

PFA Tips

Overstimulated, Overexposed, Overwhelmed

Understanding Executive Function

The daily experience of our children with autism is ‘over-the-top’ on most days. Simple daily tasks such as brushing teeth, dressing, eating, and taking a shower are the cause of frustration at the least, and more often full-on meltdowns. Since these reactions can come about in response to so many situations and extend to nearly every aspect of life, from home to school, it helps to understand what lies behind all of these experiences. What is the core, essential set of skills and behaviors that are at play here? Executive Functions!

What is executive function?

It helps to understand and define executive functions very broadly to begin with, then go into more of the details later. The broadest definition of executive functions commonly used is that executive function controls our attention and behavior. That covers just about everything, so it is no wonder that we need to support executive function development for our children with autism.

What does executive function control?

The simple way to understand executive function is to know that our executive functions allow us to express how we think, feel, and act in relation to the world around us. We all use our executive functions everyday to manage and control each thought, each feeling, and each action. Executive functions develop and mature very slowly, coming to full maturity only around the age of 30. Adults should be able to control their thinking, feeling, and actions, more or less consciously and on purpose, but children, including children with autism, are not yet able to control these functions.

It is confusing to all of us that there is no one, definitive, list of executive functions that everyone uses. It appears that every teacher, doctor, therapist, and author uses a different list of functions, and then defines them differently as well. The executive functions I find most important are those that relate to how we organize, plan, manage time, use our memory, and direct our attention – with one big word of caution. Before attempting to make a change in a child’s behavior, we must first understand what is causing the behavior.

What is the connection between executive function and sensory processing?

My colleague and friend, an autistic savant, said to me while I was writing my book, “Autism and Everyday Executive Functions,”

“It is more important to teach a child with autism about executive function than it is to teach that child social skills.”

I was naturally surprised by this comment, but as we worked together more on the book, I came



to understand what she meant. Our executive functions help regulate, control, direct, and filter our sensory experiences. Nearly every interaction a child has with the world is based on sensory input, so the second thing that my savant friend said was,

“For the person with autism, it is not possible to achieve sensory integration, so we should rather aim for sensory coordination.”

This becomes the answer to how to manage when the child with autism becomes overstimulated, overexposed, and overwhelmed. Slow down the collision between so many sensory signals at once, and then it is possible to approach one activity or interaction at a time. This is where insight about executive functions can help.

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All of our executive functions have some relationship with sensory processing – organization, planning, a sense of time, memory management, and attention. Attention is possibly the biggest of these, since we are employing attention in every waking moment. It is of utmost importance for us to understand, in sensitive detail, how each child manages the intersection of executive functions and sensory processing. This understanding will provide insight into how we can help calm the overstimulation, lower the exposure, and help the child emerge from being overwhelmed. Understanding how much the child's daily sensory experience influences the growth and development of executive functions gives us a clear path for eventually enjoying a calm and measured daily life. There is hope!

Additional Resources

“Autism and Everyday Executive Function” by Paula Moraine, M.Ed.
Available on Amazon

Executive Function Difficulties

<https://www.carautismroadmap.org/executive-function/>

Improving Executive Function In Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

<https://www.autism-programs.com/articles-on-autism/improving-executive-function.htm>

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