



Executive Functioning Skills

A Developmental Checklist for Teachers: Kindergarten Through Grade 5

A practical resource for actively teaching executive functioning skills that students need to succeed both academically and socially.

Understanding Executive Functioning Skills

Executive functioning (EF) skills are the cognitive processes that help us plan, organize, manage time, regulate emotions, and sustain attention. These are learnable skills that benefit from explicit instruction and practice across all grade levels.

Key Executive Functioning Skills:

Planning & Goal Setting • Organization • Time Management • Task Initiation • Sustained Attention • Working Memory • Impulse Control • Emotional Regulation • Flexibility/Adaptability

This checklist provides grade-level guidance on which skills to emphasize and practical strategies for teaching them. Use this as a reference for your lesson planning, classroom routines, and student support conversations.

Kindergarten

Developmental Focus: Following routines, following simple directions, beginning to organize materials, managing impulses within a group setting.

Skill	Active Teaching Strategies
Following Directions	Use visual schedules, demonstrate steps, and provide hand-over-hand guidance. Practice with 1-2 step directions.
Impulse Control	Use hand signals for "stop," model waiting in line, practice taking turns in games and conversations.
Organization	Color-coded bins, picture labels on materials, consistent daily routine. Model putting items away.

Attention	Keep activities 10-15 minutes max. Use movement breaks. Position yourself near students who struggle.
Emotional Regulation	Name feelings using picture charts, teach simple calming strategies (deep breaths, quiet corner), validate emotions.

Teacher Checklist:

- ☐ Visual schedule is displayed and referenced daily
- ☐ Materials are labeled with pictures/colors
- ☐ 1-2 step directions modeled before students work independently
- ☐ Feelings/emotion words taught and used throughout day
- ☐ Consistent transitions between activities (song, signal, routine)

Grade 1

Developmental Focus: Multi-step directions, organizing work materials, managing simple tasks, expressing emotions verbally.

Skill	Active Teaching Strategies
Planning Simple Tasks	Use "First, Next, Last" visual boards. Break assignments into 2-3 small steps. Provide checklist cards with pictures/words.
Working Memory	Write down directions on paper or board. Use visual reminders. Keep 2-3 steps visible while working.
Task Initiation	Use signal/countdown before starting. Provide sentence starters. Pair students with strong starters.
Organization	Labeled folders/bins for each subject. Desk organization routines (clear desk checks). Teach cleanup routines.
Emotional Regulation	Teach "calming strategies menu" with 5-6 choices (breathing, movement, sensory items). Practice daily.

Teacher Checklist:

- ☐ "First, Next, Last" structure used for multi-step tasks
- ☐ Written/visual directions for all assignments
- ☐ Calming strategies menu posted and practiced
- ☐ Daily organization/cleanup routine established
- ☐ Sentence starters provided for task initiation

Grade 2

Developmental Focus: Independent task completion, organizing materials and time, sustained focus 15-20 minutes, self-monitoring behaviors.

Skill	Active Teaching Strategies
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Planning & Goal Setting	Create simple goal cards. Use "Goal, Steps, Check" format. Review goals weekly.
Time Awareness	Use visual timers. Call out time reminders ("5 minutes left"). Teach "fast" vs. "slow" work pace.
Task Completion	Use task completion checklist. Provide graphic organizers for writing/projects. Check progress midway.
Self-Monitoring	Teach students to check their own work against criteria. Use visual rubrics with pictures.
Flexibility	Practice transition warnings. Use "Plan B" visuals when things don't go as expected. Role-play flexibility.

Teacher Checklist:

- ☐ Visual timers used for activities
- ☐ Task completion checklists provided for assignments
- ☐ Goal-setting routine established (weekly or bi-weekly)
- ☐ Self-checking/peer review processes taught and practiced
- ☐ Transition warnings given (2 min, 1 min, now)

Grade 3

Developmental Focus: Multi-step planning, managing longer assignments, sustained focus 20-25 minutes, organizing materials independently, managing frustration.

Skill	Active Teaching Strategies
Project Planning	Teach breaking larger projects into smaller milestones. Use project planning sheets with due dates.
Organization	Student-organized binders with dividers. Folder systems for different subjects. Weekly "desk audit."
Working Memory Support	Anchor charts visible for key processes. Written reference guides. Reduce verbal directions.
Impulse Control	Teach "stop and think" strategies. Use response cards instead of calling out. Practice waiting.
Emotional Regulation	Teach self-talk strategies. Introduce "frustration scale." Practice cool-down zones.

Teacher Checklist:

- ☐ Long-term assignments broken into milestones with check-in dates
- ☐ Organization systems taught and modeled in class
- ☐ Key processes have anchor charts students can reference
- ☐ Cool-down zone established and taught
- ☐ Response cards or hand signals used to manage impulses

Grade 4

Developmental Focus: Independent project management, note-taking, task prioritization, managing multiple assignments simultaneously, peer collaboration.

Skill	Active Teaching Strategies
Assignment Management	Teach use of assignment planner/checklist. Discuss which tasks to do first. Check planners weekly.
Note-Taking	Teach note-taking strategies (Cornell, graphic organizers). Model how to capture key ideas.
Prioritization	Teach "Important vs. Urgent" thinking. Practice sorting tasks by deadline and difficulty.
Collaboration	Teach group roles and responsibilities. Assign specific jobs in group work. Debrief group process.
Problem-Solving	Teach troubleshooting strategies for stuck moments. Use "Plan B" thinking. Practice asking for help.

Teacher Checklist:

- ☐ Assignment planner/checklist system established
- ☐ Note-taking strategy modeled and practiced
- ☐ Group work includes assigned roles and debrief
- ☐ Problem-solving strategies taught for "stuck" moments
- ☐ Students regularly self-assess their executive functioning use

Grade 5

Developmental Focus: Long-term project ownership, self-monitoring, time management across multiple subjects, metacognition (thinking about thinking).

Skill	Active Teaching Strategies
Independent Planning	Students create own project timelines with milestones. Teach backward planning from due date.
Self-Assessment	Use rubrics with student self-evaluation. Teach reflection questions: "What worked? What didn't?"
Time Management	Teach estimating task time. Use planning calendar to manage multiple due dates.
Metacognition	Ask "How did you solve that?" and "What strategy helped you?" Teach self-talk for learning.
Responsibility	Students track own progress. Take ownership of grade and effort. Understand choice/consequence.

Teacher Checklist:

- ☐ Students create own project timelines and check progress
- ☐ Self-assessment using rubrics is built into major assignments
- ☐ Reflection/metacognitive questions asked regularly
- ☐ Students understand connection between effort, strategies, and outcomes

- ☐ Transition planning to middle school includes EF skill discussion

Implementation Tips for All Grade Levels

1. Make It Visible

Use visuals, anchor charts, and examples. Post procedures, goals, and strategies where students can see them. Show what "organized" or "focused" looks like.

2. Practice Explicitly

Don't assume students know how to organize, plan, or manage time. Model the strategy, practice it together, then gradually release responsibility to students.

3. Build Routines

Consistency matters. Use the same signal for transitions, the same format for checklists, the same language for strategies. Routines reduce cognitive load.

4. Celebrate Progress

Notice and name EF skills when you see them in action. "I noticed you checked your work before turning it in." Positive reinforcement builds habits.

5. Connect Home and School

Share strategies with families. Send home organizing tips, planning templates, or skill explanations. Consistency across settings accelerates learning.

Executive functioning skills are foundational to academic and social success. By actively teaching these skills across all grade levels, you're giving every student the tools they need to manage their learning, manage their emotions, and manage their lives.

For more support in developing student executive functioning skills—or to explore professional development for your team—reach out to Alibhai Educational Consulting.