Tools to Help Your Teen With Executive Function Skills

Executive functions refer to the skills required to maintain our highest level of functioning in day-to-day life (Suchy, 2009). Examples include sustaining attention, starting and finishing a task, and storing information in our brain to retrieve later. We start to develop these skills in preschool and continue to develop them through our adolescence (Zelazo & Carlson, 2012). These skills help us plan, set goals, solve problems, and exercise self-control. Although teens may develop some of these skills without formal teaching, many need support to continue to develop and practice applying them (Gist, 2019).

Routine, sensory, and planning tools, such as the apps and paper-based systems listed here, can help teens develop executive function skills. Before choosing a tool, pick a skill to target with your teen. The skill could be something like remembering to complete chores or finishing homework. Next, decide on a routine, sensory, or planning tool that you think will work best to target that skill. Finally, help your teen incorporate that tool into daily use (try to use it at least five times per week). Just remember, it may take a while for your teen to find the tool that works best. If a tool is not helping after 2 to 3 weeks, try another one!

1) Routine Tools
Teens can develop habits that stick by tracking their habits and creating to-do lists.

For tracking habits	**Apps** • **Streaks** – Track how many days a task has been completed • **Habitica** – Build habits while building gaming stats • **Tally** – Track habit progress with graphs • **Medisafe** – Set medication reminders **Paper-based systems** • **Bullet journal** – Color or draw to track habits • **Scratch-off habit tracker** (e.g., a habit tracker calendar) – Scratch off days to keep track of habits • **Paper rings** – Add a new ring each day a habit has been completed
For creating to-do lists	**Apps** • **Remember the Milk** – Create a to-do list with reminders • **2Do** – Create a to-do list with notes

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2) Sensory Tools

Teens can benefit from visual or auditory cues that remind them to do, or not do, something.

For keeping track of time	• **Focus Keeper** – Use a 25-minute countdown timer to focus on work • **Kitchen timer** – Set a kitchen timer to signal when it's time to work or take a break • **Music** – Use music to signal when it's time to take a break or stop working
For setting visual reminders	**Apps** • **Bitmoji rooms** – Create a Bitmoji room with visual reminders • **IFTTT** – Set if-then reminders • **Plan It, Do It, Check It Off** – Create photo-based to-do lists **Paper-based systems** • **Paper or whiteboard calendar** – Add photos or text as reminders • **Sticky notes** – Write reminders on colorful sticky notes and place them next to a bed or mirror • **Photo tags** – Make tags with photos of items to remember (e.g.. items to pack in a sports bag) and place them in a done pile
For blocking distractions	**Apps** • **Stayfocusd** – Block distracting sites during designated times • **Strict Workflow** – Block websites for 25-minute periods • **Studios** – Silence other apps during work time

3) Planning Tools

Teens should use a planner, whether it is digital or physical, to keep track of short- and long-term plans.

For planning ahead	**Apps** • **myHomework** – Add due dates, syllabus, and more • **My Study Life** – Add due dates and other important information • **Timetable** – Fill in a visual planner **Paper-based systems** • **Paper planners** – Use daily, weekly, or monthly calendars to keep track of important information • **Color-coded folders** – Create a homework folder or a folder for each class
For organizing work	**Apps** • **Asana** – Create simple to-do lists • **Trello** – Track progress with digital sticky notes • **Google Keep** – Create quick and simple lists • **Stickies** – Place reminders on a computer or laptop desktop **Paper-based system** • **Lined notebook** – Jot down ideas or to-do items

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