

# Understanding Executive Functioning Challenges – Companion Notes

What looks like laziness is often exhaustion.

What looks like avoidance is often overwhelm.

What looks like defiance is often difficulty.

When students struggle to start tasks, stay organised, manage transitions, or keep track of instructions, it's easy to assume it's a motivation issue - or worse, a behaviour problem. But in many cases, what we're seeing is an executive functioning challenge: a hidden skill gap, not a choice.

**Executive functioning (EF)** is the brain's self-management system - the mental toolkit that helps us plan, focus, remember, shift gears, and stay on track. It's what allows a student to follow a sequence, keep an idea in mind, adapt to the unexpected, or finish what they started.

For many neurodivergent learners - especially those with ADHD, autism, or trauma histories - these processes don't come automatically. They need to be supported, not assumed.

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*“Executive functioning isn't about attitude. It's about access.”*

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In this lesson, we'll explore:

- What EF actually is - and how to recognise when it's running low
- Why common responses (like “just try harder”) often backfire
- What small, practical strategies can reduce shame and increase access
- How to reframe ‘stuckness’, not as failure - but as feedback

This isn't about rescuing or lowering expectations. It's about noticing when students need a bridge - and being the kind of adult who helps build one.

## What Is Executive Functioning?

Executive functioning is a set of mental skills that help us do everyday things - like plan, focus, follow instructions, switch gears, manage frustration, and finish what we started. It's the brain's self-management system. And just like we wouldn't expect a student to solve a maths problem without being taught the method, we can't expect all learners to self-organise or adapt on cue - especially if their brains are wired differently.

**Think of EF like an internal air traffic controller.**

When it's working well, everything flows. Tasks get prioritised, impulses get paused,

attention lands where it needs to.

But when EF is under strain - or developing differently, as in many neurodivergent students - it's like all the planes are circling with no one to land them. Everything feels urgent. Everything crashes into everything else. And the student looks... chaotic. Or checked out. Or stuck.

But this isn't about effort. It's about access.

Neurodivergent students often experience EF challenges as **developmental**, not deliberate. It's not that they won't do the task. It's that their brain isn't ready to do it in the way we're asking - yet.

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*"If a student could do it, they would."*  
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When we shift from seeing EF as a set of expectations to a set of skills, our role changes too. We stop demanding performance and start supporting growth. That's where change begins.

## **Four Core Areas of Executive Functioning**

Executive functioning isn't one thing - it's a collection of cognitive processes working (or struggling) together. When one is off track, the others can quickly follow.

Here are four key areas that frequently show up in the classroom - often misunderstood, often mislabelled.

### **1. Working Memory**

**What it is:** The ability to hold and use information in your mind over short periods.

**Why it matters:** It's what lets a student remember a set of instructions, stay focused during a task, or keep track of where they are in a lesson.

**When it's tricky, you might see:**

- Students forgetting the second step of a three-step task
- "What was I meant to do again?" - over and over
- Work that's half-started and quickly abandoned
- Constant need for repetition or reminders

**Often misread as:**

- "They weren't listening"
- "They're not trying"
- "They don't care"

**What’s really happening:**

The instruction didn’t stick - not because of attitude, but because the brain’s system for holding it fell through. The student isn’t being difficult. They’ve just lost the thread.

**2. Task Initiation**

**What it is:** The ability to get started - especially when the task feels complex, unfamiliar, or effortful.

**Why it matters:** Without this skill, the task might never begin - even if the student knows what to do.

**When it’s tricky, you might see:**

- Avoidance or delay, even after clear instructions
- “I don’t know what to do” - despite knowing
- Staring at a blank page
- Distraction or shutdown instead of action

**Often misread as:**

- “Lazy”
- “Defiant”
- “They need a push”

**What’s really happening:**

The first step feels like a cliff. The overwhelm isn’t about the whole task - it’s about not knowing how or where to begin.

**Reflection Prompt**

Think of a student who struggles to begin tasks.

What might make “step one” feel impossible - and how could you make that step smaller, clearer, or co-created?

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### **3. Flexible Thinking**

**What it is:** The ability to adapt, shift focus, or change approach when needed.

**Why it matters:** Learning often requires adjusting - to feedback, new ideas, or unexpected events.

**When it's tricky, you might see:**

- Rigid thinking or rule-following
- Meltdowns when routines shift
- Difficulty switching tasks or partners
- Resistance to abstract or hypothetical thinking

**Often misread as:**

- "Controlling"
- "Over-reactive"
- "Uncooperative"

**What's really happening:**

For some neurodivergent learners - especially those with autism or PDA (pathological demand avoidance) profiles - flexibility isn't a matter of choice. It's a skill that needs teaching, practice, and support. Changing plans feels like pulling the rug out from under them.

### **4. Impulse Control**

**What it is:** The ability to pause before acting, speaking, or reacting.

**Why it matters:** It helps students stop, think, and choose - rather than reacting instantly.

**When it's tricky, you might see:**

- Frequent interruptions
- Emotional outbursts or quick frustration
- Blurting answers or reacting physically
- Struggles with waiting or turn-taking

**Often misread as:**

- "Rude"
- "Aggressive"
- "Attention-seeking"

**What's really happening:**

For many students - especially those with ADHD - the "pause button" just doesn't fire fast enough. They're not choosing to explode or interrupt. Their brain is skipping the stop sign.

## From Misunderstanding to Wounding

When executive functioning challenges are misinterpreted as wilful defiance, the consequences can be long-lasting - and deeply damaging.

Too often, we respond to EF struggles with frustration:

- “You always do this.”
- “Try harder.”
- “Why can’t you just focus?”

These responses are usually born from concern. But for the student, they land as blame. And when that message is repeated - day after day, year after year - it sticks.

## The Hidden Cost: Internalised Failure

When a student hears enough times that they’re lazy, difficult, or disruptive, they start to believe it. Even when they’re trying their best, they stop expecting success. And eventually, they stop trying altogether.

You might hear:

- “I’m just bad at this.”
- “I always mess up.”
- “There’s no point - I’ll fail anyway.”

This isn’t attitude. It’s a learned response to repeated shame. It’s a defence mechanism. And it’s heartbreaking - because so often, it could have been avoided with a different lens.

When we meet skill gaps with blame, we don’t just miss the problem - we become part of it.

What these students need is what all of us need when we’re struggling:

- To feel believed
- To be supported without shame
- To know that needing help doesn’t make them broken

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*“Shame doesn’t teach executive function - it teaches students to stop trying.”*

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## Reflection Prompts

Think of a student who's stopped trying - who says they "can't," "always mess up," or "don't care." What if they're not giving up - they're just exhausted from being misunderstood?

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What might change if you responded as though their brain was working overtime - not underachieving?

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## Reframing the Challenge: Skill, Not Will

Here's the most powerful shift we can make as educators:

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*"Not won't - can't... yet."*  
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When we see executive functioning difficulties as skill gaps - not attitude problems - our whole approach changes. Instead of asking, "Why won't they do it?" we begin to ask, "What's getting in the way - and how can I help?"

This doesn't mean lowering expectations. It means offering better bridges to meet them. It means recognising that behind a student's avoidance might be anxiety. Behind their outburst might be overload. Behind their forgetfulness might be a brain that's juggling more than it can hold.

## Support, not shortcuts

Supporting EF isn't about removing every challenge. It's about scaffolding:

- Breaking tasks into smaller steps
- Offering visual cues or reminders
- Giving choices about how to start
- Building routines that reduce decision fatigue
- Creating space for co-regulation when emotions spike

These aren't "extras" - they're essential tools for access. Especially for students who've spent years being told to "just try harder."

## A Shift in Language

Sometimes the biggest changes start with what we say - out loud, and in our own heads.

Try replacing:

- "They're just lazy." → "They might not know where to start."
- "They never follow through." → "They might need more structure or prompts."
- "They don't care." → "Maybe they're protecting themselves from another failure."

Words shape belief - and belief shapes what's possible.

## Reflection Prompts

What language do you catch yourself using - even silently - when a student doesn't start, finish, or adapt?

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How might you reframe that with curiosity instead of judgment?

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What would it look like to support a struggling student this week as if they were missing a skill - not motivation?

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## Quick Win

Choose one behaviour that frustrates you - and ask: could this be an executive functioning issue?

Instead of jumping to conclusions about attitude or effort, pause and consider what skill might be missing.

Try one of these simple shifts:

- Break the task into two or three clear steps
- Add a visual prompt or checklist
- Let the student talk through their plan before starting
- Begin the first step together (“Start with me, then take over”)

These aren’t big interventions. They’re small, supportive nudges - and they can make the difference between stuck and starting.

## Reflection Prompts

What’s one student behaviour you’ve found frustrating lately?

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How could you respond differently if you assumed it was a skill gap, not a motivation issue?

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## Final Reflections

Use these prompts to pause, explore, and deepen your thinking - alone, with a colleague, or as part of team planning:

What do I currently believe about students who seem “lazy,” “disorganised,” or “disengaged”?

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Is that belief still serving me - or them?

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What scaffolds help me function on tough days - lists, routines, support from colleagues?

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How might my students need the same, in age-appropriate ways?

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What's one small change I could try in my teaching this week to support executive functioning more intentionally?

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How might I help my team reframe “difficult” behaviour as “invisible difficulty”?

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*“When students struggle with executive functioning,  
they’re not testing your patience.  
They’re asking for a bridge.  
Every time you respond with compassion instead of control,  
you build one.”*

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