

February 1, 2019

Dear Parents,

Our students have learned to do so much in their short time in school. Learning to read, write, solve math problems, and conduct research are complex tasks that require the coordination of so many different skills. Not only do children have to learn letter sounds, mathematical symbols, and punctuation, they have to organize materials, focus their attention, and remember how to pull it all together to be successful. This requires skills known as **executive function skills**.

Executive function skills are important life skills. They involve one's ability to plan, solve problems, control responses, and handle setbacks successfully. These brain functions can be compared to the job of an air traffic controller. An air traffic controller has to manage arrivals and departures on multiple runways while being able to filter out distractions, prioritize, manage lots of information, and control his/her own impulses. (Sounds a little like parenting!)

Examples of executive function skills in the school setting include remembering to raise one's hand rather calling out in class, being able follow multi-step instructions, tuning out distractions, and persevering even when the work is challenging. It also involves the ability to delay gratification- the ability to wait for something one wants. For example, a child may not be able to work in his preferred play center or use a particular material until the next day. S/he needs to manage the disappointment and wait until it is his turn. In teaching children to deal with delayed gratification or to manage disappointment or frustration without acting out, we teach them to take **meta-moments**---moments when they employ calming strategies such as taking deep breaths or engaging in self-talk ("*I'll get my turn tomorrow.*") The children have been learning a lot about taking meta-moments. Some call it "hitting the pause button."

Young children can develop these skills with the ongoing modeling and support of adults. You can support your child's developing executive function skills at home. Here are some ideas:

- Give your child multi-step instructions. Start with two steps and increase to more as s/he becomes more able. (e.g. "*Put your backpack in the kitchen, get your pajamas on, and then choose a book.*")
- Think aloud as you complete a task, like gathering the materials you need for cooking or deciding what to pack for a trip. Engage your child in thinking about the plan. ("*Since we are making pasta and vegetables, we need to get two pots from the closet.*")
- Teach your child to take responsibility for simple household chores, such as setting and clearing the table and putting away his/her toys. (It will take practice before s/he can do it independently, but the effort is worth it!)
- Provide opportunities for your child to wait for something s/he wants. Try having him/her save up for a new toy or wait for your attention, ("*I will play a game with you after dinner.*"). Plan an event like a play date a few days in advance. Show your child a calendar so that s/he can mark off the days- making the waiting period concrete.
- Give your child time for imaginative play and help him/her act out problems and scenarios. Imaginative play involves planning, experimenting, building, and problem-solving. Through play, children can also express feelings and learn to respond to the actions and feelings of others.

Many of these ideas came up at our Parenting Discussion this week. Mrs. Schmid and I enjoyed our dialogue with all who were able to attend. It is great for parents to share ideas and get insights from each other. We are planning another opportunity for discussion in the next month or so.

On another note, thank you to the GPFA for the recent Family Fun Nights! It is wonderful that our families come together to enjoy an evening event together.

Warm regards,

Lynn Herschlein