

Tip Sheets

Executive Function Skills in Infants and Toddlers

Executive Function Skills

Core executive functions include:

1. Inhibitory Control
 - Self-control
 - Self-regulation
2. Working Memory
3. Cognitive Flexibility

Higher order executive functions include:

1. Problem solving
2. Reasoning
3. Planning

Executive function skills encompass the cognitive processes that enable individuals to manage attention, and emotions, and create and attain skills. These brain-based skills help individuals to regulate behavior, attention, persistence, problem solving, memory, organization, and planning. These skills are important building blocks for cognitive, social and emotional development.

The Importance of Early Experiences

Although infants are not born with executive function skills, they are born with the potential to develop these skills. This process begins in infancy and continues into early adulthood. The development of executive function skills depends greatly on a child's early experiences. Executive functioning skills develop through engagement in:

- Responsive, nurturing, and meaningful interactions with the adults in their world.
- Enjoyable activities that promote the use and practice of skills in self-regulation.

How to Support Development

Interactions with adults help infants and toddlers focus attention, build working memory, and manage reactions to stimulating experiences. Through creative play and games, infants and toddlers practice integrating their attention, working memory, and self-control to support the higher order skills of planning, flexible problem solving and sustained engagement.

Adults play a critical role in supporting, or “scaffolding,” the development of these skills by helping children complete challenging tasks and then by gradually stepping back to let children manage the process independently as they are ready and able to do so.



For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

Copyright © 2024 Center for Inclusive Child Care

These materials may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. Information in this tip sheet has been modified from multiple sources.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families