

Building Executive Functioning Skills — Practice NOW for Camp.

When we hear the term executive functioning, many of us immediately think of organization, completing tasks, or productivity. While those are part of it, executive functioning is much more. At its core, executive functioning is the ability to manage multiple “tabs” open in your brain — juggling tasks, adapting to change, and staying focused — all while moving through daily responsibilities.

Over the summer, our campers regularly face situations that demand strong executive functioning. Take this common example: a camper finishes swim time and needs to take off their wet bathing suit, hang it up to dry, put on new clothes for the next activity, refill their water bottle, reapply sunscreen, and make it to their next period on time.

That’s a lot for a child to manage — and that’s the point.

Helping our campers build these multitasking and regulation skills is a vital part of preparing them for adolescence and adulthood. We train our staff to support this growth in subtle and effective ways. That might include verbal prompts between activities (“Don’t forget your water bottle and sunscreen!”) or visual aids like the daily schedule posted on the cabin bulletin board. Of course, developmentally, we know our campers will forget things. We’re often reprinting lost schedules or walking back with them to grab a water bottle. But these reminders are opportunities — not just corrections — and the beauty of camp is that what often distracts them are the joyful, wholesome social interactions we value so much.

Fifteen years ago, Harvard University released a phenomenal resource outlining three core dimensions of executive functioning. These provide a helpful lens for understanding how we can partner together to support kids in developing lifelong skills:

- **Working Memory**

This is the ability to hold information in our minds over short periods. For campers, this might look like remembering what activity comes next or jumping back into a game after stepping away to refill a water bottle.

- **Inhibitory Control**

This refers to managing impulses and resisting distractions. It’s what helps a camper stop and think before they act or speak — a skill still very much under construction, especially in younger kids. Sometimes, the first thought isn’t the best thought!

- **Mental Flexibility**

The ability to “switch gears” and adapt to changes. Campers use this constantly — like when rain cancels their scheduled activity, and they need to pivot quickly and embrace a new plan with a positive mindset.

At camp, we intentionally build environments that strengthen these executive functioning muscles. But when campers arrive with even a small foundation already in place, their growth and independence can be exponential.

How You Can Support Executive Functioning at Home

Here are some simple, developmentally appropriate strategies to help your child practice executive functioning in everyday life:

- Encourage problem-solving before prompting. Instead of jumping in to tell kids what to do, give them space to think through steps first. Then offer guidance or correction as needed — whether they're getting ready for bed or packing for a sleepover.
- Create visual checklists for routines like mornings or bedtime. These tools reinforce working memory and make multi-step tasks easier to manage.
- Give two-step directions, such as “Put your shoes by the door and grab your water bottle.” This supports their ability to juggle tasks without becoming overwhelmed.
- Play games that build impulse control — “Simon Says,” Red Light/Green Light, or Uno are fun ways to help kids practice pausing before reacting.
- Model flexible thinking out loud. If plans change, narrate your adaptability: “We were going to the park, but it's raining. Let's come up with a new idea!”
- Use natural transitions (like finishing a meal or leaving the house) to prompt planning: “What's next? What do you need to bring with you?”
- Praise the process, not just the result. Celebrate when your child reflects, pauses, or adjusts to something new — those are all signs of growing executive functioning!

By embedding these practices into daily life, you're giving your child a powerful head start. When campers arrive at camp with a foundation of these skills, they're better able to take ownership of their experience, solve problems with confidence, and grow into capable, resilient young people!

Resource of the Month:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/How-Early-Experiences-Shape-the-Development-of-Executive-Function.pdf>