child rather than find feasible solutions that are life-changing and promote effective foundations for the lives of the special needs student. Therefore, it is my mission to help my children understand their learning needs and show them how to advocate for themselves even at a very young age. Knowledge is Power! The more parents understand the processes of the brain and their functions, the more successful their children will become.

My oldest son who is hearing impaired and now in middle school has had many academic challenges among those Executive Functioning Weaknesses (EF). As the demands of upper elementary starting posing problems, I wondered why he was able to pass a test with flying colors but as we would study together he would indicate a failing grade was shortcoming. He made mathematical errors even though verbally he could explain multi-step processes. In 2nd grade, he gave a verbal presentation in class about his open heart surgery, specifically stating the atriums, ventricles and how the heart-lung bypass machines provided oxygen to his body during the operation. Had he put this in writing the productivity would have diminished due to the number of processes his brain would invoke to produce the same result. He was easily distracted and as 4th grade approached he would forget the assignment requirements. When projects such a dioramas were assigned he didn't know where to begin. He knew that he had to produce a diorama for the Indian lesson but didn't understand that such a simple project still required some degree of planning and organization. He had to think about what he wanted it to look like, materials needed, how many days it would take to complete it and lastly check that the requirements were met. All of this was happening while the daily demands of homework kept coming in. His productivity did not reflect his actual abilities.

On average, a 4th grader has some innate ability to keep some of these tasks together. But for a child that has Executive Functioning Weaknesses, this produces frustration and anger because they don't know why everything takes so long to complete. They can't understand why they can have a short dissertation with adults about advanced topics but yet they can't write a 2 paragraph story. Then upon entering middle school students are expected to take notes within weeks of starting 6th grade. How do they know what is important to write or whether they have to write perfect grammar in the notes? They are expected to shift between 5 binders, 5 folders and 5 books for each class. So they have to easily remove their thoughts from their last class, go their locker to only remember that they now need a different set of materials for the next class and must do this within the 3 minutes passing time. All of this requires Executive Functioning Processes of the brain.

What most parents don't realize is that we are all born with these processes but each of us develops them at a certain rate even into adulthood. Under different circumstances, these EF functions can be remediated by showing children how to do things more efficiently. It's definitely not about working harder but working smarter. In this day and age when resources are no longer scarce it's much easier to educate ourselves and provide faster solutions.

In an attempt to help my son, I started creating a weekly schedule of his homework assignments. We basically transferred them from his planner but only now he wasn't just seeing a note for Monday that

said “Science Test on Friday”. He was visualizing a whole week and what Friday really meant for him from a time perspective since he had CCD classes on Tuesday evening and another project due on Thursday that would take away free time for studying. Had we just talked about it this would have gone way over his head. But now that he could see a picture he could better manage his time to be more productive with it. This schedule evolved into a weekend TO-DO list which included everything from his own chores at home, weekend homework to family time. He soon realized making his bed was a task but made no sense to do it after 5pm when it would get all messed up again. Prioritizing his task items and checking them off as they were completed soon became a non-issue. From an academic standpoint, he created outlines of chapters as his notes before the chapters were assigned. Now when the teacher reviewed it, it was his 2nd chance at hearing the information and not realizing it the test preparation had already begun. He did this before any teacher required it in 5th grade. By the time he was in 6th grade he had already identified a way of planning and preparing himself. With organization issues, the Trapper Keeper became the Holy Grail for keeping all of his different paper needs for each class. We worked with the teachers and eliminated the 5-6 different binders for each class and had an extra set of books at home. He is now very organized and independent and forgetfulness is a non-issue. For note-taking, he is given pre-written notes from his teachers and just follows along in class by highlighting the information. As a hearing impaired person, he is entitled to have a note-taker in college so why not have this accommodation as a young adult. It relieves a tremendous amount of stress. Just like a to-do list and to aide with working memory concerns, he creates checklists to monitor the quality of his work. We use crazy phrases to remember a list of things. Our philosophy is that if you can remember the letters of the crazy phrase you can remember the rest of the information. The EF strategies list continues and yet it doesn’t seem like a lot of effort is used.

In 6th grade he was on the honor roll all year long. All of these strategies work so well. It does take a lot of work at first but it didn’t take the latest innovation to get them all implemented. It was the mere understanding that the development of his Executive Functions of the brain are simply not where they’re supposed to be for his age. And that is okay because now that he has strategies he can better cope with life’s demand as a young adult. He will be more productive in life because he has learned to find solutions to problems and not just give up, take the easy way out and will continue to produce quality results. Hopefully with continued research and awareness of EF weaknesses more students can become independent and successfully as my son.