



Activities to support executive functions in the classroom



The phrase “Executive Function” refers to a set of skills that support a person’s ability to plan, organise, problem solve, store information, follow multiple step instructions and stay focused despite distractions. These skills help us to prioritise tasks, filter out distractions from the environment and control our impulses.

Executive functions develop most rapidly between the ages 3-5, so this is the perfect time to introduce activities to support this development. This article offers some practical activity ideas to support the children within your setting. The Neurodiversity Team have also written a second article "Executive function and Early Years." Please feel free to download the article alongside this one for further understanding on the topic.

Role Play – Provide plenty of opportunities for children to immerse themselves in imaginative play including the dolls house, dressing up and role-play. Imaginative play supports the development of cognitive skills, self-regulation and planning/ problem solving. Adults should support the children by role-modelling this style of play.



Books – Use story-time and the book corner to encourage an early interest in books. Use this as an opportunity to share stories and allow the child to predict what might happen next, think about the characters thoughts and feelings and, if appropriate, begin to imagine their own story.



memory, would include memory games such as 'pairs'.

Games – Offer games that provide the opportunity to develop impulse control, for example Jenga and Snap. Hide and Seek is another great way to develop, not only impulse control, but planning and organising skills. Additionally, games that develop visual and verbal working



Obstacle Courses – Using the outdoor space provides the perfect opportunity to support the development of executive function skills. By setting up obstacle courses that encourage climbing and balancing, children need to focus and pay attention to the activity in hand. Include activities that develop organising skills, for example throwing bean-bags into hoops.

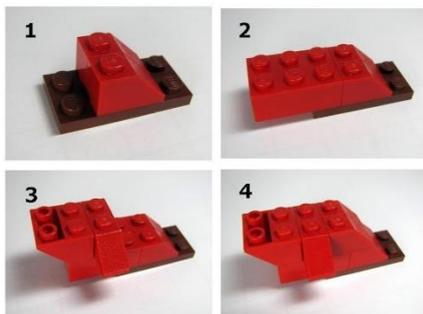
Puzzles – Ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for planning and problem solving. Jigsaws, mazes and word search style puzzles provide opportunities to enhance working memory. When providing jigsaws, it would be beneficial to start with fewer pieces and gradually increase them as and when appropriate. These could be made available throughout the setting.



Dance, Songs and Rhymes– Singing songs that use a repeated phrase, add something each time it is sung or use hand actions, help children to develop working memory and impulse control. Songs might include: ‘five little speckled frogs’, ‘10 in the bed’, ‘Old Macdonald had a farm’, ‘heads, shoulders, knees and toes’ etc.



Music provides a regular opportunity for children to engage with dance and movement. This will enhance the child’s ability to plan and organise their bodies, in time with the music.



Visual Instructions – Increase the use of visual prompts in the environment to support children to develop planning, organising and problem-solving skills. The construction area is a great place to start this, for example, stage by stage visual instructions of a Lego/block model for the children to copy. The

toilet/snack area is also a perfect opportunity for this, by providing stage by stage visual instructions of hand washing.