

Executive Function Classroom Toolkit

Practical Strategies to Build Independence, Reduce Overwhelm and Support Learning

By Nurturing Neurodiversity Ltd

What Are Executive Functions?

Executive functions are the brain's management system.

They help children to:

- start tasks
- sustain attention
- remember instructions
- manage emotions
- organise materials
- plan ahead
- adapt to change
- monitor their own progress

When executive functions are weak, children often appear:

- distracted
- forgetful
- disorganised
- impulsive
- anxious
- dependent on adults

Executive function difficulties are common in:

- Autism
- ADHD
- Developmental Language Disorder
- Dyspraxia
- SEMH
- Working memory difficulties

The goal is not to make children try harder.

The goal is to make thinking visible.

Executive Function Quick Check

Ask yourself:

Does this child struggle to:

- Start work independently?
- Remember instructions?
- Organise belongings?
- Stay focused?
- Manage emotions?
- Transition between activities?
- Complete multi-step tasks?
- Cope with unexpected changes?

If you ticked several boxes, executive function support may be needed.

Classroom Toolkit

1. Task Initiation

What it looks like

Children may:

- stare at a blank page
- avoid starting
- repeatedly ask for help
- appear disengaged


Quick Supports

- ✓ Visual “First, Then” boards
- ✓ Start with one question

- ✓ Highlight the first task
 - ✓ Use countdown prompts
 - ✓ Reduce the amount visible on a page
-

Visual Cue

FIRST

 Write your name

THEN

⇒ Complete Question 1

2. Working Memory

What it looks like

Children may:

- forget instructions
- lose track of tasks
- repeatedly ask what to do

Quick Supports

- ✓ Give one instruction at a time
 - ✓ Use visual instruction cards
 - ✓ Repeat key information
 - ✓ Provide checklists
 - ✓ Display task steps
-

Visual Cue

Today's Steps

1. Read
 2. Discuss
 3. Write
 4. Check
-

3. Attention & Focus

What it looks like

Children may:

- drift off task
- become distracted easily
- struggle to sustain concentration

Quick Supports

- ✓ Chunk learning
 - ✓ Use timers
 - ✓ Build movement breaks
 - ✓ Reduce visual clutter
 - ✓ Use attention prompts
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Visual Cue

Focus Time

 10 Minutes

Brain Break

 2 Minutes

4. Organisation

What it looks like

Children may:

- lose equipment
- forget homework
- have messy trays and folders

Quick Supports

- ✓ Colour-code resources
 - ✓ Label trays
 - ✓ Use visual schedules
 - ✓ Teach packing routines
 - ✓ Use equipment checklists
-

Visual Cue

Before Home Time

- Reading book
 - Homework
 - Water bottle
 - Coat
-

5. Emotional Regulation

What it looks like

Children may:

- become overwhelmed
- appear defiant
- shut down
- escalate quickly

Quick Supports

- ✓ Co-regulate before correcting

- ✓ Use calm spaces
 - ✓ Teach regulation strategies
 - ✓ Validate emotions
 - ✓ Reduce language during escalation
-

Visual Cue

How Am I Feeling?

- 😊 Ready
 - 😞 Need Help
 - 😞 Need a Break
-

6. Flexible Thinking

What it looks like

Children may:

- struggle with changes
- become distressed when plans change
- find mistakes difficult

Quick Supports

- ✓ Prepare for changes
 - ✓ Use visual countdowns
 - ✓ Teach Plan B thinking
 - ✓ Celebrate mistakes as learning
 - ✓ Use predictable routines
-


Visual Cue

Plan A

 Library

If that changes...

Plan B

 Reading Time

7. Planning & Completing Tasks

What it looks like

Children may:

- start but not finish
- rush
- miss important steps

Quick Supports

- ✓ Use visual success criteria
 - ✓ Break tasks into chunks
 - ✓ Model finished examples
 - ✓ Provide planning frames
 - ✓ Use self-checklists
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Visual Cue

My Writing Checklist

- Capital letters
 - Finger spaces
 - Full stops
 - Check my work
-

Executive Function Friendly Classroom Checklist

Environment

- Visual timetable displayed
 - Calm, uncluttered displays
 - Predictable routines
 - Visual instructions visible
 - Flexible seating available
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Teaching

- Instructions chunked
 - Processing time given
 - Visual supports used
 - Learning scaffolded
 - Independence encouraged
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Relationships

- Adults co-regulate
 - Mistakes normalised
 - Strengths recognised
 - Positive connections prioritised
 - Belonging actively promoted
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Remember

Many children are not struggling because they are unwilling.

They are struggling because the demands placed upon their executive functions exceed the support available to them.

When we reduce unnecessary demands and increase effective supports, independence grows.

Design Determines Dignity.

Nurturing Neurodiversity Ltd

Nurture. Empower. Include.

Supporting schools to build executive function, regulation and inclusive systems that help every child thrive.