Practical ADHD and Executive Functioning Tools for Child and Teen Clients

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Purpose Statement

The purpose of this presentation is to equip clinicians with a practical, actionable toolkit to support children and teens struggling with ADHD and/or executive function challenges. By focusing on concrete strategies for organization, planning, and time management, the session aims to help clinicians learn how to assist clients in improving their executive function skills, using concrete strategies to better compensate, and improving independence.

Purpose Statement

As part of this, the presentation also aims to help clinicians effectively support parents and caregivers in supporting kids and teens at home with ADHD and/or executive function challenges.

Agenda

- What is ADHD?
- What is executive functioning?
- How do ADHD/executive function challenges impact children and teens?
- How do these issues impact parents/caregivers?
- Practical tools for helping clients during sessions
    - Routines
    - Tracking tasks
    - Tracking events
    - Physical organization
    - Focus
    - Harnessing fidgeting

Agenda *(continued)*

- Strategies to support parents
  - Tracking schedules
- Using AI
- General executive-function-friendly session recommendation tools
- Conclusion

What Is ADHD?

- Classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder in the *DSM-5-TR*

- Subtypes
  - Predominantly inattentive presentation
  - Combined presentation
  - Predominantly hyperactive/impulsive presentation

What Is Executive Functioning?

The “air traffic control” system of the brain.

Mental processes used to **focus, retain information, and complete tasks.**

What Is Executive Functioning?

- **Pillars of EF**

Behavioral Regulation	Emotional Regulation	Cognitive Regulation
• **Inhibition:** Resisting impulses • **Self-awareness:** Monitoring self	• **Shifting:** Adapting to change • **Emotional control:** Managing feelings	• **Task initiation:** Getting started • **Working memory:** Holding info • **Planning:** Mapping out steps • **Organization:** Mental and physical

Causes of Executive Function Challenges

- Many things including:
  - ADHD
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Obsessive-compulsive disorder

- Temporary causes of impairments
  - Fatigue
  - Lack of sleep
  - Hunger
  - Illnesses

How Executive Function Weaknesses Impact Daily Functioning

- School:
  - Trouble paying and sustaining attention
  - Nervousness/worries
  - Frustration
  - Trouble sitting still
  - Challenges completing classwork
  - Missing instructions
  - Getting into trouble for talking or being off task

How Executive Function Weaknesses Impact Daily Functioning

- Home
  - Difficulty getting homework completed
  - Trouble with routines
  - Messy room
  - Losing things easily

How Executive Function Weaknesses Impact Parents/Caregivers

- More time involved in monitoring and helping their child
- Greater frustrations with parenting
- Repeatedly having to ask their child to do things
- Helping their child find things they have lost

How Executive Function Weaknesses Impact Parents/Caregivers *(continued)*

- Dealing with a messy room and things possibly left all around the home
- Simple tasks become a battle to get completed
- Repeated prompting to move their child along in the mornings.
- Challenges with their child winding down to go to sleep

Practical Tools for Helping Clients During Sessions

Activity: THE ROUTINE EDIT

Goal: Help your client to improve the efficiency and follow through with a specific routine (i.e., morning, afterschool, homework, evening).

Practical Tools for Helping Clients During Sessions

- **Part I**
  - Identify a routine (i.e., morning, after school, evening).
  - List out all steps with an estimated time needed to complete each one listed next to it.
  - Count up the time and ensure the time available fits the actual time needed.

The Routine Edit

- **Part II**
  - Questions to ask client to open a dialogue
    - Would adjusting the order of items speed up overall completion time?
    - Could any steps be cut out or moved to a different time of day?
    - How much shifting from one activity to the next or from one room to another occurs?
    - What challenges occur now with completing specific steps?

Routines

- **Part III**
  - Rewrite the routine with improvements

- **Part IV**
  - Create the schedule in a place for easy viewing
  - Possible ideas include:
    - Visual checklist
    - Calendar on electronic device
    - In a task list app

Example of Original Morning Routine

- Ben: 8-year-old boy
  - 6:30 AM: get up and watch tv.
  - 7 AM: eat breakfast while continuing to watch tv and have free time.
  - 8 AM: Parent reminds Ben for the third time to stop playing on the iPad and go get dressed.
  - 8:05 AM: Ben takes a long time to get dressed, gets distracted playing in his room.
  - 8:15 AM: Parent rushes Ben along.
  - 8:20 AM: Ben plays on the computer.
  - 8:30 AM: Ben is asked to get his socks and shoes on to catch the bus.
  - 8:35 AM: Ben is still trying to disconnect to get his socks and shoes on.
  - 8:40 AM: Ben rushes out the door to catch the bus.

Revamped Morning Routine

- Ben: 8 year old boy
  - 6:30 AM: Gets up and gets dressed.
  - 6:40 AM: Eats breakfast.
  - 6:50 AM: Brushes teeth, gets socks on, and ensures he is all packed up for school.
  - 7 AM: Free time with electronics.
  - 7:30 AM: Physical activity with family.
  - 8:15 AM: Computer time.
  - 8:30 AM: Gets shoes on and heads out to the bus.

Notable Improvements

- Ben completes most tasks before having free time.
- There is less transitioning from one task to another.
- The requirement to get dressed and eat breakfast before having free time creates more motivation to follow through to earn the free time.
- There is more buffer time to get out the door.

Tracking Tasks

Activity: Help your client identify what tasks they need to write/plan out AND set up a structured system for them.

- **General principles**
  - Keep systems as simple as possible.
  - Ensure clients will have easy access at the right time to view them.
  - Use systems that promote increased independence and limit reliance on parents/caregivers.
  - Write down tasks and do not rely on memory for most things.

Part I

- Ask your client what kinds of tasks they need to keep track of and plan out.
  - Common ones for kids and teens include:
    - Homework assignments
    - Chores (i.e., cleaning room, dishes)
    - Taking medicine
    - Self-care (i.e., showering, brushing teeth)

Part II

- Ask your client what tools they already have access to at school and at home to help them track tasks.
  - Common electronic tools to use with a program include:
    - School Chromebook
    - Smartphone
    - Apple Watch
    - iPad
    - Amazon Echo
    - Digital wall calendar

Part II *(continued)*

- Ask your client what tools they already have access to at school and at home to help them track tasks. *(continued)*
  - Nonelectronic options might include:
    - Paper checklist
    - Whiteboard
    - Paper planner

Part III

- Pick a specific tool (or tools) that your client wishes to use and help them add tasks to it/create it.

- Common paper ones:
  - Paper checklist
  - Whiteboard

- Common electronic options
  - General tasks and/or homework assignments: Google Tasks, Reminders, Todoist, Notion, Notes app
  - Homework assignments only: MyHomework

Tracking Events

Kids in preschool or older are typically capable of using a calendar.

Help your client identify what kind of calendar system might work best for them to use at the present time.

Tracking Events

- Some common physical systems:
  - Digital calendar printed out weekly
  - Physical calendar hanging up in a common location
  - Physical calendar that can be carried around

- Common digital ones:
  - Apple or Google Calendar on a Chromebook, tablet, phone, or other device
  - Amazon Echo show (with a screen)
  - Various kid-friendly picture calendars (for younger kids)

Tracking Events

- Digital considerations
  - Shared family calendar so parents can help add events and see their child or teen's events
  - Use external calendar sync options to add the child's sports or other activity schedule automatically (if applicable).
  - Set alarms for most activities to help kids get in the habit of seeing events in their calendar even if they remember them.

Planning Out Tasks and Events

Without a plan, tasks just sit in a list and don’t get done.

Without the client using their calendar to plan out tasks based on availability, things are unlikely to get done.

Planning Out Tasks and Events

- **Key Principles**
  - Help your client to add all main activities into their calendar.
  - Account for travel time.
  - Assign a time and day to each task in the task list based on estimated duration.
  - A client may benefit from a paper or electronic system where tasks and events are listed together.

Example of Events and Tasks

- 4 PM to 4:30 PM: Homework time
- 4:30 PM to 4:45 PM: Get ready for soccer practice.
- 4:45 PM to 5 PM: Travel to soccer practice.
- 5 PM to 6 PM: Soccer Practice.
- 6 PM to 6:15 PM: Travel home.
- 6:15 PM to 6:45 PM: Shower.
- 6:45 PM to 7:15 PM: Dinner.
- 7:15 PM to 7:45 PM: Take out trash, do dishes, pack lunch.
- 7:45 PM to 8:30 PM: Free time.
- 8:30 PM to 8:45 PM: Wash up for bed.

Case Example of Plan for Jenny, a 12-Year-Old Girl

- **Tools Used**
  - Tasks: Reminders app
    - Shared list with parents
  - Events: Apple Calendar (with Reminders integrated)
    - Shared family calendar also
  - Homework assignments: MyHomework app/website program connected to her school assignment portal so assignments feed in automatically
- **Devices used:** IPhone, iPad, Macbook (home use), and Chromebook (school use)

Case Example of Plan for Jenny, a 12-Year-Old Girl

- **Plan**
  - Jenny will view assignments in MyHomework and manually add in any ones not automatically added from her school portal. She will do this from her school Chromebook during class as feasible and add anything else in at home before starting homework.
  - Jenny will track home tasks with the Reminders app.
  - Jenny will add all of her events to the family calendar and use a personal calendar for blocking out time to complete tasks (i.e., homework, soccer drills).

Physical Organization

- **General Principles**
  - Everything should have a set place that is logical and easy to access.
  - Seeing things out that need can help remember them.
  - Keep surfaces as clear as possible; only have essential items out.
    - If you let one extra item on a surface, then what is the difference between two things, and after that the surface becomes cluttered.
  - Have set times to check organization and address any issues before things get very disorganized.

Organizing Your Physical Life

- Activity:
  - Ask your client to pick a specific area or thing that they wish to better organize (i.e., desk, bedroom, etc.).
  - If you can do it with them during the session use the following steps (or plan these out for them to do at home)
    - Step 1: Remove all trash.
    - Step 2: Remove anything that does not belong in that area and that has a set place. Put those items in the correct place.
    - Step 3: Move everything out of the area that does not belong there and has no set place.
    - Step 4: Organize the remaining items that are remaining within the space.
    - Step 5: Identify places to store or put the items remaining from Step 3.

Physical Organization

- A few common challenges and solutions
  - Problem: Laundry not going into hamper
  - Solution: Put the hamper near where the client gets dressed.

  - Problem: Desk piling up with trash.
  - Solution: Keep a trashcan right under the desk.

  - Problem: Client often loses phone, wallet, and sunglasses
  - Solution: Tray on dresser that has a slot for phone, wallet, and sunglasses.

Maintaining Physical Organization

- Daily check of specific areas at logical times
- Weekly check of less used spaces
- Striving to not put anything even temporarily out of place
- Use a picture of the space when organized as a checklist

Focus

- **Activity**
  - Part I: Explore with your client the common sources of distraction for them. Write out a list.
  - Part II: Identify concrete tools that your client can and is willing to use to minimize these distractions.

Specific Focus/Distraction Reduction Tools

- Pomodoro technique
  - Interval work and break periods
- Reduce visual clutter (i.e., web browser tabs, physical items around).
- Break long tasks into chunks.
- Have a clear plan to follow including time for breaks.
- Keep phone in another room.
- Silence notifications on computer.

Harnessing Fidgeting

- Excessive movement (i.e., hyperactivity or fidgeting) often occurs with ADHD and sometimes with anxiety.
  - Sometimes the movements themselves help people focus better, but they can also be distracting to the client or to others around them.

Harnessing Fidgeting

- **Principles**
  - When not optimally stimulated (i.e., interested enough to fully focus), the physical movements help fill the gap to create more stimulation to in turn focus better.
  - Fidget tools used should be mindless and not require a client to look at them while using them.
  - If they become a toy to play with, they will become more distracting.

Harnessing Fidgeting Tools

- Leg/body fidget tools
  - Standing desk
  - Standing on balance board
  - Rocking board
  - Wobble stool
  - Desk bike or elliptical while doing homework
  - Kick bands on chair
  - Walking pad
  - Yoga ball chair

Harnessing Fidgeting Tools

- Hand fidgets
  - Keychain
  - Fidget pen
  - Hand grasper
  - Various little hand ones

- AVOID for focus: Fidget spinner: great for anxiety because it occupies your attention, but problematic for focusing due to ADHD.

Case Example: Jim, a 15-Year-Old Boy

- **Fidget plan**
  - Jim will complete homework at his sit/stand desk.
    - He will do reading while pedaling on an elliptical under his desk.
    - Jim will stand on a balance board while writing papers.
    - Jim will sit on a wobble stool when he wishes to sit while writing or completing work.

Case Example: Jim, a 15-Year-Old Boy

- **Fidget plan** *(continued)*
  - When relaxing/watching television or videos, Jim will:
    - Stand on a balance board or pedal on a bike while sitting on the couch.
  - At school, Jim will:
    - Use a fidget keychain during classes.

Strategies to Support Parents/Caregivers

- **General Principles**
  - If tools and strategies are too complicated for them to use to help their kids or themselves, they are not going to be useful.
  - Aim for tools that help promote their child increasing their independence and not relying on them for reminders.

Organizing Schedules

- Help parents and caregivers have a system where events and activities for the family are consistently written down.
  - A basic electronic calendar
  - Program like Cozi or Skylight Calendar
- Encourage families to have a weekly meeting to review the schedule, identify conflicts, and plan ahead. This helps everyone and teaches kids through modeling and active participation how to look ahead with planning.
- Work together with your client and their parent on developing systems that they can all agree to use and do not create much more work for parents.

Using AI

- AI can be a useful tool for planning out tasks, breaking them into parts, and so on if you teach clients how to effectively use this.

- Suggested prompts
  - “Help me plan out my days/tasks?”
  - “Create an hour-by-hour schedule within the timeframe of X to X and allocate time for these tasks. … I have these events (with times listed out).”
  - “Make a homework plan for these assignments (list them out).”

General Executive-Function-Friendly Session Recommendation Tools

- Weave practical executive function friendly tools into the session structure and throughout as feasible.
  - Make an agenda to start the session
  - Write down or have the client record the specific strategies and plan.
  - Encourage clients and parents to put the date of the next session in their calendar during the current appointment.
  - Use automated reminder features with practice software for reminders about appointments, completing paperwork, etc.

Conclusion

- Often the simplest tools work best.
- Start small with planning.
- Support the client emotionally if they feel overwhelmed when working on these things.
- Within reason, everyone can benefit from periodically reviewing their time management and organizational systems to determine if adjustments can help improve efficiency.

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Thank you!