

# Executive functioning for Autistic teens: tips for secondary school

This resource discusses what executive functioning is and provides some strategies that teens can use to help with executive functioning at school. It focuses on self-monitoring, managing distractions and flexible thinking.

## What are executive functions?

'Executive functions' are the skills we use that help us plan, make decisions, focus, complete tasks, and organise information.

## How do we use executive functioning in school?

In school you may use executive functioning to pay attention in class, know when homework is due, complete schoolwork on time, and have your bag prepared for school each day. In secondary school there are extra challenges and demands compared to primary school. You are expected to complete more homework, do bigger and more complicated tasks, move between different classrooms, and do more things by yourself. Executive functioning helps us manage these changes in secondary school.

## How can you develop strategies to help with executive functioning at school?

Some people find certain executive functioning skills trickier than others. Practising these skills and using tools to help can make secondary school easier to manage.

**Easy-tricky scale:** It can help to work out which executive functions are easy for you, and which are tricky using an easy-tricky scale. Knowing your strengths mean you can use those to help with the skills you find tricky. You can find a copy of the scale in '[Executive functioning: tips for autistic teens](#)'. The video '[Amaze Executive Functioning - Ebony, Autistic education specialist](#)' also discusses the easy-tricky scale.

It is helpful to try new strategies when you are having difficulty with managing school tasks. Not all strategies may work for you, and that is okay. A strategy may not work the first time, but it is worth trying it again in the future, because levels of executive functioning can change over time. The best way to develop your executive functioning skills is to practise them. Remember to ask for help from a family member, mentor or teacher if needed.

There are three executive functions that are particularly important in secondary school. These skills are self-monitoring, managing distractions, and flexible thinking.

We will explain what these are, what they may look like in school and tools you may use to help with them.

## Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring helps us be aware of how we are going with a task in the moment, use time effectively and do what we are supposed to be doing.

**At school, we may use self-monitoring to** check that our schoolwork is accurate, hand homework in on time, and use time available in class to finish schoolwork.

### Tools/strategies:

<b>Timers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a timer to help you stay on track.</li> <li>• Time how long certain tasks take you (such as a maths sheet) to help you know how much time you need when you do it next time.</li> </ul>
<b>Checklists</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep a checklist of things you need to do.</li> <li>• Check off the steps of a task as you go.</li> </ul>
<b>Visual cues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Such as post-it notes, printouts, and pictures as reminders.</li> </ul>

## Managing distractions

Managing distractions is the skill that helps us control our urges and impulses and follow the rules. It also helps us make other people feel happy and respected.

**In school, difficulty with this skill may look like** interrupting someone, blurting out something in class, not waiting for our turn, being distracted by noises, lights or smells, or doing something other than the task we are supposed to be doing. It's okay to find it difficult to manage our impulses. Everyone has to manage distractions, and everyone has moments where they find it difficult.

### Tools/strategies:

<b>Working out what time you focus best</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You may find it easier to focus at certain times of day.</li> <li>• For example, you may focus better in the morning, so then you could plan to do the tasks that use up more focus in the morning.</li> </ul>
<b>Working out what environment you focus best in</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You may feel more comfortable or focus better in certain environments.</li> <li>• You may not get to choose the environment you work in at school, but you may be able to at home.</li> <li>• Things to consider including – indoors/outdoors, noisy/quiet, and low/high levels of light.</li> </ul>
<b>Breaks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking regular brain breaks means you only need to focus for shorter periods of time.</li> </ul>
<b>Headphones and fidgets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You can use headphones to block out sounds such as a noisy classroom, or to play music.</li> <li>• Fidgets can give you an outlet for your energy, and help you focus.</li> </ul>

## Flexible thinking

Flexible thinking helps us feel calmer and more relaxed about things we can't predict or control, such as unexpected changes or when people think or feel differently to us. When people don't think flexibly, sometimes this is called "rigid" thinking. There can be benefits to rigid thinking – often people who think more rigidly are more organised and keep a regular routine.

**At school, we may use flexible thinking to stay calm when** there is a different teacher than usual, there is a change in schedule, switching classes and activities, and changing the way you are working on a particular task. You may feel stuck in a particular way of doing something or have difficulty thinking of a different way to do it.

### Tools/strategies:

<b>Managing expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowing the situations where you may need to flexible, and understanding the different changes that may happen at school so that you feel prepared.</li> </ul>
<b>Easy-tricky scale</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We do not need to be flexible about everything - we can choose which things to be flexible about.</li> <li>It helps to identify the things that feel more important to you that they go to plan.</li> <li>You can write down the things you find tricky and easy to be flexible about on the scale. Or the things you feel more or less strongly about going to plan.</li> </ul>
<b>Clear instructions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear instructions from your teacher about a task can help you understand what it requires.</li> <li>You may get these instructions written down or use visual cues to understand and remind you what the steps are.</li> </ul>
<b>Calendars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Calendars can help you know what to expect.</li> <li>You may write in the regular classes and activities you have, as well as any appointments or events.</li> </ul>
<b>Menu board/ list of choices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You can use a menu board to write down the different options you have when doing a task.</li> <li>It can help you think about a different option or way of doing something when you feel stuck.</li> </ul>
<b>Having a 'plan B'</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a backup plan for activities that are more likely to change can make managing the change easier.</li> <li>For example, if you have a hike planned and the weather is rainy, you may have a backup plan to watch TV.</li> </ul>
<b>Asking for help when stuck</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When you are stuck on a task, asking for help can help you find another way to do it.</li> </ul>

## Other resources in this series

This resource is part of a series on executive functioning. The series includes videos and information sheets which provide valuable insights into the lived experiences and feelings of young Autistic people, as well as practical strategies young people can use to build their executive functioning skills. These resources would be useful for Autistic students, teachers, and parents.

You can access the resources by visiting <https://www.amaze.org.au/support/resources/executive-function/>.

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