

The Scattered Student

Is The Problem More Than It Appears?

By Gloria S. Lazar

Take a look at your child's room, are there books, papers and electronics strewn across the desk? And are there clothes on the floor, shoes strewn all about and the general makings of a danger zone. If so, what does this mean?

If your middle school or high school student lives in a state of disarray, frequently forgetting papers or textbooks in the school locker, or the finished assignment on the kitchen table, disorganization might be indicative of a problem that's more than adolescent carelessness.

WHAT CAN IT MEAN?

Your child may be experiencing a lack of executive function. Executive functioning involves the management of oneself or one's resources to achieve a goal. It consists of behavioral skills that have an impact on mental control and self-regulation. To some degree, the external organization of our possessions can reflect the internal management of our thinking.

When a student has difficulty keeping track of his belongings – books, papers, clothes, money, keys, cell phone, clothing – the cause may not be solely adolescent sloppiness. For some students, just getting through the day may be a reflection of a larger problem of self-monitoring and self-regulation.

Is this always the case? Not necessarily. Some students, and some adults for that matter, aren't neat and organized. But when a student has difficulty in planning tasks, allocating sufficient time for assignments, organizing his or her life to achieve required goals, the external disorganization might be a clue to what's going on mentally.

HOW TO FIX IT

Can a parent fix the problem? Assisting with

organization and planning can be valuable, but parents often end up doing too much and the student may not develop the skills required for independent thinking.

When a student forgets homework, lunch, gym clothes and other important items, does the parent bring these to school? If a student forgets to bring home papers or books needed for homework that night, does the parent drive back to retrieve the necessary material? Does a parent keep a schedule to remind the child when assignments are due and continually cue until it becomes "nagging"? Sometimes parents let themselves be roped into providing support in ways that keep their child afloat, both for school and family obligations.

By providing too much assistance, parents deal with the immediate problems, but don't help their child develop the life skills for executive functioning. By removing the need for the child to utilize self-awareness and self-modification, parental assistance does not facilitate independent behavior. In addition, the "nagging" often becomes an issue between parents and children that has deeper, more detrimental effects, rather than positive results.

Intervention with a professional that is skilled in cognitive training provides a more effective way to help your student develop a set of critical life skills. A professional will begin assessing the student's needs by exploring how much assistance parents provide, sometimes confirming what the parents suspect, but other times alerting well-meaning parents to their behaviors.

WHAT STUDENTS NEED

Effective therapy by a professional, often a speech-language therapist, involves assessing the student's

skills in a functional context, both at school and at home.

Intervention often begins with an introduction of specific strategies and facilitating the student's awareness of what is required to self-monitor and self-regulate his behavior more efficiently. Time management, prioritization of tasks, organizing assignments, keeping track of personal possessions all require strategies that a student needs to learn and implement.

For students who have a diagnosis of attention disorder, the need for self-awareness and self-modification, what are called "metacognitive" skills, remains critical in the development of executive function skills. Even students who have a less serious form of executive function deficit, benefit from strategies for memory, organization, prioritization and the use of external aids (electronic or more old fashioned methods of calendars, planners and reminders).

The key to dealing with executive function difficulties is the implementation of self-awareness, self-regulation, and effective use of techniques of organization and planning on the part of the child or adolescent. At some point, the child grows up, goes to college, lives on his own, and needs these skills to succeed in the world. Innate intelligence only serves as a basis for success but doesn't ensure achievement and happiness. A child's talents are only as good as they can be used efficiently in life.

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