

Student: _____

Age: _____

Grade: _____

E.F. _____

Executive Function Key Concepts and Strategies

by Sarah Ward,
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AFTER RECESS, as part of the daily routine, the class reconvenes on the rug. Jackson runs from the back of the room where he has been playing with the class hamster to his cubby and slips off his jacket. It drops to the floor. He kicks off one boot. The teacher calls stragglers to join the others on the rug, so he hops to the circle wearing one boot and plops down. The teacher shares the agenda for the afternoon, which includes reviewing the science homework. Looking alarmed, Jackson pops up, and races back to his cubby while kicking off his other boot.

He pulls out his backpack, removes a homework folder, and grabs his assignment. Leaving the backpack open and boots scattered, he races to the homework bin. Realizing his name is not on the assignment, he zooms back to his desk to grab a pencil and sits back down on the rug with the rest of the class.

As the teacher gives instructions for the next activity, Jackson slips his homework underneath him and sits on it. The class is dismissed to their desks, and Jackson, talking excitedly to the boy next to him, stands up and follows the boy to his desk. His nameless homework is left on the floor. When he gets to his desk, his morning work folder and silent reading book are on the floor with assorted bits of paper. As the class starts the next activity, Jackson does not have the materials he needs. Again, he needs to walk about the class to get ready.

Anne has a music lesson Saturday morning at 9:00. Her mom wakes her at 7:30; Anne rolls over and groans, "Ten more minutes." Mom returns ten minutes later and tries again to wake Anne. After two more rounds of "Ten more minutes," Anne finally gets out of bed and heads for the shower. She showers for twenty minutes. Mom knocks on the door to announce the time. She encourages Anne to hustle so they can leave the house in thirty minutes. Anne gets out of the shower, puts on a robe, plops herself on the living room couch, flips open her laptop, and checks her social

media sites. Mom reminds her to get ready for music. Ten minutes later, Anne saunters into her room and stares at a land mine of clothes trying to decide what to wear. She sits on her bed and starts to remove her nail polish.

Mom hollers a reminder, "Get dressed!" Finally, ten minutes later, Mom exclaims anxiously, "We have to go...!" Anne responds to this seemingly sudden pressure and shouts, "I'm coming!" She heads into

Staying

the bathroom in her bathrobe to blow dry her hair. Patience waning, Mom asks about her instrument and sheet music; Anne directs her to the basement. Finally finished with her hair, Anne heads to the kitchen for something to eat.

Exasperated, Mom, who is standing at the door holding Anne's instrument, music sheet, and breakfast bar, exclaims, "We need to go now. We are late!" Anne yells back in frustration, "I told you to wake me up earlier!"

As adults, we joke about "senior moments." That moment when you have imagined an item you are going to retrieve and then when you finally that room to get it you draw a blank. "What did I come in here for?" Ack. A senior moment.

What do a student zigzagging about the classroom, a slow-paced teen, and a senior moment all have in common? Challenging executive function skills.

Weak executive function skills

Individuals with strong executive function skills stay a beat ahead. In contrast, teachers and parents describe individuals with weak



executive function skills as being “a beat” or—as Jackson’s teacher sighs—“twenty-two beats behind.” How do executive skills enable us to stay a beat ahead? Strong executive function skills enable us to imagine and plan a “dry run” of the task in our mind before we begin to carry out the plan. If a task is planned in a different space than where the task will be carried out, then we create an image of the future space in our minds. For example, when a child hears the direction, “Get ready for lacrosse,” he might be downstairs in the family room and imagine walking upstairs into the bedroom, heading over to the dresser, opening the third drawer, and retrieving their uniform. Then he might envision a transition from the bedroom to the mudroom and then the garage, where cleats and gear bags are stored.

The imagery is a mental anchor that allows the child to better resist distractions and maintain a pace so as to reach a goal. When forethought guides children’s actions, they can carry out tasks more successfully. Small glitches, such as looking for a missing item, can also be

a Beat Ahead

handled more smoothly. However, when children with weak executive function skills hear the instruction “get ready,” they hear the words, but do not pre-imagine the task or the steps to be ready. Even if they respond, “Okay,” they do not initiate any actions to move toward their goal. When these children finally enter their rooms, because they have not pre-imagined the task, they are only starting to ask themselves, “Okay, what am I doing?” Without the vision of an outcome in mind, they are open to distraction. When these children go into their bedrooms and see books, Legos, and a laptop, they easily disengage from the goal of getting ready. They are





ORGANIZATION & FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS: A basic map of a bedroom or a classroom can be used with a pointer to plan out directions and rehearse routines. This strategy can improve the use of mental imagery and self-talk, which are two skills that support a child's ability to carry out tasks and routines.

now a beat behind. Likewise, a senior moment is simply the loss of this pre-imagined intention.

Developing strong executive function skills

So, what can we do to develop a child's capacity to be a beat ahead and successfully carry out intentions in the future? According to Russell Barkley, in order to develop strong executive function skills, individuals "need to repeatedly practice: self-monitoring, self-stopping, seeing the future, saying the future, feeling the future, and playing with the future so as to effectively 'plan and go' toward that future."

Our natural inclination might be to provide checklists. While this strategy can sometimes work, it is limited. Checklists made by adults are not that helpful in creating mental imagery for children. For example, as adults, we might make a list of items to buy at the market. While making this list, we create, if only for a brief moment, a mental image of the supermarket, our dinner table, or shelves in our cabinets. These images help us navigate the market and remember items even if the list is left at home. When we hand children a checklist we've made, they have not used imagery to create the list and may find it hard to create imagery after the fact.

A better technique, when giving directions, is to use words that create mental imagery. For example, rather than asking a child, "What do you have for homework tonight?" pose a question such as: "When you walk into

class tomorrow, what do you see yourself handing to your science teacher Mr. Jensen?" Instead of directing your child to get ready for soccer, try asking, "If you were standing at the door ready to go to soccer what would you look like? What does 'ready' look like?" To improve the effectiveness of your instruction to go upstairs and get dressed, try saying, "What drawer do you see opening to find your sport clothes?"

Visuals are also helpful in teaching kids to get ready and organize themselves. It's often a struggle to get children out the door in the morning. Multiple prompts and checklists might get your child out the door, but the process is likely to be difficult. Instead, try snapping a quick photo of your child when he is ready for school and standing by the door with his coat, clothing, shoes, backpack, and lunch. The next morning, show your child the photo, and simply say, "This is what 'ready' looks like." Ask him to imagine a plan that enables him to "match the picture." Once children remember the images in these photos, they can use their mental imagery and the photos no longer need to be shown.

In the classroom, cue students to imagine their actions before they transition. For example, when students are transitioning from recess, as they line up, say: "Imagine yourself at your cubby. What do you look like? What do you see yourself doing?" For younger students, ask them to describe how they will prepare for an activity. They can use a pointer to point to the space they will go to and pre-imagine themselves in



What does 'ready to start the lesson' look like? You need 5 minutes before your lesson actually starts at 4:30 to prepare so that you are ready when the lesson starts. This 5 minutes gives you time to take your instrument out of the case, open the sheet music to the practice warm-up page and to be seated in front of the music stand.



Working backwards to shade in the time needed, what does the travel time look like? 5 minutes to walk through the parking lot, 15 minutes to drive to the music lesson.



Shading in 5 minutes to gather your instrument and sheet music and 10 minutes to dress and brush your hair and teeth, you can see that you need to start getting ready for your 4:30 music lesson at 3:50.

that space carrying out the expected actions, "I am going to go to the back of the room and get a worksheet, then I am going to walk to the counter under the windows and get my text book, then I am going to sit at my desk and take out my pencil."

Take this technique a step further. Ask the student to draw a blueprint of the classroom or their house. Tape this blueprint to a clipboard, so the child can 'tap out their plan' before a task. Use a pencil or pointer to tap on the blueprint while encouraging them to pre-imagine and verbalize their plan; this method will foster an important skill—self-talk. For example: "I am going to walk into the bathroom, brush my teeth, then go across the hall to my bedroom. Next, I'll go to my closet, get my shoes, then walk downstairs to the front hall to get my backpack."


Use an analog clock

Children may still have difficulties using an appropriate pace even if they have a mental image of the directions. If their pace is slow, then they are vulnerable to distractions. What helps children to imagine carrying out a plan within a particular time frame? An analog clock.

As adults, we often strategize times before verbalizing the plan to children. We say, "You need to start getting ready at 3:45." However, this direction is given after we have thought, "Dance starts at 4:30, so we need to leave the house at 4:00." Try asking children to work backwards from an end time. Many children benefit from seeing how time fills up on an analog clock. A dry erase marker can be used to shade "slices" of time and write actions when planning backwards on a glass analog clock. See the example of backwards planning for estimating the time to prepare and travel to a music lesson (see graphic above).

Students can also use the clock to visually plan their time for homework or in-class assignments.

Another advantage of drawing on the clock is building self-awareness. Students can see visual markers of the time that has passed, and then determine if they have used time effectively or had any "time robbers" such as daydreaming or getting distracted by the television or Internet. To stay a beat ahead, students must monitor how closely their outcomes match the future plan they had imagined.

Ask students to plan checkpoints when they can stop and determine if they are on track with their plan. Students set a mid-point timer to stop and check how well they are working towards completing an assignment. The purpose of the timer is to improve self-monitoring and an awareness of how time is used, but not how quickly they can complete an assignment. Students who set timers for the end of a task frequently experience more stress, whereas a timer set for check-ins midway through a task provides opportunities for problem solving. Overall, when students are given guidance to plan and self-monitor while using mental imagery, they often experience independence and a better sense of self-control. Try it! 

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Verbal Mediators: The Language of Executive Function

Edited by: Kristen Jacobsen & Sarah Ward, MS CCC-SLP

Declarative Language

Authored by: Linda Murphy

Why is Declarative Language so important in fostering Executive Function Skills?

1. **Inner Voice:** Self-narratives help students develop an inner voice. After the initial language spark is ignited, most of us then go on to develop our own voice that we use to share our thoughts, recap experiences, talk about what we are doing, and talk about what we are thinking. Most of us also then go on to create our own inner voice. This is an important by-product of our language learning. We use our inner voice to problem solve and plan. We remember what we have learned or noticed in the past, and apply it to the here and now. For example, imagine you are getting ready to go to work and you can't find your keys. Your inner voice may say something like, 'Hmmm.... Now when did I last see my keys? Where do I usually put them down? What jacket did I have on yesterday?... Maybe they're in the pocket.' Your inner voice helps you think through the problem so you can get started on a plan of action to solve it. Children with Executive Functioning difficulties do not usually develop this inner voice to regulate their thoughts and actions on their own. Just as modeling was important when your child was learning to talk, thoughtful modeling now, in this regard, is equally important. So – talk out loud, think out loud, work through a problem, make predictions, ponder opportunities, consider possibilities, and reflect on past experiences when you are with your child. They will learn from your models, internalize the ideas, and begin to form their own inner voice.
2. **Perspective Taking:** Provide a window into another person's perspective. Some children with executive function challenges have difficulty taking perspective. Using declarative language to share your thoughts and feelings provides a student with a regular window into these communication exchanges in an inviting, nonthreatening way. We are providing them information that is critical in a social interaction that we know they may not pick up on their own. When we present declarative language in this way, we are not asking them to provide an answer that may be right or wrong. Rather, we are clueing them into social information and then allowing them to decide what to do with the information. By regularly using declarative language, we are also slowly building episodic memories and awareness that different people have different thoughts, opinions, perspectives and emotions. For example, you say something to your child but he is facing the other way, appearing not to listen. Rather than say to him "turn around!" or "look at me" (both imperatives) share your feelings and perspective with declarative language: "I notice you looking out the window", "What would help me know you are listening to me" or "I feel like you are not listening to me."
3. **Big Picture Thinking:** Students can better see the big picture in order to create multiple solutions to a problem. Declarative language can also help students create a visual image of the gestalt and how they would like to see the outcome of a situation in their "mind's eye". Often times when we focus on having students carry out specific detailed directions, we can all lose sight of the big picture. Because some children with executive

function challenges are strong when it comes to details, but weak when it comes to seeing the big picture, it is important to think about the big picture when we present information. Giving very specific directions or questions that have one right answer promotes that focus on details. For example, if we tell a child to “put the book in the book-box” or “line up at the door for music” we are zooming into the details and creating a situation where there’s one and only one right answer. However, if we use language instead to comment on what we see in the big picture: “I see a book on the floor” or “what do you look like if you are ready to go to music?” - we are instead encouraging our children to take a step back, notice the context and situation around them, and subsequently form a plan of action that makes sense to them. We are also leaving open the possibility that there may in fact be more than one solution –i.e., maybe the toy could go on a shelf or in the toy box, maybe the students could put away their work, line up by the door, or collect their music instruments and line up by the door.

4. **Problem Solving Skills:** Declaratives support students ability to develop problem solving skills rather than merely than just following direction skills. When we direct students as to what to do, ask them to follow directions, or ask them to answer questions with a definitive right/wrong answer, we are honing their receptive language skills. This is not a bad thing, but it may not be what the student with an executive function challenge needs most. In contrast, if we use declarative language to present information about the environment or situation at hand, we are instead inviting her to notice this information and develop a plan of action. We are inviting him or her to have an “aha!” moment where he or she figures out what to do with given information. We are giving students an opportunity to think more independently! Problem solving moments are critical for all students as they learn to see themselves as more independently functioning human beings in the world.
5. **Read the Room:** Help your child read what’s going on in his environment. We know that it can be difficult for some kids to tune into the social information that is going on around them. Rather than telling them exactly what to do and when to do it, use declarative language to help them notice what is important! For example, if it is time for a transition, instead of telling your child “go to the table for snack” or “put on your coat,” direct his attention toward the changes in the environment: “I notice all the kids are at the table” or “I notice all the kids are putting on their coats.” This will help internalize the importance of periodically checking in on one’s environment; there are visual clues available all the time, and they are important to pay attention to! We want our kids to learn that information is not always going to come to them - they have to become active information gatherers. In contrast, if we are using imperatives all the time with our kids, information is coming to them on a regular basis, and they don’t have the same need to look around or read the behaviors of others.

Job Talk:

Politicians wanted to increase voter turnout and turned to psychological research for help. It worked! Researchers framed voting as either a personal identity label (e.g. "be a voter") or as a simple behavior (e.g. "voting"). This change in phrasing to a personal identity label significantly increased interest in action and a substantially larger percentage of individuals voted! Research has shown that people want to feel like they are a part of something and take ownership of something rather than being told what to do.

Children are no different! Motivation to complete a task is increased by invoking one's sense of self. Subtly manipulating the *verb form* of a behavior ("Brush your teeth please") to feature a *noun label* (Annie is a toothbrusher!) creates an essential part of one's identity. In other words it creates confidence and a positive sense of self that this is "What I can do!" This subtle change in language can change an occasional behavior of helping around the house ("Please set the table.") into a child who has confidence in their permanent trait or skill (I am a tablesetter!).

When packing for a ski trip, being asked to be a 'packer' is a positive thing and requires the child to imagine in their mind "what does a packer do? What tools will a packer need?". On the other hand just asking a child to "Please pack the car with your warm clothing, boots and poles." Just asks the child to do something, does not invoke their reasoning of what is required and



likely does not fire them into action except perhaps to make excuses for why they can't! Using the declarative noun form (*clothes gatherer*) creates psychological essentialism and develops in children a positive attitude, a strong and stable sense of self and generalizes to how they perceive themselves and their essential role over time.



Sarah Ward, M.S., CCC/SLP and Kristen Jacobsen M.S., CCC/SLP have translated this research into a simple trick to help our children to take ownership of and participate in various tasks. They advise to turn the child's task into a "job" and add "er" to the action that you are asking the child to do which gives them the "job title" such as "Washer", "Wiper", "Tooth brusher", "Listener", etc. Give it a try, it's amazing!

Declarative Job Talk (Noun Form)	Imperative Verb Form
Please be a handwasher!	Wash your hands.
Be a counter wiper!	Wipe the counter off.
Time to be a toothbrusher!	It is now time to go upstairs and brush your teeth.
You are getting ready to be a mathematician!	Please take out your homework and start your math.

Resources:

Bryan, C. J., G. M. Walton, T. Rogers, and C. S. Dweck. "Motivating Voter Turnout by Invoking the Self." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108.31 (2011): 12653-2656.

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Heyman, G. "Talking about Success: Implications for Achievement Motivation." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 29.5 (2008): 361-70.

Helping Anxious Students Move Forward

Strategic accommodations can help students with anxiety develop persistence and independence.

Jessica Minahan

Sitting across a graffitied desk from me, an exasperated 9th grade English teacher says, “We’ve given him every chance!” She’s talking about Jeremy, a basketball star by all accounts, who is bright but getting little to no homework or schoolwork done and spending more time in the bathroom than in his classes. “Basketball is his only love, and many of us hope it is his ticket out of the inner city,” the teacher tells me. The teacher also explains that Jeremy has a diagnosis of generalized anxiety disorder and has been struggling with academic performance and work engagement since elementary school.

The school’s guidance counselor told Jeremy that unless his grades improved, he wouldn’t be allowed to play basketball. Unfortunately, his grades did not improve and Jeremy was kicked off the team in January. He ended the school year failing all but one course.

Anxiety disorders are extremely prevalent among children and adolescents in the United States. With 31.9 percent of adolescents having had an anxiety

disorder at some point in their lifetime, anxiety is the number one mental health concern that educators and counselors face (Merikangas et al., 2010). Yet most teacher preparation programs only mandate one course (or none at all) in behavior and mental health principles. Overwhelmed teachers like Jeremy’s are trying, but lack the training to help their students adequately.

Work Avoidance Is *Not* an Issue of Motivation

In my work as a behavior analyst and consultant, I see work avoidance at all grade levels: a 1st grader staring at the wall during reading group, a 5th grader asking to see the nurse when she’s called on in class, an 8th grader putting his head down and disengaging during independent math work. Many people might think this behavior indicates a lack of motivation, especially when attempts at incentivizing the student don’t work. That’s what it *looks* like.

And yet if we consider Jeremy’s plight, we see this isn’t true. Despite his anxiety, Jeremy couldn’t

have been more motivated to play basketball. Yet that wasn't enough. Why?

Though extremely motivated and academically capable, Jeremy lacked four crucial executive functioning and emotional skills:

- **Accurate Thinking:** The ability to look at an assignment or situation and accurately judge its difficulty, the time it will take to complete, and one's own ability to engage in and complete it.

- **Initiation:** The ability to organize one's thoughts and start engaging in a task.

- **Persistence:** The ability to sustain effort, even when faced with a mistake or difficulty (perceived or real).

- **Help-Seeking:** The ability to ask for help when difficulties arise (rather than avoid the task or feel defeated).

Penalties and incentives don't teach these skills and are unlikely to improve students' behavior. Instead, they often leave students like Jeremy feeling misunderstood and rejected. What is more helpful for students with anxiety is to teach them *how* to engage in work and to develop these skills.

Teaching Skills for Work Engagement

When we teach our children to ride a bike, we give them training wheels. Similarly, we should provide accommodations, such as placing math problems on cards on a key ring so students see one problem at a time instead of a long worksheet, to support students while explicitly teaching work engagement skills. Providing students with accommodations supports their ability to think accurately, initiate, persist, and seek help, allowing them to succeed while they are building these skills. If we remove the supports before students are ready, they'll crash.

Accurate Thinking

Behavior occurs for a reason. Work avoidance behavior—putting your head down on the desk—is the behavior we notice, but it is often precipitated by mild avoidance behaviors and an invisible series of negative thoughts. Students with anxiety or depression are at a particular risk for these kinds of inaccurate thoughts. Students may create an all-or-nothing situation in their minds (“I hate math” versus “I struggle with multiplication”), which can cause defeat before the student even begins. Another common version is catastrophic thinking (“I don't know how to do the third problem, so I'll probably flunk 6th grade”). Because thoughts are invisible, it is important that negative thinking should be measured—not assumed—through data gained from interviews and thought journals.

One approach to turning negative thinking into accurate or positive thinking is to have the student rate the difficulty of a writing assignment before and after the activity (Minahan & Schultz, 2014). Before the activity, the student might rate it “very difficult” due to his anxiety-fueled perception, but an hour after completion, he'll likely have a more accurate perception and assign a lower number. Referring him back to those ratings may shift his mindset for future work.

Another strategy is to create a chart that breaks a task into parts (Minahan, 2014). Make a list of different task parts, mixing in neutral items (writing lower case letters, using punctuation), favorite things (drawing, telling a friend about my idea), and some aspects they dislike (spelling). Then have students categorize each of the items into one of three columns: “I like it,” “It's OK,” and “I don't like

it.” Show the chart to the student when she makes an all-or-nothing statement such as, “I hate writing!” You can reframe by saying, “Actually it seems you *like* writing. Are you having trouble thinking of an idea? That's a small problem. I can teach you how!”

These strategies give the student a realistic view of tasks and isolate the exact skill that's a challenge. Combined with reframing language, it reduces the student's all-or-nothing thinking, empowering both student and teacher (Chambers, 2017).

Initiation

Have you ever asked a student to start work, only to realize a few minutes later that she is staring into space? If you offer help at that point, you may find that the child has already been wallowing in negative thoughts and is on the verge of shutting down. It isn't realistic to ask negative-thinking, anxious students who lack initiation skills to begin work independently. Instead, we must help them start and then ask them to continue on their own.

If teachers can assist the student within the first 30 seconds of assigning materials, they can help dissuade negative thinking (Minahan, 2014). Another helpful strategy is to look at the assignment together earlier in the day—or even the day before: “This is the math sheet we'll be doing later. Let's start the first and second problem together.”

Chunking (breaking work into smaller pieces) can also help students with low initiation skills. Give them one sheet at a time instead of the whole packet, or tell them to do only the even-numbered problems. If a student still doesn't engage, teachers can give the student a math sheet that

Have you ever asked a student to start work, only to realize a few minutes later that she is staring into space?

is completed except for the last few problems and ask the student to finish it. This is actually more effective than giving them a blank sheet and asking them to do only the first five because the sheet *looks* almost finished and easier to complete. It gives the student a sense of completion and gratification and can bypass negative thinking.

For a writing assignment, try filling in the first sentence and first half of the second. Stopping in the middle of a word, mid-sentence, is a great way to get the student to continue. He can be taught to stop mid-sentence so when he returns to the assignment it'll be easier to keep working.

For students who are risk-averse or perfectionistic, provide a whiteboard for writing. Teachers can also put worksheets in a transparent sleeve and allow students to use a dry-erase marker. In middle or high school, provide a second copy of a paper-based quiz to remind students that mistakes aren't permanent.

Persistence

Teaching and nurturing persistence can be accomplished using psychologist Carol Dweck's growth mindset theory, which teaches students that

FIGURE 1. Self-Monitoring Strategy Sheet

What am I worried about?	What strategy can I use?	Did I use it?
Initiation <i>My thoughts might be</i> This looks difficult. This is going to take forever. I can't do it.	Ask a teacher to help me start. Use a wipe off board instead of paper. Skip the problem I'm stuck on and try another. Change seats so I am away from distractions. Tell myself I only need to do work for two minutes and then I can take a break. Tell myself I only need to do the first five items and then take a break. Use positive self-talk.	
Persistence <i>My thoughts might be</i> This is too hard. I need to stop.	Skip the hard problems and do the easy problems first. Work with a classmate. Check the problems I've completed. Take a quick break. Pair the task with something pleasant (comfy chair, listening to music). Picture the completed product.	
Help Seeking <i>My thoughts might be</i> I don't know how to do this. I forget how to do this.	Raise my hand. Hand the teacher a note. Look in my notebook. Ask a classmate or ask to work with a classmate.	

“every time you push out of your comfort zone to learn hard things, your brain grows new connections and you get smarter” (Dweck, 2006).

Rewarding persistence, not just product, can prevent students who work hard but don’t earn great grades from “turning off” and not bothering to try. Do this by focusing part of the grade on *small* evidences of persistence, like, “Did I attempt more problems today than on my last quiz?” “Did I correct an answer?” “Did I attempt one of the challenge problems?” This allows a disengaged student to focus on effort and not be intimidated by a need for correctness.

Help-Seeking

Students with anxiety or depression may lack the initiative to ask for help when they’re stuck or overwhelmed by a task, and instead feel defeated and give up (Minahan, 2017). In some students, it could be that they are embarrassed about asking. Pull them aside and decide on a nonverbal or private system they are comfortable with, such as putting a pencil behind their ear when they need help.

Once we get students to ask for help, the next step is to assist the student to reflect on and articulate specifically what they need to reduce dependency. While talking, they may realize there’s another strategy available. When a teacher won’t accept the nonspecific request for “help,” and instead requires students to answer, “What do you need help with and why?”, students are forced to look more closely at the challenge. In articulating, “I don’t remember the formula,” a student may realize the problem is one he can solve himself by looking in his math book. The teacher can then reinforce that independence by saying, “Great! You *didn’t* need help! I’m glad you figured it out.”

FIGURE 2. Independent Work Inventory	
Input	Output
Watching a movie	Verbally answering questions
Listening to a recorded book	Playing content-specific cause/effect games on iPad
Reading one line	Circling multiple-choice answers
Reading one paragraph	Circling true/false answers
Reading two paragraphs	Filling in the blank
Reading two to three pages	Writing a one-sentence answer to an open-ended question (indicated by one line)

The flip side of this is that some students respond to anxiety by asking for help too frequently. Jeremy’s classmate Monique always asked, “What do I do?” immediately after being given directions. When the teacher asked her, “What were the directions?” she would be able to repeat them perfectly. This type of help-seeking is actually reassurance-seeking, and making this distinction is important to building students’ self-awareness. Helping them replace, “I don’t know what to do,” with “Can I have a check-in with you?” or “Did I understand the directions correctly?” will promote anxious students’ more accurate and confident self-concept.

Increasing Independence

When all reminding and prompting attempts have failed, teachers commonly sit with reluctant students and plod through the assignment with them without explicitly teaching strategies. However, working one-on-one or profusely prompting them through each task can cause dependence.

A better strategy is to teach students how to self-monitor. If students can

learn how to assess their own needs and find the strategies to get help, they will not need to overly rely on the teacher. Figure 1 (on p. 47) shows an example of a self-monitoring sheet that visually lists strategies a student can use independently to initiate, persist, and seek help. For students who seek reassurance, teachers can add options such as “Ask the teacher for a check-in,” “Ask three classmates before asking the teacher,” or “Reread the directions.” This type of chart can be made into a class poster for all to reference.

Even with teachers’ daily suggestions of strategies to help students solve problems independently, most students still believe that asking the teacher for help is their best tool when they are stuck. For that reason, the teacher needs to be persistent in referring to the self-monitoring sheet when prompting a student to solve problems independently. First, the teacher can label the struggle as one of the small skills, such as, “Looks like you are having trouble initiating.” This reframes the student’s all-or-nothing

thoughts into smaller, easier-to-tackle problems he can solve independently. Teachers can then point to the strategies column on the chart and ask the student which strategy he's going to use to solve his own problem, saying, "Show me the strategy you've chosen to help yourself." The teacher can provide guidance if needed, but the student is gaining independence.

Independent Work

Often, I see a teacher work with students in a small reading group or one-

guidance on how to gradually increase students' level of input/output as they show signs of success. For example, students may be intimidated by reading an entire chapter of a book, but might be able to easily listen to an audio book. They may fail fill-in-the-blank quizzes, but be excellent at verbally answering questions in class. If you can identify where they are on the inventory, then you can meet them there and help them succeed independently.

If, however, a student's independent

does Jeremy complete open-ended writing independently?"

"Never!"

His teachers were overshooting the method of output. Looking at work samples, we found Jeremy wouldn't engage in reading when there were more than two paragraphs on the page. I suggested they accommodate the work, requiring him to read only one or two paragraphs. I also suggested accommodating assignments from open-ended questions to multiple-choice. Jeremy's history teacher agreed to try this, and within five weeks, Jeremy was completing work and beginning to improve toward reading one page of text in a book and completing fill-in-the-blank answers. Jeremy told the principal, "It's like I'm a student! I hand in work and get graded." History was the one class he passed that term.

Simple changes, like increasing the font size of an assignment, can help a student think the task is less difficult. Students sometimes can find pencil-and-paper tasks intimidating, but almost all assignments or concepts have a non-paper equivalent that may be less off-putting (for example, a math game on a tablet or laptop). Being patient and flexible is also key—students' abilities may fluctuate daily, depending on underlying levels of anxiety. On Monday, they may need to take a step back, while on Wednesday they can continue to move toward more difficult methodology.

Teachers readily reduce or accommodate the way we give assignments to students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, or visual impairment, but we don't always think to make such accommodations for students with anxiety or other emotional disabilities. By meeting students where they are and systematically increasing the difficulty with support—while teaching ini-

on-one and then ask them to finish the assignment independently, only to be surprised when the students go off-task or become disruptive. The frustrated teacher often feels a particular student *can* do the work, as evidenced by his earlier production with her, so she assumes that he must be choosing *not* to do work back at his desk.

The teacher does not realize that she was essentially giving the student help without his asking for it, thereby preventing him from developing his initiation and persistence skills. Without the initiation, persistence, and help-seeking skills necessary to tackle the assignment independently, he becomes stuck and avoidant.


So how can she help him? An input/output inventory (see fig. 2) can help teachers think about where to meet students so they can be successful independently and give teachers

work skills are at a lower level than his capability in a supported environment, then we'll likely see work avoidance or disruptive or challenging behavior. Like a helium balloon, if the student is not tied to the structure of work, he'll float aimlessly. Meeting students where they are independently and systematically introducing more difficult methods of showing knowledge is the only way to shape behavior toward success while building work tolerance and skills.

For example, one day in class, Jeremy's teacher asked students to conduct research on the computer and answer two open-ended questions on a sheet of paper. Instead, Jeremy was scrolling through social media and encouraging classmates to join him. The teacher eventually asked him to leave the room. When meeting with Jeremy's team, I asked, "How often

Penalties and incentives are unlikely to improve students' behavior. What is more helpful for students with anxiety is to teach them *how* to engage in work and to develop these skills.

tiation, persistence, and help-seeking skills—we build independent work tolerance.

To embrace the skill-building approach to work engagement and to expedite the learning of initiation, persistence, or help-seeking skills, recognize and celebrate when students use strategies instead of focusing on whether they did the work. This promotes independence and generalization of the skills, allowing teachers to increase learning time and meet the needs of every student. 

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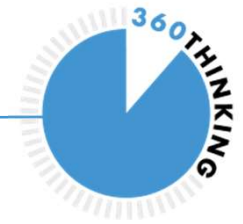
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Video Extra

In this short interview conducted at ASCD Empower17, behavior analyst Jessica Minahan describes specific and counterintuitive ways teachers can help students who experience anxiety so it doesn't thwart learning. Watch the video at www.ascd.org/el1217minahan.

Jessica Minahan is a board-certified behavior analyst and international consultant. She is co-author of *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students* (Harvard Education Press, 2012) and author of *The Behavior Code Companion: Strategies, Tools, and Interventions for Supporting Students with Anxiety-Related or Oppositional Behaviors* (Harvard Education Press, 2014). Visit her website at www.jessicaminahan.com.

Executive Function Skills Checklist



Cleaning

Tidy a space (reading corner, playroom) (5-7years old)

Clean a Room (8-11years old)

Develop and maintain a system of organization/cleaning (12-14years old)

Manage Laundry, Keep Dorm/Apartment clean, deep clean at reasonable intervals

EF Age:

Errands

Simple: get your shoes from the bathroom (3-4 years)

2-3 step direction put the placement on the table and then get the napkins (5-7 years)

With a time delay – to and from school w/out reminders (8-11years)

Follow complex school schedule & multiple transitions with teachers and classrooms (12-14 years)

Independently plan and follow school/work and leisure activities, drive own car

EF Age:

Self-regulation

Inhibit unsafe or inappropriate behaviors (3-4 years)

Inhibit behaviors; follow safety rules, use appropriate language (e.g. not swearing or using bathroom language when not appropriate), raise hand before speaking in class, and keep hands to self (5-7 years)

Inhibit/self-regulate behaviors; maintain composure when teacher is out of the classroom; inhibit temper tantrums and bad manners(8-11 years)

Inhibit rule breaking in the absence of visible authority (12-14 years)

Avoid reckless or risky behaviors (e.g. use of illegal substances, sexual acting out, shoplifting, or vandalism) (high school on)

EF Age:

Executive Function Skills Checklist



Time

Understand sequence, past/present/future tense, causality (3-7 years)

Independently remember changes in daily schedule including different after school activities (8-11 years)

Follow complex school schedule involving multiple transitions with teachers and classrooms (12-14 years)

Plan time effectively, including after school activities, homework, family responsibilities (12-14 years)

Establish and refine a long-term goal and make plans for meeting that goal; collegiate or other vocational goals. Independently organize leisure time activities, including obtaining employment or pursuing recreational activities during the summer (high school)

EF Age:

Projects/Exams

Plan simple projects: e.g. book report: select book, read book, write report (8-11 years)

Plan and carry out long-term projects, including tasks to be accomplished and a reasonable timeline to follow (12-14 years)

Create, plan and follow timelines for long-term projects, tests, after school activities, family responsibilities

Study for tests, create and maintain learned material for midterms/finals (high school)

EF Age:

Papers

Bring papers to and from school (5-7 years)

Bring papers, books and assignments to and from school (8-11 years)

Track belongings when away from home

Appropriately use a system for organizing schoolwork (12-14 years and beyond)

EF Age:

Executive Function Skills Checklist



Homework

Complete -20 min max (5-7 years)

Complete – 1 hour max without assistance (8-11 years)

Manage schoolwork effectively on a day-to-day basis, including completing and handing in assignments on time – 2 hours (middle through high school)

Establish and refine a long-term goal and make plans for meeting that goal; collegiate or other vocational goals (high school)

EF Age:

Work

Simple chore – self care-brush teeth (3-4 years)

Simple chore/self help – make bed, make a bowl of cereal (5-7 years)

Chores 10-30 min in duration; set the table, vacuuming (8-11 years)

Help out with chores around the home, including both daily responsibilities and occasional tasks that may take 60-90 minutes to complete; emptying dishwasher, raking leaves, shoveling snow etc. (12-14 years)

Safely babysit younger siblings (12-14 years)

Part time work: house sit, dog walk, mow lawns Independently obtain employment and or work during the summer (late middle and high school)

EF Age:

Money

How to spend (5-7 years)

Save money for desired objects and plan how to earn money (8-11 years)

Save money to meet a financial obligation (college savings/spending money, car payment/insurance, etc.) (middle and high school)

EF Age:

Chronological Age

Average EF Age: