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Homeschooling *and beyond*

EXAM TIME

The do's and don'ts of parenting during exam time

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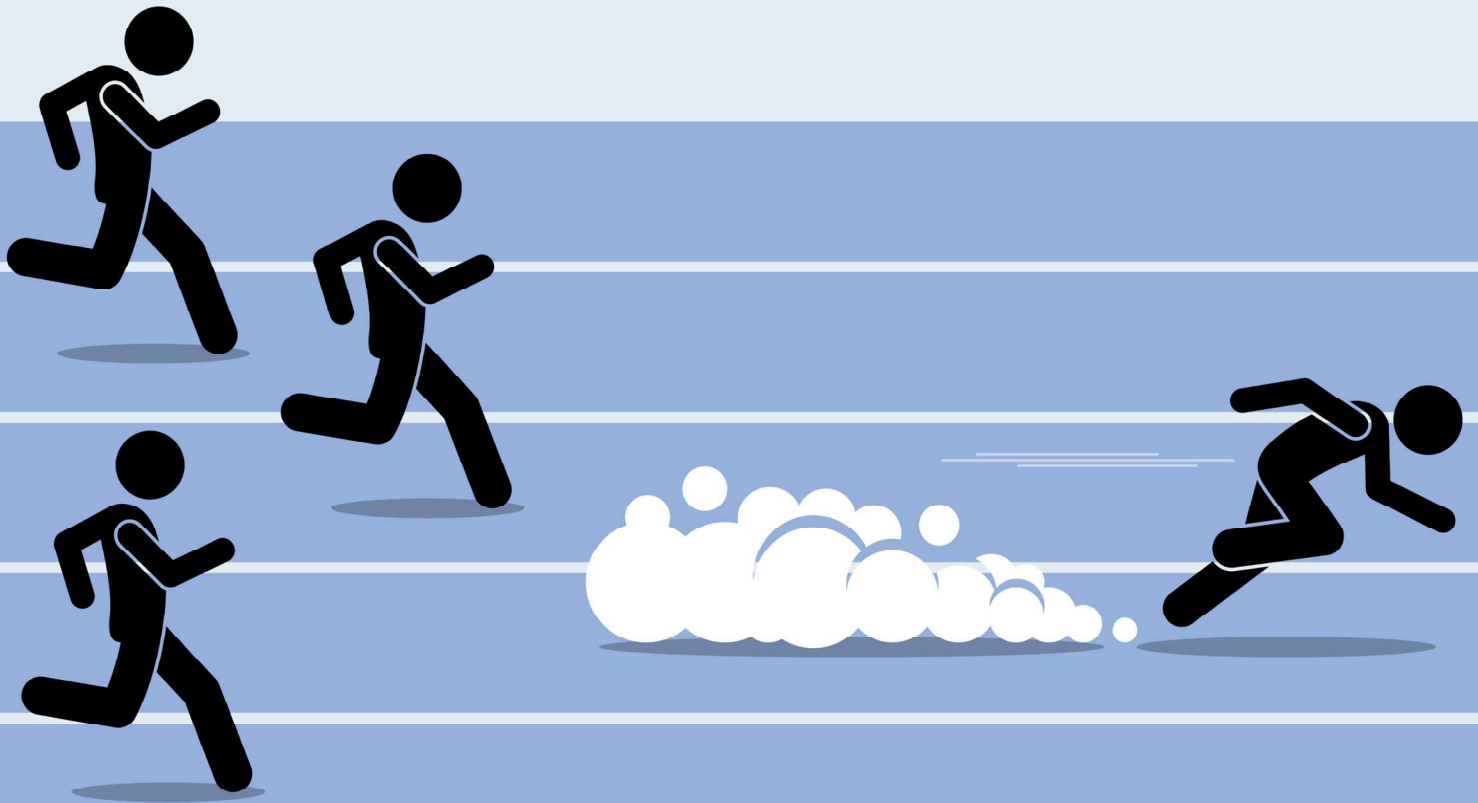
fun spring activities

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Dyscalculia: More than a maths struggle

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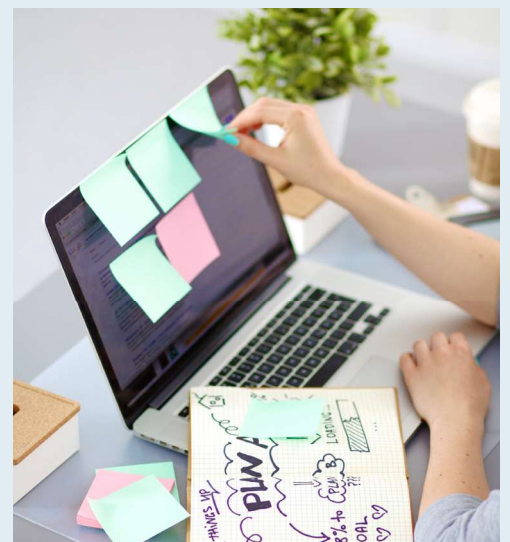
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For children, teens and adults with executive function challenges, the smallest project or task can be overwhelming. Planning and prioritisation are essential skills for initiating tasks and following through, writes Dalena van der Westhuizen, cognitive development specialist, master brain coach and co-founder and MD of BrainAbility

Crucial skills for success

We all sometimes feel stuck on a big task or project, unsure of how and where to begin and simply postponing it until the very last minute. It can be overwhelming when we find it difficult to break down and plan a task or project, or decide which of our many tasks should take preference over the others.



For some people, however, this is a daily struggle. And while a single Internet search may yield many so-called reasons for procrastination – such as stress, anxiety or fear of failure – there’s another important and often overlooked reason: weak executive function skills.

What are executive function skills?

Executive function skills are often described as “the management system of the brain”. That’s because they help us set goals, plan and get things done. Important executive function skills like planning and prioritisation enable us to develop a roadmap of *what* needs to be done *when*.

(To learn more about executive function skills, read: Is Your Child Lazy? in issue 6 of SAHS & Beyond.)

Why are planning and prioritising important?

Planning is about determining all of the tasks you need to complete in order to achieve your goal or finish a specific task. By getting a clear understanding of these tasks, you can better prioritise and allocate your time.

Prioritisation, on the other hand, allows you to make decisions about what is most important and what is less important so that you know what to focus on. Being able to discern between tasks that are most urgent and less



“Being able to discern between tasks that are most urgent and less urgent is a crucial skill for school, work and life in general.”

How to recognise weak planning and prioritising skills

Here are some traits and frustrations you might recognise:

urgent is a crucial skill for school, work and life in general.

People with weak planning and prioritisation skills find themselves impaired before they even begin an assignment or a task. They have difficulty identifying the steps required to accomplish their goal (eg creating a presentation, doing homework, cleaning their room, etc) and can’t decide what information and tasks are important to address and in which order they should do so.

- Having trouble starting and/or completing tasks.
- Starting projects, but failing to finish them because of difficulty following the steps required.
- Finding it difficult to remember and follow all the steps within familiar tasks, such as getting dressed, packing a bag for school/work, etc.
- Struggling to figure out the most important work/ assignments to complete first.



- Having trouble when there's more than one item on your "to-do" list.
- Struggling to create a verbal or mental picture of the steps/sequence of a project/task.

Can planning and prioritising skills be improved?

Yes, they absolutely can! Like most skills, planning and prioritisation can be improved with the right intervention. There are also a few tried and tested strategies you can apply at home or the office:

1. Be clear about the end-goal

It's simply impossible to plan if you don't know what you're planning for. That's why it's so important to articulate what a successful end-goal looks like before getting started on a project or a task.

Use this process to create a checklist of the most important elements of that goal; it's a great planning tool that will also support self- and task-monitoring.

2. Remember, planning is part of doing.

Many people simply skip planning because they don't consider it a part of doing. They just want to get started. However, it's important for you to reframe that: planning is doing something. It ensures that you don't miss important steps of the task and it lowers stress levels by breaking multi-step to-do items into manageable parts.

One of the best strategies for planning is time-boxing. Box or block out time in your day/calendar for specific tasks, instead of simply writing them on

a to-do list. Remember, when you set time blocks and due dates, include a catch-up day or two to allow for unexpected delays.

3. Decide how to prioritise

Deciding what to do first is tough, particularly if you don't distinguish between "need-to's" and "want-to's". Try using something as simple as a "1, 2, 3 system" where "1" means this needs to happen now/as soon as possible, "2" means it has to be done as soon as the 1's are done and "3" means it's the least urgent and last thing to be done.

Whichever prioritisation system you settle on, practise sorting a few example tasks so that you can adjust the system and be sure that it's effective, yet easy enough to implement.

4. Keep practising and adjusting.

Keep practising your skills by asking questions to plan and prioritise everyday (school, work and home) tasks and projects. Use questions like:

- What's the most important thing to get done today?
- When will I be able to do that?
- What are the steps I need to follow to complete each task?
- Can any of those things be done on a different day or at a different time?

Here's to better planning and prioritising!

