

Strategies for Students With Scattered Minds

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Brain-Based Learning

Teachers can help students strengthen their brain's executive function with "workouts" in which they practice pausing, prioritizing, improving their working memory, and mapping their options.

By [Dr. Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers](#)

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Imagine a team without a coach guiding players toward working together to execute a winning strategy. Imagine a company without a leader to make sure that employees across departments are equipped and organized to collaborate on continually improving products and increasing sales. Imagine a marching band without a drum major to lead musicians through their complicated maneuvers while staying on beat.

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The brain's executive function network performs in the same capacity as a coach, CEO, or drum major: directing one's thinking and cognitive abilities toward setting goals and planning to achieve them, establishing priorities, getting and staying organized, and focusing attention on the task at hand. Now imagine trying to perform those

abilities if your brain's executive functioning system wasn't working effectively -- no coach to develop a game plan, no CEO to help you organize your resources for accomplishing your goals, no drum major on which to maintain your learning focus.

That's the challenge facing students with attention deficit disorders, who in effect struggle with **executive dysfunction**. As a former classroom teacher and school psychologist, Donna worked with many youth who had great difficulty with various executive functions, including:

- The ability to inhibit behavior, which often resulted in impulsivity, an abundance of movement, and difficulty following instructions
- Initiation and planning behavior, the lack of which made it hard for students to get started on classroom work and assignments and maintain their focus on learning tasks for the duration required to complete them
- Working memory and the ability to selectively maintain attention on information needed to complete a learning task
- Cognitive flexibility, or the ability to recognize when it may be useful to adjust one's thinking and action based on new information

As we noted in our post [Strategies for Strengthening the Brain's Executive Functions](#), children and youth can be taught to develop their executive functioning to become more successful self-directed learners. Explicit instruction about executive function and how to improve it is especially useful for students with learning challenges, as they can benefit the most from learning to rein in and consciously direct their "scattered minds."

Executive Function "Workouts"

Practical instruction to help struggling students hone executive function offers potential dual benefits. First, students will be better prepared to improve their performance in school and, later, on the job. Second, you can reduce classroom management issues by teaching these students strategies to avoid distractions -- and to create fewer distractions for classmates. If you need to guide youth with attention deficits, put these strategies to work in your classroom:

"Just a moment, let me think." Students who exhibit poor impulse control often benefit from additional adult support, including one-on-one strategizing about ways to overcome habits like blurting out an answer without thinking it through or behaving in ways that distract other students. For example, you might suggest that an impulsive student repeat the question either out loud or silently before answering. Maybe you'll agree on a "secret word," a password that you can say to remind the student about using his or her executive function abilities. Incorporating regular opportunities for movement into lessons can also help students reduce impulsive behaviors and stay focused on learning.

Start with the end in mind. *Initiative*, defined as readiness and skill in taking action, applies many aspects of executive function to maximum impact in school, work, and life. To help students develop initiative, guide them to establish their clear intent for a learning project as the first step in setting out a concrete plan to complete the task. Then if they start to go off task, they can revisit their clear intent: "Is what I'm doing now helping me to achieve my goal?" Breaking down learning tasks into a series of instructions is another useful strategy that models for students a step-by-step approach to direct their attention toward a small, discrete action that will move them closer to accomplishing their clear intent. Each little success along the way -- clicking another item off the to-do list -- can help keep students focused on big goals.

Learn to remember. Researchers working with students with attention deficits found that [training to improve working memory](#) (PDF) helped them avoid distractions and improve school outcomes. A variety of strategies have been developed to bulk up working memory. We've found that teachers and students alike enjoy and find useful a recall activity that we call Memory Pegs, which employs association to enhance memory. To help students recall the

names of the first ten U.S. presidents in order, for example, guide them to say the names as they tap "pegs" on their body in descending order: George Washington (head), John Adams (shoulders), Thomas Jefferson (heart), all the way to number ten, John Tyler (toes).

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Consider more options. Cognitive flexibility is a form of higher-order thinking that students can apply in creative problem solving and in weighing the pros and cons of multiple alternatives. Students with ADD may grab on to the first idea or answer that comes to mind. You can teach students to **map their options** with a graphic organizer that places the problem or question in the middle and encourages them to surround it with two or more solutions -- and the more the merrier. Option mapping reinforces that there is often more than one way to solve a problem or think about a concept. That in itself is a useful example of executive function at work!

About the Author

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