

Some General Information on Executive Skills

One formal definition of executive functioning:

- The executive functions are a set of processes that all have to do with managing oneself and one's resources to achieve a goal. It is an umbrella term for the neurologically-based skills involving mental control and self-regulation.

From: *Late, Lost, and Unprepared* by Joyce Cooper-Kahn, Ph.D. and Laurie Dietzel, Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House, 2008.

Executive Skills Defined – One Example

Note: There are many different ways in which executive function skills are defined. Below is one example based on a book written for parents: *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson, EdD and Richard Guare, PhD, New York, New York: The Guilford Press, 2009

The distinct executive functions that are best understood and measured are response inhibition, working memory and cognitive flexibility.

Skills Involving Thinking (Cognition)

- **Working memory:** Ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks; incorporates ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to current situations
- **Planning/prioritization:** The ability to create a roadmap to reach a goal or to complete a task; making decisions about what's important to focus on
- **Organization:** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials
- **Time management:** The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines
- **Metacognition:** The ability to monitor oneself; ability to ask oneself – how am I doing or how did I do?

Skills Involving Doing (Behavior)

- **Response Inhibition:** Capacity to think before you act
- **Emotional control:** The ability to manage emotions to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior
- **Sustained attention:** The capacity to keep paying attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue or boredom
- **Task initiation:** The ability to begin a task or activity without undue procrastination and to independently generate ideas, responses, or problem-solving strategies.
- **Goal-directed persistence:** The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of the goal, and not be distracted by competing interests
- **Cognitive flexibility:** The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes