

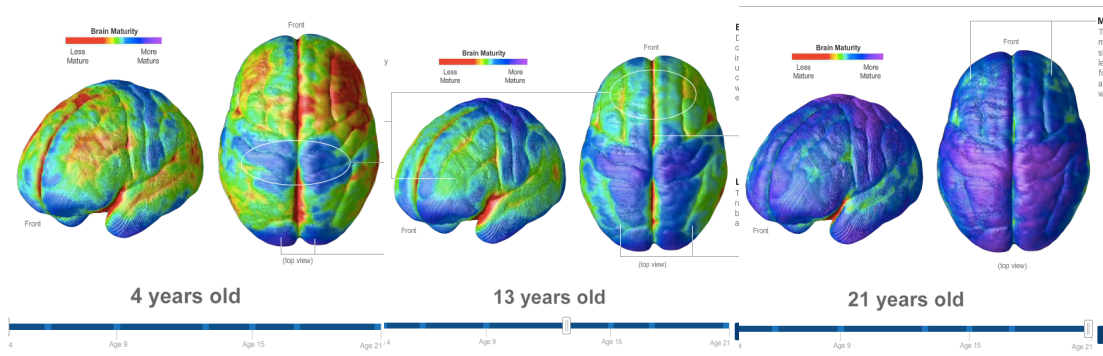
Executive Skills Coaching

What Parents Should Know

By Peg Dawson, co-author *Coaching Students with Executive Skills Deficits*

What executive skills are

Executive skills refer to the cognitive processes required to plan and organize activities, including task initiation and follow through, working memory, sustained attention, performance monitoring, inhibition of impulses, and goal-directed persistence. Located primarily in the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain just behind the forehead), these are skills that begin to develop in some form soon after birth, but neuroscientists are now realizing that it takes about 25 years for these skills to fully mature. And for kids with attention disorders, these skills tend to develop even more slowly. The MRI images below reveal how slowly the frontal lobes of the brain mature (with the color purple representing full maturation).



What coaching is

One of the responsibilities of parenting is to teach children the skills they need to become effective, independent and self-regulated adults. And for the first decade or so, most children are receptive to their parents teaching them. As they come up on adolescence, however, they begin to resist instruction from their parents. This is because a primary developmental task of adolescents is to establish their own identity. The reason this is such a strong drive in so many teenagers may be baked into our DNA—scientists have speculated that this was the drive that propelled our ancestors to move from our origins in Africa to explore and settle in new lands and habitats.

When children begin to push back at their parents' effort to teach them new skills, coaching is an option many parents turn to. Coaching serves as a way station between kids relying on parents to manage (or micromanage them) and them being able to function independently. It's

an approach ideally suited to helping teens grow the executive skills they need to become the independent self-sufficient individuals both they and their parents want them to become.

Coaching is a process whereby adults work with students to help them identify goals that are important to them and to make daily plans to help them achieve their long-term goals. With younger teenagers, long-term goals may be those the student hopes to accomplish by the end of the marking period. With older teenagers, coaches may continue to work on marking period goals, but they may also work with students to identify the goals they want to accomplish by the time they complete high school. Examples of marking period goals might be: *make the honor roll, earn no grades less than a C, or pass math*. An example of a long-term goal for an older adolescent might be: *get accepted by the state university, get a job as an auto mechanic, or get into hairdressing school*.

Key features of coaching:

Coaching approaches vary. Through years of working with and refining our coaching process, we have identified some key elements that contribute to its success. Some of these features are:

- Coaching has to be voluntary. Students who feel pushed into coaching tend to sabotage the process, so we find it helpful to establish up front that the student is a willing participant.
- It is the student who sets coaching goals and not parents. A primary goal of coaching is to help students become autonomous. The only way this can happen is for students to make key decisions, particularly around the goals they want to work toward.
- Students help identify the strategies that work for them as they pursue their goals. In this way, the coach acts as a consultant—offering advice and suggesting strategies, but always leaving the final decision in the hands of the student.
- Coaches provide ways to track progress so that the students they're working with have clear evidence that they're being successful. Coaches have an array of measurement techniques they can draw on, selecting the appropriate technique based on the specific goals the student is working on. Giving students clear feedback about their progress is one of the most powerful components of our coaching model.
- Success with achieving small goals builds a foundation for solid skill development, making it easier for the student to achieve larger goals, but *this takes time*.

What is the parent role in coaching?

- Be willing and able to step back. You own the car, but you have to allow your child to drive it—and let the coach rather than you sit in the passenger seat to guide and instruct as your child learns to drive.

- Take cues from the coach. There may still be a role for you to play, but this should be the result of a negotiation between you, the coach, and your child to ensure that everyone agrees that this is the right course of action.
- Be patient. New habits are not acquired overnight. We often say with respect to executive skill development, *progress is measured in years and not months*. While it is likely that with coaching that time frame can be shortened a bit, at a minimum it will take a marking period or two to see growth—and longer for that growth to solidify.

What parents can do to support executive skill development

Just because a coach has taken over part of the role you used to play with your child doesn't mean there aren't things you can do to support executive skill development. Here are some of the tips we often share with parents:

- Pick your battles. While health and safety concerns rightly impact parents' decisions about when to impose their will, kids mature by making decisions and experiencing the consequences of those decisions.
- Be willing to negotiate, keeping in mind the things that motivate teens. These include having the chance to do what adults do, making their own choices and decisions, having their opinions valued, and having some say in what rules will apply and how.
- Work on positive communication skills. These include being available to talk when the teen is ready (or offering a specific time to talk), using active listening that focuses on reflecting the teen's feelings without judging it or offering a solution ("*it sounds like that made you really angry*"), negotiating when possible, and avoiding the "knee-jerk no."
- Keep your eye on the biggest prize—building goal-directed persistence. The best way to do this is to model this yourself. If your child sees that you work hard to achieve the goals that matter to you, that's a lesson that will bear fruit in years to come. What's important to a teenager may be very different than what's important to their parents, but as those frontal lobes mature, kids will draw on past experience and begin to apply what they picked up from all that observational learning that was going on throughout childhood and adolescence.

Our approach to coaching is nicely captured by the following quote:

"Human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them rather than to them or for them."

~Ted Wachtel, International Institute for Restorative Practices