8 Ways to Strengthen Your Teen’s Executive Function Skills

From the ADHD Experts at ADDitude
Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD
A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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For the last 14 years, give or take, you’ve acted as your child’s “surrogate frontal lobe.” Though she’s in high school now, you still find yourself planning your teen’s schedules, coaching her through her nightly homework, or completing the chores she’s forgotten (for the tenth time this month).

And you feel guilty about it.

Because, though teens with ADHD often do need more parental structure and support, you’re not doing anyone any favors by helicoptering. As the impending shadow of adulthood looms, it’s time to assess whether you’re doing too much for your child — and how you can better prepare him for success in the “real world.”

Chances are, your teen is craving independence. The problem? Adolescents with ADHD don’t always have the executive function skills needed to manage life on their own. They must be taught and coached over years.

Where to begin? First, consider that brain chemistry and brain development change dramatically during adolescence and puberty. Recognize that your child’s neurological and emotional health is changing daily — so your cop-
ing strategies should, too. Once you understand your teen’s brain, use the 8 strategies below to start building her executive functions.

**What Teens Want**

All teens — with and without ADHD — essentially want the same four things:

1. The chance to do what adults do
2. The opportunity to make their own choices and decisions
3. The feeling their opinions are valued
4. The freedom to decide what rules apply and how

Understanding these central desires — and leveraging them wisely — can help you design targeted strategies to help you build your teen’s executive function skills.

**What Are Executive Functions?**

Executive functions are brain-based skills that help teens to regulate behavior, set and achieve goals, balance desires with responsibilities, and learn to function independently. More clinically, they comprise 7 skills critical to daily life and future success:

1. **Self-Awareness**: Simply put, this is self-directed attention.
2. **Inhibition**: Teens with hyperactive-type ADHD, in particular, struggle with self-restraint.
3. **Non-Verbal Working Memory**: Working memory refers to the ability to hold things in your mind. Non-verbal working memory is a measure of how well your teen can recall visual imagery.
4. **Verbal Working Memory**: Verbal working memory refers to “self-speech” or internal speech. Most teens think of this as their inner monologue.
5. **Emotional Self-Regulation**: This is your teen’s ability to manipulate his own emotional state using the aforementioned executive functions. This means learning to use words, images, and his own self-awareness to process and alter how he feels about things.
6. **Self-Motivation**: This refers to your teen’s ability to motivate herself to complete a task when there is no immediate external consequence. Teens with inattentive ADHD are often deficient in this skill.
7. **Planning and Problem Solving**: Experts sometimes like to think of this as “self-play.” It refers to how your teen manipulates information
in his mind to come up with new ways of doing something. The human brain is constantly “taking things apart” and recombining them in different ways; it’s an important way for people to plan solutions to problems big and small.

Typically, these executive skills take 25 years to fully develop (meaning even your child’s neurotypical friends struggle with them). The ADHD brain, however, can take as long as 30 years to develop these executive function skills. Along the way, individuals with ADHD are too often labeled lazy or defiant. In reality, their problems are not motivational but neurological — brain-based challenges with initiating tasks or sustaining attention.

Executive Function Building Strategies

Try these 8 tactics to help your teen understand and compensate for her brain-based challenges:

1. **Set the Tone**
When communicating with your teen, focus on the problems and frustrations she encounters in each specific situation, not the skills or lack of skills underlying these problems. If your teen feels attacked or deficient, she will not likely participate in any proposed changes.

2. **Pick Your Battles**
Not all disagreements are created equal. There are times when you can (and should) walk away from a dispute with your teen. This necessitates knowing your child — and yourself — well enough to understand how to quickly de-escalate any situation.

This doesn’t mean letting your teen walk all over you. It means working to model emotional control for your child. This is an art, not a science — particularly for parents living with ADHD themselves — so don’t beat yourself up if you snap or stumble along the way.

3. **Use Natural Consequences**
In certain scenarios, your teen’s own actions are punishment enough. For example, a child exceeding her smartphone’s monthly data limit either has to pay the extra charges or she loses the privilege of using her phone. Both of those are natural consequences, which are typically easier to understand — though not always easy to swallow.

Allowing your teen to experience natural consequences is rarely easy, but it is important as it strengthens the mental connection between cause and ef-
fect. As you do, remind your teen that her behavior alone triggered the consequences, whatever they might be. Say, “We discussed this when you got your phone. If you exceed your data limit, you can pay the additional charges, or you can surrender your phone.” This framing gives your child a choice — as well as an active role in avoiding the “punishment” of losing her phone.

4. Link Privileges to Performance

This one is simple: If your teen does X, he gets Y. If he finishes all his homework, for instance, he gets to play an hour of video games before bed. Or, if he completes all his chores this week, he can go to his friend’s party on Saturday. Don’t offer rewards for the completion of simple, one-step tasks; give your child real incentives for finishing the work that unlock the things he enjoys, like screen time or nights out with friends.

For less concrete behaviors, try a long-term approach. If you’d like your child to be more supportive of her younger sister, for instance, put a marble in a jar whenever you notice her speaking to her kindly or joining her for a game. When the jar is full, tell your teen that she’s earned a special privilege.

5. Be Willing to Negotiate

In adolescence, kids should take on more responsibility and parents should relinquish some (not all) authority. To make this work, a parent must try to respectfully understand her child’s point of view and motivations — in other words, why he wants what he wants — and be willing to negotiate a solution that leaves everyone happy.

When a problem arises, ask your child how he would solve it. Teens are more likely to participate in a plan if they feel like an equal partner contributing meaningful input on the rules. Discussing and implementing solutions as part of a team also helps your teen improve her self-awareness, working memory, and problem-solving skills.

6. Trust, But Verify

When you and your teen agree to work on a behavior, be sure to create a reliable, fair way to check in. Make sure your teen knows you’ll be keeping track of her progress, so she doesn’t feel as though you don’t trust her.

If you created a plan contingent upon her turning in her homework, for example, tell your child that you’ll be emailing her teacher every Thursday night to confirm that all assignments were turned in on time — and then follow through. This weekly report can be written into your child’s IEP or 504 Plan, if she has one.
7. Involve Others
As he enters adulthood, your child will need to learn how to synthesize information from people and places outside the home. Try asking your child’s sports coach to help him improve his time-management skills, for instance, by offering rewards when your child consistently shows up on time to practice.

If you don’t have ADHD, your child may benefit from mentors who can demonstrate how real-life adults manage the condition. Have your teen spend time with a family member or community leader who has ADHD. Adolescents often respond well to new perspectives — particularly from people who share some of their challenges.

8. Ask Questions
Instead of making suggestions or giving orders, try asking questions to draw out information from your teen. “So what do you have to do for homework tonight?” “When are you planning to start that science project?” “Do you think you have enough time to finish it?” Use language that supports executive-skill development, like, “What’s your plan? What do you have to do first? How long will that take?” And remember that more is not always better — too-frequent reminders and questions may push your child in the opposite direction.
**ADDitude eBooks Available Now**
additudemag.com/shop

**Video Games and the ADHD Brain**
A parent’s guide to understanding video game addiction, setting limits on screen time, and choosing brain-building games.

Whether it’s Minecraft or Candy Crush, kids with ADHD are prone to extreme gaming — playing as much as they can and responding poorly to limits. Tired parents want to strike a fair balance without waging war — which is where this eBook comes in. In it, you’ll learn how video games affect the ADHD brain, how to set better limits, and how to choose games that do your child good.

>> Learn more about this eBook: [http://additu.de/videogames](http://additu.de/videogames)

**A Parent’s Guide to ADHD, Diet, and Nutrition**
The foods, vitamins, minerals, supplements, and herbs that can help your child manage symptoms.

What is a good ADHD diet? Is sugar the enemy? What about gluten? Dairy? In this comprehensive special report, we detail the connection between the food your child eats and the severity of his hyperactivity, inattention, and impulsivity, covering topics from artificial dyes and flavors to the right amount of protein.

>> Learn more about this eBook: [http://additu.de/nutrition](http://additu.de/nutrition)

**The ADHD Homework Survival Guide**
An ADHD-friendly guide to help you (and your child) survive nightly homework battles without tears, tantrums, or fights.

After working hard to focus and remember all day long, your child fights his nightly homework with a vengeance. Parents who are tired of daily battles over vocab lists and multiplication tables agree: There has to be a better way — and now, there is. In this 50-page special report from ADDitude, you’ll learn how to break the bad homework cycle and keep your child learning.

>> Learn more about this eBook: [http://additu.de/hw-book](http://additu.de/hw-book)

**FREE ADDitude Downloads**

**Executive Function Worksheet**
Common executive function challenges — and easy-to-use solutions.

**Teacher-Approved Apps and Tools**
Mobile apps that help your child learn, while also addressing challenging behaviors.

**Required Reading for Parents of Kids with ADHD**
10 books on everything from managing explosive behavior to navigating special-ed meetings.

**10 Ways to Neutralize Your Child’s Anger**
Teach your child to express and manage anger in appropriate ways.

**The Secret Power of Fidgets**
Learn how fidget toys can improve student behavior and focus.

**Secrets of the ADHD Brain**
Learn why we think, act, and feel the way we do.

**Top 5 Homework Frustrations**
Why kids struggle with homework, and what you can do to help.

**Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at:**
[http://additu.de/freedownloads](http://additu.de/freedownloads)
ADHD Webinar Replays from ADDitude:

The College Transition Guide for Teens with ADHD
>> [http://additu.de/adhd-at-college](http://additu.de/adhd-at-college)

After high school graduation, executive function challenges multiply for teens with ADHD — just as they’re leaving the watchful gaze of their parents, which often leads to rocky adjustments and academic challenges. The best way to strategically conquer life in college with ADHD? Begin preparing and planning while your child is in high school. This webinar helps you (and your teen) learn how.

Organization Strategies for High Schoolers
>> [http://additu.de/organizational-skills](http://additu.de/organizational-skills)

Any parent of a teen with ADHD knows how challenging staying organized is for our kids. Students today have more demands, more distractions, and busier schedules than ever before. Luckily, the strategies, tips, and resources offered in this webinar can help parents improve their teen’s organizational and time management skills — and boost her academic success in the process.

How to Unleash Your Teen’s Superpowers
>> [http://additu.de/super](http://additu.de/super)

Tweens and teens with ADHD are brave pioneers — innovating, creating, and facing their challenges head on. But these amazing young adults need new tools to succeed on their exciting journey, while still maintaining an authentic sense of self. This webinar offers strategies to help parents encourage self-discovery, build healthy inner dialogue, and find out where your teen truly shines.

The ADHD-Executive Function Connection
>> [http://additu.de/efunction](http://additu.de/efunction)

We’ve all heard of executive functions — the brain-based skills that affect how we plan, organize, and carry out tasks. But how do executive functions relate to ADHD — and how can children and adults with the condition compensate for natural deficiencies in these critical skills? Thomas Brown, Ph.D., explains the ins and outs of executive functions and how they affect focus in this expert webinar.

How to Build Confidence In Your Child
>> [http://additu.de/confidence](http://additu.de/confidence)

Research suggests that, by the age of 12, a child with ADHD will receive 20,000 more negative messages than will her neurotypical peers. Due to attention and behavior deficits beyond their control, kids with ADHD struggle daily to prove that they measure up to their classmates. Counterbalance the negativity with these positive parenting strategies that motivate your child to be the best he can be.

FREE ADHD Newsletters from ADDitude

Sign up to receive critical news and information about ADHD diagnosis and treatment, plus strategies for school, parenting, and living better with ADHD: [http://additu.de/newsletter](http://additu.de/newsletter)

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- **Parenting Children with ADHD and LD**
  Behavior and discipline, time management, disorganization, making friends, and more critical strategies for parents

- **ADHD and LD at School**
  How to get classroom accommodations, finish homework, work with teachers, find the right schools, and much more

- **Treating ADHD**
  Treatment options including medications, food, supplements, brain training, mindfulness and other alternative therapies

- **For Women with ADHD**
  Managing ADHD on the job, running a household, dealing with challenging emotions, and much more