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Madras Dyslexia Association

15, Sambasivam Street, Behind Jeeva Park, T. Nagar, Chennai 600 017 Tel: 2815 6697, 2815 7908

EMail: ananyamdachennai@gmail.com Website: www.mdachennai.com

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MDA

wishes its readers
A Very
Happy New Year

Executive Functioning and Learning Disabilities

I have often written about learning strategies, and how important it is to help students become “strategic” in their approach to learning, and I discussed some ways that teachers can promote student learning by both teaching and reinforcing the use of effective strategies to their students and by imbedding effective teaching strategies into their classroom instruction. What was missing from that discussion was any real focus on the kinds of “thinking” students need to do when they are confronted with different types of learning challenges and opportunities. These “thinking ingredients” fall under the umbrella term “executive functioning.”



A Working Definition of “Executive Functioning”

“Executive functioning” is a term used to describe the many different cognitive processes that individuals use to control their behavior and to get ready to respond to different situations. Whether the task at hand is to read a newspaper article, write an email to a friend, have a telephone conversation with a relative or join in a soccer game at the park, executive functioning is at work behind the scenes, helping to accomplish the desired goal. In other words, executive functioning:

- Is conscious, purposeful and thoughtful
- Involves activating, orchestrating, monitoring, evaluating and adapting different strategies to accomplish different tasks
- Includes an understanding of how people tap their knowledge and skills and how they stay motivated to accomplish their goals
- Requires the ability to analyze situations, plan and take action, focus and maintain attention and adjust actions as needed to get the job done.

We All Have It and We All Do It

Sometimes these processes seem to happen in a seamless and automatic way, and at other times they seem to not happen quickly enough (or not at all), resulting in what some people refer to as “getting stuck,” not knowing what went wrong and having a hard time discerning what to do next. At its best, executive functioning allows us to be mentally and behaviorally flexible to all sorts of task demands, to adjust our thinking to accomplish our goal (even when there are changing conditions along the way) and to adapt our reflexes and responses in ways that result in coherence and smoothness of responses.

How does someone know if their executive functioning abilities are well tuned and ready for action? A few indicators might be if you:-

- Make good use of past knowledge and experience (both before you start an activity and while it is ongoing)
- Take notice of the current situation for cues about what is expected of you and how you might best proceed doing the task at hand
- Think about what you are doing (or are about to start doing), imagine what if any implications it has for you in the future, and allow yourself to feel whether this activity has any personal values or relevance to you (taking your emotional temperature really does matter because it often has a very real impact on how you think!)
- Feel you are ready and can be flexible in changing your thinking along the way if need be
- Can delay gratification (not jump to conclusions too quickly) and inhibit any impulsive responses that might take you off track or distract you from your goal
- Are able to adjust the way you think and respond when the rules change unexpectedly..

Learning Disabilities and Executive Functioning

Our article, [What is Executive Functioning?](#) describes how in school, at home or in the workplace, we're called on all day, every day, to self-regulate behavior. Normally, features of executive functioning are seen in our ability to:

- Make plans
- Keep track of time
- Keep track of more than one thing at once
- Meaningfully include past knowledge in discussions
- Engage in group dynamics
- Evaluate ideas
- Reflect on our work
- Change our minds and make mid-course corrections while thinking, reading and writing
- Finish work on time
- Ask for help
- Wait to speak until we're called on
- Seek more information when we need it.

Problems with executive functioning may be manifested when a person:

- Has difficulty planning a project
- Has trouble comprehending how much time a project will take to complete
- Struggles to tell a story (verbally or in writing); has trouble communicating details in an organized, sequential manner
- Has difficulty with the mental strategies involved in memorization and retrieving information from memory
- Has trouble initiating activities or tasks, or generating ideas independently
- Has difficulty retaining information while doing something with it; e.g., remembering a phone number while dialing.

These problem behaviors are often the descriptors we hear about students with learning disabilities (LD) as well as those with AD/HD and language processing disorders. Parents and teachers complain that they:

- “Forget to look ahead,” and have trouble planning and setting goals
- Have difficulty sorting, organizing and prioritizing information
- Focus either on details or the big picture at the expense of the other
- Have difficulty shifting from one activity to another (especially when rules/task demand change)
- Have a hard time juggling multiple details in working memory
- Struggle shifting between information that is literal vs. figurative, past vs. current, etc.
- Are often overwhelmed by the increased and varied work load in the middle and upper grades
- “Get it” (e.g., the information being taught, the work tasks assigned) but often “don’t know what to do with it” (e.g., how to complete the task in a way that demonstrates their knowledge).

For individuals with LD, problems with executive functioning are often complicated by performance anxiety. Feeling anxious about what to do and how well you’re doing (especially when, as is the case with LD, you are “winging it” without a strategy or plan of attack) can easily lead to feeling overloaded and overwhelmed. This in turn leads to exhaustion, inattentiveness, and a cycle of insecurity and feeling out of control. Not a great scenario for learning!

An Excellent Resource

A fine summary of executive function difficulties and learning disabilities can be found in the fifth chapter of a new book titled [Executive Function in Education: From Theory to Practice](#), edited by Dr. Lynn Meltzer (2007, Guilford Press). The chapter discusses some of the core executive function processes that affect academic performance:

- Selecting appropriate goals
- Initiating work
- Organizing
- Prioritizing

- Memorizing
- Shifting strategies and being flexibly in thinking
- Self-monitoring/checking

The chapter also includes an explanation of the inter-relationships between strategy use, effort, self concept and academic performance.

Useful sections can also be found on reading comprehension, written language, independent study, homework and long-term projects and test taking. This chapter also addresses the challenge of identifying difficulties in executive function because of “diagnostic fuzziness,” a term that means exactly what it sounds like. There is much overlap between the shared behaviors we typically attribute to executive function LD, and ADHD. There is also considerable controversy around how motivation, effort and persistence affect the types of behaviors that fall under the executive function umbrella.

And the part of this chapter that I like the best talks about “intervention approaches” on two different levels: the environment and the person. It offers (as simplified and paraphrased below) a set of principles that are important for teaching all students, and are especially critical for students who show weakness in executive function processes:

- Executive function strategies should be taught explicitly and systematically.
- Teach students how when and why specific strategies should be used.
- Embed strategy instruction into the curriculum.
- Students should be encouraged to modify and personalize strategies to match their own learning preferences.
- Practice using strategies with different tasks across content areas.
- Keep motivation high (as being a strategic learner can be very hard work!).
- Help students set realistic goals and use self-monitoring and self-management strategies to identify areas of weakness and self-correct behaviors and performance.

- Make sure that students experience success in using strategies and encourage their consistent use over time.
- Count “strategy use” as part of a student’s grade (focus on the “how” of learning, not just the “what”)
- Help students understand the limitations of hard work without a strategic plan for learning; effective executive function tools and strategies can greatly improve learning efficiency.

Sheldon H. Horowitz, Ed.D. is the Director of LD Resources & Essential Information at the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Those of us who have been teaching children with LD as well as parents of these children

We are grateful to NCLD which has granted us the permission to reprint the article.

Our take on this

Reading the above article opens our eyes to this very important function that has an impact on a child’s performance. For teachers and parents of children with LD (learning disabilities) and ADD (attention deficit disorder), this awareness of executive function is a must, as it is a major issue to deal with among these children. This is especially for children in classes 8 to 12 as those years coincide with the children’s adolescent years where their preoccupations are with non academic activities and at the same time the curricular demands are increasing. Any help given in academic areas without addressing the executive function area is a futile one. According to Goldsmith, these “executive skills “are for all. ***“Whether you’re taking out the recycling bags or preparing an annual report, you need to understand the task, plan the most efficient way to do it, follow through, and sometimes revise or start again”.***

If we look around the world today more and more children seem to be experiencing difficulties in this area. Sometimes they seem to get over it with age and experience and perhaps some inputs. In a child with LD there seems to be quite a few executive skills affected and it needs deliberate looking into. Otherwise the child is misunderstood and punished for not submitting assignments and homework on time. This has a chain reaction and parents are often called in to deal with it and the child is clueless as to

what he is doing wrong. In the Indian context where tardiness in meeting deadlines is not taken lightly it could be a big blow to a child’s esteem to be reprimanded constantly

Can we ask ourselves the following questions about this child?

Does he have a problem starting work and does he put it off?

Does he get distracted in the middle and do other things instead of what he started doing? does he easily get frustrated with a task and give up?

After having started something does he leave it incomplete?

Is he distracted and inattentive?

Does he forget what needs to be done and deadlines easily?

Is he forgetful about his belongings?

Does he do his homework but forget to take it to school and submit it?

Does he waste time doing nothing

Does he know what is important?

Does he get so involved in something and therefore lose sense of time?

Does he feel there are some quick solutions to everything?

Does he focus better under anxiety when he knows it has to be done?

The answers to many of these questions is yes and we surely know that this spells TROUBLE for the child. Goldsmith is of the opinion that parents who work closely with schools, can improve their children’s executive skills. She warns there aren’t “one-size-fits-all” strategies for improving these skills and they will have to be well thought out for each child. Both short term strategies that provide daily support as well as long term ones to make the child independent have to be planned.

Cyclone Nilam –a report by the NIOS students



On Tuesday evening 30th October, a cyclone named Nilam lay centred about 450kms south east of Chennai. On Wednesday, the city woke up to witness very windy and wet day. The wind was so strong that many trees were uprooted and branches were broken

- **Vishnu**

Cyclone Nilam hit Chennai in the first week of November. The railways tracks were flooded so the trains were cancelled. The oil tanker "Prathiba Cauvery" ran aground due to the cyclone.

- **Akshay**

There was emergency warning given to the fishermen and were asked not to go the sea. Service forces were organized to help people to vacate from low-lying areas. There was urgency among the people to reach their homes safely.

- **Janani**

When the cyclone hit Chennai, lots of trees fell down. All the emergency services were good. They saved many lives but some people died and many houses damaged.

- **Dipakk Raj**

When the cyclone hit Chennai city, people's urgency in saving their own lives was sad, they didn't think of saving even children's' lives.

- **Gagan**

There was an excellent service force to combat any emergency. The electricity supply was cut off for more than 8 hours to prevent electrocution. The Government had announced that the vaccination will be given free in the government hospitals

- **Renuka**

The city was affected by cyclone. The cinema theatres were closed. The schools were closed and so too were many offices.

- **Shrinidhi**

The city had excellent emergency services – immediate medical attention for people who met with accidents, flights, trains, buses were cancelled, schools closed fearing that children could either be electrocuted or fall down into manholes.

- **Shirly**

Cyclone took the life of 43 people. The force of winds was above the speed of 125 km per hour. The emergency service was not so good. 17 people died of electrocution.

- **Vijay Leonard**

News at MDA / ANANYA

Forging a relationship with Ford

Our Dyslexia Awareness talks as part of "Global week for caring" at Ford Business Services was followed by a generous gesture from the Ford-Rotary digital literacy programme. The team at Ford Business Services Centre visited our remedial centre on 9th November lead by Mr. Srikanth to hand over the cheque for the furniture and has enabled us to get 10 sets of desks and chairs were bought for our remedial centre.

Winners again

Bhavani CDC, Jaipur announces winners of the 6th National Art competitions 2012.

J.Dhanush of Junior school wins a prize for art work of Special merit along with a cash prize

Shirly Varghees, R.S.Janani, J.Renuka and V.Dharani in Senior school win certificates and also cash prizes.

Congratulations to the winners!

Celebrations

Since Navarathri came during term time, the children of Ananya kept a nice 'golu' in the front hall. Tasty prasadam and sundal was served to one and all.

Again November 14th saw a lot of competitions among Junior and senior children.

Seminars Attended

A Seminar on "Auditory Processing Disorders" was organized by Sri Ramachandra Medical college, Department of Speech and Hearing Alumni association at SRMC Porur. A special lecture by Prof. Asha Yathiraj, All India Institute of speech and hearing, Mysore) threw a lot of light on this condition

A seminar was hosted by Vidyasagar and, conducted by Prof.Nigel Osborne and Mr. Darren Abrahams from 'Opera Circus' U.K. It was on Neuroscience and Special education with a focus on Music, Theatre and Creative Arts. They also attend a musical play performed by the students of Vidyasagar. It was indeed interesting to see the impact of the Creative arts on Special education. Both these were attended by Vilasini.D and Geetha. R.

Ananya's children at Hydra

9 Children from Ananya have been attending sessions at Hydra, an initiative of Multiple Intelligences Foundation and VidyaSagar. The children have been exposed to a variety of experiences that have helped them find their intelligences. On 10th of November these children a project was put up at Hydra premises and showed us a different side of the child working in their strength



area brimming with knowledge and confidence. A special thanks to Yasodhara Narayanan and Dr.Prasanna Sriya who were the main facilitators for this project. The children certainly stole the visitors' hearts by their presentations. picture

Our New premises at Sambasivam street

With our taking one more building in the Sambasivam street complex, the office and Occupational therapy unit are housed in a separate building. Mrs. K.S.Vijayalkshmi Training Coordinator, PSBB Schools inaugurated the new training room on 13th of October, the first session of the week end training programme for the mainstream teachers. Now there is a buzz of activities happening there with weekend mainstream teacher training courses, weekly parent training programmes and Parent Support Group meetings.

Weekend Teacher training programme for mainstream teachers

22 teachers from mainstream schools in the city and outside participated in the 9 day programme for teachers. We had 5 teachers coming from the outskirts that would start out at 6 to be in class by 10. These classes were held every Saturday and there was a good response to it.

More for parents:

Today parents in general need a lot of sharing, support from one another. Parents of some of the Senior classes at Ananya have been meeting as a group and sharing concerns as well as ideas.

Some parents who have been teaching their children at home have also been attending a parent training programme on how to help their child. Any parent interested in this can contact our office.

Training in Tamil for teachers by the Corporation of Chennai

We have been training some Corporation teachers through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan last year and some more Corporation school teachers in some districts of Tamil Nadu

this year. For the first time the Corporation of Madras has come forward with an initiative of training some of their teachers. The first batch of this training was held on the 3rd, 4th and 5th of December with the first day training at the Corporation school and subsequently at our Ananya Learning Centre

**A tribute to Ms. Padmini Vasudevan**

Padmini is not with us but her beautiful vision of bringing Art and a Cause lives.

She has been the spearhead behind Art for a Cause which put up a lovely collection of paintings and raised funds for a cause

A talented artist, a great art teacher

A heart of gold

A great urge to reach out

You touched our lives greatly

You will continue to live in our hearts

May your soul rest in peace



MDA News Snippets

- 5 & 6.9.12 Training session for Resource persons from Manochetna MARC, Kolkatta at MARC campus conducted by Subha.V and Sujatha.R
- 7.9.12 Subha.V delivers a talk on "Understanding and supporting children with specific learning disability" in a seminar "Effective teaching for children with difficulties in an inclusive set up" organized by Manochetna Academic and Research Centre (MARC) in Kolkata
- 10 & 14.9.12 Sessions on dyslexia and methodologies for KG Trainees at PSBB School, TP Road Conducted by MDA resource Team lead by Subha.V
- 13.9.12 Dyslexia awareness at Ford Business Services at their Perungudi premises by Vilasini.D and Geetha R
- 14.9.12 Dyslexia Awareness at Women's Christian College as "Assembly Talk" by Geetha .R
- 6.10.12 Full day workshop for KG teachers from 4 CSI schools in Chennai conducted at CSI Bains school, Kilpauk conducted by Subha.V, Vilasini.D, Harini.R and Visalakshi Iyer
- 3.11.12 Workshop on remedial strategies for teachers of Anna Gem Science Park HSS conducted by Sujatha.R
- 17.11.12 Study skills workshop for teachers of Anjuman High School conducted by Harini.M and Radha.B
- 30.11.12 Awareness cum workshop conducted by Subha.V and Geetha.R at Cuddalore for 250 teachers from Government schools in Cuddalore and Vrudhachalam districts organized by the Indian Academy of Pediatricians and UNICEF.
- 4,5 and 6.12.12 Workshop and training programme for 30 teachers from various schools organized by the Corporation of Chennai. Workshop conducted by Subha.V and Geetha.R at the Nungambakkam Government Girls' high school; Training in 2 batches at Ananya Learning Centre coordinated by Suajtha.R

Our editorial team - Indu Ramesh, Kamala Ramaraj, Geetha Raghavan and Vilasini Diwakar

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BOOK POST

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 Madras Dyslexia Association
 15, Sambasivam Street, Behind Jeeva Park,
 T. Nagar, Chennai 600 017