



FREE GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Executive Functioning skills and what they look like in your kid

A plain guide to the skills underneath focus, calm, and follow-through, with 1 small thing to try for each

If you've ever watched your kid melt down over something small, do the homework and never hand it in, or stare at a page for 40 minutes unable to start, you were watching a brain skill, not a character flaw.

There are 9 of these skills. Most people can't name 1, including the professionals I train. This guide walks through all 9 in plain language, what each looks like when it's running and when it's running low, and 1 small thing you can try this week.

A quick promise about what this is and what it isn't

This is a guide for seeing your kid more clearly, not a test that scores them. There's no grade at the end and nothing to diagnose. You know your child better than any checklist does. This just gives you the words and a place to start.



Start here

These 9 skills have a name: **executive functioning**. They're the mental tools that let a person start a hard thing, hold a plan in their head, manage a big feeling, and change course when the plan breaks. They matter more for how life goes than almost anything a single school year measures.

The honest part

Almost nobody was taught these on purpose. Most of us picked up whatever we picked up by accident, from whoever happened to be around. So if some of these are hard for your kid, nothing has gone wrong. The skill was never built, because nobody knew to build it. That's the good news buried in here: skills can be built, at any age, including yours.

How to use this

- Read it once, all the way through. You'll recognize your kid in some sections and not others. That map is the useful part.
- Pick 1 skill to start with. Not all 9. The 1 that's causing the most friction in your house right now.
- Try the 1 small move for a couple of weeks before adding anything. Small and steady beats a whole new system that lasts 9 days.

One thing worth knowing

These 9 are a practitioner's teaching model, the way I and a lot of people who do this work carry it. You'll see other lists with different numbers, because researchers group these skills differently. The point isn't the exact count. It's that naming them gives you somewhere to aim, instead of a vague sense that something's hard.

You'll also notice things like communication, teamwork, and empathy aren't on the list. Those matter enormously, and they're a different family of skills. I keep them separate so this stays clear.

SKILL 1 OF 9

Self-Awareness & Self-Monitoring

Noticing yourself while it's happening

What it looks like

- Younger: doesn't notice they've drifted off the task until you say something.
- Older: sure the room's clean when it clearly isn't, or certain they knew the material then blanks in the test. The gap between how they think it went and how it went.
- This is the skill underneath almost all the others, because you can't fix what you can't see.

Try this

Guess first, then check. Before anything you can measure, have them predict out loud with a number. How long will this take? How many will you get right? Then compare the guess to what actually happened. The gap does the teaching, quietly, without you having to say a word.

What not to do

Don't say "see?" when they guess wrong. The moment prediction becomes a trap, they stop guessing honestly, and you've lost the one tool that builds this.

How you'll know it's working

They start catching their own gaps before you point them out. "Actually, I don't think I really studied that part." That sentence is the whole skill arriving.

SKILL 2 OF 9

Impulse Control

The pause between feeling it and doing it

What it looks like

- Younger: grabs, interrupts, touches the thing right after you said not to.
- Older: sends the message and reads it back a second too late. Says the thing in the group chat.
- The gap between a thought and acting on it is a real skill, and it gets shorter when they're tired or feel something's unfair. Their worst moment isn't their real level.

Try this

After a slip, skip the lecture and go straight to repair. "Okay. What's the fix?" Then make them do the fixing, in their own words. A real repair, not "sorry if you were upset." The small discomfort of fixing it is what builds the pause for next time.

What not to do

Don't just confiscate the phone and deliver the speech. That teaches "don't get caught," which is a different lesson than the one you wanted, and it skips the pause entirely.

How you'll know it's working

The gap gets a little longer. They catch one on the way out of their mouth, or come to you and fix something before you even knew it happened.

SKILL 3 OF 9

Emotional Regulation

Feeling something big and staying standing

What it looks like

- Younger: 0 to 100 over a small thing, then can't come down.
- Older: goes silent and stiff, or blows up, when something lands wrong.
- The feeling arrives at full volume before the part of them that sizes it up has finished growing. Arguing about whether it's a big deal is a conversation they can't have in that moment.

Try this

Name the feeling and give it a size. "That's rage. That's a 9." Say it flat, no fixing, no "but." A feeling with edges is one they can start to get their hands around, and you haven't argued about whether they're allowed to have it, so there's nothing left to defend.

What not to do

Don't praise them only when they go quiet and calm. Calm-on-the-outside while burning underneath isn't regulation, it's hiding, and rewarding it teaches them to mask. Praise them for staying in the room and talking to you while they're still upset. That's the actual skill.

How you'll know it's working

Recovery time shrinks. A meltdown that used to eat an hour becomes 20 minutes, then 5. Eventually they name it themselves: "I'm at like an 8 right now."

SKILL 4 OF 9

Working Memory

The brain's sticky-note system

What it looks like

- Younger: you give 3 instructions, they do the first and forget the rest before the stairs.
- Older: does the homework and never hands it in. Agrees to a thing and it's gone by dinner.
- This holds a decision you made a minute ago long enough to act on it. It's small, it's shared, and every new input pushes something out. Looking scattered is not the same as not trying.

Try this

Hand it back instead of repeating it. "What's the order?" Let them say it out loud, badly, and fix it themselves. Then help them get it out of their head and into 1 reliable place, the same place every time. A note, an alarm, a spot by the door.

What not to do

Don't just say it a 4th time, louder. That's you doing the remembering for them, and they never find out they could hold it themselves. Plus, it's exhausting for you to keep repeating.

How you'll know it's working

They build their own catch without being told. A list appears. An alarm gets set. The thing lands where it's supposed to, because they made a system instead of relying on their memory.

SKILL 5 OF 9

Planning & Prioritization

Deciding what matters, and when

What it looks like

- Younger: the project due tomorrow that was assigned 3 weeks ago.
- Older: "5 more minutes" that's actually 45, because they genuinely can't feel how long things take.
- When a teacher says "project," they hear 1 thing out in the future. You hear 6 steps with dates, because you've done this for 30 years. Nobody's shown them how to see the 6 yet.

Try this

Ask for the first piece only. "What's the first step, and when's it happening?" Not a plan, not a chart, just the first domino. For time, have them guess how long something will take, then time it, then look at the gap together.

What not to do

Don't build the beautiful colour-coded plan for them. It works right up until the day you stop making it, because it was always yours. The question survives, because they can ask it themselves.

How you'll know it's working

They find the first piece on their own, and their time guesses start landing closer to reality. A huge assignment stops being a wall and becomes a first step.

SKILL 6 OF 9

Organization

Systems simple enough to actually keep

What it looks like

- Younger: everything they own lives in 1 pile, or 1 bag, or the floor.
- Older: the backpack with a permission slip from November fused to the bottom.
- It isn't that they don't care where things go. Nothing has a home, so everything goes in the same place, and that place is "in." Organized people mostly just have simpler systems, not tidier natures.

Try this

Build 2 categories with them. Not 9. Two. "Goes back to school" and "stays home," or "done" and "still to do." It has to be their system, in their words, or it won't survive a Tuesday.

What not to do

Don't dump it out and sort it yourself, however satisfying. You've bought a clean bag for a day. You haven't built a kid who can keep one.

How you'll know it's working

The system survives a bad week. That's the only real test. If it still runs when they're tired and behind, it was simple enough and it was theirs.

SKILL 7 OF 9

Task Initiation

Getting started, even when it's hard

What it looks like

- Younger: knows what to do, wanders the room instead, looks like dawdling.
- Older: cares about the grade, wants to do well, and has stared at the same page for 40 minutes.
- Starting is its own job, separate from doing. It gets mistaken for laziness more than any of the other 8, and the wanting has nothing to do with the ability to begin.

Try this

Shrink it until it's almost silly. Not "do your essay." "Open the doc and type the title." That's the whole ask. Once they're in, the block usually breaks up on its own, because the edge was the hard part.

What not to do

Don't call it lazy, even in your head. It isn't, and the label sticks to a kid and becomes the story they tell about themselves.

How you'll know it's working

They reach for the small version themselves when they're stuck. "I'll just do the first bit." That's them managing the start instead of drowning in the whole thing.

SKILL 8 OF 9

Goal-Directed Persistence

Staying with the hard middle

What it looks like

- Younger: quits at the first hard question, pencil on the floor.
- Older: 2 weeks into the summer job, wants out. Great at starting things, fades around the middle.
- Everything worth doing has a stretch where the fun's gone and you're not good yet. That stretch feels exactly like proof you were wrong to start. It isn't. It's the shape of learning anything.

Try this

Name the stuck feeling and start from what's already there, not from zero. "Yep, that's the hard part. Everyone hits it. What have you got so far?" For older kids, get specific: "What's the actual worst part?" "I hate it" can't be solved. "The 6am start" can.

What not to do

Don't say "you didn't even try." It lands as "you're the kind of kid who quits," which is the exact story you're trying to change.

How you'll know it's working

They start recognizing the middle as a phase instead of a verdict. And sometimes, once it's specific, quitting is the right, considered call. Knowing the difference between a bad fit and a hard patch is the skill, not gritting through everything.

SKILL 9 OF 9

Cognitive Flexibility

Adapting when the plan changes

What it looks like

- Younger: comes apart when Thursday's plan moves to Friday. Same activity, new day, total meltdown.
- Older: day 3 of the trip you paid for, done, wants to sit in the room. The dread the week before school starts.
- Swapping a plan they'd already built in their head for a new one costs real effort, and that machinery is still under construction well into their 20s. What looks like drama is often just the cost of the switch.

Try this

Name the cost instead of arguing with it. "Yeah, changing plans midweek is genuinely annoying. What's the part that's bugging you most?" Agreeing it's hard isn't the same as agreeing it shouldn't happen, and kids can feel the difference.

What not to do

Don't punish the reaction. Punish it and they learn to hide the reaction, not to handle the change. The skill underneath never gets built.

How you'll know it's working

They adjust with less lost time. A changed plan costs 10 minutes instead of a whole day. Eventually they can say "I just need a minute to switch gears," which is the skill naming itself.



The most useful thing I can leave you with

You'll have noticed something reading this. A lot of these skills are ones you're still working on yourself. That's not a coincidence, and it's not a failing. Almost no adult got taught these on purpose either.

Here's what I've learned doing this work, and living it at home. The most powerful thing you can do for your kid's regulation is to strengthen your own. A child who's overwhelmed borrows their calm from the nearest steady adult. They read your face and your voice and set their own thermostat by it. Which means the work you do on yourself isn't separate from parenting them. It's some of the most important parenting you'll do.

So be as patient with your own learning curve as this guide asks you to be with theirs. Pick 1 skill. Try 1 small thing. Let it be slow.

Play along with us on YouTube!

I'm building a series of brain-fitness games you can actually play along with at home, the kind that don't look or feel like brain training. No worksheets, nothing that announces itself. Just games that quietly build these 9 skills, one at a time, that you can do in a car or at the kitchen table.

Subscribe on YouTube: [Village of Play – Cognitive Fitness Training](#) or Link in my bio

Subscribe and each new game lands in your feed as it goes up, so you're never hunting for the next one.

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