

Learning Disabilities

Helpful Tips for Parents and Educators

In this third part of our four-part series on learning disabilities, we will share helpful tips for parents working with their children at home, and educators working with children in the classroom.

What Parents Can Do

When it comes to learning disabilities, it's not always easy to know what to do and where to find help. Turning to specialists is, of course, important. You will also want to work with your child's teachers to make accommodations. But don't overlook your own role. The single most important thing a parent can do is be a child's advocate. Some tips to help you do that are:

- Learn the specifics about your child's learning disability
- Research and pursue treatments and services
- Nurture your child's strengths; understand their weaknesses
- Provide structure, consistency, clear communication, and rewards
- Create a behavior plan and stick to it
- Build their confidence by giving them small "do-able" tasks to complete around the house
- Praise them whenever you see them trying or doing well
- Make sure they get a healthy, well-balanced diet and proper sleep
- Pay attention to your child's frustration and stress level
- Help them learn to express themselves, deal with frustration, and work through challenges
- Create a strong support system
- Establish a good relationship with your child's teachers – communication is essential!
- Reach out to other parents who are addressing similar challenges – they can be a great source of knowledge and emotional support



Helping your child with organizational skills will make the task of getting homework completed a little easier:

- Provide a consistent and structured time and location in which to complete homework
- Eliminate distractions such as cluttered areas, pets, television, etc.
- Allow frequent, short breaks – as often as every ten to twenty minutes
- Help your child make and use checklists, crossing off items as they are completed
- Organize loose papers by color coding folders
- Establish a homework folder for finished homework
- If possible, keep an extra set of textbooks and other materials at home
- Check and help your child organize his/her belongings on a daily basis

What Educators Can Do

The school setting requires children to sit still, listen quietly, pay attention, follow instructions, concentrate...all things kids with learning disabilities have a hard time doing – not because they aren't willing, but because their brains won't let them. That doesn't mean these kids can't succeed. It may take coming up with creative strategies, but there are many things teachers can do to help children thrive in the classroom.

- Evaluate the child's individual weaknesses and strengths
- Develop an IEP (Individual Education Program).
- Provide them with a calm, quiet environment in order for them to stay focused
- Eliminate distractions – seat away from doors and windows
- Break longer work into shorter chunks; divide big assignments into smaller ones; break down and reinforce the steps involved in your instructions
- Provide a stress ball or other small object for the child to squeeze or play with discreetly at their seat
- Set specific goals and daily positive reinforcement
- Give consequences consistently and immediately following misbehavior; be specific in your explanation, making sure the child knows how they misbehaved
- Write the schedule for the day on the board or a piece of paper, crossing off each item as it is completed
- Set up a homework procedure – establish a place where the student can turn in work
- For those who struggle with controlling their impulses – outbursts or speaking out of turn – rather than correcting them in front of the class, develop a discreet gesture or words you have previously agreed upon to let the child know they are interrupting; praise them for interruption-free conversations.
- Physical activity is also very important to address fidgeting and hyperactivity. When possible, incorporate physical movement into lessons or allow short breaks. Encourage children to participate in sports; make sure they don't miss recess. Ask them to run an errand or do a small task for you – even if it just means walking across the room to sharpen pencils or put something away.



For Both Parent & Educators

It is important to understand each individual child's learning style. Children learn better when they are given information in a way that is easy for them to absorb.

- Auditory Learners learn best by talking and listening. Have these kids recite facts to a favorite song. Let them pretend they are on a radio show and work with others often.
- Visual Learners learn best through reading or observation. Let them have fun with different fonts on the computer and use colored flash cards to study. Allow them to write or draw their ideas on paper.
- Tactile learners learn best by physically touching something or moving as part of a lesson. For these students, provide jelly beans for counters and costumes for acting out parts of literature or history. Let them use clay and make collages.

One positive way to keep a child's attention focused on learning is to make the learning process fun. When reading, engage them in the story – ask the child/children what they think will happen next; or act out the story by choosing characters to portray – use funny voices and costumes. For working on math, use memory cards, dice or dominoes to make numbers fun; draw pictures to help them understand the mathematical concepts.

Next month's final article in this series will focus on talking to children about their learning disabilities, and will conclude by providing a little hope for successful outcomes!

Hooked on Hookah's

Dangers of Hookah Smoking: The Latest Trend in Teen Activity

Imagine a teen smoking 100 to 200 cigarettes in an hour. You might think that's an impossible feat, but it's not. If a teenager is smoking a hookah, just 60 minutes of puffing away is actually equivalent to inhaling that many cigarettes, according to the [American Lung Association](#). Hookah smoking is an emerging trend across the United States that continues to grow among teens and young adults, though, hookahs have been used for centuries in the Middle East and Asia to smoke tobacco.

What is Hookah?

Hookah, also referred to as narghile, shisha, goza, and hubbly-bubbly, is a water-pipe used to smoke specially made tobacco by indirectly heating the tobacco, usually with burning embers or charcoal. The water-pipe generally consists of four main parts:

- The bowl where the tobacco is heated;
- The base filled with water or other liquids;
- The pipe, which connects the bowl to the base; and
- The rubber hose and mouthpiece through which smoke is drawn.



Hookah smoke can be served in a variety of flavors such as, strawberry, grape, mint, pumpkin pie, cappuccino, coffee, chocolate etc., making it more enticing for younger smokers.

The water-pipe and tobacco can be easily bought in specialized shops and online, and some teens are using the hookah as a way to smoke marijuana.

What You Need to Know:

Because hookah smoking has been flying under the radar for a while, many parents are not aware of its consequences. "Some people don't believe it's a form of smoking. Indeed, it's a form of smoking," says Dr. Samuel Fawaz of internal medicine at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak Michigan, and founder of the Hookah Community Coalition. A number of teens believe that it is safer than smoking cigarettes, but Fawaz says this is a common misconception.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) notes the "mode of smoking" causes hookah smokers to absorb higher concentrations of toxins found in cigarettes because they puff more, inhale deeper and smoke for longer periods of time. The water pipe does not filter out the "bad stuff", and the water-filtration and extended hose does not filter out the nicotine, tar, cancer-causing chemicals and dangerous heavy metals. Other health risks involved with hookah smoking are:

- Hookah smoke contains high levels of toxic compounds, including tar, carbon monoxide, heavy metals and cancer-causing chemicals (carcinogens). In fact, hookah smokers are exposed to more carbon monoxide and smoke than are cigarette smokers.
- As with cigarette smoking, hookah smoking is linked to lung and oral cancers, heart disease, and other serious illnesses.
- Hookah smoking delivers about the same amount of nicotine as cigarette smoking, possibly leading to tobacco dependence.
- Hookah smoke poses dangers associated with secondhand smoke.
- Smokers who share a water pipe are at risk for infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, and viruses such as hepatitis and herpes. Shared mouthpieces may enhance the opportunity for such diseases to spread.

What Parents Can Do:

Talk to your kids about the risks of hookah smoking. There is a belief among youth that hookah smoking is somehow safer than smoking a cigarette because the smoke is filtered through water; let them know this is not true. Educate your kids by letting them know water-pipe smoking carries the same serious health effects as smoking cigarettes. And that in fact, not only does it carry the same risk in causing lung cancer, there is an increased risk of cancers of the lower lip, esophagus, and stomach from water-pipe use. Let them know that the commonly used heat sources that are applied to burn the tobacco, such as wood cinders or charcoal, are likely to increase the health risks from water-pipe use because, when burned on their own, these heat sources release high levels of potentially dangerous chemicals, including carbon monoxide and heavy metals. Inform them that they are putting themselves at an even greater risk of incurring dangerous health problems.

(Sources: www.beaumont.edu; www.metroparent.com; www.mayoclinic.org; www.royaloak.patch.com; www.education.com)

Executive Skills for Children: What Are They and How Do I Teach Them?

Late, Lost, Unprepared and Overwhelmed

Picture a student with a mess of papers falling out of a backpack, assignments continually late, things like name and date continually not put on those assignments that are turned in, it does not seem to matter how many times you ask the student to organize their work, put their name on their paper or remind them to do their homework, the results continue to be the same. Now picture the child who is asked to pick up their room that has toys scattered in one corner, books piled every which way on a book case, closet doors open, clothes falling off of hangers, spilling out of drawers, shoes and game pieces scattered in all directions. In each of these scenarios the child looks at the task they have been asked to accomplish, begins but is easily overwhelmed and unsure what to do next. With just that brief description a picture of at least one child, but most likely several, has entered your mind. The above scenarios are examples of a child that is struggling with executive skills.

When people hear “executive skills,” it sounds like a business term or a skill needed by budding CEO’s. However, the term executive skills comes from neuroscience and is the term used to refer to the brain-based skills that are required for humans to plan and execute a task. So, instead of thinking in business terms think of a set of mental processes that each child needs to plan, prepare, control impulses and organize. For every action that the human brain formulates and completes executive skills are needed, from pouring a glass of water to completing homework. A child with executive skill weakness may easily get distracted, make poor choices, demonstrate little emotional or behavioral control, have difficulties remembering multi-step instructions and have low self-esteem.

Executive skills are closely linked and the same behavior may reflect weakness in more than one skill area. Weakness in executive skills is not a matter of a learning disability, but rather basic learning. As schoolwork gets harder and students are asked to be more independent learners, children with weak executive skills fall further and further behind. Scientists and learning specialists have many lists and descriptions of executive skills. Below is a summary of eight important executive skills:

- **Impulse Control – the ability to stop and think before acting.**

A child with weak impulse control says or does things without using a cushion of time to reflect. These children may pay much more attention to their text messages than to their schoolwork. They will do whatever pleasurable thing comes along without considering their obligations or commitments. Children with this weakness often speed through schoolwork, sacrificing accuracy and completeness along the way.

If your child needs help with this skill, he or she may: interrupt a lot, chatter excessively, speak out of turn, put off getting started on homework until the last minute, make impulsive decisions that interfere with school demands, rush through assignments without reading directions, be very inconsistent with following rules from day to day

- **Emotional Control – the ability to manage feelings by thinking about goals.**

Closely related to impulse control, emotional control helps people keep their eyes on their goal even when painful or unexpected things happen. Children who can’t manage their emotions have trouble accepting criticism. They’re quick to call a situation “unfair.”

They overreact to losing a game or getting called on in class. They have difficulty sticking with schoolwork when they are distressed about something.

If your child needs help with this skill, she or he may: be easily frustrated and be quick to give up, be unable to tolerate corrections or criticism, find it difficult to calm down and do homework, have trouble postponing play or favorite activities until work is done

- **Flexibility – the ability to change strategies or revise plans when conditions change.**

A child who behaves in ways that are inflexible, or “cognitively rigid,” has difficulty when a familiar routine is disrupted or when a task that seems easy becomes complicated. This child gets frustrated when a first attempt to solve a problem isn’t successful. She or he is unable to see other ways to do familiar tasks or to make another choice when the first choice proves unworkable.

If your child needs help with this skill, he or she may: not tolerate change of strategy or tactics, have difficulty with open-ended assignments that require brainstorming or choosing topic, panic when there’s a lot to remember or when a task doesn’t look like it will lead to success, struggle with transitions.

- **Working Memory – the ability to hold information in mind and use it to complete a task.**

Children with weaknesses in working memory are unable to remember and apply crucial information so they can move to the next step of a task. They falter when a task requires that they remember a series of directions, generate ideas in response to the directions and then express their ideas. Information just doesn’t “stick” for them.

If your child needs help with this skill, she or he may: have trouble following direction – particularly when they are given orally only, have difficulty with writing and complex multi-step tasks, not remember what has just been read or explained, have trouble taking notes in class, forget steps – especially in regards to math problems, forget to take what is needed to class.

- **Self-Monitoring – the ability to monitor and evaluate your own performance.**

Children who are weak at monitoring themselves may not notice that they’re not following directions until someone points this out. They tend to misjudge their own efforts and have trouble adjusting what they’re doing based on feedback or cues. They are often completely surprised by a low grade on a test or project.

If your child needs help with this skill, he or she may: make seemingly careless errors especially in math, have trouble proofreading and checking work, lose sight of goal or endpoint of project, skip test or homework questions without noticing, do things fast or not pay attention to time limits and runs out of time.

- **Planning and Setting Priorities – the ability to create steps to reach a goal and to make decisions about what to focus on.**

Children who have difficulty planning and setting priorities are easily overwhelmed by complicated, multi-part tasks. They can’t independently impose structure and order on their ideas. They have trouble thinking through the steps required to achieve a goal. They tend to underestimate a project’s complexity and time requirements.

If your child needs help with this skill, she or he may: come to class unprepared, underestimate time and effort a project takes to complete, become overwhelmed trying to complete multiple projects for multiple classes, have trouble identifying main ideas in what is read or heard.

- **Task Initiation (Getting Started) – the ability to recognize when it’s time to get started on something and then to begin without procrastinating.**

A child who is weak in this skill will have trouble starting homework and will put off projects until the last minute. This child is sometimes seen as lazy or unmotivated – keep in mind that this child may procrastinate because he or she really doesn’t know how to start. Many children who have difficulty getting started also have trouble with planning and organizing. They get overwhelmed by all they have to do, so they don’t do anything.

If your child needs help with this skill, he or she may: have trouble getting started on projects/assignments even after being given specific directions, find reasons not to begin homework, be unable to complete three or more assignments in a row, have difficulty with multi-step routines, often turn assignments in late, stare at blank paper or screen unable to start writing.

- **Organization – the ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.**

This skill is closely tied to skills six and seven: planning and setting priorities and task initiation. Children lacking organizational skills lose permission slips, assignment sheets, notebooks and library books. They do not notably improve their organizational skills as a consequence of their disorganization (for example, if they lose their homework, they get a failing grade). Children with poor skills in this area may understand the value of organization but are unable to discover ways to keep track of things.

If your child needs help with this skill, she or he may: do homework but neglect to turn it in, have trouble organizing work and living space, come to class without needed materials, be tardy to class, do sloppy or incomplete work.

Improving Children’s Executive Skills

With executive skills being an integral part of the learning process, and closely linked to one another, experts have compiled ten principles to improve children’s executive skills:

1. Teach deficient skills rather than expecting the child to acquire them through observation. Provide children with direct instruction – defining problem behaviors, identifying goal behaviors, and then developing and implementing an instructional sequence that includes close supervision at first, followed by a gradual fading of prompts and supports.
2. Consider the child’s developmental level. Understanding that’s normal at any given age so that you don’t expect too much from a child, is key.
3. Move from the external to the internal. All executive skills training begins with something outside the child – before a child is taught not to run into the road an adult stayed with her or him outside to ensure that it didn’t happen, then the child was taught to look both ways and eventually allowed to play outside without direct supervision. Parents and educators organize and structure children’s development to compensate for the

executive skills. When we help our children develop effective executive skills we should always begin by changing the things outside the child before moving on to strategies that require the child to change such as reminding a child to brush their teeth as part of a nightly routine rather than expecting them to remember this on their own.

4. Remember that the external includes changes you can make in the environment, the task, or the way you interact with the child. Minor changes in the physical or social environment can impact success. For a child that has challenges with task initiation that could mean doing homework at in the kitchen where he/she can be monitored and given reminders and encouragement; for a child with emotional control issues, keep birthday parties/social gatherings small to avoid overstimulation
5. Use, rather than fight, the child's innate drive for mastery and control. Build in choices to give the child control, practice difficult tasks in small steps and increase demand and independence gradually. Use negotiations to move away from an automatic "no" answer and a "have to", to a "want to" when completing difficult executive skills.
6. Modify tasks to match your child's capacity to exert effort. Some tasks take more effort than others for children and for adults. To modify a task break it down into smaller steps that can be achieved.
7. Use incentives to augment instruction. Rewards can be as simple as praise or as elaborate as a point system that encourages a child to earn a reward daily, weekly or monthly.
8. Provide just enough support for the child to be successful. Teachers and parents should support and encourage students to succeed, but not place unrealistic expectations for the child's abilities. Determine how far the child can get on task on their own and then intervene – don't do the task for them, just offer support to get over the hump and move back to independence.
9. Keep support and supervision in place until the child achieves mastery or success. To ensure mastery or success, a system must be put in place, tried and replicated. Often times failure happens when support/supervision are removed before replication of the skill happens in multiple situations independently.
10. When you do stop the supports, supervision, and incentives, fade them gradually, never abruptly end them. Once a skill has been mastered and the child can use it independently, gradually reduce the support/supervision. Cueing or prompting by the parent/adult is no longer used, incentives become less frequent and an end of the incentive is agreed upon with the child and the adult.

(Sources: Dawson, Peg and Guare, Richard: Smart but Scattered 2009; <http://www.ncld.org/types-learning-disabilities/executive-function-disorders/executive-skills-your-child-with-learning-disabilities>)