



# Pathways to Success

Helpful Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

## Executive Functioning Skills

### What are they and why do we need them?

Executive functioning skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus, multi-task successfully and remember instructions.

Just as an air traffic control system at an airport safely manages the arrival and departure of many aircrafts, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals and control impulses.

We are not born with executive functions skills but instead with the potential to develop them. Children rely on their environment, supports and experiences to guide the growth and development of these skills. When a child's needs are not being met during the time of development, it can impair their brain architecture and impact their development.

Positive environments, supportive relationships and experiences provide children with “scaffolding” that helps them develop and practice healthy executive functioning skills.

There are three types of brain functions that have been identified as necessary for executive functioning skills to develop:



- **Working memory**  
Helps us to use and keep information over short periods to time
- **Mental flexibility**  
Allows us to keep or shift our attention on tasks and then apply different rules in different settings
- **Self-control**  
Allows us to prioritize, think before we act and realize consequences

Source: The President and Fellows of Harvard College. (2020). *Executive Function & Self-Regulation*. Retrieved April 16, 2020, from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function>

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## Developing Healthy and Positive Skills

For children to develop positive executive functioning skills, the following are areas that parents, caregivers and educators can model and provide for our children.

### Supportive relationships

Family, friends, teachers and other community members foster a child's feelings of being socially connected. When these relationships are stable, consistent, and predictable it allows children to experience challenges and build healthy coping skills for the future.

#### Ways to encourage this:

Consistent and predictable people, one on one time with a child, serve and return interactions, touch, affection and praise.



### Routines

Providing stable and consistent routines helps children to develop an ability to predict what is next, learn to sequence events, prioritize their needs as well as build time management skills.

#### Ways to encourage this:

Establishing routines, using schedules, first-then, visual timers, and transition warnings.

## Play

Helping children learn and develop play skills is an integral part of a child's development. Children learn through shared play with an adult or peer, as well as through playing alone. Structured and unstructured play allows children to build social skills, have friends, be creative and allow time for a child to regulate.

#### Ways to encourage this:

Build in time to play with your child—something they are interested in and something you are interested in, start a game and ask your child to join, explore things at home, and set up time with a friend.

