

Executive Function! What is it and Why should I care?

First the wordy definition....Executive functions (also known as cognitive control and supervisory attention system) is an umbrella term for the management (regulation, control) of cognitive processes, including working memory, reasoning, task flexibility, problem solving as well as planning and execution.

So what does that mean to you, the parents of preschool age children? Teaching our children to have high executive function will be one of the greatest strengths we can give them when it comes to their school career. In preschool it is our job to instill in the children a love of learning so that when they go off into elementary and secondary schooling they go in with a hunger to learn more. Preschool is also the optimal time to help them develop executive function. To be a successful Kindergartener, the start of their school career, you must be able to control your impulses, sit for extended periods of time, have problem solving skills, and have the ability for delayed gratification. One of the great things though is that one of the best ways to strengthen executive function is through PLAY!

When two children are fighting over the same toy it is a great opportunity for these children to learn. It is not a time when children are misbehaving, it is a learning opportunity! By working with our children to make a plan together it is allowing for them to think about the situation, reason to what result they want, gain the ability to be flexible (waiting until the other child is done), problem solve, plan and then execute that plan. All of that learning is taking place within that short period of time.

When children get into their play and start to make the rules and share their ideas with their friends on how they think the play should look, they are strengthening their executive function. By allowing the children to do these things for themselves, rather than us impose on them what the play should be or look like, we are allowing them the freedom to build the executive function plus self confidence and creativity.

Having the children wait until the other child is done with the swings, the toy, the pencil we are doing two things. We are honoring the play of the first child. They have a serious job ahead of them and we need to honor their process. We may not see the importance of swinging continuously the entire outside time, but to that child it is very important. The second thing we are doing is allowing the second child to build that delayed gratification skill as well as everything else wrapped up in executive function. We are allowing that child to learn the skills that will last

them a lifetime, not just for their schooling. One of the most amazing things with this type of situation, or any sharing situation, is by having the adult guidance the child with the object becomes cognitively aware of the situation, instead of the fight or flight response that occurs when something is grabbed from their hand. By feeling safe and secure in their play and being made aware it allows them to process the situation on their own time. Sometimes they still need to play with that toy, but I would say the majority of the time when they realize someone else wants a turn they will give up the item of their own free will and share rather than the artificial sharing that is imposed by adults.

The best learning for preschool students occur when they are given large blocks of free play so that they may become deeply engaged in the play. Many time they act out real life situations through their play as a way of understanding the world around them. They have chances to have conflict resolution. They learn to be a part of a community. They learn to control their impulses and start to develop reasoning, problem solving, planning and execution of these plans. As parents and teachers it is our job to support them through some of these, but also to know when to step back and let them figure things out. Allowing them control of their play allows for deeper meaning in their play. All of these will allow for the development of their executive function, one of the things that will best determine their future success in school.