



Is your son finding it hard to navigate his school work?  
Do you worry he will fall further behind?

# THREE

STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN

# EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING



Each of us executes a set of higher mental skills that allows us to plan and organize, make decisions, manage time, and focus our attention.<sup>1</sup> This is called executive functioning. Without these key capabilities, tasks become difficult. Follow these strategies to strengthen your son's executive functioning skills to help him overcome frustrating academic obstacles and succeed in school.

# 1

## Establish a daily routine.

Getting your teen to follow a daily routine can be frustrating for both of you. By thinking outside the box and remaining committed in your approach, you can establish a successful and beneficial routine for your son. At GRA, we've found that young men who experience executive functioning challenges benefit from:



### Specificity.

It is important to **request specific tasks, one at a time, to minimize any confusion regarding expectations.** [Stephanie Wright](#), a Certified Professional Organizer specializing in children with executive functioning challenges and ADHD, notes that teens with executive functioning challenges are unable to tackle vague requests such as, "Clean your room."<sup>2</sup> You might start by asking him to place all the dirty laundry in the basket. Applaud him and lead him to the next step.

### Checklists.

Executive functioning challenges make it difficult to grasp how much time a task will take. Adding activities like sports and wanting to spend time with friends makes it increasingly difficult to manage daily tasks. **Encourage your son to make a daily checklist of items that are specific and immediate.** Writing down a timed schedule within the checklists and blocking out activities with a planned time will help him visualize what and when things need to get done.

### Small, immediate tasks.

Large projects for a teen with executive functioning challenges can lead to disappointment. **The ability to break down tasks into smaller, more manageable parts can be challenging.**<sup>3</sup> Help your son develop a system to split assignments into smaller parts. This will boost his confidence and motivation to complete work.

### Positivity.

[Stephanie Wright](#) notes that weak executive functions in a teen can lead to tasks or requests frequently coming up short of expectations.

**Focus on praising accomplished tasks rather than punishing incomplete tasks.**<sup>2</sup>

### Creativity.

Teens who struggle with working through a daily routine can benefit from a splash of creativity to liven seemingly dull events. **Listening, asking questions, and observing how young men naturally approach and respond to certain tasks can provide tremendous insight.**<sup>2</sup> In the morning, does your teen enjoy breakfast or a shower first? Does he enjoy getting ready to music? Does he respond better to conversation or solitude in the morning? How does he respond best after school? Does he need a snack? Relaxing TV time? Physical activity? By understanding what makes your son the most productive will allow you both to create an exciting, personalized routine.



# 2

## Communicate with your son.

Teens who have executive functioning challenges **interact with the world differently**. Within these differences come many strengths. Their ways of completing a task may not be the most efficient, but it makes sense to them.

[Understood.org](http://Understood.org) suggests when your teen is working in a way that doesn't make sense to you, ask him to explain his method.<sup>3</sup>



### Ask him to explain his method.

This opens lines of communication between you and your son. Reviewing the ways he can manage his belongings and study more effectively will help your son build his own tool set for these skills. This can be as simple as helping him organize his backpack and folders once or twice a week, and reviewing subjects with flash cards and active reading. If you catch your son recognizing and correcting mistakes within his daily routine or schoolwork, make it a point to celebrate his progress. Recognizing not only the finished product but also the hard work he puts into planning goes a long way.

At GRA, instructors work to actively pinpoint the challenges your son faces to help him reach his full potential.





# 3

## Encourage exercise and activity.

Regular exercise expands our working memory, creating a direct link to academic achievement. Exercise also improves our selective attention and inhibits disruptive impulses, such as losing interest and focus, and drifting off. According to [PBS](#), **those who exercise regularly have quicker reaction times, give more accurate responses, and are more effective at noticing errors within their school work.**<sup>1</sup> At GRA, every student who would like to participate in a sport can. No cuts are made. Your son can find fulfillment in the teamwork and camaraderie of his chosen sport while improving on necessary executive functioning skills.



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Executive functioning challenges can make learning in a traditional atmosphere frustrating and unenjoyable. At Grand River Academy, your son can work toward excellence with an active environment and instructors who identify learning strategies suited to his needs. **With the right approach, your son can succeed at learning in the classroom.** Find out how GRA can help your son at [www.grandriver.org](http://www.grandriver.org).

### References:

1 Paul, Annie Murphy. 2013. "The Science of Smart: A Surprising Way To Improve Executive Function." The PBS NOVA Secret Life Blog, March 13. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/blogs/secretlife/blogposts/the-science-of-smart-surprising-way-to-improve-executive-function/>

2 Wright, Stephanie. Expert Beacon. "Create Daily Routines for Children with Weak Executive Functions." Accessed June 30, 2015. [http://expertbeacon.com/create-daily-routines-children-weak-executive-functions/#VaZWw\\_IVhBd](http://expertbeacon.com/create-daily-routines-children-weak-executive-functions/#VaZWw_IVhBd)

3 Morin, Amanda. Understood. "Understanding Executive Functioning Issues." Accessed June 30, 2015. <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/understanding-executive-functioning-issues>